

Cloud Cover
by Junj
Part 2: The Destroyer

"Shave and a haircut – two gil!"

Vincent Valentine groaned, slapping his hand to his face in an uncommon show of emotion, even if it was irritation. He leaned heavily on the mop he was holding, taking a peek at the man stomping out the tune in front of him.

Cid Highwind noticed the look he was receiving, his foot poised for another rendition of "Shave and a Haircut, Two Gil". He set it slowly down on top of the mound of paper towels covering the floor of the Seventh Heaven. He scratched the back of his head, his eyebrows raising.

"Am I annoying you?" he asked. "By doing this?"

Vincent sighed, pushing himself off the mop and resuming his work. "It's not so much what you're doing that I mind, but the idiotic way in which you're doing it."

Cid laughed. "This? Idiotic? Ha!" He continued to stomp on the paper towels, though without the previous rhythm.

Vincent sighed. After the two Shinra commandos had been killed, it had taken them almost fifteen minutes to persuade Marlene to go back to sleep without coming down to the bar room and twice that amount of time to drag the bodies to a dumpster in the slums. The furniture had been dumped in a corner. And, now, much to Vincent's dismay, Cid had taken almost four rolls of paper towels, covered the bloody floor with them, and was walking around on them, leaving red footprints where he tread directly over the blood. It was a waste of time and energy, not to mention paper towels.

"Why can't you just use a mop?" he growled, his eyes narrowing as Cid bent over to pick up a particularly drenched paper towel. "Like any normal person?"

"Like you?" He dropped the towel in a large trash bag, looking with disgust at the sticking red covering his fingertips. "You ain't exactly normal yourself there, Vin."

"And just what are you insinuating?" His tone had picked up a menacing note.

Cid snorted. "Oh, come on, Vinnie! I'm not blind. You ain't normal. You're freakin' weird." He frowned slightly, his tone taking on a more serious note though a smile broke onto his features, ruining the effect. "And so am I. It is nothing to be ashamed of."

Vincent stared at the man standing in front of him, his brow furrowed. "Weird, huh? At least I use a mop, towel man."

Cid took a deep breath. "It is against my morals to use a mop, Mr. Valentine. Respect that fact, and I will not be forced to kill you later."

Vincent couldn't suppress a small smile. "Kill me. I think a 'thank you' note would be in order, first and foremost. You'd be dead. You're lucky they missed with that shot."

"Aim had nothing to do with it," he muttered, rubbing his palm against his pant leg.

Vincent leaned forward on the mop. "What?"

Cid glanced up, meeting Vincent's eyes. "I said we'd better do something with this &*%\$. You know, before Tifa comes home, finds her house a mess, and starts yellin'. And then Barret'll say, 'Don't make me kick yo ass, foo'! Drop and give me twenty!' To which I will reply, '@#\$\$ off.'"

Vincent didn't reply, dutifully noting the fact that Cid was pissed though unsure as to why.

"Damn it! Hand me that damn mop!"

Vincent tossed the mop to Cid who picked it out of the air easily. Kicking the paper towels out of his way and into the general direction of the trash, he began to mop the floor viciously. His bangs, normally held back by his trademark goggles, now fell before his eyes, annoying him immensely, but he made no move to push them from his face.

Why are you so impossible, Cid? Aeris asked, her tone hard with her own anger. I swear if I told you not to jump off a cliff, you'd do it just to spite me.

He dunked the mop into the bucket of soapy water before returning to the floor with renewed anger. I didn't ask you to save me!

You didn't ask me not to, either.

Look, you wanna play you're little games with yourself, that's fine by me 'cause you ain't fooling anybody. You've saved me twice, now, and I don't think it's because you like me. What do you want?

I don't know –

Damn it, Aeris! Don't play these fool games with me! I'm not stupid, and what Shera says 'bout me getting locked up in the basement when I was a kid isn't true.

Cid –

Just tell me what it is you want!

Aeris took a shuddering breath, the sound reverberating in his head as though it was actually real. I'm using you –

No @\$*.

-to save the Planet.

To save Cloud.

No – I mean, yes... I don't know what I mean. Saving the Planet involves saving Cloud. What she is planning... God help us.

Cid shook his head as if to rid himself of her pestering presence. "I really don't care anymore," he muttered under his breath, vigorously scrubbing the floor with the mop. "You do whatever the hell you have to. I don't give a damn."

"What are you talking about?" Vincent asked, a curious light in his dark eyes.

Cid glanced at him. "I'm not talking to you. I'm talking to myself. I'm crazy. Next thing you know, I'll be walking down the street with a hamster on my head screamin', 'I'm a pony! I'm a pony!' So just, shut up."

Vincent didn't say anything, leaning against the bar, his arms crossed across his chest in the nonchalant – even cold – manner which defined him. He arched an eyebrow. "Are you finished now?" he asked. "If you mop any harder, you're going to wear through the floor."

Cid merely shook his head and straightened with a sigh breaking through his labored breathing. "I dunno."

“What?”

He shrugged. “Anything. I know absolutely nothing.”

“That’s very interesting.”

Cid shook his head. “Don’t you have anything purposeful to say? ’Bout as interesting as my ass.”

“I think you’re under-glorifying the subject.”

“Am I? What do you know? I got ten that says nothing. Nothing important anyway.”

Vincent frowned but had no reply to give the pilot. He crossed his feet impatiently, glancing at the clock as the seconds ticked by. There was no sound except for their soft breathing. Cid’s face broke into a smile.

“You don’t know anything, either!” he exclaimed, laughter in his voice. “Where’s my ten gil? Fork it over!”

He walked across the wet floor, narrowly avoiding a trip over the bucket of suds and soap. He held out his hand, rubbing his thumb against his index and middle fingers, the smile widening on his face. “I can get five shaves and haircuts with this sweet money,” he declared. Vincent groaned.

And then the most sickening sense of evil passed over them.

Vincent’s groan disappeared behind a scream. Cid winced as the scream cut through his mind, overpowering the dread twisting his innards. He grasped his head pain flowering through him. His heart pounded in his ears, thundering over the shrill scream. It cut off as quickly it had begun.

The black faded as he slowly opened his eyes, suddenly aware that he had fallen to his knees in the numbing pain. The horror was still there, darkening the world, and over the ringing still in his ears, Cid could hear another scream. A scream that was real, not an intangible force that only he could hear. It was Marlene’s.

He staggered to his feet. “Marlene!”

The scream withered away to sobbing. He was for once unaware of Aeris’ presence at the back of his mind. Dazed, he stumbled over his own footing. He fell to the floor with a dull thud, knocking the bucket of bloody and soapy water over, dumping its contents. The cries were lost as he slipped into unconsciousness.

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Reno groaned, the white light piercing through his closed eyes and creating a bloody shade for his vision. He frowned. No, his eyes weren’t closed. The light was breaking through his hair. His hair was that dark, crimson covering his eyes, sticking to his forehead in wet clumps.

“Reno?”

That voice was so familiar, but Reno couldn’t place it as one he had heard in a long time. A very long time. He pushed the hair from his forehead and from his eyes with his hand, squinting in the sudden brightness. A dark silhouette emerged over the bright, and Reno was able to put a name to the voice.

“Reeve? What the hell?” He pushed himself into a sitting position, ignoring the protests from his aching muscles. He felt over his chest, feeling the bloody, rumpled cloth but not the underlying wounds he remembered receiving from that

machine gun burst. "I'm alive? *&\$%."

He fell back against the cold surface of the floor, a wave of nausea hitting him. He groaned.

"Take it easy, there, Reno," Reeve ordered.

Reno shut his eyes against the dizziness and the brightness, wishing it to all just go away as the gunshots covering his chest had.

"Yeah, you almost died."

Reno blinked his eyes back open, confusion lining his brow. Hovering over him like a mother hen did her chicks was Cait Sith. But Cait Sith was Reeve, and Reeve was there as well. They couldn't be together. They were the same person!

He pushed himself into a sitting position again and slid back to the wall, his eyes wide. "What the hell is going on here?! You and him – you – him – what the...? Damn!"

Reeve rubbed his forehead before letting his hand slide down his face, coming to a stop at his chin. He shrugged, his hand dropping. "Let me explain this. I am Reeve."

"Yeah. No &\$@#," Reno agreed shakily.

Reeve held up a hand. "No interruptions, please. I am Reeve, and this is Cait Sith. I programmed Cait Sith with an artificial intelligence of sorts so he and I could be doing two different things at once. When Tifa wanted to launch her attack on the laboratories, I hacked into the security system while Cait Sith acted as a relay man. I gave the AI total control when the fighting started because I got kicked out of the system. Unfortunately, I have no means of turning the AI off from here, so we're stuck with him."

"You act like that's a bad thing," Cait Sith declared, crossing his arms indignantly. "Look at what Baldie did to my mog!"

Reno raised an eyebrow. "Baldie?! Huh? This is too damn weird!"

"I'm sorry you feel that way."

All three of them turned to the new voice, Reno's confusion increasing to almost unbearable levels. He stood, his eyes on the new person in the room. Scarlet. Oh, how he hated Scarlet. But what was she doing here?

She walked farther into the room with an over-powering seductive gait. She shook back her hair, letting it fall behind on of her shoulders and down her back. "Oh, please, Reno. You're going to have a coronary if you keep staring like that."

He glowered at her but clenched his jaw to keep from saying anything. He inwardly squirmed under her almost hungry glare but somehow managed to keep a straight face, praying to any sort of god that she turn her attention on someone else.

"What do you want, Scarlet?" Reeve asked, his tone uncharacteristically icy. "Let Reno alone; he's had a bad day."

Instead, Scarlet moved closer to the Turk. "I know he's had a bad day." She fingered the collar of his damp, navy blue suit. She tsked. "You're never going to get that blood stain out of your suit."

Reno cringed. "Why would I want this suit? You've contaminated it with your very presence."

Scarlet couldn't resist a wicked smile. "I can help you get rid of it, if you like."

Reno grimaced, frowning. He pushed her away, ignoring the locks of red hair that fell before his eyes. "Get away from me."

Reeve cleared his throat, an action which was promptly ignored by Scarlet.

"You know what you want," she hissed, her eyes lighting up as she grabbed the cloth of his jacket.

Reno's frown deepened, anger pulsing through him. "I hate you. I want you to die!" he growled, his tone menacing. "What part of that can't you understand?"

Scarlet feigned hurt. "Oh, Reno, you're being inconsiderate to my feelings. Don't you think an apology would be in order?"

"Here's my regret!"

His clenched fist rammed into her jaw, ripping her from his shoulder and throwing her to the floor with the force of the blow. She clutched at her split lip, tasting the blood flowing from the cut. She stood shakily, slumping forward as she straightened. "You're going to pay for that, my dear, dear Reno. Guards!"

A pair of guards filed into the room. Big, nasty guards.

One cracked his knuckles before proceeding to beat Reno down to the ground. And over the pain from the blows, even to the point where oblivion was creeping up in the corners of his vision, Reno felt nothing but absolute satisfaction.

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The wind rolled over the grassy plains as a light breath, stroking the tall plants of the earth like a young girl would absentmindedly stroke the silken hair of her favorite doll. The yellow grass wavered in the breeze, a golden ocean stretching as far as the eye could see. The sunlight bent and gleamed on the glossy stems, creating thousands of tiny shadows and soft reflections of light and dark. The grass rippled in the wind, a million waves peacefully bending and folding until they were halted by either the light blue sky or the monstrous obelisk reaching for the heavens.

It was this obelisk for which she was searching.

Grasping to the sky with fingers outstretched, waiting for an eternal embrace that would never come, the large city, filled with magnificent crystals and golden treasures, loomed above her. Long, dark shadows fanned out beneath the towering spires and obscured the earth from the light of the sun, depriving the plants of their lives. Rocks protruded from the ground, sharp with jagged edges mimicking the large city's reaching hands as they jutted from the earth.

Shadows hid everything in a musk dark and a tangible cold as though the hand of Death never truly let anything escape the black that surrounded everything. It was the dark she despised, overly cunning in view of the light, always creeping up on it as the evil did in the hearts of man, as the shadows crept up on the edges of the world. The light made the dark, could not survive without it, but darkness... darkness was the absence of nothing and everything. The dark was everywhere.

Aeris Gainsborough, a small smile written upon her features, stepped under the arch defining the entrance to the City of the Ancients, her hand drawn tightly around the hilt of the Ultima Weapon. The twinkling blade of the sword chased away the darkness and any creatures which sought to hurt her. The sword was heavy, dreadfully so, but it was a mere reminder of her duty and of her past.

Glittering water accented the stone cold pillars and marble floor, reflecting light over them and making it seem as though the entire city had been created out of water. Light fluttered across her angelic face, gleaming off her soft features and glittering within the emerald orbs of her eyes. The sword clutched deeply in her hand sparkled in the reflected light.

She stepped to the edge, staring down in the depthless, crystalline water. The deep blue of it reminded her of the color of

his eyes as he had laid her to rest eternally within the heart of her city, the city of her ancestors. God, how she longed to see those eyes again, the eyes she had grown so accustomed to in the short while she knew them, the eyes she had grown to love. But they had drawn her back here to this place where she had sacrificed herself. Why were they forever returning to the place of their departure? Why were they damned to relive a life where they were separated by some inexplicable force?

She fell down to her knees, the Ultima Weapon dropping from her numbed hands, the tears flowing freely down her face. It always came back here, forever returning to the fact that they couldn't be together, especially not now. There was no choice in the matter; she could never have him. He was Tifa's. He deserved Tifa.

The blade of the Ultima Weapon clattered to the ground, ringing on the white-washed floor before sliding into the water. And as the sword slipped into the pool, the water changed.

Crimson fanned out where the liquid swirled against the blade, the dark color staining the blue translucence that had been reminiscent of his eyes. The Ultima Weapon sank beneath the surface, leaving behind a trail of red like a plume of smoke bleeding to the surface. And she cried as the crystal pool before her was slowly transformed into something entirely different.

A lake of death.

A lake of blood...

~*~

Cid forced his eyes open against the vision, opting for the overly bright lights of the Seventh Heaven rather than the sickening sight of a reddened lake. He shook the sight from his vision, a sense of dread welling in the pit of his stomach. The red lake was too familiar, too unnatural to possibly be a coincidence. What was Aeris up to now?

He shook his head, attempting to rid himself of the persistently annoying locks of hair which fell before his eyes. What I wouldn't give to have back my goggles, he said to himself, slightly surprised to hear no reply from Aeris. She was interrupting his thoughts more often than not.

He blew out a shaky breath and his eyes finally met Vincent's. He cleared his throat, slightly embarrassed to see the concern that was hidden within his red orbs. "Hey, Vinnie?" he asked, though he had no need to draw the other man's attention. Vincent was already focused on him. "You wouldn't happen to have two gil somewhere, would you?" He couldn't keep a chuckle from springing from his mouth. "I need a shave and a haircut."

Vincent slapped his forehead with his good hand, slowly rising. "When are you going to grow up?" he asked, bending over to pick up the fallen mop.

Cid merely shrugged, straightening his jacket as he stood. He groaned, an ache pounding through his head. "That's the last time I go to sleep without smokin' first."

Vincent frowned. "I don't think this had to do with nicotine cravings," he declared, glancing at the mess which dominated the floor of the Seventh Heaven. The water from the bucket Cid had kicked over created covered the floor, soaking into the mound of paper towels. Bloody suds were a crude decoration.

Cid's head snapped up at the sound of a creaking board, and his gaze landed on Marlene. Her lips were pursed, her hands planted on her hips in a posture reminiscent of Tifa. Clutched in one hand, hanging limply from her waist, was a rumpled, ratty, old teddy bear, almost hidden by the folds of her purple nightgown.

"Marlene? Maybe you oughtta go back upstairs," he stated, rubbing his eyes of the ache which settled behind them.

"What have you two been doing?" she demanded, her voice hot for someone so young. Cid rolled his eyes, mouthing a choice word as he looked away from her and back to Vincent. The other man shrugged, giving Cid control of the conversation. He muttered another, more foul, curse.

"First and foremost, are you okay?" he asked.

Marlene nodded, confusion lining her brow. "Why wouldn't I be? You're the one destroying the Seventh Heaven."

He glanced at the ceiling. Thank you, Aeris. He looked back to Marlene, grimacing. "Don't step there; we'll never get it outta your slippers."

"Screw the slippers!" All three occupants turned to see Barret entering the Seventh Heaven, Tifa at his heels. "Cid, what the hell did you do to this place 'cause I mean... da-amn!"

Cid glanced from Barret to Tifa, involuntarily fidgeting under her angry gaze. No Cloud. Ah, damn... He winced at the stream of insults he knew was coming. "I leave you with one, simple thing to do – one, simple, little task – and you somehow manage to screw it up!" she declared, her face reddening with rage. "What the hell's the matter with you, anyhow?! Can't you take care of one, little thing without someone holding your hand?! When are you going to grow up?! What the hell did you do to my bar?!"

Cid merely shrugged, struck wordless by her anger. He looked at the puddle of water at his feet, staring intently at the dark splotches mottling his coveralls. "I take it 'the full frontal attack' didn't work," he muttered.

"Damn straight," Barret replied, looking around the room. Red XIII pushed through the larger man's legs, shaking his coat vigorously.

"Not in the least," he said. "We did manage to find Yuffie, though."

Barret snorted. "And lose that fat ass."

"Don't you get it, Cid?!" Tifa yelled, her voice cracking with emotion. "Cloud is gone! We're probably never going to see him ever again! What the hell's wrong with you?! Are you freakin' brain dead?! But if you want to sit here and play with your damn soap suds, fine!"

"My problem?! What the hell's yours?!" he demanded. "It's not my fault Aeris made off with him, is it?! What'dya want me to do?! Freakin' walk up to her during her dramatic escape from Midgar and say, 'Excuse me, but Cloud ain't leaving'? Or snap my magic fingers and stop them? What the #\$@*s with that?!"

"At least you couldn't keep this place in some sort of freakin' order?! Would that be too much to ask from you?!"

"Damn it, Tifa! I didn't do this! The mess's his!" He pointed to Vincent to mark his words. The other man glared at him from underneath the black locks of his hair as the three turned away from Cid and to him. No one said anything.

"Holy crap! What happened to your bar, Tifa?" Yuffie asked, her eyes wide in shock as she pushed through the congregation standing in the doorway. "And what are you doing here?"

Vincent shrugged. "I don't know. I thought maybe I'd come by and say hello."

Barret's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Why are ya here? Ya ain't working for the Shinra again, right?" Cid slapped his forehead and groaned.

Vincent shook his head. "No."

"You felt the need to drop by, right?" Yuffie asked, hefting the Oritsuru. "I don't trust him," she declared, looking to Barret and back again.

"Good, 'cause I don't either," he agreed. "How do we know ya ain't on their side?"

Cid shook his head, covering his eyes with one hand. "Look, he's clean. He ain't working for them."

Barret raised his gun arm. "How do ya know that? Unless you're working for them."

Cid groaned. "Barret, I think you outdid yourself with the stupidity factor. Two Shinra showed up here. He killed 'em."

"God, you're a liar," Marlene stated. Cid turned around to her, finding her sitting on the stairs, her teddy bear draped over her knees. "You told me nothing happened."

Cid shook his head. "I told you that so you would go back to bed."

Marlene shrugged. "I know. It just isn't fair. I always get caught lying."

Cid frowned. "Now I have. Are you happy?"

"What else have ya lied about?" Barret asked, his voice a dangerous growl.

"Damn it! Where the hell are you getting this crap?!" he demanded, his small will over his anger breaking again. He turned on the group standing near the doorway. "Come on, tell me! What else have I lied about?! I would really like to know! Just for curiosity's sake, you know." His gaze jumped from person to person, but no one responded. "No takers? Damn, I was hoping someone would, so I could figure out all my little, white lies. Maybe I lied about my age? I'm seventy-eight, right, Barret?" He frowned. "Or maybe the color of my eyes? They're blue! #@&*\$%-@#%&* blue! But I bet if you looked close enough, you could see that they're really pink. You would see that, wouldn't you?"

He started to push through them to the door. "I'm not going to put up with this #\$\$%& anymore. I'm leaving."

You – you can't! Aeris stammered, her voice urgent.

He frowned. Why the hell not? They don't need a liar to help them get Cloud back. They sure as hell don't need me.

I do. Take me to the City of the Ancients. I need your help.

Cid snorted, brushing Aeris from his mind. As an afterthought, he turned back to Tifa, his eyes dark. "I got ten that says Cloud's at the City of the Ancients. You want him, go get him... if you wanna trust a liar."

He turned heel without waiting for a reply, storming out into the night.

~*~

"Nygel's dead. Screw the mission."

Elena glowered at Raice, her face reddening with anger. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?!" she demanded. "Are you saying that Reno just died for jack squat?!"

Raice shrugged. "This is a war. Wars have casualties. Reno was stupid for taking that job in the first place. Shinra's a bunch of lying weasels dressed up in suits. He shoulda thought of that before he took the job."

"This was supposed to be a simple get-in-get-out deal."

" 'Supposed to be' being the operative phrase, right?" Raice looked away, shaking his head. "This ain't worth it anymore."

"What do you mean by that?!" Elena snapped, rising up out of her chair. "Are you saying what I think you're saying because you'd better not be." Her eyes found Rude's shaded ones, and he arched one eyebrow coolly before returning to his work of absentmindedly staring at the gun across his knees.

"I'm saying that this is a big bunch of crap. Being a Turk lost its appeal years ago, Elena. Even you can't be so dumb as to not realize that. All this is is a lousy pension and a ratty blue suit. The Turks are dead; they were dead with Tseng. What fools you are to think that that's not the truth. And now Reno's dead, and all you have left is a stupid mission. I hope you dedicate it to him."

"That should have remained unspoken," Rude declared, running a hand over his bald head. "Have a little more respect for the dead. He may be gone, but he had something that you lack. He was loyal to his friends."

Raice frowned. "Then why'd he sacrifice himself for the good of his enemies?" he questioned, his eyes liquid ice.

Elena pursed her lips. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Raice barked a short laugh, shaking his head. "Oh, come on, Elena. You can't be that stupid. You were right there. Why do you think he was standing out in the open? It wasn't for us, I can tell you that."

Elena looked to Rude for verification, but the man just shrugged. "I never saw any of it," he said, "until it was too late."

"God, you really are dense." Raice stood, picking up his jacket. "Reno was shooting Gainsborough off of that other chick. Machine gun," he made explanatory motions, "right across him. Took him down before he could say 'shave and a haircut'." Raice merely shrugged. "It was foolish of him to do that. Let them kill each other, I say."

"Well, you have no honor," Elena growled.

Raice brushed the comment away. "And then Rude brought out his shotgun and blew away the guy casting Cure on him."

Elena spun to face the bald man, her eyes wide in surprise. "You did what?!"

Rude sighed and helplessly shrugged. "It was Reeve dressed up for Halloween again. Who knows what side he's on, anyway? He could've been killing him."

Raice snorted. "Not likely. If anything's to blame for Reno's death, it's his foolishness and your naivete."

Rude stiffened at the words. "Now, you look here – "

"No, you look here!" Raice ordered, cutting off Rude. "Reno was an idiot to even get into this Black Materia crap again. He got what he deserved."

"The hell he did! I'm gonna give you what you deserve!"

"I'd like to see you try."

"Fine." Rude stood and brought the shotgun up off of his lap. He didn't bother to even aim as he pulled the trigger. The explosion of the shot echoed through the small room that contrived their office, sending Rude back a step.

Raice's body fell to the ground, followed shortly by the sickening splatter of the remains of his chest hitting the wall. Blood pooled out beneath him, leaking from the gaping hole in his torso and soaking into the white carpeting. Elena grimaced; that was going to leave a nasty stain.

"Why did you do that?" she asked, looking from the dead body to where Rude was standing, his shotgun now lowered at his side. He merely shrugged.

"He pissed me off."

~*~

Reeve stared gloomily at the walls of their cell, a frown creasing his brow and his lips pursed in thought. He hadn't taken into consideration that Scarlet and Heidegger had been able to build up more support in the past few weeks. He hadn't even considered them to be the cause of the problems in the Shinra office. Why hadn't he seen this earlier? What had distracted him so much so that he could miss what was right under his nose?

"Well, I hope you're satisfied," Cait Sith declared with a small harumph to punctuate his words and breaking Reeve from his thoughts.

"Actually, I am," Reno simply stated though he wished his body was in as good a shape as his ego. He was stretched across the only bed in the small cell, using the mog's arm as a pillow, listening to the thundering of his heart in his head. He probably looked as bad as he felt, bruises and aches in places he didn't know existed. "Did you see the look on her face?"

Reeve smiled, unable to stop a small chuckle from escaping his mouth. "It definitely was sweet. I've never seen her look so utterly... dejected in my entire life. I've been waiting a long, long time for someone to just give her a whack."

"Was it worth it, though?" Cait Sith queried, unable to grasp the humor they obviously saw in the situation.

Reno would have shrugged if he hadn't been prone. "I'll remember it for the rest of my life."

Cait Sith crossed his arms across his chest. "I hate to break it to you, but your life's gonna be a short one if we don't get outta here."

"True. Of course, I plan on busting out of this puke hole before that happens."

The little cat snorted. "And how do you plan to do that? We don't exactly have any way of doing it, and, after that stunt you just pulled, we are now further away from escape than we used to be."

Reno sat up, pushing himself away from the large mog. "Cait, my dear friend, you're insulting my ingenuity. I'll think of something."

"Sure, and I'll sprout wings and fly outta here."

"Why don't you try that? It could be a help," Reno said sweetly, but there was venom in his eyes.

Cait Sith frowned, a pout coming to his face. "Shut up."

Reno raised his eyebrows. "I was truly sincere. Did I sound sarcastic, Reeve? I didn't mean to sound sarcastic."

Reeve sighed, shaking his head. "It's too hard to tell with you, Reno. You may want to work on that in the future."

Reno shrugged, leaning his back against the wall. "Looks like we're gonna have a lot time to work on speaking skills."

"Guess so."

An uneasy silence fell over the group, no one having anything to say. Reeve returned to his dismal thoughts, cursing himself for his own short-sightedness. Reno absentmindedly wondered what Elena was doing, trying to bring up a picture of her in his mind but always coming up blank, his thoughts wandering to far less pleasant ones. Cait Sith amused himself by twiddling his thumbs.

The door opened, and a man dressed in a garish green suit entered, his long beard bouncing over his stomach. No one in the cell paid much heed to him, giving him only a sideways glance before returning their attention to their own thoughts. Heidegger frowned, his face reddening in anger.

"I would appreciate some respect from my prisoners," he declared, his voice gruff.

Reno pursed his lips, debating whether or not to voice the insult growing in his mind. He finally shook his head. "Nah. Too easy."

Heidegger glared at the Turk, his piggy eyes narrowed considerably. "I won't ask you to voice your opinions of me, Reno, because, quite frankly, your opinions means nothing. I could care less what you do, even though you do provide some good entertainment, especially that show with Scarlet." Heidegger gave him applause in a quiet small clap. "Well played."

Reno nodded. "Thank you. I do try to keep things a little interesting in this eternal boredom."

Cait Sith stood. "I wish to voice an objection to this treatment. My poor mog's stuffing is falling out all over the place!"

Heidegger glanced once at Reeve. "How dreadfully annoying! Really, Reeve, how do you put up with him?"

Cait Sith frowned again. "I resent that comment!"

Heidegger shrugged, tugging once on his beard. "I don't."

Reeve rubbed his brow, returning Heidegger's look. "What do you want, Heidegger? I don't think you came here to exchange pleasantries."

Heidegger looked crestfallen. "Ah, Reeve, don't you like me?"

Reeve exchanged a glance with Reno. The latter answered the question. "No, not really."

"Well, no one asked you, anyhow!"

"I did," Reeve declared. "It was telepathic, so you couldn't have heard it. You know psychics and junk. I'm enlightened in the ways of telepathy."

"Bull. And no one cares what he thinks, anyhow." He glanced to the Turk. "I already told you that, didn't I?"

Reno shrugged. Reeve shifted on the hard floor. "What do you want, Heidegger? I'm getting tired of this."

"I'm getting tired of you." He leaned closer to Reeve, eyeing him carefully with his black gaze. "What's the password to your computer?"

Reeve pursed his lips. "Give me one good reason why I should tell you."

Heidegger frowned, his face hard as stone. "If you don't I'll personally make sure you suffer a long time before you die."

"It's a reason, but I'll have to decline. You might want to start at the first word in the dictionary. If it's not in there, have fun running through an infinite combination." Reeve smiled smally. "My mind is drawing blank. You'll have to excuse me in my old age. Senility."

Heidegger's frown deepened as he turned back to the door. "Enjoy your senility while it lasts. We have ways of making you talk."

Reno stood, jutting his lips out, his brow furrowed. He turned on his companion. "Yes, Reeve," he said, his voice low and jeering in a mock imitation of Heidegger. "You will talk, and you will like it." On his last words, he creased his brow expectantly.

Heidegger turned an interesting shade of purple. He hurriedly exited the room.

When the door closed, Reeve couldn't hold a straight face anymore. He burst out laughing, gasping for breath. Cait Sith hid his chuckles behind his paws, covering his mouth. Reno slumped to the ground, a wide grin on his face.

"Priceless expression!" Reeve gasped, futilely attempting to stifle his chuckles. "Simply priceless! His and yours both!"

Reno chuckled. "And, alas, I can only imagine mine for I was without a mirror. I think I missed my calling. I should've been a politician."

Reeve shook his head, smiling nonetheless. "Yeah, you certainly know how to bring out the worst in people."

The Turk's grin couldn't get any more roguish or wider. "It's a practiced art. My only strong point in school. Obnoxiousness 101."

"Class clown?" Reeve asked, his eyebrows raised in curiosity.

Reno shook his head, his eyes twinkling at the irony. "Most likely to succeed."

~*~

Pathetic.

"Huh?"

Weak, pathetic, foolish, feeble...

Cloud blinked the black from his eyes.

Puppet... weak, weak puppet... dance for me, sing for me, puppet...

Water dripped, a shallow sound on cold marble.

Let me pull the strings, puppet... pathetic...

A wind howled through his mind with whispered voices for passengers.

I'll make you dance, make you kill... you are nothing...

Cloud rolled onto his back, shutting his eyes tightly from the pain.

... without me... nothing... no master to pull the strings...

He groaned.

Dance... dance for me...

"Did you think I'd let you get away from me, my love?"

Cloud opened his eyes to come face to face with the emerald orbs of his nightmares.

Sephiroth... Sephiroth... pathetic...

But it wasn't Sephiroth; it was someone far worse. She grinned maliciously at some jest that he neither saw nor heard. And he felt the fear come gnawing at his innards, almost a tangible creature that fed off his flesh and snapped his bones. Crack. Drip.

Fear not, puppet... pathetic by nature... pulled up by your master... weak puppet...

Aeris giggled, her smile still small yet somehow gaining malevolence. "Why do you fear me so?" she asked, her voice bittersweet, soft as silk but cold as ice. "I won't hurt you, love. Stay with me forever. Love me forever."

Cloud shook his head, his eyes narrowing. "I can't love a sadistic bitch."

Aeris' giggle changed into a laugh. "Is that what you think me to be? How pathetically ignorant!"

Stupid... foolish puppet...

Cloud stared deep into those green eyes so reminiscent of the Lifestream. "You can't tell me you don't enjoy the hurt of others. Why do you do this?"

Aeris' smile wavered only for a second. "Out of love. For you."

Puppet's strings... pulled and twisted... as is she... as are you...

"Pull those strings however hard you wish; I'll never serve you," he growled, a menacing tone diffusing into his voice. But no amount of menace could ward away the voices inside his head.

Ha, ha... make a stand where the bravest would sit... foolish puppet...

The rancor bled from Aeris' smile and into her eyes, an inner light glowing hungrily within them. "Won't you serve me? Rule the world; you can be so much more with me. You can have so much more than your pathetic Tifa. Besides, you did love me. Before."

Cloud's eyes grew hard. "You are not Aeris." He frowned, pushing himself into a sitting position and slowly sliding across the marble floor and away from her. "I won't be your puppet. I won't dance for anyone," he growled, though more to the howling laughter reverberating through his skull than to the woman kneeling before him.

"You don't have to be a puppet forever," she whispered. "I can make you strong. No strings to hold you to your fate. No people to bind you, no Planet to scold you for your mistakes. So many things can be undone. So many possibilities. Money,

love, power..."

Puppets have no power... fools have no power... weak...

Cloud's frown deepened, and he fought the urge to clutch his head, to attempt to drown out this never-ending stream of hatred from infiltrating his thoughts and spiting his very words. From where was it coming? Why wouldn't it stop?

"Be with me and be strong for all eternity. Be with me and be loved by someone more deserving of love than Tifa. Never be stung by shallow words and silence. Cared for, loved for... Be with me. Love me," Aeris ordained. A pleading note was easily evident in her entire demeanor, a plaintive pain locked deep within those eyes. How could such wide, innocent eyes love to hear the screams of another echoing through the night and see them as a symbol of power? How could this be?

"Forget Tifa. She will soon find that nothing is fair in love and war, and I always win. You will love me." And a hungry look replaced the plaintive one as she seemingly looked straight through him and into his very soul.

And the look and her words made him angry.

Puppet's anger's cheap... worth its weight in dust... forceless anger...

And the voices made him angry.

The water dripped, a shallow sound on the cold marble floor. Drip... drip...

"Shut up!"

Aeris reeled back from his anger before she felt her own.

"Love me, damn you!"

Her hand rose against him.

Crack.

Drip... drip...

Blackness invaded his vision.

Pathetic.

~*~

Scarlet leaned back in Reeve's chair, glancing at her reflection in his computer's screen. Her hair was perfect. Her face was flawless. Her eyes were thoughtful, though her mind was not pondering anything seemingly important. She was wondering how she could possibly persuade Reno to come back on her side. He was such a delight when he was a friend and a damned, obnoxious nuisance when he was a foe. It was a puzzle why he had left, but she could get him back. She would.

The possibilities were limitless.

And then the phone rang.

"Damn," she muttered, leaning forward in the chair, her concentration broken. Who would want to call her at this hour? It was lunch time. Nobody worked at lunch time. It was supposed to be a nice, quiet time used for unwinding. Not endless

phone calls.

"What do you want?!" she snapped into the mouthpiece after picking the phone up off of the cradle.

The voice at the other end was not a welcomed one. "Why so harsh, Scarlet?" Aeris asked, mock sweetness in her tone. "I didn't interrupt your lunch hour again, did I? I'm sorry for disturbing you."

"Cut the crap, Aeris," Scarlet ordered, her own voice tight with barely controlled anger. "What do you want?"

Aeris clicked her tongue in a reprimand. "Temper, temper, Scarlet. You might want to consider therapy. I hear Dr. Huiji is very skilled in multiple areas of psychology as well as other things." She quietly groaned, interrupting herself. "Oops... I forgot. I killed him. You'll have to find someone else."

"I don't want to hear about your plunders and pillage, Aeris. I'm in the middle of something right now, and if you don't tell me what it is you want, I'm going to hang up the phone." The threat hung in the air but was never carried out.

"You aren't after another guy, are you, Scarlet?" Aeris asked, a scold ready on her lips. "Let me guess. It's that fool Reno that you've captured, right? Give him a few whacks with love from me. And a warning never to shoot at me again."

Scarlet laughed shortly. "He's already been kicked for being a bastard," she informed. "I imagine he's sitting down there with that self-satisfied smirk painted on his face while he licks his wounds."

Aeris' voice picked up a colder tone. "Well, kick him again. He ruined my manicure and lowered my self-esteem a few notches. I would feel so much better knowing that he was truly paying for that."

Scarlet frowned. "What's in all this for me?" she carefully asked. She didn't want to be pulled into some stupid plot with someone as untrustworthy as Aeris.

"Nothing."

Scarlet's frown deepened. "Nothing? What kind of deal is this? I do a favor for you and get absolutely nothing in return? Not quite fair there, Aeris."

Aeris sighed. "As my poor Cloud has just recently discovered, few things are."

Scarlet's eyes lit up at the mention of Strife. There was a man. The man. The man who had killed Sephiroth, the man who had saved the Planet, the man with the hair. Even Reno's hair couldn't compare to it. An evil grin spread across her features. Screw Reno; she was after the bigger fish in the pond. "How about you let me come visit Mr. Strife in return for this favor you ask?"

The answer was curt and sweet. "No."

Scarlet ignored it. "What was that Aeris? You're breaking up. I can't hear you."

"Cut the crap. I said no."

"Was that an affirmative?" Her grin widened. "Great. How about tomorrow? I'll give Reno a few more kicks, take a Polaroid, and you can see my handiwork."

"Scarlet, no!"

Aeris' voice was a mere screech as Scarlet returned the telephone to the cradle. Cloud Strife could still be hers. All she had

to do was kill Aeris. Reno could be left to the dogs. Why stay with him when she could have someone so much better? Out with the old, and in with the new.

She stood and started to the door, her thoughts racing. What am I going to wear?!

~*~

Elena couldn't believe she was doing this. It was despicable, it was foul, it was low. This was the last place she wanted to be right now. But here she was, standing in front of the Seventh Heaven, about to go have a chat with Tifa Lockhart against her better judgment. She wasn't here for herself, though. She was here for Reno.

About an hour ago, she and Rude had persuaded a guard to spill his guts about the laboratory raid. Apparently they had taken prisoners who were, most importantly, alive. The guard hadn't outright said Reno's name, but Elena knew no one else with a "red fro" as the guard had put it. And then there was the mog and Reeve. Surely Tifa would be willing to help them if she knew that the Shinra had Reeve as well.

With one last tug at her suit jacket and a grim determination, she opened the door and entered the Seventh Heaven, unarmed.

Tifa glanced up from behind the counter, a fake smile on her face to greet the two newcomers. Her eyes were red from apparent lack of sleep and crying. Elena had seen the struggle as Aeris and her men had yanked Strife out from under Tifa's nose. Somehow, seeing her hurt for the one she loved made Elena feel stronger about the own grief she felt for Reno.

The weak smile faded away as Tifa realized exactly who had come to visit her. She set the glass she had been cleaning down on the bar.

"Well, what do you want?" she asked, unafraid to voice her displeasure with a grim tone.

Elena moved into the bar room, slowly, hoping that Tifa wouldn't take that as an act of aggression. She cleared her throat. "We need your help," she stated nonchalantly, though the words stung her deeply. Asking an enemy for help... she shook her head.

Tifa frowned at her words, her gaze flickering past Rude. She leaned forward on the counter. "Give me one good reason why I should help you," she growled. "All you've ever done is make my life a miserable hell."

Elena couldn't suppress her anger. "You ungrateful wench!"

"I'm ungrateful? What do I have from you that I could be grateful of?" She wiped a drop of water from the bar with her rag, shaking her head. "I can't think of a thing."

Elena frowned. "Not to me. I could care less what you think of me! I'm taking about Reno."

Tifa snorted, her brow creased. "So? What about him? I take note that he's not here."

"You're sharp."

"I despise sarcasm," she declared, her voice quiet with anger.

"I live for it," Elena replied. "You're really clueless, aren't you?"

"About what?" Tifa sighed. "I'm getting tired of these games, Elena. I don't have time for this. You can leave now. The exit's right over there." She pointed to the door to punctuate her words. Elena didn't give it so much as a glance.

She narrowed her eyes, her lips a thin line, tightly compressed with her anger. "Who do you think shot Aeris off of you at the laboratory?" she asked. "I can tell you that it wasn't one of your people."

Tifa wasn't buying Elena's words. "What were you doing there, anyway? I can tell you it wasn't to help us."

Elena set her jaw. It was now time for the moment of truth. Should she divulge the Turks' secrets just to get help from her enemies? Would it be worth it? She glanced back at Rude, but he only gave her a small shrug, offering no guidance. Elena turned back to Tifa, slowly nodding to herself. She would. She owed at least this much to Reno.

She took a deep breath. "We were there on a job for some doctor who hired us out."

Tifa nodded, realization coming across her face. "Oh, that's right. The Turks are mercenaries now."

Elena expected the words to hide some sort of jeer and was nonplussed when they didn't. She shrugged it off and continued. "This doctor, Nygel Something-or-rather, wanted us to swipe Black Materia from his own lab. A real loon. Then he told us to give it to Reeve."

Tifa nearly did a double-take. Black Materia? This was bad. That thing had nearly destroyed the Planet once and now it was on the loose? She shook her head but continued on trying to find out what the Turks wanted. "So, you're saying that in essence you were hired by Reeve?"

Elena shrugged. "I don't know who hired us. It could have been Reeve, but the doctor could've also been scared out of his mind and pulled a name out of thin air. All I know is that when we got there, you had already started fighting the Shinra. Some time in that confusion, Reno got it in his head to help you and pulled off a coupla shots at Aeris. He was taken down doing that. We never found the Black Materia. We don't know where Reno is."

Tifa bit her lower lip, thinking over Elena's story. It fit the scenario too well to be false, but something told her that Elena wasn't telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth. She arched an eyebrow, expectantly. "And? What happened that you aren't telling me?"

Elena inwardly cursed, glancing back at Rude. She had hoped that she wouldn't have to divulge this little secret, but they needed Tifa's trust too much not to. What she said next could either gain that trust or destroy whatever trust they had already attained.

Elena cleared her throat. "Actually, there was a misunderstanding."

Rude groaned. "Oh, cut the crap, Elena," he growled. "Miss Tifa, I am truly sorry for my actions, but it seems as though I blew a hole through that mog Reeve's little cat is always running around on. You have my deepest regrets."

Tifa covered her mouth with one hand in surprise. She hadn't been expecting that to be the rest of it. And she wouldn't have expected them to tell her. The Turks must really need help, she thought, her gaze shifting from between them. Turk and truth are not two words I would normally associate with each other. She nodded.

"I don't know why, Rude, but somehow I believe you are being sincere. I trust you. I'll help you."

The breath Elena finally realized she had been holding escaped her lungs in a whoosh. She struggled to maintain her cool. "Thank you, Tifa."

Tifa managed a small smile. "Don't thank me, yet. We still have to find Reno." She grabbed the Turk by the arm, pulling her out of the bar and down the hall. "Tell me about this Black Materia..."

Yuffie frowned from where she was hiding, slowly opening the door leading out into the bar. Black Materia? Gawd! She

couldn't believe it. She had swiped the Black Materia from the laboratory and out from under the Turks' noses? Unbelievable. But she couldn't give them the materia; she couldn't trust them easily with it. After all, this was the junk that had nearly destroyed the entire Planet. She hurried out of the Seventh Heaven.

~*~

"Cid?"

Cid didn't stray away from his work to look for the voice. He knew who it was; it was the one person who had managed to imprint the Highwind with the putrid stench of her bile. It had taken weeks for him to get the pleasant aroma of oil and grease back into its rightful place. He continued welding down the connection between the fuselage and the wing, sending a spray of sparks into the air.

"Cid!"

He clicked the blowtorch off, removing the protective covering from his face, turning to face the persistent annoyance. "Go away, Yuffie. I don't have any materia."

She didn't leave but, instead, sat down on top of a crate filled with scrap metal and bits and pieces of the plane. A wide grin was painted on her young face. "I know. I stole it all already at that laboratory. Do you want it back?"

He pulled himself out from under the Gay Boat, examining the job he had just finished. He set the blowtorch on top of the wing. "Keep it," he said absentmindedly. "Materia won't work against the woman we're fighting. But you ain't the truthful, repentant type, so why don't you tell me why you're here?"

Yuffie cringed. "Actually, I was wondering if you could do a favor for me?"

Cid pulled a cigarette from his pack, sitting it in his mouth but not lighting it. "Depends on what it is."

"Hide this somewhere." She held up a small blue-black sphere, its curves twinkling in the light. He didn't need to ask to know what it was. He hid his shock.

"Where'dya get it?" he asked.

Yuffie shrugged. "I found it."

Cid chuckled. "I'm sure you did." He immediately sobered at the sound of Aeris' voice. Take it. Give it to someone you trust, someone Aeris can't touch. Instinct was screaming at him to throw the materia into the deepest ocean, but he nodded solemnly. "Give it here, and I'll mail it to someone when we get back to the Seventh Heaven."

Yuffie grinned. "Sure, but you gotta tell me who it is. It's still my materia, y'know."

He shrugged. "Whatever."

"Yuffie, can I speak with Cid alone for a moment?" Tifa winced as Cid visibly stiffened at the sound of her voice. Yuffie glanced between them before hopping off of the crate. She started walking away but broke into a run when she thought they weren't looking.

Cid turned around to look at Tifa. "Yes?"

She shifted her weight from one foot to another, breaking her gaze. Red burned at her face as she stammered for words. "I didn't mean to... I mean, I was angry... I didn't mean to take it out on you..." She trailed off, looking back into those horrible Mako eyes. She wasn't expecting them to be glowing with mirth. Her brow furrowed in anger. "And I'm sorry! And I was

wrong! Are you happy?" she growled.

He chuckled, a broad grin lighting up his features. "You've never told me you were wrong before," he declared. "I didn't think you had it in you."

She half-shrugged. "But you did ruin my bar. You're lucky that blood didn't soak into the floor 'cause I'd be out here killing you instead of apologizing."

"That's nice." He nonchalantly picked up the blowtorch, re-igniting the flame. He brought the edge of the flame to the end of his cigarette, lighting the smoke before snuffing out the blowtorch.

God, you're weird, Aeris declared.

Tifa's brow furrowed. "You are strange."

Cid grinned again, laughing at both their words. Tifa pursed her lips. "What's so funny?" she asked.

He shook his head, unable to smother the smile on his face. "Nothin'."

Neither said anything, listening to the waves crash against the shore in the distance. The wind blew across the plain, ruffling their hair and clothing. Silence reigned, though it was not as uncomfortable as some of the silences they often shared.

"Cid?"

He glanced up from the ground at the sound of her voice, taking the cigarette from his mouth and blowing a trail of smoke into the breeze. He flicked the ash from the end of it before returning it to his mouth. "Yeah?"

"Elena and Rude came to the bar today, and they asked for my help," she explained. "I said I would give it to them." She stopped, waiting for any type of input he might give her.

He merely shrugged. "So? It's not like they're still working for Shinra, and if they were, they'd be working for Reeve. What's the problem?"

Tifa smiled smally. "Well, you see, Barret's gonna get pissed when he hears..."

Cid nodded in understanding, a grin coming to his face. "I know. Just forget it. I think he has deep-rooted psychological problems that begin with his obsession with Mr. T. 'I pity da foo' who wears blue suits.' 'I pity da foo' who don't watch Fat Albert.' 'I pity da foo' who ate my Mr. T cereal.' "

Tifa shook her head but laughed nonetheless. "One of these days, he's gonna hear what you say about him, and I'll pity da foo' who insults Barret."

"Who's insulting Barret?" he asked, his most innocent expression painted on his face. "I was talking about someone else." "Yeah, right. I believe you."

Cid grinned. "Good, 'cause that way Barret'll never know any of my smartest insults."

Tifa grabbed his arm. "They're not smart; you're just stupid," she said, though there was no sting hidden in her voice. She started pulling him back to where she had tied the chocobos. "Come on, let's go meet the Turks."

"Are you back again?" Reno asked, glancing at her as she walked into the doorway. He groaned, leaning against the stark wall of the cell. "I was rather hoping you'd carry out my wishes and just... die."

Scarlet smirked, but her eyes were cold. "Well, I wouldn't want to disappoint you by not disappointing you."

Reno just shrugged at her words, too tired to bother to voice any smart remarks. She waited for one and was surprised when he didn't take the bait. She hid her shock well, merely standing in the doorway. She made no move to enter the room.

"You're losing your touch, Reno," she declared, smoothing a wrinkle out of her tight dress. "I was expecting another one of your delightful charms." She ran a hand over her hair, checking to make sure it was in perfect order. "No matter. I'm after a bigger man now."

Reno merely gave her a sideways glance. "The mog's over in the corner. You're free to have him. He's not a big conversationalist, though."

Cait Sith looked openly hurt at Reno's words. "That's not nice. You're being inconsiderate to Mog's feelings." The mog growled an assent.

Reeve grinned. "Cait Sith, I'm sure that Scarlet isn't really after your mog. She'd much rather prefer to have Palmer. Two men and a half can fit into him."

Scarlet raised her eyebrows, looking at Reeve with a glint of menace in her dark eyes. "Reeve, have you been taking lessons from Reno, or did you have the brains to think of that yourself?"

Reeve shrugged. "You'd be surprised at the insults my mind can think of."

Scarlet sniffed indignantly. "It's always the quiet ones." She turned her gaze back to all the occupants of the room. "However, I did not come here to exchange insults."

"Could've fooled me," Reno muttered.

Her angry gaze snapped to him. "Watch your step, Reno. You're already on my *&%\$ list." She cleared her throat. "I came because of a little favor for a friend of mine."

Reno's brow creased as if to tell her that he didn't care why she had come. She knew he didn't care at the moment. He would soon enough.

She sauntered into the room, her steps small due to her tight dress and high-heeled shoes. "It has been brought to my attention by this friend of mine that you have disgraced her and, worse yet, injured her. Not very chivalrous, Reno."

"You can send her my regards," he said dryly.

Scarlet shook her head. "No, she doesn't want your regards. She probably would like to see you dead, but, alas, it will not be so. You are my prisoner, after all. However, it would not do to have her angry with me considering our shaky coalition. Therefore, Reno, I must do something." She walked next to him, her heels allowing her to stare face to face with him and not be dwarfed by his height. "What shall I do?"

"Like I care?" he asked, even though her question was clearly rhetorical. "Shoot me, kick me, whatever. Just make it quick. I hate long waits."

"So do I." She brought a clenched fist back and punched him across the jaw. He fell back, tripping over his own feet and

hitting the floor with a thud. The air exited his lungs in a whoosh, and he heard a clear ringing in his ears. The iron taste of blood filled his mouth, the crimson liquid dribbling down his cheek from a split lip.

Scarlet loomed over him like the ominous cloud which drowned the light from the sun and smothered the life from terra. She cast a shadow over his face, darkening the world from his eyes. He wiped the blood from his lower lip with his hand as he pushed himself back up. Her foot came down onto his chest, the needle thin heel of it boring painfully into his breastbone.

"You, Reno, are the hungry puppy that gets beaten yet continues to get up and beg for scraps," she hissed. "Stay down."

She pulled her foot off of his chest, turning around in a frenzy of color. Her hair flared away from her head as she turned and bounced as she walked quickly to the door. She pushed the guards out of the cell before leaving herself. The door slammed behind her, ringing through the small cell with a metallic clang that somehow shattered all their fervent hopes and wishes of ever escaping.

~*~

"I object to this course of action," Barret declared, his expression dark with mistrust and anger. "How do we know we can trust 'em?!"

Tifa shook her head, sharing a knowing glance with Cid. She had foreseen this; she had known that Barret would not like this plan. It was a good idea, an excellent alliance, and perfectly sound. Of course Barret wouldn't like the plan. Tifa sighed.

"Barret, you don't have to live with them or even share a meal with them. Hell, you don't even have to trust them," she said. "They came to us for our help. They're under our control, if you'd prefer to see it that way. But I think we owe our help to at least Reno. He did, after all, save me."

Barret snorted. "That shot coulda been from anywhere."

"But it wasn't. So, regardless of whether you're gonna help me or not, I'm going to help them."

"Even if it means losing Cloud?" he asked, his brown eyes cold.

Tifa frowned, her own tawny gaze freezing over like a puddle in winter. Her brow furrowed with anger. "That's a cheap shot," she growled.

"The hell it is!" He leaned closer to him. "Stop bein' a damn hypocrite. Ya know ya ain't gonna stay here and find Reno. Ya owe it ta him ta get the rest of us helpin' them Turks, but ya don't owe it enough ta help 'em yourself. Cloud means more ta you than Reno ever will, and I know that, and Red knows that, and Cid knows that. And you know that."

Tifa looked away from Barret, unable to hold his gaze. She felt her face burning with embarrassment and shame. He was right. Nothing Reno, or anyone for that matter, could do would make her place him higher in her heart than Cloud. It wasn't his fault or Cloud's fault. Just hers.

After an awkward moment of silence passed before Tifa cleared her throat to speak. "I guess this means you think I'm selfish." She glanced at him. "And I am."

Barret placed a comforting, gentle hand on her shoulder though he towered over her like the thunderous peak of a mountain. The anger was seemingly gone from him, and a small smile lit his lips, gone almost before it had appeared. "Ya ain't selfish. Ya just love him. Me? I would have anything for my Marlene, probably even if it meant leaving a couple of yous out to dry. #@\$\$, Tifa, ya can't decide who ta love; it just happens."

Tifa nodded slowly. "But I am being selfish, right? First and foremost, I owe it to Reno to help him out."

Barret merely shrugged. "That's nothing you can't repay atta later date. Reno's gonna be around for a long time. Turks are damn hard to kill."

She looked up to the face of the man beside her, a sudden hope coming to her eyes. "What are you saying?"

A grin formed on his features, broadly shining through his normal grim tones. "Ya do whatcha have ta, and so will I. Break the team up. I'll help out your Reno; go get Cloud." He shrugged at his sudden change of heart. "Get there as fast as ya can, 'cause this here train's never going to catch up with 'em if ya keep makin' stops."

~*~

The table was immaculate, beautifully set due to hours of tedious and meticulous work. Shimmering silver lined with gold lay perfectly placed beside the delicate china. Whitened wax burned brilliantly in sterling candelabras, the light from their wicks glimmering at the edges of the crystalline glasses and the clear liquid within them. The mouth-watering aromas of delicious foods wafted through the air like the salt on a sea breeze, concentrated yet not overpowering, strong yet not unpleasant.

Despite all the pleasing foods and tranquil atmosphere, there were thousands of places Cloud Strife would rather be. He would even prefer to be back in the darkness of the North Cave, absolute in his loneliness... no, not there, not there; never again would he dance for someone else like that. Never again.

Puppets dance for masters... why can't you see?

He shook his head as if to rid himself of the voices – or voice, more appropriately – that haunted him now. Was it the voice of the mighty Sephiroth, attacking his mind with the spirit of evil, shadowing his hopes, shattering his dreams? He didn't know, but Cloud didn't want to fight these battles against a foe who could neither be hurt nor expelled from his thoughts. He was tired of the insults and the lies that this voice hurled at him from the darker portions of his mind.

Lies or truths?

Wicked laughter echoed between Cloud's ears, an infinite cackle that somehow seemed borne on the wings of the past but was a constant reminder of the future to come. Of what he was to become if he let himself slip into the darkness like he had at the North Cave. He wouldn't let that happen. He couldn't.

"You're not eating," came a voice. "Why not? Scarlet was kind enough to bring a little extra. Eat."

His gaze snapped up from the plate of delicacies and fine gourmet, meeting with the eyes of his captor, ice blue on sparkling emerald. His face hardened in silent anger, a frown forming on his lips.

"I'm not hungry," he declared darkly. He felt like the little boy dressed up neatly in his finest to have dinner with too snippy aunts, anxiously waiting to be released and freed back to his life of romping around in the dirt and mud. If it was at all possible, his expression grew more ominous. "May I be excused?"

"No, you may not," Aeris snapped. "Not until you clear off your plate."

Cloud's frown widened. "You know there's a distinct difference between hunger and appetite. If everyone ate in accordance to their appetite, we'd all be fat blobs sitting around on our asses and watching soaps all day. I'm not hungry."

Aeris stood, slamming her silverware down onto the lace tablecloth. "Fine! Starve then. Do you see what I have to put up with?! He's like a little child willing to do anything just to spite me!"

Scarlet gave Aeris half of a smile, her painted lips quivering. She nodded her head smally, raising an eyebrow as she looked

over to Cloud. "I see, Aeris. I can really sympathize with you. I'll gladly take him off of your hands."

Aeris frowned. "I bet you would."

"And what's it to you?!" Scarlet demanded, rising as well. "You obviously can't appreciate him." The smirk returned to her face, and she winked at Cloud. "I can."

Cloud squirmed, a sudden pit of dread welling up in his stomach. He had faced countless dangers and somehow managed to come out on top, but that little gesture frightened him more so than most feral beasts. He looked anxiously for any way to escape.

"And what do you mean by that?!" Aeris demanded, her face clouded with anger. Her voice lowered to a quieter and far more dangerous level. "Just what are you insinuating?"

Scarlet laughed shortly. "You know exactly what I mean." Her face became stone, harder than the marble on which she stood. "He's too much of a man for you."

Aeris frowned, her brow furrowing and her eyes narrowing. "So what does that mean to you? If he's too much of a man for me, he must be a helluva lot more than you can handle."

"You bitch," Scarlet growled, clenching her hands into fists.

"Slut."

Scarlet's features softened. "Why, thank you."

"You would take that as a compliment, you two gil whore."

"And what are you? At least I don't have to kidnap my men."

Aeris snorted. "What was that stunt with Reno? A walk in the park?"

Scarlet frowned. "He was an enemy. Enemies get captured and taken prisoner."

"And have you make googly eyes at them," Aeris added, small smirk twitching her lips. "And then some."

"So I know how to have a good time. More than I can say for you. You're idea of a good time is the rack and a hot poker."

Aeris' will snapped, her anger overcoming her. "Tramp," she snarled, lunging forward. She rammed into Scarlet, her nails biting deeply into Scarlet's flesh. They both went down in a collection of shrieks and yowls.

Cloud watched the fight, wide-eyed until it finally came to blows. Then, he saw that this was his chance for escape. Slowly, he stood from his chair and started walking from the hall in which they had been eating.

Aeris gave Scarlet one more whack to the head before she stood, wiping the blood from a split lip. Her gaze landed on Cloud's empty seat, her eyes widening in surprise before narrowing again in anger. She turned back to Scarlet who was just now attempting to regain her composure as she struggled into a kneeling position.

"You bitch," Aeris growled. "Look at what you've done! You've let him get away."

"Me? You're the one who started the argument."

Aeris frowned. "You would blame me for this situation. Scarlet, my dear, you're trying my patience." Her blue staff appeared in her hands, forming from the very air. "He is mine." Before Scarlet could so much as scream, the blue staff, crackling with energy, sliced deeply into her neck, cutting through tendons and bones, slashing her trachea and her spinal cord. Blood slowly oozed from the wound, flowing from her severed veins and arteries as her headless body toppled to the ground. Her head rolled several feet away, her lifeless eyes staring into eternity, slightly widened in surprise.

Aeris rose, the staff disappearing from her hands in a few wisps of blue. "Cloud!"

~*~

Cloud stopped in his tracks as Aeris' cry echoed through the arching halls and empty rooms of the City of the Ancients. The sheer ferocity of the call was enough to freeze his blood and twist his innards. And then he started running.

It was a while since the last time he had been in this city. She had died, then, and he would have given anything to have her back alive. Now there was nothing he wouldn't do if it meant her death. Nothing. And somehow that scared him. Was it because he was no better than Sephiroth? Was he just like him? His legs pumped faster, ignoring the small stab of pain where the gunshot had been partially healed by Aeris. And he ran.

You're weak. Weak, weak, weak... scared of that weakness...

Cloud shook his head in a silent denial, his lungs burning as he pushed himself far beyond his limits. It couldn't be true. He couldn't be another Sephiroth, so tired of being used, of being a puppet that he would wish someone dead. Had he always been like this? He ran, but the questions and fears would not disappear. They were always there; they were forever haunting him like he was some animal waiting to be poached. He could not run; he could not hide. There was nowhere to go when you were running from yourself.

He ran around a corner and met with a flash of blue right in the face.

Pain exploded in his head as he fell backwards, hitting the ground with a ringing blaring through his ears. Whatever breath he had left in his body exited his lungs as he fell, leaving him gasping for breath. The salty iron taste of his blood mingling with his sweat ran over his lips, the obvious source his nose.

He was afraid to look up, all too aware of what he would see. He knew who would be there with her face hard with anger and her eyes narrowed dangerously with her rage. He knew what was coming. And he braced himself for it. He was not surprised when the first blow landed.

"How could you do that to me?"

Cloud didn't respond, cringing and closing his eyes against the biting pain that accompanied the blue light. But by closing his eyes, he was only facing a more dangerous foe. Darkness crept up on his mind bringing with it the very nightmares that had awakened Cloud at night gasping for breath. The green drowning...

~*~

"Well, what dya think?"

Tifa slowly sucked in her breath, her gaze flitting over the monstrosity in front of her. The Tiny Bronco – well, Gay Boat – had had a complete refitting and sported a new structural design. The propellers on the wings had been flipped around to face the front of the plane. The cockpit had been expanded to fit three, even if it was a bit squished. The bright apple red color was faded and washed away to a more delicate pink. Gleaming metal mottled the places where Cid had patched the body. It wasn't bad, but it didn't look very sturdy.

Vincent cleared his throat, scratching the back of his head. "It's delightfully tacky, yet somehow unrefined," he declared,

looking over the plane. Tifa glanced at him while Cid beamed at the praise his brainchild was receiving.

Tifa was not as willing to accept the plane. "Are you sure it'll fly?" she asked, watching the grin fall from Cid's features.

"Sure it will. That wing ain't gonna fall off again, either." He pushed and pulled the one wing, rocking the entire plane. "See? No problems."

"No problems?" Yuffie blurted. "Look at the paint job. It looks like a blind man did it!"

Cid frowned. "It faded, alright?" He glanced at the plane, grimacing at the puce-pink that it sported. "It's reminiscent of your time aboard the Highwind. They call this color 'Ode to Yuffie'."

Yuffie wrinkled her nose but kept her mouth shut. Barret raised his eyebrows in doubt, slowly shaking his head. "I dunno. It doesn't look like it'll fly."

The pilot sighed, rubbing his brow. "It's either this or wait for the Highwind's engines to start working again. It'll fly, trust me. Besides, you've the best pilot in the entire Midgar Area to fly you there." He held up his hand to cut any comment that Barret was about ready to blurt. "Don't insult me, please, Barret."

"The wing fell off you said?" Red asked, closely scrutinizing the structure of the plane. "Are you sure it will hold against the stress during the flight?"

As if on cue, the entire group started bickering and talking, the noise level around the plane rising considerably. Even the chocobos chirped and scratched at the earth in an attempt to gain attention.

Tifa shook her head, massaging her temples of an ache which had settled there. This was getting nowhere fast. Red blabbed on about the durability of the plane while Yuffie wailed about the color. Barret and Cid seemed to be stuck in a argument of whether or not the plane would actually make it off the ground. In fact, the only one who didn't seem affected at all by the overpowering rabble was Vincent, but that was to be expected. He was always the cool one. Right now, Tifa could feel her anger slipping away quite quickly.

"Shut up!"

All the people gathered there stopped talking, mid-sentence, and turned their attention to Tifa. She felt her face burning but didn't apologize or back down. She needed to be a leader now, for Cloud.

"Alright," she said. "That's better. Now, here's the way it's gonna work. There's six of us here. We'll break the group in half, so there's gonna be two groups of three. One group will go to the City of the Ancients to look for Cloud —"

"Why there?" Yuffie asked. "I mean, how do ya know to go there?"

Tifa shook her head and didn't answer her question. "It doesn't matter, Yuffie. You're going to stay here as part of the second group which will break Reeve and Cait Sith out of the slam." She raised her hand. "No buts, Yuffie."

Cid grinned. "Yeah, I don't want the Ode to Yuffie to become authentic." Barret and he broke out into laughter which was abruptly cut off by a glance from Tifa. Cid cleared his throat and shuffled his feet, joined shortly by Barret.

"You guys are worse than two street boys," Tifa scolded. "Show some respect. It's not her fault she gets motion sickness. Apologize."

"Sorry," Cid muttered. He felt like he was back in high school and got caught at a prank. A smile broke through his supposed shameful expression.

Yuffie's brow furrowed, a pout forming on face. "What're you grinning at?"

"Nothin'. I was just thinking about prank I pulled in high school." At her questioning glance, he cleared his throat. "Ah, there was a bunch of clubs, you know, basic stuff. And I, naturally, participated in a club devoted to the wonders of aeronautics. But there was always this damn wuss group hanging around and revving up their hot rods or whatever the hell they were. They had little cubby-type things they kept all their tools and crap in. So, I decided to throw their lockers out of the top story of the school and into the snow as a winter break gift."

Tifa raised her eyebrows questioningly. "And?"

Cid looked thoughtful for a moment. "And it would've worked, too, but I didn't take into consideration the wind factor." Barret snorted. Cid gave him a sideways glance.

"Wind factor, my ass," he declared, crossing his arms.

"Mine too," Cid agreed. "I put a locker through one of their windshields. They were pissed. The principal gets on my case, yelling and screaming 'bout the school having rules and crap. So this skinny little wuss guy gets out there and starts jabbering at the principal about a straight wind, getting all technical. The principal's freakin' clueless, everybody's yelling, and I finally ended up with two months of detention."

"Is there a moral to this story?" Vincent asked, an utterly vacant look in his eyes.

Cid shrugged. "Actually, yeah. If I hadn't gotten caught, I probably wouldn't be here. That wuss guy was Palmer."

"Ya mean Palmer wasn't always fat?" Barret asked incredulously.

"Nah. He was a skinny ass, too."

Yuffie frowned. "Man, you guys had all the fun! In my school, they won't even let you pull the fire alarm between classes!" Red XIII cleared his throat. "Uh, I think we're all out here for a mission," he said, his one eye looking from person to person, "regardless of what you were allowed to do in class."

Tifa nodded. "Red's right. Where was I?"

"The Ode to Yuffie," Cid interjected. Yuffie shot him a menacing glare that he promptly chose to ignore. "Yuffie's stayin' here."

"Okay," Tifa rubbed her hands together, cracking her knuckles. "Red, it's obvious that the Gay Boat won't accommodate you comfortably. You can either live with that for a couple hours, or you can stay here as well."

Red sat back on his haunches, a sheepish grin on his face. "I think I'll stay. I have a feeling whoever goes is going to get a bath."

Cid turned a glare reminiscent of Yuffie's on Red which the beast ignored. "It'll fly." He crossed his arms over his flight jacket. "You guys have no faith."

"It takes more than faith to fly across an ocean," Red argued.

"It doesn't matter," Tifa ordained. "I like a good swim now and then." Cid frowned but didn't say anything. "I guess that means you're with us, Vincent seeming how Barret's leading the second group. You okay with that?"

Vincent merely shrugged, swinging his cape behind him. "Doesn't matter."

"Can you swim?" Red asked, his tail whipping the ground in merriment.

Cid's face turned an interesting shade of dark red, and he shook violently with his anger. "You *#\$&@# &%)#@*-\$^@*! I'm gonna kill you!"

Red XIII's grin was washed away as the pilot lunged for him, and he turned tail and pounced away. Cid grabbed the beast's foot as he struggled to start running. "You think you're just gonna insult my Gay Boat and get away with it?! Never!"

Red kicked a mouthful of dirt into Cid's face, causing the pilot to curse again as he spit it from his mouth. "You &*\$#@%!" he yelled as Red started running. He staggered to his feet. "Get your ass back here!" They both disappeared behind a crest in the plains, invisible except for an occasional yelled obscenity. The rest of the group stood there in stunned silence. The chocobos cooed to themselves as though they were laughing at some private joke. Although the group didn't know what it was, they soon followed suit.

Except for Vincent who quietly turned away, the hurt growing within him like a bottomless pit. Lucrecia kept coming back at him, an relentless thought that would never let him be. He couldn't laugh with them. His soul was far too scarred to be healed by simple laughter.

~*~

...feel small? weak, pathetic... fool...

not pathetic... not weak... not foolish

...nothing? not strong, either... what are you?

...

proud? ... ha! proud cloud, proud cloud thunders... rains... lights...proud cloud cries teardrops for his mother...

...your mother...

...for his love...

...your death...

...for his life...his life is shorter than the air...life is the air which is no life at all but fervent wishes by peasants for his storms to go away...

the world is cruel, demon...you're dead...

am i? stupidity was a strong point...i'll live on forever with my mother...what have you got?

...

no love... no life... hatred, anger, weakness? pride... proud cloud was always too proud to leave without a show of light electricity scraping through the air... destroy those peasants... free the hatred bottled up with a downpour of rain floods a clap of thunder for their fears a flood for their fields a gust of wind to blow them away until all they have left is those shattered hopes for a good year... good year for storms... how many die?

... no one dies... i'll not kill...

proud cloud is always a constant... unrelenting... unsympathetic... ready to kill... ready to flood...destroy, maim, kill, hunt them down with your rains pounding upon their heads filled with fervent hopes turned to desperate wishes for relief from proud cloud stays forever... destroy their unsympathetic voices with your anger... shout louder at them until they listen... don't let them win...

... i won't let them win... never win... i'll win, i'll show them there's more to me than pretty summer nights...than sparkling lights reflected from my depths... gaze upon my fatal beauty... i'll show you...

you will? weaknesses... proud cloud is blamed for deaths, proud cloud won't stay forever... fickle thing...

...i'll never die...

...you won't live forever... light will come... cold will come... night will come... pain-filled losses and mourners crying for their dead... you won't live, you'll won't keep fighting...

...

they'll be others... stronger... better... no false pride, no soiled dignity to crush... no untrue strengths to wade through on the search for a falsified truth... no pain...

... my pain...

... your pain... you deserve it... proud cloud's too proud to cry... are you crying?

...

you will... you will...murderer of innocents, destroyer of purity, prophet to lies... kill those you love with your rage... kill those close to you with your hatred... you suffer so shall they...

...no... that's not true...

look at your truth... gaze into that mirror into your soul, your foul wicked soul, hell-bent on vengeance, knee-bent to pride...

i'm not like that...

saw your reflection? i saw it... so little hope for life in that twisted image upon the wall protecting yourself comes crumbling down and i saw you there... destroyer...

...i'm not...

neither am i, but there will be more after me and after you disgrace the name with your death and your pride... no hope left... so little hope left in this world at all...what are your hopes?

i have no hope... no hope for anyone... the world is a just a group of oppressed people sitting around in their privates hells waiting for someone to lift them from the dirt and the dust before they crumble to bones...

...

what are your hopes?

a pessimist in our midst... who will be that fool trying to help a world of people too weary and scarred by life to help themselves... will it be you? you'll be the flood that will scar them and hurt them and kill them and drown them until there

is nothing left and you are alone...

i won't...

you will... i did... once i had strength... now i have less than those fatigued warriors standing up against the forces of life... they say only the strong will survive, but it is always the weak that will kill you...

who are you?

no one... i used to have a name, just like i had a face and mind filled with life and happiness... no more... nothing is the same, proud cloud to ride on free in the air... no more spring rain...no more happiness for me... nothing... not one bloody thing...

i'll not be like you...

ha! little man wants to be big... you can't stop this...your pride will have you my dear, dear friend, as anger had the black-caped man and power had me... it was all for nothing...

who are you?

...

who? tell me...

...proud, proud cloud, put your head on my shoulder and cry for awhile... i am you and you are me and we are one and the same... somehow the same...surprisingly different yet somehow the same.

i don't want to be like you... i'll have happiness...

...in solitude with no one to love you and your stupid, stupid hurt... you'll die sooner or later alone and lonely, cold and hurt, no loving fire to help you... they all leave sooner or later... we all do...

who are you?

...

...

...proud cloud ready to pour his wrath upon the world...

...

...my proud, proud cloud...vengeance is best served cold...

~*~

Cait Sith hummed quietly to himself as he stuffed a wad of cotton back into his mog's stomach. "Hold on there, buddy," he muttered, breaking the song. "I'll get ya fixed in no time. You'll be stitched up and rearing to go!"

Although he tried not to show it, he was actually devastated by the injuries his mog had received. Never in his existence – seeming as he didn't particularly have a life – had he felt so helpless to do anything. He had never felt so open, so torn; he had never felt this small on top of his mog. Now, he was the little insect easily squashed beneath the heel of a boot. He hated this feeling.

"Don't take it out on me," Reeve declared, throwing his hands up in exasperation. "I'm not the one who got you here!"

Reno frowned, his face darkening. "What the hell are you talking about?!" he demanded. "You signed us that job!"

Reno's frown became mirrored on Reeve's face. "What are you talking about? I haven't done any business with you since before I got the company."

The Turks' frown disappeared, a sudden realization coming over him. He punched the wall angrily. "That asshole! I'm gonna kill him."

"Who?"

"Nygel Huiji – Doctor Nygel Huiji."

Reeve raised his eyebrows in disbelief. "Nygel Huiji? Are you sure?"

Reno frowned again. "I think I'd remember the name of a geek who just conned me. Damn, what the hell's Elena gonna think?"

The ex-Shinra President sat down on the cot with a sigh, mulling over his thoughts. "What was the job?"

The cot squeaked in protest as Reno sat down next to Reeve. "We were supposed to swipe some Black Materia from his labs and give it to you."

"Really?" A smile began forming on Reeve's features as a new thought sprung to his mind. "Maybe she doesn't have to know that I didn't sign you that job."

"What're you talking about? Just tell me and stop dancing around the subject."

"Bear with me for a second, Reno. Black Materia is decidedly bad, correct?" Reno nodded. "We wouldn't want that falling into the wrong hands such as those of Aeris or Scarlet, also correct. So just stick to the original plan. Find the Black Materia and bring it back to me. I know someone we can trust who won't lose it."

Reno leaned back against the wall, stretching his feet out in front of him. His head was starting to pound again, a slow rivulet of blood running from a cut on his brow. He paid it no heed. "That's assuming we ever get outta here, right? The odds of that happening ain't looking in our favor."

Reeve shrugged. "Never stopped a Turk before."

Cait Sith turned back to them, an object in hand. He had stuffed it in his mog at the fight and had forgotten about it until now. A smile was lighting up his face almost as wide as Cosmo Canyon. He held it out for them to see.

"Won't stop one now," he declared, doing a little dance of victory.

Reeve and Reno exchanged surprise glances. "What the hell?" Reeve asked, bewilderment in his eyes. "Where'd you get that?"

And then Reno grinned, shaking his head slowly. "Why you little thief..."

~*~

Tifa watched the sunrise on the horizon, a beautiful portrait of color and light so exquisite and seemingly pure that it was breath-taking. The sun peeked over the edge of the grassy plain, kissing her cheeks with its warmth, its light sparkling in

the golden blades of grass. It was a symbol of hope, a new day in which she could dream of finding her love. It was a symbol of new life.

She felt no elation.

For while the sun shined warmly upon her, its red light bloodied the sky, a vile picture of the fields turning crimson. And for while the warm sun beat down upon her face, she felt nothing but the cold chill of being alone. Cloud was gone; she might be chasing her own tail, following ghosts on her false hopes that he was near. He might be dead. Or worse.

Mideel. She remembered that event though it had transpired months ago. What had he done to deserve this harsh treatment by the fates? He was constantly lost, not in the physical sense of the word. His mind was scarred beyond repair. He could never know his true self. She could never know him either. Was he really Cloud Strife or just some figment of her imagination born in some test tube in Hojo's lab? Who was he?

She wished she could help him, but the true Cloud – if there had ever been one – had died that day in Nibelheim. She couldn't help him. Not when he was fighting his own mind. She couldn't hide him or fight him or even run away. She was drawn to him like a moth to flame, and she was scared that one day he would burn her so badly that she would just shrivel up and die. She was so scared, but he needed her, and she loved him.

God, how she loved him.

There was nothing that could stand between them, even if Cloud wasn't Cloud. But if Cloud wasn't Cloud, then whom did she love? That thought had been forced into her mind by the small portion of her that was a cold realist over and over again. Without him here, she found it invading her thoughts more and more frequently, and it scared her. What if her love was wasted on a mere puppet? What was she supposed to do?

There wasn't anything she could do. She would look for him and search for him until she wore herself down to a mere silhouette of a woman. Her heart would ache until she found him, but she absentmindedly wondered which would hurt more. The search or her findings. What if she found him like she had at Mideel? Twisted and shattered like a glass doll which had received the brunt of a mean child's anger. What if he was like that again, but there were no more pieces left to glue together with her love? He was just a broken man with less happiness than the average bum.

Or what if she never found him at all? Tears stung at her eyes. What if he ran off to be with Aeris and left her alone except for her dying memories? He wouldn't do that. He loved her, not Aeris. But what if he didn't? He had never said anything above love and had only taken her on a date once. He had to love her. He had to.

But he didn't have to and that was the point. She would run after him around the world searching for him and never finding him because he wanted to be lost. No, he couldn't want that. Not after Mideel. Never again would he want to be that broken and exposed. But it was always easier to be lost and forget all the worries of the world than to always be found and face those worries and fears and aggression.

And what if she did find him, and he didn't love her at all? Then what? That would be the ultimate slap in the face. Would she just go home crying to... to who? Nobody. Without Cloud she had nobody. Barret and Marlene and Cid and Vincent and all the others didn't matter. They weren't her family. They were only friends. Her family was dead. And Cloud was the closest person she had. If he didn't want her...

She collapsed into the sea of grass, her shaking knees refusing to hold up her weight any longer. The tears streamed down her cheeks, and she buried her face in her hands. She would find him, and they would be together, and he would love her. There was no other choice.

She didn't want to be alone.

Cloud watched a small ray of light filter in an even smaller window perched near the top of the small room. The ray floated to the ground on a whisper of air, shining on through the darkness with a dim glow that could mean anything to anybody but was a small beam of hope amidst the overpowering black. A hope that that black would not become his life, that it would not rule him. A small hope that left with the sun.

He reached out to touch the light with a shaking hand, trembling not out of fear but out of the hope of a desperate man. The light glowed softly on his hand, a warmth that seemed to be trying to comfort him. He couldn't be comforted by that warmth. Not anymore. He was lost. He could never find himself now.

And no one would search for him.

And Tifa... how could she ever want to see him again? After all the pain and hurt he caused? After all the awkward, silent moments they shared? She couldn't love him; she must hate him for all the hell through which he'd put her. He hated himself for that. He didn't know which he felt more strongly, the hate for everything he done or his hate for everything he hadn't.

The air swirled, the ray of light flickered. The light of truth that showed him the pain. Why would she look for him? He was a cursed, wretched being, shunned by his own mind. He wasn't even sure who he was. He could be a perfectly sane person destined to be hurt over and over again in his life because of some deed he had done. Or he could be just a wisp of memory that faded as fast as it appeared, slipping through the grasping fingers that clung to it.

And whose fingers were they? Were they his or hers? Was he just trying to fool himself? Maybe he was that wisp of memory, and he wanted so bad to be with Tifa that he had found one fond memory from her mind and become it. Living the past wasn't a life at all. But it was with her, and something with her was better than everything without her.

Or had she made him into someone he wasn't? Did she want him to be the Cloud Strife from her memories because she had loved that Cloud? Living a lie wasn't any better than living as a figment of the past. But it was with her. Even it wasn't him with her, he would play the part to be with her. He would do anything to be with her. He loved her even if she didn't love him, even if she loved her memories or her past and not him. It didn't matter. This light was his love, the small flicker of hope that he would find some sort of happiness in this life, regardless of whether or not it was based on the truth. The truth often hurt; he could be immune to that hurt. When your life was a lie, you had to be. You had to be.

But what if she never came? What if she bore no love for the past or for the future? What if she did hate all the strife he had caused? What if she hated him and hated Mideel and hated the truth? The hot tears stung his eyes, and he closed them in an attempt to stop himself from crying. He couldn't bear that. He couldn't live with that. To be hated by himself was one thing, but to be hated by his love was something he couldn't stand. The dejection, the loneliness.

The small ray of hope beamed down gently on his face as if to calm his frenzied mind. The hope that she would come... it was the only thing he could do. He couldn't not do anything. He had to believe that she would come rescue him from this hell. She had done it before; she must care for him. He needed to believe; he needed to have something to cling to where the walls were slick and smooth. He needed to have hope. There was nothing else. He had to hope that she loved him, that she cared for him.

The light flickered once, the warm sun slipping behind a wall of clouds. He looked up at the window as the light disappeared altogether. The room was bathed in a dim gloom, the darkness totally encompassing the corners. He sank to his knees, oblivious to the tears streaming down his face. He slowly shook his head in a silent denial, wishing the light back to help him through this. If not her, then the light would surely help him through this. But it had disappeared forever, abandoning him to his own hellish demons. He was destined to be alone, eternally damned to a life of solitude.

He hated being alone.

~*~

Vincent's eyes clouded over with his pain as he fervently wished that he could forgive himself for his sins. He wanted Lucrecia to be there with him. He wanted to feel her delicate lips brushing his cheek, her beautifully shining hair between his fingers, her soft breath on his back. But he would never feel that again. He could never see her again. She was gone. Forever.

He turned back to the present, hoping that she wouldn't come back to his thoughts like a silent doe slipping through a forest glen. He knew she would, though. She always did, and there was nothing he could do about it. He hoisted himself into the third cramped seat on the Gay Boat.

"No one's having second thoughts 'bout this, right?" Cid asked, turning around to view all the people behind him. Tifa's face was grim with her determination; Vincent's was stone to hide all the pain he felt.

"I have to find him," Tifa declared, blinking away the tears which were rapidly forming in her eyes. "I have to know."

Cid nodded. "All right, then." He turned back to the array of controls in front of him, quickly running through a mental pre-flight check. Praying he didn't miss any steps, he looked out to the grassy sea on his right side. "Clear right!" There was no one there – who would be – but Cid felt the need to have something a little more mundane than the events of the past week or so. He started the right propeller. It choked once, spinning slowly before it started humming as the blades cut cleaning through the air. A wind from the propeller blew over them.

Shortly after starting the right propeller, he started up the left, getting almost the same results. The Gay Boat was no longer the Gay Boat. The Tiny Bronco would fly again! He poured the power onto the engines, checking to make sure they would run at their maximum speed before bringing them both back to a more moderate and rather slow speed.

"You both ready?!" he called over the noise of the engines, glancing behind him. He received two nods. "Okay, here we go!"

He released the brake on the plane, sending it taxiing over the flat expanse of trampled grass before them. The speed indicator slowly rose as the plane moved faster over the plane. Cid watched it carefully, glancing at their diminishing runway. Don't tell me I made it too short! He thought furiously. Beyond the runway was a nice cliff leading to the ocean. They had better make it.

The needle rose further towards their optimal speed, quivering as the plane ran over bumps in the field. Almost there. He glanced at the drop-off around of them. It was far too close. He'd have to jump the gun and pray. He glanced back down at the little needle. It was close enough, wasn't it? Sure, it was. He looked back up ahead of him.

Blue sea stretched out. They had less than a few hundred meters before they were pancakes. It's close enough. He pulled back on the stick, grimacing as the small vehicle shook from the strain. "#\$@%!" he cursed. The plane's nose lifted from the ground, the aircraft swaying a little as it was finally airborne. The plain melting away from them, the wheels of the small ship meters from the edge of the cliff.

Stall warnings buzzed in the open air cockpit, a small light blinking on the control panel. It would shut off sooner or later as they gained height. Cid grimaced. Hopefully.

Tifa slapped him on the shoulder. He leaned back to look at her frowning face. "Why the hell'd you put the freakin' runway leading to a cliff?!" she demanded, her tone clearly disapproving.

Cid shrugged. "Sorry?"

She whacked him again. "Yeah, you'd better be. You almost got us killed before we even got to Cloud!" She leaned back in her seat, crossing her arms indignantly. So far, this trip was not going well, but she was on her way. She would find him; she wouldn't be alone, not anymore. And if he didn't love her, then so be it. But she had to try. By the last breath in her heart-broken body, she had to try.

~*~

Barret's gaze slowly took in all the people seated at the table in the Seventh Heaven, his brown eyes hard with the upcoming mission. They had to break Reeve and Reno from the Shinra jail before something bad happened to them. Barret frowned. He didn't particularly relish thought of him being on the same side as the Turks, but for Tifa's sake, he would be. He didn't have much of a choice.

He cleared his throat. "All right. We all here?" he asked, though the answer was clearly obvious. There were nods from around the table. "Good. As y'all know, we're gonna be breakin' Reno an' Reeve from the slam. Any complaints 'bout that?" There were none. "Good, 'cause I don't give a damn whatchall think, got that? This is my show, and we're gonna do this AVALANCHE style."

Elena coolly arched an eyebrow. "This should be interesting. I wonder what Reno might think," she said. "We've never done anything any way other than Turk style."

Barret glowered at her, but he could find nothing that hinted toward an insult or jeer. "All right. We're gonna go in da front door, give 'em all somethin' ta remember us by, grab Reno and Reeve, and haul ass. Any complaints?"

Once again, there were none. No one seemed to care which way they went about doing this, just as long as it got done. Yuffie barely stifled a yawn. Somehow, it seemed like they were about to do something as normal as the laundry. It was slightly unnerving.

Barret stood up, stretching out the muscles in his back. "Seeming how's there're no complaints, I'm gonna assume that y'all agree with dis course o' action. I expect no mishaps and no screw-ups. Ya got that?" Nods around the table. "Good. Keep yo cool 'til tonight. That's when the real fun begins."

~*~

"Your friends are coming," Aeris declared as she stepped from the shadows, her voice as sweet as honeydew.

Cloud recoiled from her as though she were some sort of poisonous snake, waiting for him to put his guard down so that she could strike. Or worse. She was the black widow, sizing up her mate. He shivered. He wouldn't let her close to him. Not now. Not after that last time.

very amusing, o pathetic one... pathetic one...

Cloud grimaced against the voice, frowning at the words echoing through his skull. "Go away," he muttered. "I don't want to talk to you."

Aeris mistakenly thought he was talking to her. "What? Don't you care that your friends are coming to free you from this eternal nightmare?" She reached her hand out to him. He slunk away from it. "Don't you want their help?"

He pushed his back up against the wall, slinking back into the corner. "Get away from me," he growled. "When Tifa gets her, she'll –"

"She'll what?!" Aeris snapped as she pulled her hand back. "She can't do crap to help you. I don't even know why she hangs around you. You're an ungrateful cesspool of slime, delving your own hurt until you've look at it so long your eyes start to bleed!" Her lips compressed into a thin line as her emerald eyes flashed angrily. "She probably keeps you around because it makes her feel more controlling."

there's a thought, proud cloud... what do you think?

"Shut up," Cloud snapped, his own face hardening with anger. "That's not true."

"Isn't it? Why else would someone want a worthless piece of crap like you? You certainly have a thing for hurting everyone around you. Tifa probably feels better when she can see that there's someone in this world more oppressed than her. She probably looks at you and feels strong. I know I do."

Cloud shook his head. "You're a bloody liar. I won't listen to you anymore."

Aeris frowned. "You're going to listen to me until your ears bleed, and your throat is raw from screaming at me to stop." Her features darkened over. "And do you know why you'll do this? Because I know everything. You are merely a doll beneath my fingertips to push and prod and twist and turn until I tire of you, and then you are nothing. Your friends are nothing. They will arrive here, and they will die."

The laughter echoed through the room, Aeris' and the voice within Cloud's head.

proud cloud, proud cloud, sing and dance and twist... silly puppet, silly, silly puppet, let me pull your strings... forever and always until finally in death do we part from this... proud, proud cloud, don't you see? it's all so simple, these painfully simplistic things... you the puppet, i the puppeteer, together we'll make them laugh and cheer... you the puppet and i the master, the tears will run free, the cries be our laughter... puppet, puppet, puppet, puppet, proud cloud, the puppet...

And finally, he couldn't take it anymore. "SHUT UP!" he screamed, his throat burning from the force of his cry. All the sadistic merriment stopped on the word, Aeris' laughter abruptly stopping as though cut off by the sharpest blade. The voice even quieted in his head, chuckling softly to himself in the back of Cloud's mind.

"I'm going to kill you, Aeris," he hissed, his anger seething.

Aeris stared at as though he was truly a force that could and would kill. And then, she smirked. "Maybe later, Cloud," she said sweetly. "I wouldn't want to miss the reunion. You know how touching those things are." She clutched a hand at her breast. "Right here."

She laughed as she exited the room, disappearing back into the shadows. Cloud couldn't stop the tears from flowing from his eyes as the pain of his battered body and soul returned to him, over-taking his anger easily. He fell back to the wall weakly.

"God, Tifa, don't come here," he whispered, his mind thinking up all the nasty things that awaited his friends. "Leave me alone. Don't come. Please, Tifa."

The only response he got was a bout of laughter reverberating through his skull, burning his mind with its icy cruelty. He closed his eyes in an attempt to free himself from the sound, hoping to fall into the troubled waters of his sleep.

silly puppet...

~*~

"Oh, &\$*#."

Tifa straightened at the choice words bubbling from the man seated in front of her. She leaned forward, glancing at the dizzying array of knobs and gauges littering the control panel in front of Cid. She turned her gaze on the side of his head.

"What does that mean?" she asked, a feeling of dread sinking into her stomach. She absentmindedly wondered if Red was right. Maybe this bucket of bolts really wouldn't make it. She shook the thought from her head.

"It means I just realized that I don't know where to land this piece of crap, and we don't have enough fuel to go circling around," he explained. He scratched his brow, squinting into the wind to look for their destination.

"So what? I can't even see where we're going to land."

He sighed. "It's that gentle slope on the horizon." He pointed, but it was to no avail. She didn't know what she was looking for. "We're about fifteen minutes to the shore. We should make it, but... I dunno. We might not."

Tifa sat back in her seat, startled. "What do you mean, 'We might not'? We have the fuel to get there, don't we?"

Cid tried a smile grin, but failed miserably. "I thought so. Must've hit a harder head wind than I planned for. Oh, well."

"Oh, well?" She resisted the urge to smack him. "You mean we're gonna crash, or what?"

"Probably or what. We still can make it. Trust me."

Tifa crossed her arms indignantly, silently fuming. She should have thought of this. Leave it to Cid not to pack enough gas to make it to their destination. It wasn't as if they could make a pit stop or two on the way there. She glanced back at Vincent who merely gave her half a shrug. He seemed not to care about their impending doom, but that was Vincent. She turned back to the horizon.

Her gaze searched the horizon, finally spotting the tawny beach against the blue of the sea. It was so far away; they'd never make it. If they didn't make it, Cloud would be forever lost. They had to make it to the shore. Even if she had to swim until infinity took her in its grasp, she would. It was too late to turn back because she got a little wet. She couldn't afford to even think about not making it to her destination. Cloud couldn't afford it.

The small slope got bigger and bigger in her view until she could see the breaking point of the waves, white froth bubbling from the dark blue depths. The plane started to descend at an alarming rate.

"Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn!"

Tifa forced herself not to listen constant stream of cursing from Cid, though it underlined even the sputtering of the engines, a thrumming chant. The engines coughed, caught themselves and ran smoothly.

Cid smiled smally in relief. The smile faded quickly, as another alarm displayed itself on the controls. " *&#@!"

"What is it, now?" Tifa demanded.

"Landing gear seems to have jammed itself but good. And we're running on fumes," he added. Glancing at the distance that remained to the shore and their rate of descent, he shrugged. "We probably won't need the gear."

"What?!"

He turned back to them. "We're not going to make it to the shore. We'll hit the water first. It was nice working with you guys. A real pleasure."

Tifa smacked his shoulder. "You dumbass! Did you know that this was gonna happen?"

He shook his head. "I recommend unbuckling your seat belts."

"What are you talking about?" Vincent asked, leaning forward in his seat. "I thought they were there to protect you in crashes."

"Well, depending on our angle when we hit the water, we could end up flipping forward 'cause of the force. You don't want

to be strapped into the plane when that happens. It ain't fun. And watch the bubbles."

"You've done this?" Tifa asked, incredulously.

"Sure. Lots o' times. Any good pilot can crash a plane."

"Any bad one, too," Tifa muttered, trying to quench the fear in her as the engines finally died down to nothing. The water lapped hungrily below them, the waves jumping over each other as though they waited for the plane to come play with them. The beach was not far off, the deep blue mellowing out to a more sandy, lighter color as they approached the shore. This was it.

The plane hit the water, screeching metal filling the air as though the entire plane was crying out in pain. Water sprayed everywhere, drenching all of the plane and its occupants. Tifa's heart thundered in her throat as she felt herself falling forward, though the plane still clung to her. And then they flipped into the water.

The world turned into a sickly blue shimmering as bubbles and foam erupted in her vision. Her seat belt dug painfully into her abdomen. She should have taken it off when Cid told her to. She fumbled for the latch, her movements far too slow to be natural. The plane continued to push through the water, blissfully unaware of her struggle.

Her lungs burned for oxygen, her head thrumming in time with her heart. The seat belt came undone, freeing her from this watery prison. Which way was up?! The world seemed to be a monotonous blue, darkened in every direction, the currents swirling around her as they conformed to the plane's force. All around her were the tiny crystalline sphere of little bubbles, filling her vision with their countenance and her ears with their whispering. The quiet was complete except for that whispering. It was almost as though she was once again in the Lifestream, though the whispers and giggles seemed to hold more pleasant secrets than the haunting demons of that green lake. They told her things, and it suddenly became clearer to her battled head.

Watch the bubbles.

They floated to the surface like they were tiny nymphs coming up for breath after a bout of watery games. She followed their lead, chasing after them and swimming from beneath the broken fuselage of the plane. The wing clipped her leg, and the pain threatened to return her to that panicking fear she had just overcome. She felt herself falling from the promise of the surface.

But she couldn't lose. She had to get there. Swim until infinity, remember, Tifa? she asked herself. Cloud needs me now. I have to reach him. And so she swam the desperate paddle of a oxygen-starved mind screaming for the sweetened breath of air to relieve it from this slowly suffocating, wet hug.

Her face broke the surface of the water just as she was about to relent and breathe in a mouthful of sea water. The salty liquid sputtered from her gaping jaws as the sweet air entered her lungs. She hungrily gulped it down, the homeless beggar finally eating a never-ending feast of her favorite food. There didn't seem to be enough.

Water running from her soaked hair, she scanned the lapping waters for any sign of her companions. There was none. Oh, God... She pushed that thought from her mind, slowly paddling to the shore, the cold water of the north already chilling her flesh.

"Cid? Vincent!" Only her own voice echoed back to her. The waves pushed at her harmlessly, sending her to the shores of the beach. Her feet touched muddy ground. She started walking. "Where are you?"

There was no one. No gulls sailing through the air, no cheering voices having fun at the beach. Where were they? "Cid! Vincent! Come on, don't leave me here!" Her voice cracked as her eyes frantically searched the surrounding serenity. "I don't want to be alone! Come back! No!" She choked. "Don't leave..."

Silence reigned complete as she stumbled from the water. She couldn't believe it. What cruel irony that she would be the one to reach the shores alone and have to save her love alone after all their confidence and her worry. Tifa felt something stinging her eyes but could not discern if it was her salty tears or the salty chill surrounding her. Their confidence couldn't save them.

As if to spite her, two figures burst through the sleek surface of the water.

Cid coughed, choking on the water as he clung to Vincent for support. His blond hair was matted with crimson over one side of his brow. His breathing was sporadic, more like a shaky sputtering than true respiration. Vincent merely glanced to Tifa as he pulled the other man to the shore. Blood flowed from a cut along his cheekbone, but he seemed to be relatively unhurt.

As they reached the beach, Cid stumbled and fell, getting a face full of saltwater sand. He lay there on his stomach for a moment, catching his breath, before he rolled over onto his back. He had thought he was dead... again. But she wouldn't allow that, would she? Never. She needed him. Damn her. His eyes found Tifa's and Vincent's.

"Perfect landing," he declared, following his statement up with a bout of coughing.

Vincent frowned, holding out his good hand to help the pilot to his feet. "Why didn't you tell us you couldn't swim? Damn."

Cid took a shaky breath, rubbing the cut on his brow with a pained expression on his face. "I can swim. I just can't hold my breath." He brushed some wet sand from his coveralls.

Tifa looked relieved. "I thought you two were dead," she said, realizing how that meager statement couldn't cover the panic she had felt.

"My plane's dead," Cid stated, almost oblivious to Tifa's mood. He looked at the remnants of it, slowly sinking into the depths of the sea. Debris was scattered along the water, already washing up on the shore. The sun sank behind them, casting long shadows on the ship's new grave. "Well, seeming how you're sinking, you weren't a very good boat, either. I guess that means you're just gay." He sketched a salute to the remains of his most loyal friend as she dropped silently down to her final resting place.

He didn't turn back to Tifa and Vincent for quite some time, one thought running repeatedly through his head. The lake of death from Aeris' dream, the lake of blood... it started here. The first casualty was slowly leaving this world forever.

He couldn't find it in his heart to say who was next.

~*~

"So what do you want to do?" Reeve asked, glancing at the door. The three men – well, two men and a toysaurus – hadn't quite figured out how this discovery, or thievery in accordance to Reno, could lead to their ultimate escape from this prison.

Reno glanced at the five rounds left in the magazine for what must have been the hundredth time that hour. There didn't seem to be much to do other than look over his silvery, shining Smith & Wesson 1056 which he had so recently recovered from the inside of a giant stuffed mog. He shrugged. "I dunno."

Cait Sith crossed his arms across his furry chest, his face downcast and clouded over with anger. "We're in the same position as we used to be except now we've gotta gun. Any bright ideas about how we should go about using it?"

"Well, you pull the trigger – "

"The sarcasm is unappreciated, Reno," Cait Sith declared, his tone unusually harsh for him. "What we need now is a way outta here, not your snappy remarks. You'll see how well witticism worked when you get the chance to look in the mirror." "Jeez," Reno muttered. "Someone's getting snippy over here."

"Damn right I'm getting snippy!" the cat snapped, jumping to his feet. "I'm tired of being cooped up in here like some sort of chicken, my mog is slowly degenerating into a state of total hollowness, I'm hungry, and I'm tired of hearing your stupid comments!"

"Reno's fan club is slowly deteriorating into nothingness."

All three heads snapped to the door, forgetting their own inner squabble when the red face of Heidegger and two grinning guards filled their vision. The man was dressed in another garish green suit, red and yellow military stripes decorating its lapel. His piggish eyes, encased deeply inside his square face, glowed with mirth at his own wit. Reno slapped his forehead with one hand, irritation displayed on his expression. Frowning, he raised the handgun with his left.

"Eat this, you commie bastards," he growled. He fired the gun twice, taking down both of the guards flanking Heidegger. Their smiles disappeared as the bullets drilled into their brains, ripping through their skulls like a rock through the fragile layer of ice upon a newly frozen pond. No sound emerged from their open mouths as they both toppled to the floor, lifeless.

Heidegger squeaked an oath as he fled from the room, ducking as Reno fired a shot after him. He tripped as he started down the hall, grabbing the railing of the set of emergency stairs to steady himself before climbing them. Reno frowned when the executive left the small cell, standing up quickly to give him chase.

"Get back here!" he shouted, anger clearly evident in his entire stature. He jumped over the corpses clogging the doorway and into the hall, firing another shot after Heidegger's retreating form.

"Reno!" Reeve called, exiting the room. The red-haired Turk was already down the hall, running up the steps after the Shinra executive. "Wait up! Damn." He glanced back in the room. "Cait, get your butt outta here and back to the Seventh Heaven. We'll catch you up."

The little cat was dubious as he pulled his mog to its feet. "What if I get caught again?" he asked, hustling to the door.

Reeve frowned. "Just do as I say!" he snapped. He turned heel and ran to the stairs, taking them two by two. The sound of one more shot echoed through the stairwell, reverberating off of the cold steel walls. A muttered curse was barely audible over the clanging of footsteps on the steps.

Reeve's frown deepened considerably. Someone was not happy, and Heidegger was going to feel the same way soon. Reeve turned the corner of the steps, running up the next flight of stairs. Another curse. Very soon.

~*~

Barret scratched the back of his head, staring deeply at the scene in front of him. Two guards, both looking quite bored, kept a taciturn vigil over the front doors of the Shinra building. It was quiet, and only a few of the street's urchins and solicitors bothered to even give the two guards a glance. Evidently, nothing was happening.

But it didn't feel right.

Something was up, even if the large man didn't know exactly what. It was his gut feeling, derived from years of running from the law and from the Shinra. It had saved his life and the lives of others on countless occasions during which he had terrorized the faithful followers of Shinra, Inc. It was nothing to be taken lightly.

"It's too quiet," Elena whispered softly. "I don't like it."

Barret glanced back at her. "Ya get that feelin'?" He looked back to the ominous tower looming before them. "Well, something's up."

Red XIII flicked his tail back and forth, watching the main entrance with his keen eye. "What do you want to do?" he asked. "They have little defense for the company prestigious for security. They've got to be hiding something."

Barret shrugged. "But we can't just sit here on our asses. Much as I hate that little fat ass, we oughtta see him home."

"And Reno," Elena added almost a little too fervently. Rude and Yuffie exchanged knowing glances. Yuffie held a hand to her mouth to cover up a giggle. "What?" Elena asked, noticing the exchange. "You got a problem? You can take it up with my lawyer."

Yuffie's response was to only giggle louder. Barret stifled it with a glare as cold as nails and hard as a rock. "'Nuf of that," he ordered. "We ain't gonna give ourselves away 'cause some foo' woman's laughing her head off."

Yuffie pouted, crossing her arms, offended. "I'm not a 'foo' woman'," she declared, her tone curt. She shifted from foot to foot impatiently when no one responded to her. She uncrossed her arms, annoyed. "Well, team leader, what're we gonna do? Sit here in the dark until the end of the world?"

Barret glared at her but said nothing in response to her. He tore his gaze from her and set it back on the building before him, forcing his mind back to the task at hand. "I guess we'll just wait 'til something happens."

She planted her hands on her hips, raising her eyebrows expectantly. "And if nothing does?" she asked, piqued.

Barret gaze remained glued on the top of the tower. He nodded smally, his brown eyes narrowing considerably. "Something's gonna happen, alright," he stated simply. "I can feel it. It's in the air." He stared morosely at the door. "Come on, we gotta Turk ta free."

~*~

"Now, Reno, don't you think you're being a little too hasty, here?" Heidegger glanced around him, looking for a way out of the situation but doubting he would find one. He raised his hands, gulping as he looked down the barrel of the handgun.

Reno stood before him, his dark eyes glowing with anger. Bruises around his jaw and cheekbone accentuated the foul mood and rage that was barely evident on his stone cold face. Blood slowly dribbled down the side of his head from the cut on his brow, leaving a crimson path that was almost invisible beneath his cloak of red hair.

"Why don't you put the gun down and we can talk about this like civilized beings? You know man to man?" He swallowed, gulping a mouthful of air. "You know, there must be something you want from me. I can get you anything! Anything!"

"I don't want anything from you," he said softly, his tone as empty as space yet as cold as the stars that twinkled dimly at night. "I hate you. With every beat of my heart, I'm reminded of you. With every throb of pain pulsing through my head, I'm reminded of every whack and every cheap shot you ever gave me, and I'm pissed off."

"It was a simple misunderstanding!"

Reno brought the gun up, re-aiming it and shifting his grip. "Misunderstanding? A misunderstanding. They only misunderstanding there is, is your miscomprehension of what it means when you piss a Turk off. I can give you a crash course." He stepped forward menacingly.

Heidegger stepped back, stumbling over his feet as he walked out onto the balcony. The wind whipped relentlessly at his face, biting at his hands and cheeks with the numbing teeth of cold. Heidegger would gladly spend the rest of his life in this

chill if it meant staying out of Reno's cold, angry scrutiny.

Reno stepped out after Heidegger, his aim neither faltering nor wavering. His open suit jacket slapped at his sides, his red hair flying around him like the reaching flames of a fiery sun. He was oblivious to the fact that they were standing precariously close to the edge.

"No where left to run, Heidegger," he commented, glancing down the large tower to the lit streets below with the ease of a man who knows no nervousness. "I guess you lose."

"No wait, Reno!" Heidegger urged. "Don't shoot! I didn't do anything to you; it was Scarlet. I can help you get her!"

Reno frowned. "Heidegger, there's only one thing I hate more than a fat sheep dressed in wolf's clothing. That's a little lying weasel like you dressed in wolf's clothing. Goodbye."

"Reno!"

The word cut through the bitter cold air like a whip, a loud warning. Reno wasn't visibly shaken by the harsh tone, nor was he entirely surprised to hear it. He turned his head slightly to look at Reeve. Heidegger looked as though he'd been saved by his guardian angel.

"Reeve, you gotta help me! He's gone mad!" Heidegger stumbled precariously close to the edge, a blast of wind hitting him hard. "He's a box of fruit loops!"

"Ah, shut up," Reno growled. He pulled back on the trigger.

Heidegger's heart thundered in his throat, his breath catching as Reno's finger pulled back on the trigger. God, this is it, he thought, his fists clenching. Please be kind to me in the after life. He steeled himself for the shot.

Click.

Even the howling of the wind seemed quiet underneath the pounding of his heart. I'm alive! I'm alive! He clutched as his chest, a grin coming to his face. "I'm alive!" he screamed. He jumped up and down merrily for joy. "Loser!"

"Would you shut your fat jowls?!" Reno demanded, rage breaking through his mask. In one solid motion, he brought back his left hand and threw the gun at Heidegger, catching him off guard. The gun whacked the executive in the head with a nasty crack, and Heidegger fell backwards, his arms flailing.

"No! Wait!" He lost his footing and fell from the edge of the balcony, his scream lost in the wicked wind. Reno watched expressionless.

Reeve winced, coming forward to look over the edge of the building. Barely visible in the dim lighting below on the streets was a broken figure of a man surrounded in a widening pool of crimson. He grimaced.

"Remind me, Reno, to pay the street cleaners extra?" he asked, running a hand through his black hair.

Reno sat down on the ground, his knees buckling and giving out beneath him. He held his head in his hands, shaking it slowly. "Oh, God, I can't believe I just did that," he declared. His head pounded in time with his heartbeat as a wave of nausea swept over him. He let himself fall back to cement floor. "Damn. I loved that gun."

~*~

The light broke through the green canopy of leaves, mottling the ground in brightness and in dark. Warm sunlight speckled the floor and filled the forest with its warmth, a welcomed companion for weary travelers. The chill of the North was

warded away within the confines of the greenery, for not even the coldest ice could penetrate the pleasant peace that was the forest's sovereign ruler.

But there was no sound.

No welcomed chirps filled their air, the birds having left for some other place, a better place, long ago. No crickets, no hum of insects buzzing through the shelter of leaves. No rustling of a dull breeze stirring the mottled floor of the forest. It was deathly still, as though that black floor of the woods was slowly choking the life. The small rays of light were not strong enough nor numerous enough to save the comforting noises that accompanied life.

It was a reflection of his soul.

Vincent Valentine stepped over a fallen log which was untouched by the tiny creatures of the forest that gnawed at its bark. His footfalls were soft on the mushy ground, as if the slightest sound, made by man or animal, would disturb the dark silence that hung over the forest like it would a graveyard. Even breathing could disturb it.

He wished that it didn't have to be like this, but wishes were often wasted on wells and stars; and he had run out of stars to wish on long ago. The silence was his solemnity; it couldn't be broken by even the loudest noise or the most wicked discord. It couldn't be shattered by anything short of the voice that he loved telling him that everything would be all right. Everything wouldn't be all right, that was a child's wish. Nothing could be all right. Not anymore.

He didn't know who was blame: her or himself. Surely she couldn't be at fault. She had been tricked into doing that by Hojo. She hadn't known what she had done. Or had she? What was it he had told her before she had stepped from the edge and plummeted into the falls? I can make my own decisions. I'm not a child. No, she wasn't a child. She was far from it. So, if she was at fault, why was it so damn hard not to blame himself for her death? Had she been a coward, or had he just been a failure?

He heaved a sigh, finding himself wishing once again that it wasn't as it was. But it was. There was nothing he could do about it. So what did he do? He blamed himself. Nothing more, nothing less. There was no point to what he did. There was no logic behind it, no ethics that could justify his actions. It didn't make him feel good, it didn't make him satisfied, it didn't somehow just make everything perfect. There was nothing that he could do that could do that. He did what he could, and he didn't like it.

His eyes found the back of Cid's head as the pilot ducked underneath a low branch. He knew what it was like to suddenly have all his dreams shattered like the flimsy crystal one could find in any novelty shop. But he had had his dreams glued together slowly, piece by piece. Vincent couldn't have that. There was no one left alive who could repair that broken glass. It was destroyed forever, the fragments tarnished and yellow with mold. That didn't make them any less important or forgotten. The shards still cut him deeply, emerging from the darkest places to slice through him in his dreams and nightmares. And he blamed himself over and over for letting that crystal globe of hope shatter so easily, but he didn't know who had dropped the glass onto the cold, hard surface of reality. Maybe it had been him, maybe she had done it, or maybe it had been broken by everything. Who really kept that spheroid in one piece for all of life? No one Vincent knew had been able to retain that same crystal dream they had had as children. Not Cloud, nor Tifa, nor Barret, nor Cid. No one. But children were idealists who didn't know better than to dream.

For Vincent dreaming had lost its appeal long ago. There was nothing for him now. He walked on in silence.

~*~

Reeve's hand was poised over the telephone, hovering above the receiver as though it were a beautiful flower which was irresistible to pick but far too poisonous to touch. Indecision gripped him like an iron shackle. The moment of truth was upon him. This could make or break the Shinra corporation.

"Just make the call," Reno mumbled, his voice muffled by the cushions on the couch. He was sprawled on his stomach, his head buried. He pushed himself up to look at Reeve though all he could see was the back of the president's head. "You

don't have anything to lose. Do you actually think that the people in this company care who runs it? All they want is their weekly wages and a lousy pension at their retirement."

"I don't know," Reeve said, glancing back at Reno. "How am I supposed to stop all this madness?"

Reno's head sunk back to the couch. "You can't. Restore order in your company, and that's it. Make the call, say some fancy schlock to raise the hopes of the employees and go back to your normal life. Get on the horn already."

Reeve smiled grimly as his hand tightened over the receiver of the phone. He slowly brought it up to his ear, clearing his throat. His shaking hand punched a button on the phone, the over system intercom. A loud, monotonous tone reverberated through the entire building, halting all actions, fighting and plain work.

~*~

Barret stopped firing his gun arm at the sound of a clear tone which cut over the din. He halted all the fighting with a simple raising of his other hand. All turned quiet as an overpowering voice replaced the tone, quiet yet somehow authoritative.

"Employees, resistance fighters." Barret easily identified the voice as that of Reeve. He exchanged glances with Red XIII.

"Reeve ain't a part of this, is he?" he asked. "We ain't fighting for crap, right?"

Red XIII managed a small shrug that was more of a bobbing of his head and chest as he was standing on his forefeet. "I don't know. We still need to free Reno."

Reeve cleared his throat. "For all those who have not yet been notified, Heidegger is dead. He met his unfortunate demise as he lost his balance on a balcony, tumbled over the edge and plummeted to the ground hundreds of feet below him. I cannot say that his was a great loss, nor will I say that I will miss him without lying to you. I am now in control of this company." There was a slight pause. "And I must say that I am ashamed of all of you."

Barret exchanged glances with Red again. "What the hell...?"

"I thought I could change this corporation," Reeve continued. "After looking at the progress of this company in the last couple of days, I see that I am wrong. You can't change the ethics of others. As my comrade-in-arms told me just a few minutes ago, all the people of this world want is their pay. I could get up here and call you all greedy little losers, and you'd all come back for work for your two gil's worth. I can't change that; only you can. But I am ashamed.

"Heidegger and Scarlet were hardly the best people in the world. Their ideals and motives speak less to the people and more towards personal obligations like money and power. And yet you didn't fight while their slowly sucked away your vitality and livelihood. It makes me sad to see what kind of world we're slowly creating by letting the evil at heart rule us. This world may not be flawless, it might even be a pit of slime molded together into some crude form, but I believe that it is worth fighting for and worth preserving. I don't care what you believe, but there are going to be some changes right here, right now. No longer will we drag our hides into work for a piece of gold or a sheet of paper. No longer will we go home silently, our voices lost in the fast-paced chaos of the surrounding world. No longer will we let the tyranny rule our lives and make our choices. If the people of this world can't be their own, they'd be better dead."

"What's your point, old man?!" some employee shouted from down the corridor. "Who gives a *&#@ 'bout this?"

As though he could hear the comment, Reeve continued on with his little tirade. "My point is not to degrade you nor to make you think that there isn't a piece of gil in the world that hasn't been tarnished by evil. My point is that you sit here, day after day, behind your desks or in the generators or in the laboratories letting the man in the leather chair rule your working life. Not anymore. The changes I am making will create a more democratic Shinra. I don't want to suffer through another crisis like the one today. I don't want a group of resistance fighters breaking their way into our facilities to rescue

anyone from the greasy hands of Shinra evil. There will never be another foible like the ones we used to sport. The new Shinra is now."

The intercom system hung up with an audible click, but the fighting did not resume. Barret looked back at the people in his group before stepping from his hiding place. The new Shinra is now, Barret thought as he exposed himself to the now friendly foes. I hope ya can put yo money where yo mouth is, Reeve, 'cause if ya can't then there ain't no hope for yo train ever getting back ta its tracks.

~*~

"They're coming."

Aeris turned from the open air window to look back into the darkened room. There was nothing in the room that was alive, nobody breathed a portion of the still air; she was talking to nobody tangible. But it was there. It was everywhere.

She looked back out the window, her gaze skimming over the edge of the forest that was barely visible behind the golden horizon of long prairie grasses. She couldn't see the trio of people that rested there, but she knew that they were indeed sitting on fallen logs and large boulders on the edge of the wooded area. And he was with them.

She smiled. This would be easier than she had originally intended.

~*~

Cid glanced at the blurry, black shape kissing the sky along the horizon. He was barely able to suppress a shudder as an overwhelming sense of dread came over him. The end was near. Why did it have to be like this?

"What is it?" Tifa asked, her voice drawing his attention from the large obelisk surrounded in a sea of gold. He leaned back against the rock, stretching his legs out in front of him. The Flayer, having been washed ashore from the remains of the Gay Boat, was leaning at a gentle slope beside him.

"Nothin'," he replied. "Just got this feeling of being watched is all."

"Oh." There was something there that was left unsaid, but Tifa didn't press it. A sinking in her gut told her that she'd rather not know, but she was going to find out soon. And she didn't like that feeling at all.

~*~

"Did it work?" Reeve asked, swiveling in his chair to view the Turk on the couch behind him. He swallowed. There was no sound permeating through the still office air, no resounding echo of gunfire.

"How am I supposed to know?" Reno muttered, though it seemed as though he was talking to the sofa's cushions rather than any person. "I'm not your employee."

"Well, what did you think?"

Reno rolled over onto his back, his gaze finding Reeve's. He sighed, breaking the look and staring up at the gray ceiling. "What I think is irrelevant, you do know that. You practically came out and said it yourself. What was that? 'I don't care what you believe'?"

Reeve chuckled. "That's not what I meant, and you know it. That was something completely different. I'm asking for your opinion on what I said to them."

"Oh, well, in that case, you sher talk pwetty."

Reeve grinned although he wasn't sure whether it was at the jest or the compliment. Reno broke out laughing, but the chuckles morphed into a groan as he brought a hand up to his head. He immediately sobered. "Seriously, Reeve. You definitely have an eloquent air about you. See, I'll be the politician, and you can be the poet. You can write all my candidate speeches."

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind should I ever get fired from my job here."

"Yeah, you're gonna be in trouble with this new democratic out look, huh? Be careful, you might end up as a figurehead."

"Nah. I was thinking more towards an executive head, me, and heads for other portions of the company. You know, security. I need a good security head, someone who know his way around the trade, someone who knows where the weaknesses in this company lie."

"What are you insinuating over there, Reeve?"

"Oh, nothing. I'm gonna need help, old buddy, old pal."

Reno groaned, rolling back onto his stomach. "Let me think about it. Right now, I need about ten aspirins and a week of sleep."

"I can get some of that Restore Materia, so you won't look, or feel for that matter, so banged up."

"I've had enough materia to last me a life time."

"You sure?"

"Positive. Absolutely positive."

~*~

"Don't worry, Mog. We'll get your stuffing back and get you all sewn up again. You'll be as good as new." Cait Sith hopped down the hall, glad that he and his mog were finally on their way out of their prison and into freedom. And, from Reeve's exciting monologue, Cait Sith could tell that his master was all right. He didn't know where Reno went. Come to think of it, he didn't care where the Turk was. He wondered if he should feel guilty for not caring or at least bad. "Oh, well."

He trotted around the corner only to come face to face with a big foot that nearly came crashing down on his toes. "Ahh!" Cait Sith jumped back to avoid being trampled beneath the large combat boots. He tripped over his mog and fell on his rear. Rubbing it, he looked up at the man responsible for his misfortune. His eyes found the glowering face of Barret Wallace.

"Watch where you're going!" Cait Sith demanded, crossing his arms across his furry breast indignantly. "To think I almost became the tiny splotch on the bottom of your gigantic shoe!"

"Huh? Cait Sith?" Barret exchanged a confused glance with Elena.

"Aren't you supposed to be in jail or something?" Elena asked, eyeing the small cat warily. Something was up, and she didn't like not knowing what was happening.

Cait Sith shrugged, leaning back into his mog. "I broke outta that puke hole. Too sparse. I go for the blue suede shoes and the chicks. Hey, baby, you come here often?"

Elena rolled her eyes, sighing. "Holster it, cowboy. Kitties bore me."

Yuffie winced. "Ooh. Shot down." She glanced down the hall. "Where's the rest of the crew?"

The cat shrugged again. "I dunno. Reno blew a fuse or two and shot down the hall after Heidegger. Reeve followed him, left me here all by my lonesome. Some master, eh?"

"Did Reno kill Heidegger?" Red XIII asked, his tail twitching.

"You wanna tell it to your gossip circle?" Cait Sith asked, though he left little time for an answer. "I don't know what happened. The only place that has access to the over-system intercom would be the President's office. You can get your story from the main man, the head cheese, el honcho, there."

"Well, then, what're we waiting for?" Elena asked. "Let's go."

Yuffie grinned, nudging Rude in the ribs. "She's really going for this, huh? All out an' out there, you know what I mean."

Rude's solemn face broke out in an uncharacteristic smile. "She's adamant about recovering our lost comrade."

A giggle escaped her lips as they started down the hall. "Whatever."

~*~

Reno nearly fell from the couch as the door crashed open, the large wooden structure breaking from its hinges as it was violently forced into the office. Barret Wallace, Reno noted with a frown, was quick to follow the ruined door, a trail of his comrades following him. There was that annoying little girl, and Cait Sith, and that red lion thing, and Elena, and Rude...

And Elena, and Rude?

The two Turks caused him to do a double-take of the entire situation. The Turks must have been on the verge of hopelessness if they had allied with AVALANCHE. Especially since Elena was almost undoubtedly the new temporary leader of the Turks. She loathed AVALANCHE.

But all this thinking was irritating his headache. It was a much nicer alternative to let others think right now. They didn't need him. Whatever they thought was perfectly all right. He could just sit on the couch in the corner of Reeve's nice, big, air-conditioned office and go to sleep. Much better than thinking, sleep. His head sunk into the cushions.

"Howdy ho," Cait Sith greeted, stepping over the smashed door. Reeve didn't look up from his desk.

"Hey. 'Bout time you showed up," Reeve said. "I had to do everything by myself. You think that was easy?"

"Well, Mr.-High-and-Mighty, ya don't want our help then next time we won't haul our asses outta bed ta get ya," Barret growled. "Da Turk'll probly give us more appreciation than that. Damn."

"Where's Reno?" Elena asked, glaring at Reeve. "Don't tell me I wasted my time and effort on nothing."

Reeve finally looked up to the group. "Around here somewhere I'm sure."

Elena's face darkened. Her fingers itched for the feel of her side arm. "Don't play games with me, Reeve. I am no longer in the mood. Where is he?"

Reeve turned to the figure on the couch behind him. "Yo! Reno!"

"Go away," was the muffled reply.

"But your fan club showed up. I guess they didn't deteriorate into nothingness like Heidegger assumed."

"Shu'up. Bite me."

Reeve shrugged. "Well, that was inconsiderate." He turned back to Elena. "He doesn't want to talk to you. He's had a bad day."

"A bad year is more like it," Reno amended, turning his head to one side. He stared at what he could see of Elena from beneath his shock of red hair.

Elena walked around the desk to get a better view of the form sprawled haphazardly on the couch. "Did you kill Heidegger, Reno? If you did, I don't know whether I should congratulate you or shoot you."

"Whatcha talkin' 'bout?" Reno pushed his upper body off the sofa, shifting around to rest on his side.

"Heidegger was our ticket to fixing this Shinra mess. He could've restored the old ways and saved us from working with these AVALANCHE floozies. Reeve obviously ain't gonna do it from his little speech about reform."

"Elena, what you just said was plain sad. Unless you haven't noticed, the old ways sucked, so, uh, you can go away." He flopped back down into his former position.

"Reno, that's not what I meant. This new democratic way ain't gonna work. We come back to Shinra, and we'll have no say in anything. If Heidegger was still here, he'd get us a say. But you had to blow a fuse and kill him."

Reno sighed and shook his head. "You're making my headache exceptionally bad. And I didn't kill Heidegger. He had a nasty spill off the balcony. That first step was a doozy. And as for your working arrangements, Reeve has given me a proposition which I will think about."

"So what're you saying? That my presence here wasn't even needed?" Elena glowered. "You mean that I didn't have to drag my sorry ass into their Seventh Heaven to make an alliance to spring you from the slam. Heidegger's nasty spill. Yeah, right."

"#\$%&," Barret growled, turning around. "What a waste of time. I'm leaving."

"Yeah. Bummer," Yuffie agreed as she turned tail and waked out of the room followed shortly by Red XIII.

"We shouldn't have underestimated you, huh, Reno?" Rude asked, barely stifling a yawn.

"I said I'd think of something," he muttered. "No one ever listens to me, though."

"That's exactly why you should take this offer," Reeve interjected. "Everyone'll have to listen to you."

Reno wanted to just sink into the sofa and disappear. "Oh, God, go away. Go away."

~*~

Tifa stared down into the crystalline waters of the pool, searching its royal blue depths for any type of answers to her problems. The water sparkled and gleamed, catching every minute bit of light in the large cavern, dazzling the eye. It reflected only the light, no images and no answers for her.

"Do you see it?" Cid asked, squinting as he leaned over the small pillars marking the pathway up to the pagoda. She looked up to him.

"What is it supposed to look like? I haven't seen it in a while you know." She turned her gaze back to the shimmering surface of the pool.

"I dunno. I never saw it, remember? I imagine that it's kinda like a crystal ball-type thing." He scratched the back of his head. "A glowing pebble maybe? @#\$%, I don't know."

"It looks like normal materia," Vincent offered. "Sea green in color. It glows of its own accord. Look for a source of all this glimmering."

Complete silence reigned over them like a smothering blanket as they searched for the Holy Materia. The large walls of the room, though they seemed like they would create any sort of echo, only absorbed every sound, even their quiet breathing. It seemed as though nothing could break that silence.

"Is that it?" Tifa asked, pointing to a point near one of the pillars that seemed to be the source of a pale glow.

"Could be," Cid said. "You know the only way we're going to find out, don't you? Someone's gonna have to go down there and check it."

Tifa frowned. "How deep is it?"

"Uh..."

"I'll get it," Vincent declared.

"What?"

"I'll go and get the materia." Before anyone could voice an objection, Vincent slipped into the water. He dove down into the crystal waters, the blue liquid encasing him as though he was in suspended animation. His movements were sure, yet they appeared somehow dark against the pale green light. He was beneath the surface for only a matter of seconds.

It was the longest group of seconds in Tifa's life.

Vincent's hand closed over the green globe, snuffing the light from the water. A portion of the light was extinguished from the large room, turning the waters into a darker blue. Vincent broke through the glassy surface. He grabbed onto the edge of one of the pillars, his golden claw scraping against the marble. He held up a sea green orb in his good hand.

"This look like it, Tifa?" he asked, oblivious to the water running from his hair down his temples.

"I guess so." She shrugged. "Looks familiar."

Cid turned around, the sudden feeling of a mal presence tinkling the back of his mind. No one was standing there hidden within the shadows. His brow furrowed as he searched every corner of the room. Nobody was standing there though the feeling was too strong to be unwarranted. Cid turned back to Tifa.

"You ever get the feeling you're being watched?" he asked.

"Ooh, very good."

Cid turned abruptly to the new voice, almost slipping on a marble surface slick with water. Tifa grabbed his arm to steady him as she turned to look at the new speaker. Vincent pulled himself from the water, his hand tightening around the green globe.

"Well, well, Aeris, we meet again," Cid said, bringing the Flayer to bear. "Maybe now I can finish what I started."

"What we started, my dear, and what you won't be around to finish. Because I'm going to." A malicious smile peppered her features as her blue staff materialized within her hands. "But first I have to thank you for recovering the Holy Materia. My hair always gets frizzled after it gets wet as such."

"Well, you're not welcome," Cid growled, his hands tightening over the haft of his spear until his knuckles turned white. Don't let her have it, Aeris ordained, her voice tight with anger. It is mine. Cid's brow creased in confusion. Wait a minute. What the hell you talkin' 'bout?

"It's time to talk back that which was once mine."

"Never," Vincent declared, his fist clenching. "Enough blood has been shed because of this materia. Too many lives have died for your destroyer. Give it up, Aeris. Stop this madness."

Aeris' smile flickered before disappearing all together. "What do you know of my little project, Mr. Valentine?"

Vincent frowned. "It killed Lucrecia. It brought these demons to my soul. It destroyed Aeris, and it will destroy you. If you get this. If you don't, I may be able to have one night of dreamless sleep."

"It won't destroy me," she snapped. "Only one thing can, and once you're dead, that thing will be mine."

Tifa's gaze drifted between Vincent and Cid. What are they talking about? she wondered hotly. She hated being left in the dark, and she was more oblivious to the basic plot of this "project" than she was to most things. She was so annoyed by her lack of knowledge that she was fighting the urge to scream.

"Would someone please tell me what's going on?" she asked, her words slow and articulate.

"Ah, Tifa, so dense." Aeris sighed. "It's a wonder what Cloud ever saw in you. Past tense, you know. He's mine."

Tifa's face clouded over with pure wrath. "You bitch. He loves me."

"Loved." Aeris brought the staff to bear in front of her, the blue outlining every curve of her face and reflecting in her emerald eyes. A wind picked up to swirl about her, slapping her dress across her heels and whipping her hair about her face. The light withered away, and the shadows increased, claws outstretched and open towards the trio.

Tifa swerved to escape decapitation as a set of wicked talons whistled in the air inches from her head. She knocked one of the creatures of the night away from her only to be met by another hideous demon, red irises glowing like embers within the dark. They were everywhere, and the more she killed, the more appeared.

Aeris' smile returned to her flawless features as she turned to the former Turk. "You can't win, you know," she stated simply. "It wants to come to me; it needs to come to me. It has a purpose, and that purpose lies with me. The quickest way to get from one point to another is a straight line. It's much easier to get from you to the Black Materia by letting me get it there. It knows that; it won't let you live if you give your life to keep it from me. You might as well let me have it and spare yourself the pain."

"Shut up, Aeris. I'll never give you this of my own free will." His claw clenched tightly as he felt the hot anger boiling over within him. Not now. But the creature could feel his distress; it wanted to help in its own twisted way. It wanted to be a guardian over him and the materia. Sweat beaded on Vincent's brow as he attempted to push it away. Oh, God, but not

now.

Pain enveloped him as he doubled over in a display of unearthly crimson light. A scream escaped his lips which was soon transformed into a roar as his bones snapped and skin stretched, and chaos erupted from the inner peace which he had fought hard to retain. Wings open and outspread as though they were ready to receive the sky, the demon threw its head back and roared a second time, its prize clutched tightly within one claw. It beat its wings with one purpose in mind. Protect the sphere, protect itself. There was little else to do.

It rose in the air, calling upon the powers of hell to destroy this foe. The ground erupted into the laughing and deformed face of Death, a black mist pouring from the empty sockets and holes that should have sported the eyes and mouth. The black encased everything, shadow and flesh alike, before the skull shattered into a thousand piercing shards that cut through skin as easy as it sliced the air.

Aeris Gainsborough stood through it all, unscathed.

"You are foolish, Vincent, to let this pathetic creature protect the materia." She shook her head sadly. "One would think you'd know better by now. Your monsters are no match for Hojo's more dignified creations."

She hefted the electrifying blue staff, oblivious to the decreasing amount of shadows she had left for her warriors. The head of the staff, an icy sunburst, came to rest inches from the marble floor, the breeze ignited once again to blow the two long locks of her hair from her face. Her lips curved upward as she voiced a single word. "Petrify."

The creature howled as the eerie blue light swirled along its feet leaving a dark blue smoke in its wake. Pain was the only thing the creature could feel as its nerves were severed by the spell. Numbed skin was soon turned to stone, flesh to granite, tendons and ligaments to solid rock. The spell moved upward at an astonishing rate, but the creature was helpless to resist it. It attempted to fly away, but the heavy rock of its legs and feet weighed it down. Its red eyes flashed bright with an anger reminiscent of the animal which has just been caught by a poacher but refuses to give up the fight for its life; anger built from desperation.

The creature raised the materia high as though to protect it from the spell weaving its way over its torso and wings. It let out one more strangled cry as its head was cast into the hard stone. Moments later, its last claw flashed as it was changed to stone and the blue light disappeared. All turned quiet as the chaos was forced to peace. The materia slipped from the creature's granite grasp.

It hit the marble floor with a resounding clang.

Cid turned from the shadows he was fighting as the sound reached his ears. It was there, bouncing back towards the deep waters of the pool. It is mine! Aeris shouted, her words harsh and loud in his head. Get it!

Every single cell in his body was screaming for him not to get within ten feet of that materia, but he found himself moving towards it. Damn it, Aeris! What's with this? You're a liar! No! But there was nothing he could do. He could scream inside his own head or shout until his lungs burned, but he couldn't stop himself. His feet were moving of their own accord. Or someone else's. The thought curled his innards.

"No!" Aeris shouted, seeing his move towards her prize. "You won't get it that easily. You won't destroy my work." She moved to the materia, the blue rod disintegrating into the eerie green light. She came face to face with Cid.

Cid didn't know what to do. Or what Aeris was going to do. He wanted to take the Flayer and stuff it up her butt sideways, but he realized he no longer had it in his possession even though he couldn't remember letting it go. He also wanted to get his ass out of there, but he couldn't move. She wouldn't let him go.

"You are clueless, aren't you?" Aeris asked, a sneer on her face. "Simply clueless. You have no idea what you've gotten yourself into." She bent over and picked up the Holy Materia.

"It doesn't matter," Cid declared, watching her every move. "Whatever you do, you can't win. I'll get to the others and help you repent for your crimes. The sentence is death."

"That's not you talking, Cid," Aeris commented. "You used to be so sweet. Look what the White has done to you. It's supposed to be good and grand, isn't it? But it's nothing without the dark and even less without the light."

"I'll have them both."

"The hell you will." She glanced behind him, her eyes lighting up when she saw Tifa struggling with the shadow spawn. "Maybe you oughtta help Tifa there. She's struggling with my friends."

Cid wanted to look; he wanted to see what was happening behind him, but he couldn't. Anger tightened his features as his rage at Aeris and at this thing controlling him overcame him. He clenched his teeth as he fought this thing. He wanted to look. He wanted to help.

"Here, let me help you look, Cid," she said, grasping his shoulder with one hand. "Just turn around." He grabbed her other hand, tightening his grasp around her frail wrist. She did not let go of the small sphere of materia.

"I don't want to see her," he snarled. "She is worth nothing; you are worth nothing. Give me back my materia."

Her fingers tightened around the cloth of his flight jacket. "Cool off." Her movements were fast and sure. She broke his iron grasp with a flick of her wrist and a show of incredible power. She threw him from the pillar they shared, a small smile flitting across her features as he tumbled into the waters with a splash.

"Let's go," she muttered, raising her hands to the sky. The unearthly zephyr rose about her, encasing everything, every shadow. Tifa let out a small scream as the light smothered her, choking the wind from her lungs. It seemed like an eternity, but it was over in a matter of seconds. The hall was empty, void of life.

Cid broke through the surface of the water, water sputtering from his mouth. He choked, grabbing onto the edge of the marble floor and pulling himself over it onto the steady ground. He coughed, breathing heavily as he lay on the hard floor, the phony voice of Aeris ringing through his head.

It is mine! How could you let it leave?! How could you?! How could you?! You inconsiderate son of a bitch. How could you do that to us? You let her have it. You let her go.

"Shut up!"

Only the silence answered him. There was no life here. No one to respond, no one to offer a comment. The severity of the situation suddenly hit him. If he was alone...

"Oh, God." He turned to the large, rigid statue glowing with the reflections from the water. Shadows flickered over the stone face of the creature that had so recently been alive and had so recently been Vincent. The eyes were blank, never again to glow red with their inner light. Cid fought the urge to be sick.

He stumbled to his feet, trying to block the crying voice within his head. It was telling him to find its materia and at the same time cursing him for letting the materia go. It was a lie, everything was a lie. And where was Tifa? Where had she gone?

Pushing his companions from his mind, he lurched to the door, dragging his feet. He was alone with a lie, a bloody figment of his imagination. And Vincent was gone forever, and Tifa was gone, doomed to torture by a sadist. As he stumbled out into the hall and back towards a temporary freedom, he found himself green with envy, wishing for their fates.

But wishes were wasted on lies.

~*~

"It is I who have created this monster, loosed upon the earth. He will kill us all, destroy the people of the world, tear the ground until the Planet's screams will be as abundant as the blood spilling from its wounds. It is I who have done this, and it is I who will be unable to stop this madness. As it often is, the man who is the beginning will never live to see the end. The Planet has my regrets, my regards, and my thanks for showing me the truth. I only hope that the Planet can forgive me and my erring ways. I repent, but I will never be saved. Forgive me."

Reeve sighed as the tape clicked, coming to its end. This was bad, very bad. The only man who could fix this grievous error in judgment was dead. There was nothing he could do. He picked up the phone on his desk.

"Doloris, issue the order to demolish the labs and everything there within. I don't want anything, even a paperclip, to be left. Every file, every test tube, everything destroyed," he ordered, fingering the tape. As an afterthought, he added, "And get me Reno on the horn."

He hung up the phone, leaning back in his chair. What mess had he blundered upon by recovering this tape from the labs? What mistake had been repeated by that fool Huiji? I thought this was over with Sephiroth's death, Reeve thought sadly. How wrong we all are every time. What a bunch of fools. God, help us.

~*~

A low moan was barely audible over the voices muttering and cursing within his head. It was a constant buzzing, always with him now, always ready to insult and hurt, always ready to voice an insane comment. But at most times it was as it was now. Words too low and too quick to be discerned from one another, a mush of sentences and fragmented thoughts all grouped together, talking in one voice, whispered in one wild rush.

He wished it would stop and leave him in peace.

"Cloud?"

He pushed one more voice from his thoughts, a crazy smile gracing his lips. They thought they could fool him by using her. They thought he would be that weak. Ha, ha, foolish voices. You think you're gonna put me outta my misery by giving me the one thing in life that can grant me happiness. I deserve no happiness. Let me be.

"Cloud, wake up."

The pleading note in her voice... so real. It was as though he could reach out and touch her pale skin, stroke her chocolate hair, and stare so deeply into her perfectly round brown eyes. What would he see by peering through the doors to her soul? Would he see his own love and want reflected in her? Or would he see that pity he feared?

He was too scared to open his own eyes and look.

"Cloud, don't do this to me. I need you. Come back."

Did she need him, or was that just a bunch of pretty words made to be a lure to bring him back to her? Nobody had ever told him that he was needed. No one had come to him begging for his return. What did that mean?

Take a chance, you silly puppet. He winced against the ferocity of the voice inside his head. Was it guiding him or seeking to make him look foolish once more? Why was he forced with so many decisions in life? Hadn't it already been proven that he couldn't make a choice that was the right one? Was this voice just messing with his head?

"Don't leave me alone. Please, Cloud. Please."

A weight fell over his chest, but at that moment something was lifted from his heart. There was only one thing in this world that felt so light and smelled so sweet. There was nothing that compared to her very presence. It was the soft light that blessed the earth, her scent was that of the morning dew, her hair silkier than the rose that kissed lovers. It had to be her.

He slowly opened his eyes as if he were a dreamer finally arousing from a thankless nightmare. He could only hope that this was not another dream concocted by his sick mind, made to torture him by shoving the shards of his shattered hopes deep into his heart, made to twist and turn the jagged ends of his world of broken glass deeper and deeper into his bleeding flesh. But this was too real for that, wasn't it?

His trembling hand stroked her head, running over her soft hair. This was too real to be untrue. Even his mind wasn't this cruel to him. Even his mind wouldn't think of all this horrors. She had to be real. She just had to be.

She sobbed against his shoulder though whether in sadness or in joy he did not know. "What has she done to you, Cloud?" she whispered, her voice soft in his ear. "Why does it have to be like this? Every time. Every damn time."

"The things that hurt us bring us closer than shallow laughter and tear-felt joy will ever," he whispered softly, though he could not recall if the words were his or another man's. She drew a sharp breath against him. She sat back up, wiping the tears from her eyes.

"Oh, Cloud." Her arms wrapped around him, cradling his head. "Oh, Cloud."

"How touching." They both turned to the figure standing in the doorway, casting a long shadow in the room. Emerald eyes flashed with mirth. "How very deeply touching." Aeris stalked into the small cavernous chamber. "The reunion of two lonely lovers." Her soft features hardened with anger. "I think I may lose my lunch."

Tifa sat back on her heels, her eyes narrowing with barely controlled rage. "You stay away from him," she ordered though she had neither the ability nor the power to back up her threat, not against Aeris, not against that.

"Or you'll do what?" she snapped. "Hurt me? I'd like to see you try."

Tifa snorted. "Would you now?" She stood, pushing up imaginary sleeves on her shirt.

"Going to protect your little dear, now, are we? How pathetic. He does need protection. He is such a pathetic creature, such a weak fool to need protection from a bar wench."

Cloud pushed himself into a sitting position, the iron taste of dried blood gracing his lips. His throat was dry and rough, his body aching, his bones screaming a bloody protest at such treatment. He didn't feel the pain nor the aches, he didn't feel the anguish, he felt incredibly angry. "Don't call her a wench," he growled. "She's not a wench."

"Isn't she? All she's ever done is lie to you. Over and over. She let you live that lie back in Kalm, didn't she? She let you repeatedly suffer through your memories. She let you wallow in your pain, so she could feel stronger, be better than she really was. For if she is the muddy slime at the bottom of the food chain, than you are nothing. You make her feel good because you are so pathetic."

"That's not true."

"She tells you lies to keep you near."

"No."

"Ask her something to see the truth, then."

Cloud bit his lower lip. There was so much he wanted to know and even more that she couldn't tell him. He wanted to answers as to why, but reasons like that were rarely known and never disclosed to people like him. He wanted to know what the Planet had been thinking when the fates made their decision to do this. She couldn't begin to answer that. His eyes found her.

"Did I kill him?" he asked, fearing the answer. The answer would seal his fate. Could he be trusted? Could he ever trust himself?

Tifa didn't answer immediately, muddling through what he meant. Did I kill him? Tifa wanted to blurt out that he hadn't killed Cid, but something stopped her. Cid wasn't really Cid anymore. But Cloud didn't really need to know that, did he? He shouldn't have to worry about that, she thought.

"You didn't kill him, Cloud," she declared, her voice soft yet not lacking in force. "He's still alive."

Aeris smiled wickedly. "See how she tells you things that have no value in truth. Look deeply into her eyes and tell me she is as truthful as I. Look here for the evidence; look to me for the truth." From somewhere hidden within the folds of her dress she produced a pair of goggles that were far too familiar. She tossed them to Cloud who let them hit the floor with a hollow thud.

Blood crusted and black with mud, they seemed to be speak more to Aeris' truth than to Tifa's lies. Cloud stared at them, feeling the cold bite of tears burning at his eyes. His throat constricted as he fought the inevitable hurt. He tore his gaze from the irreproachable evidence and looked to Tifa.

He had one question to ask her.

"Why?"

Tifa looked away, wanting to shout out to him that Aeris was the one who was lying, that Cid had actually survived that horrific night, but she found that she couldn't. Some inexplicable force stopped her. Aeris smiled once before she left the room, walking away from the torment they were both feeling as though they were worth nothing and felt nothing. She glanced back to look into Cloud's watery eyes.

"Why?"

~*~

Yuffie glanced at the contents of her bag once in reassurance. Sitting there, tucked within the deeper nooks of the knapsack, were her glittering treasures. Well, they weren't really hers, but Cid had said she could keep them, so shouldn't that mean that she could keep all sixteen? Sure, it did.

She walked her motorcycle through the streets of Midgar, strutting proudly away from her latest conquest and the old team's latest failure. From what she had heard from Barret and the rest of the guys, the stuff she now carried was Cloud's. She grinned in triumph. Had been Cloud's, past tense. It was hers now. She had found it, stolen or not, and it was hers.

She felt no remorse for swiping the lost warrior's junk. It was all well and good to her. The finders would keep while the losers could weep. He probably didn't need it anyway. What had Cid told her? Materia wouldn't help them where they were going. Her grin widened. All the better for her.

She was through with the team, now. They weren't worth anything more to her than a handful of fool's gold. She knew it was cold; she knew it was very mean of her to think of them that way, but it was the truth. Why lie to herself and to them? She knew they knew the truth. Lying was so frivolous.

There would be no more goodbye's. Hell, she hated saying goodbye. That was the worst part of meeting people; you always had to say goodbye sooner or later. It was so much better when people just walked away. Like she did. Simple, quick, no regrets. That was the way that was the best. No regrets. She could live with it.

~*~

The blue sky stretched above the earth, a perfectly flawless tone. It was as clear as crystal, as cloudless as the grass seas were empty. No white fluffiness, no streaks of cotton decorating the blue. It was as clear and as empty as he felt.

Cid was laying prone in the tall grass, watching as the breeze flitted through the golden tresses, wishing he was any place but there. The illusion of Aeris, his own stupid naivete, left him relatively alone for now. She was only a small voice bottled up in the back of his mind, whining that they were too close to lay here waiting for something to happen. Cid didn't care though. She could rot back there. He was watching the sky right now. She could wait. They all could wait.

This was all he needed right now. The warm sunlight on his face, drying out the damp chill from his bones, a soft breeze to whisper promises to his ears, no intrusions, no worries for once in his life. He could sit here and stay for a spell. He closed his eyes. He needed a soothing dream.

The light disappeared behind a cloud, the warmth dissipating from his skin.

"What the hell?" he muttered, opening his eyes and pushing himself into a sitting position. Hovering above him was no cloud. It was large and man-made and startlingly familiar. Cid grinned. "I knew they'd get ya flying, baby," he declared, standing. "Highwind's a name that don't fail ya."

The Highwind set down softly on the next hill like a majestic bird returning to its nest, hissing as its engines cooled. A ladder was thrown over the edge of the deck, and little people began exiting the ship. Cid started walking to them, striding confidently down the slope and up the next. He didn't know what he was going to tell them; he didn't care. He'd probably just blurt the story out anyway. It didn't matter. They needed to find out, and if this was the way they'd learn of it, then so be it.

Barret Wallace dropped down in front of the pilot, his large feet easily trampling the prairie grasses. He wiped some sweat from his brow, pursing his lips as he looked his rumpled companion over. Weaponless, dirty, damp, Cid Highwind was not an impressive sight. Barret, however, did not say a thing about the bedraggled appearance of the pilot once he saw the look in those blue eyes. Haunted, hunted, lost.

He cleared his throat, opening his mouth to say anything. Cid starting talking before he got the chance. "Vincent's dead, turned to stone. Tifa's gone," he said, a simple statement that meant far more than the words would say. He stopped, waiting for an insult, an accusation, anything.

Barret didn't know what to say. How could you respond to something like that? He shuffled his feet, squinting in the bright light as he looked away. Tifa was gone... and Vincent was dead. Bummer. "So, what do you want to do?"

Cid shrugged, following the other man's gaze into the distance. His brow furrowed. "I don't know. There's not much we can do, you know. Except wait for her to do something."

Barret frowned. "Let that bitch make her move. We'll get her, right? Jes' you an' me sending her back to where da sun don't shine."

The pilot nodded absentmindedly. He hadn't exactly expected this, but he was finding that most of the things he expected were often wrong nowadays. Expectations were just that. You couldn't depend on them. They were about as reliable as a blind man's judgments of colors. Cid told himself that he should stop expecting anything. If you didn't expect anything, you wouldn't be disappointed.

"Six feet under, pal," he said, though the comment was far from correct. The bloody waters were still there at the edge of his vision ready to wash over them and drown them out. He squinted as he looked far over the golden sea. There in the distance darkness was creeping in like a thief ready to poach the unsuspecting chocobos straight from the coop. Billowing blackness was ready to pour its fury down upon the denizens of the earth, ready to come upon them as swiftly as that crimson pool.

The storm was approaching on the horizon, coming to obscure the bright blue hues of the crystalline sky with the unfathomable dark of ominous cloud cover. All they could do was wait.

~*~

Cloud forced his bloodshot eyes to remain open though they burned and begged him for sleep. He couldn't sleep here. Not with her sitting across the room from him. Not with the liar just waiting for his guard to be let down so she could wheedle her way back into his heart. He would never be so stupid again. He would never let himself be hurt by another again. It always came down to this. What was he to do?

"Cloud, don't do this to yourself," she said, her voice soft yet loud enough to echo through the spacious room. "Aeris is the one lying to you. I would never do anything to hurt you. I... I..."

"You what?!" he snapped, his voice bitter with the resentment wrought from years of repeated pain and suffering. "You love me?" He laughed sharply. "Nobody loves me. Nobody cares that I get hurt and hurt and hurt. You think that I don't know what people think. They look at me, and they say to themselves, 'What a poor, poor guy.' But do you think they actually care?" His eyes narrowed. "That's not care; that's pity, and I receive a helluva lot more pity than I do care. And do you know what's sad? I repeatedly mistook that pity for love."

Tifa shook her head. "I love you. I do."

"You do," he muttered. "What's in love? A bed of roses and a box of chocolates. A bloody holiday." He snorted. "A pool of pain when those roses have wilted, and the chocolates are gone, and the bloody holiday is little more than an empty yesterday. I don't need that. Hell, I've already got my fill of wilted roses with cutting thorns. And I've stuffed myself silly with those damn chocolates. My stomach hurts, Tifa. And I think I'll take the cake for a collection of beautiful empty yesterdays. I keep looking to the future, you know? I looked so long and so hard that when I finally glance back over my shoulder I find nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"It's better than the hurt I feel when I look back and see all the things I never said and all those moments lost along my way," she said. "I wish I could go back and change something, anything, to make that pain go away. But it's always there, gnawing at my innards. It's always reminding me of a promise made beneath the stars. Not the one that was spoken, but the one that we shared with each other in our silence. The quiet vows that we'd always be there for each other. But we're not, are we?" She felt the tears stinging her eyes. "It makes me wonder if we ever will."

Cloud grimaced as he thought back to the gap in his memory. He wasn't there for her when she needed him the most. He wasn't there to help her recover from the pain of Sephiroth's betrayal and the hurt of her father's death. He couldn't help her physically or mentally because he wasn't there. He was never there. He was the fleeting promise made between a mother and her son that they would keep in touch as they slowly drifted apart. He was the promise he had made with a friend a long time ago. If I'm ever in trouble, come and rescue me. Some rescue he had been. Abandonment. What had he done? Or hadn't he done? He couldn't have kept that promise. Zack was gone, probably dead. You can't keep a promise to someone you let die, could you?

Zack drowned... green drowning... Cloud closed his eyes tightly shut, trying to block away a parade of unwanted memories. Five years he would give anything to forget. Five years in a green hell, a haze of pain and feverish dreams of escape. What had they done to him there? What had he let happen to the friend he promised to help whenever they were in peril?

"Cloud..." Tifa murmured. He felt her hands brush his cheek, but he could not recall seeing her move to him. His eyes were closed too tightly for that. He felt the soft caress brush away a wetness he could not recall crying. This couldn't be pity,

could it? Pity was felt from a distance, something that was played out like a child visiting the zoo. Don't get too close. This was too close for pity. Far too close. It had to be that other thing, the one true emotion he felt but had never thought he received. Was this the thing she called "love"?

He wrapped his arms around her, filling the empty space in his heart with her presence. He was complete now, more so than he had ever been before this time. He had never known that something, that someone, could fill that hole in his soul so well as she. And as she filled the emptiness brought about from years of being hurt and alone, a sudden realization came over him. This was far better than anything Aeris had to offer. The truth stung, and lies were so much easier. Was it selfish to want to be with someone because it felt good, because it felt right? Lies could be right, couldn't they? He chuckled in his thoughts. Look at him, he was living proof. A lie so intricate and so fitting that it had become the truth. Who needed truth when you could make your own?

"What are you doing?" The voice snapped him from his reverie, making him pull back from Tifa's warm embrace. She was always doing this, always sneaking up on him. His eyes hardened as they met with Aeris'.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" he retorted, his voice hot with anger. He stood defiantly, standing against Tifa shakily though with a grim determination. "You can tell me all the filthy truth you want. I think I'll stick to the lies. When you've lived your life as a lie, I guess making your own truth just comes naturally." A smirk lit his features. "I like these lies." He nodded, his shock of hair swaying with his head. "I like them a lot."

Aeris frowned. "Lies are lies, regardless of how much you like them. You can't dwell in illusions all your life, Cloud. Once you start to stay there within them, you'll see what I mean. She'll show you things, and you won't be able to stop her because you're just as blind to the truth as a bat is to the sun."

Cloud shrugged emphatically, making her grind her teeth at his slow and deliberate indifference. "At least I'll be happy for a short while which is something more than what I'll be with you."

Rage flashed cold in Aeris' green eyes, and her hand slapped across his face with a resounding whack. "How dare you!"

Tifa wanted to rush forward to maim, beat, and smash Aeris to a bloody pulp, but a force held her back. Snaking tendrils of blue clutched at her hands and feet, holding her paralyzed to the spot. Her brown eyes were hot with anger.

Cloud shook the ringing from his ears as he turned back to Aeris, his jaw set. "So this is what it's like to be loved," he said softly. "I always needed to be needed, you know. Needed to be beat on by the woman who always had a special place for me in that blackened organ she called her heart."

The next few blows were quick and hard, strong enough to knock the wind from his lungs. He doubled over as a well-calculated punch rammed into his gut, bubbling pain in his stomach and abdomen. He wheezed as he straightened up a bit in an attempt to regain his composure. His efforts were met with a nasty uppercut. His teeth clacked together, blood pouring from his mouth as they cut into the soft flesh of his lower lip. The force sent him sprawling backwards until he hit the ground with a resounding thud. He rolled onto his side, moving too slowly in his haze of pain. The iron taste of blood choking him caused him to spit up a river of crimson as he lay on his side. Fire erupted in his chest as Aeris' foot caught him right over his sternum, giving him the overpowering sensation that his heart was dead in his body. He gasped for breath as another kick hooked into his ribs. He couldn't breathe.

He slowly slithered in the general direction of Tifa, moving slowly through the red blur that ran over his vision. Somewhere along the line, his older injuries had burst open to spill their rivers of blood over the hard marble floor. He didn't know when; he didn't care. Oblivion was already creeping up on him, a dark fuzz on the corners of his sight.

He wondered if he had truly broken his promise to Zack. Had Zack ever truly done anything to help him during that eternal hell. He had been there, he had been a friend, but what else? Nothing. No help in escape, no help in beating the people who sought to control him. And where was Zack now? Dead? Chickening out when the going finally got tough? Had he made a promise that was broken by an incorrigible craven?

Darkness washed over him like the cooling waves of the sea. He didn't break a promise to Zack; he had made one to Tifa instead. Love was more powerful than any friendship. It was the best kind. And if what he thought now was a lie, than it would be just one more of his truths. Just one more for his collection. Just one more for his love.

~*~

Reno rocked back on his heels, feeling as though he had just received one of those nasty left jabs to his kidney. He didn't know whether the blow was more mental or physical; Reeve's profitable request certainly knocked the wind out of him. He attempted to recover any scrap of composure he had left, hoping that he didn't look like he felt. He cleared his throat, pounding on his chest once.

"Uh, okay, well, you caught me off guard with that one, Reeve," he declared, a small nervous chuckle entering his words. "You wanna repeat that once more?"

Reeve frowned, lightly tapping a pencil on the hard wooden surface of his desk. "You heard me right the first time, Reno. I'm re-hiring you and the rest of the Turks on that job. Go out and find me the Black Materia."

Elena's frown was deeper than Reeve's. "You want us to go back out there and risk our butts to get you that damn thing? No way. No bloody way."

"I think I'm offering a square price with you, but I can make it more if you want me –"

"We don't want your gil, Reeve," Elena snapped, cutting him off before he could finish the offer. "That materia is a curse. We don't want anything to do with it."

Reno glanced at Elena, his features darkening. "Who says? Maybe we're gonna do this because it's the right thing to do." He looked back to Reeve, nodding slightly. "We'll talk the job."

"Now, wait just a damn minute here, Reno!" Elena ordered curtly. "This thing almost got you killed. You can't honestly say that you're going to do this because it's right. It's not right! This job plays out like a broken piano!"

"I know what this job means." Reno frowned at her, his eyes cold behind his dark glasses. "We're taking it. You can do what you want; I don't care. I'm going to find that sucker and bring it back here before it can cause anymore havoc." He turned his back to her. "Who had it last?"

"Reno –"

"Who had it last?!" The ferocity of his rage cut through all the background noise like a warm knife through butter. He shook with anger, breathing slowly and surely as he tried to scrap the last bits of his exterior cool. He leaned forward over Reeve's desk, looking at the man over the top edge of his sunglasses. "Who was last seen with the materia?" he asked, his tone quiet and slow.

Reeve pointed the pencil to a small television set which portrayed a freeze frame of a young girl amidst surrounding chaos, a small glittering orb shining brightly in her hand. Reno glanced at it once more. The scene was all too familiar. The laboratory.

Reeve couldn't resist a smile. "Yuffie Kisaragi."

~*~

From somewhere within the confines of a small room she had already begun to classify as a cell, water dripped constantly, running across the white stone of the ceiling until the cohesion of the little droplets was no longer powerful enough to hold it up, and it splattered into a small pool on the floor. It was the only sound that permeating through the air; it was the only thing that marked the passing of time. A small drip to count off the minutes as they ticked by like the tick of a hand on

the old grandfather clock in her old house.

The dripping water reminded Tifa of the well. She hadn't known how to tell him back then. She was so private with her feelings after her mother had died; she didn't want to feel the hurt that a broken heart could cause. How foolish she had been. Shattered love hurt whether it was voiced or not, but how was one so young supposed to say the words "I love you"?

Well, now she had, and he had let her come so close to him. Not just physically, but he had let her come close to his heart. She had glimpsed into his broken soul and tried to fill those holes that bled his livelihood like the trickle of water from the ceiling. She had looked and had not liked what she saw, but she could help him heal. Her love could help him heal if only he let her remain that close to him.

She had no doubts that he would.

She just wished he would awaken now to share this revelation with her.

"Aeris is going to pay for this," she whispered, running her hands through Cloud's soft hair. She loved how it bounced back into its place after her caress passed over it. She loved its jagged edges and ferocious spikes. She loved how it represented a small part of him that was still the little boy trying to be a hero and trying to show how manly he was. He was a hero. He was her hero.

She lay down beside him, wrapping an arm around his chest, ignoring the dirty, blood-crusted garments he wore. It didn't matter. They were both dirty. She couldn't suppress a small giggle. In the movies, the heroes never got dirty and the women they saved always had unwrinkled dresses. Those stories never turned out to be true, but something had happened between Cloud and she. Somewhere along the line he had saved her. Not from mortal peril or from life's cruel tricks, but from her own loneliness. After Nibelheim it had threatened to consume her, to steal her very life. It almost had. But he had been there, in her thoughts and dreams, and finally in person to keep her from the edge. She couldn't count the times she had sat upon the jagged cliffs of Midgar just wanting to end it all with the one giant leap of faith which would let her finally escape the despair of being alone in the world. But she could never bring herself to end it all, and she found herself often looking up into the night sky so reminiscent of the night he had made his promise and thinking that every day he saved her was every day that he had kept his promise.

He had saved her mentally each and every night. When she had found him, he saved her from her loneliness with the flash of an understanding smile or a grin at a jest they shared over one of her drinks. It wasn't the mutual companionship she shared with Barret. It was deeper than that kind of care. God, had it taken her five years to realize that it was love?

Cloud moaned softly, turning his head to face her as he opened his beautiful blue eyes. She smiled softly as the pain that was hidden deep within those cerulean orbs was lessened as he gazed deeply within her. Her light fingers brushed away the blood running from the side of his mouth.

"You kept your promise," she whispered. He had a right to know. She had known that that promise had hurt him deeply. He always thought he had failed her. How could he ever think that? He was the best thing that ever happened to her. "You saved me."

Confusion glowed brightly within his shimmering eyes. "What are you talking about, Tifa?" he asked, shaking his head slowly. The pain returned to haunt his features, somehow pulling the skin tight around his face, adding years to his complexion. "I never had the strength to save you," he muttered, tearing his gaze from hers. He bit his lower lip.

weak, pathetic... never did have the strength, did you...

"You don't know anything, Cloud," she declared in response.

"I know I..." He took a deep breath and groaned, physical pain bearing over the mental anguish.

She put a finger to his lips, silencing him. "Shh. I know." Her brown eyes found his once more. She wished she could away his hurt. She wished he could have just a little peace of mind for once in his grief-stricken life. She could give him some, couldn't she? Nothing could compare to the power of love, right?

Leaning forward, feeling his breath hot on her lips, she kissed him. He made no move to stop her, nor did he kiss her back with a mimic of her fervor. She wasn't quite sure what that meant, but she decided that it could mean nothing bad. She broke the kiss, making a trail of smaller kisses, barely more than delicate caresses of her lips, down his cheek and back to his ear. The cold metal of his earring bit into her tongue as her mouth enveloped the soft flesh of his earlobe.

He shuddered against her.

It took her a moment to realize that it wasn't out of pleasure or love, or even lust. His body wracked with sobs, tears leaving a salty trail as they were squeezed out of the corners of his eyes and down the side of his worn face. She pulled away from him, wondering if she had done something wrong. If he didn't want this, if he didn't love her, what kind of fool had she just made herself out to be? How had she just destroyed the brittle nature of their relationship she worked so hard to build? She resisted the temptation to go run to the dark corner of the cell and just cry.

She rolled away from him, pulling her arm from where it had lay across his chest. He caught her hand before she could fully drag it from him, however. He sat up, finally meeting her watery gaze with his own tear stained eyes. His lower lip trembled as he fought back about sob. What could she possibly see in him? He was such a pathetic fool. And what trap had she sprung for herself by following her love and finding him here? Her death was awaiting her now. There was little that could prevent that now. He wished so many things could be undone, but that past was etched in stone. No truths could be made for that mistake.

Why did she have to love him?

He shook his head slowly. "Just hold me," he whispered, his voice cracking as he let go of her hand. She didn't pull her fingers from his, instead squeezing them in reassurance. She sat up as well, coming close to him once again. She wrapped her arms around his body, pulling him into her warm embrace. He hugged her tightly back, unable to stop the flow of tears from his eyes.

She kissed him once more on the forehead before she started to rock him back and forth to the melody of a peaceful lullaby they could only imagine. The only song they heard was that of the dripping of the water from somewhere in the darkness. She swayed him slowly, her head sinking low on his shoulder as his rested comfortably against hers. She swayed until sleep claimed his weary body, slowly taking him away. She swayed until his tears melted away in the peaceful slumber of a fatigued soul that had finally come upon something that could mend its hurts and heal its wounds. She swayed until once more her thoughts were her only company.

She felt the tears bite her eyes, but they weren't the same cold ones that had stung her eyes all those lonely nights. She wasn't alone. Not anymore. The warm liquid running down her pale cheeks was from joy. She had finally faced the truth of her feelings. She had finally seen the truth of his. She leaned back onto the ground which no longer seemed as hard or jagged, and she joined him as he slept within the confines of her arms.

~*~

Aeris turned her back to the door, her heart throbbing as she felt tears well up in her eyes. Why did Tifa always get to love him? All she did was lie to him time and time again. It was more than just the compulsive white lie that was often made to be a jest; it was the lies that bound a man to a false fate, the controlling lies that weren't entirely untrue. How could he love her after all the lies she'd told?

Aeris frowned as she ran a fingernail across the chipping stone of the windowsill. She flicked a piece of dirt out into the air absentmindedly, watching the darkening skies off to the horizon. How could she make him see the light of truth when Tifa wrapped her lies about him like the black storm off in the distance? What could make him look at the mirror's reflection

instead of through it?

Her nails tightened around the sill until her knuckles turned white. Right now she wanted something to snap. She wanted something to fall into place like it should. Cloud was being too resilient and the White Materia was out for its own gains even though it had no need for anything of material value. Nothing was working right. She wondered if killing Nygel had been such a good idea after all.

She shook her head to her thoughts. Nah. Killing him was the one smart thing she had done in Midgar. Letting him live long enough to stash the cloned Black Materia had been the one stupid thing she had done. Maybe she should solve this problem like she had Nygel's loyalty problem. Killing Tifa would leave him only with her.

But, then again, if he had grown so attached to Tifa, he would surely be lost and possibly very angry with her. No, that wasn't the way to go. He had to see the light before she killed Tifa. A smile lit her lips, a small twitching at the corners of her mouth. If he saw the light, he could kill her. Then, if by some chance he regretted that action, there would be no one to blame but himself. She could live happily with that.

She turned to the small room. And as for the nuisance White Materia... she had plans on how to take care of that. Plans that would distract the small team of peons that sought to free Cloud and Tifa from her clutches and possibly kill a couple of them in the process. It wouldn't be a loss she would mourn.

"Go, my child," she murmured, her eyes locking with the cold serpentine gaze hidden within the shadows. "Wreak havoc on the denizens of the world. Show no mercy to them for they are the foul beings who seek to destroy us. No harm will come to you, borne of steel or man or from the Planet itself. And when you have plundered as you wish and eaten your fill of men's charred flesh, recover the power which was once ours. We will have our Promised Land."

The creature seemingly grinned cruelly, its scales glittering as it stepped into the dim candlelight. Talons clicked on the floor as it made its way to the window, stretching its wings to their extent before folding them back together. Aeris rubbed its obsidian head, marveling at how perfect she had made her creation. Twisted together from the very darkness that settled deeply within the hearts of men, it knew no flaws. The anger and hatred, prejudice and greed, that claimed men knew no flaws. It was those deep temptations, it was those horrific sins, it was complete evil.

It jumped from the windowsill, sailing downward until its wings caught an updraft onto which it could lazily soar. It grew in size as it flew onto the deep horizons, swelling as he became closer to the dark emotions from which it fed until it was no longer a small dragon dwelling within the darkness. It was now a creature of destruction. The people would feel its fury and bleed for its hunger.

It was headed straight for Boneville.

~*~

"So what happened to the Gay Boat?" Red XIII asked, his lips twitching as he fought back a smile. He knew it wouldn't make it. Too bad he hadn't made any bets. He could be rich. Intellect over confidence.

Cid sighed, leaning back against the large console of flight controls and stretching his feet out in front of him. "It's spread for about a mile over the ocean. It worked like the charm I never had."

"That well, huh?"

Cid rubbed his eyes with his hands. "Oh, shut up. I got us here, didn't I?"

"That's open for interpretation," Jerry interjected, smiling smally as he looked down on his captain. Some of the crew openly laughed.

"Next time you can all pile into a ruddy, ole piece o' crap, and I'll take my baby," he declared, patting the deck beneath him. "You will, will you?"

"You bet. Get your asses back to work." Cid pushed himself from the deck on the Highwind, standing. "Go fix something."

Jerry glanced around the bridge of the ship. "Everything's working fine, now, thank you. How're you?"

Cid glowered at him. "Find something to do. If nothing needs fixin' then I'll go an' break something for ya. How's that for service?"

Jerry glowered back. "Pretty crappy if you ask me. I think you're having an emotional reaction to the loss of your Gay Boat." Cid opened his mouth for a comeback, glancing behind the pilot to the scenery beyond him. Glowing bright red on the horizon, billowing black smoke into the air like a rabid chimney, was the remains of Boneville. He pushed himself around Jerry, grabbing the controls of the large ship.

"Boneville's burning!" he shouted, pulling everyone from their own thoughts. Skipping all the pre-flight checks and routines, he gave the new and improved jet engines a cold start. Thankfully, they cooperated with him for once in their lives and started smoothly, launching the ship into the air and sending them flying towards the ruin.

~*~

"The two love birds wake from their mid-afternoon nap," Aeris commented, leaning back against the wall of the cell. "How sweet that they could share these last moments in their stain-glass world together..." Her tone grew hard. "Because I'm about to shatter it with the cold indifference of reality."

Cloud stared at her, feeling the wrath growing stronger within him. Every time he looked at her, he felt his anger and distaste for her like bile crawling up the back of his throat. She hadn't taken everything from him. He wouldn't let her take Tifa. Not now, not ever.

"What do you want?" he growled, careful never to take his eyes from her. She was the snake that was settled quietly in the tall grass, whose bite was harmless until you realized it was laced with poison. He had had enough of her venomous words to last a lifetime. He didn't want to hear them, he didn't want to feel their sting anymore.

"My dear Cloud, I've already told you what I want. I want you to wake up and smell the coffee." She jerked her head in the direction of Tifa. "She wants nothing more than to control you with her lies. Why do you think she repeatedly tells them to you? You love the lies, don't you? Why is that? Because they're far less painful than the truth. I can help you live with the truth, Cloud. You don't always have to be her lying puppet."

Puppet... the word echoed through his head with a fit of laughter.

i told you, silly puppet... didn't i tell you... do you see the truth, puppet... or is proud cloud still too proud to look?

Cloud ground his teeth in rage. "I'm nobody's puppet," he snarled.

Aeris smiled weakly. "Oh, yes, you are. Your strings are just too tangled for you to realize that they are there. Every single little lie she's told you binds you to her, and with every single one of her lies you make your truth, you help her tie you down. You've been her puppet for an eternity, Cloud, because she couldn't let you go. She needed to be a controlling force in your life. She is now. Do you want to cut the strings?"

Tifa frowned. "Don't play your sick little mind games with him," she ordered. "He deserves more than that."

"Do he deserve to be more than your little doll to wring and twist?"

"He isn't!" she snapped. "I love him."

Aeris' face quivered with barely contained disgust. "You love him," she repeated, twisting the words into a mockery. "Which do you love more? The way he makes you look at yourself and see something more than a lost bar wench, or the power you can control his very thoughts? I'm really quite curious about this."

"I bet you are, you bitch."

Aeris sighed, producing the small sea green globe of materia. The Holy Materia. It pulsed brightly as she displayed its power to them. It knew where it had to be for the balance. It knew its purpose. "It wants you, you know," she declared. "It wants to be you forever, Cloud. You are the reason it was created. Let it cut the controlling strings. Take it and be your own. Nobody's puppet, Cloud. No more strings."

He stared at the green sphere of power, uncertainty digging its cold claws into his mind. Nobody's puppet... it was so tempting. What would it be like to think for himself? What would it be like to live in the light of truth instead of surrounded by lies? Was it worth it?

take it, foolish puppet... you'll feel its power, it's yours... it's ours... to have and hold and wield against ourselves... we can destroy it together... take it and live in the dark... take it and conquer it, conquer the light... take it so the world can live in black... forever and always... take it...

His hand reached out to the materia, slowly moving towards it as if it was a precious gem. He wasn't entirely sure why he wanted to feel its sleek coldness enclosed in the palm of his hand. He didn't want to live in the darkness his mind promised; he didn't want to destroy the light. But something compelled him to grasp its sleekness.

His fingers closed around the small orb.

Aeris grinned as Cloud's eyes widened with the surge of power pounding through his veins. The light and the dark... her Destroyer was nearly completed. Of course, there were loose ends she needed to take care of, first. She needed the White Materia so that the Black and Holy would not totally ruin his mind in their quest to destroy each other. And then there was Tifa. She could deal with that problem right now.

"Kill her."

~*~

It loomed on the horizon, encased within the destruction of Boneville. Fires raged around the creature though it was not scorched by the heat of the flames nor choked by the dark blanket of smoke which created a wreath about its head. It felt the White Materia's presence before it saw the ship coming up upon the horizon. It tilted its head back and roared a challenge.

"That bastard!" Cid growled, relinquishing the controls to Jerry as he moved to the front of the deck. "Thinks he can total a town and get away with it?"

The creature was easily the size of the Highwind, its scales glowing with the blaze burning around it. Blood stained its pearly teeth a dark crimson as it ate its fill of the people of Boneville. Snapped bones, some from the uncovered remains of a prehistoric creature and some fresh from the bodies of the newly dead, littered the ground, mixed in with the burning debris.

"Open missile tubes one and two!" Cid ordered, grabbing the rail with an iron grasp. He raised one fist clenched into the air. "Fire!!!"

Nothing happen. No action of friendly missiles towards their foe. Cid turned to Jerry, deadly ire clear within his blue gaze.

Jerry swallowed.

"We don't, ah, have any missiles, sir," he stammered, a cringe slowly appearing on his face.

"You *&\$%#\$@ waste of *&\$%#\$@ crap! What the hell do you mean 'we don't have any missiles'?! What kind of crew is this?! What do you want us to do?! Throw bloody rocks at it?!" He turned back to the dark dragon. "Damn it!"

The dark roared in response as though it was laughing at them before wrenching a large metal beam from where it was lodged in the ground. It tossed the beam at the Highwind like it was an effortless action. Cid resisted the urge to duck as the beam sailed above his head, narrowly missing the top of the ship.

"Ha! You piece of crap! Your aim sucks!" He turned back to the people on his ship. "I can throw better than that with both my arms tied behind my back!"

Red XIII feigned enthusiasm. "Some feat there, Cid."

The captain merely bowed to the red creature, avoiding a piece of brick to the head. He turned back to the dragon. "Missed again!" He broke down into sputtering laughter.

Cid's laughter cut off sharply as a sickening sensation came over him. He had felt it before at the Seventh Heaven that night before. It was the imbalance of light and dark. He knew what it was now. The voice inside his mind had told him. He grimaced as the dragon sprang into the air, pumping its wings as it flew away from the carnage it had caused.

"Turn the ship around," he ordered. "Go back to the city."

Barret stepped forward. "Now wait jes' a minute here. We gotta stop that thing before it destroys something else."

"No, we don't." He glanced back to the city, obscure against the black background of clouds. "We gotta stop Aeris before she kills us all."

~*~

"What?!" Tifa demanded, immediately standing and backing away from Cloud and Aeris. "No!"

Aeris sneered. "You heard me, Cloud. Cut the strings, sever those ties that bind you to her lies. Kill her."

Cloud's chin quivered as the voices escalated to shouting in his head. kill her... kill her... you can't trust her... trust is death... kill... kill... He didn't want to. He loved her. He couldn't kill the one he loved. Tears burned in his eyes. Was it the only way he could free himself from being a puppet? By killing his love?

Aeris turned and pulled the Ultima Weapon from where she had carefully concealed it. She handed it to him, smiling in satisfaction as he took the large sword from her hands. The glass globe fell from his hands and shattered on the floor. It was like his own world, slowly coming to pieces, breaking into smaller and smaller bits. It was like all the lies he had listened to all his life. Was it time to trade his fiction for fact, or was this all a lie as well?

"Finish it, Cloud."

Water poured from his eyes. "I can't." His arms quivered as he tightened his grip over the familiar hilt of the Ultima Weapon. The blade shown brightly, casting a halo of light around Cloud as though he was the bright Angel of Death ready to unleash his ire upon the selfish sinners of the world. "I won't," he whispered. It wasn't him slowly rounding on Tifa; it wasn't him about to drive the sword through her like he had done with Cid. It wasn't him... it wasn't.

"Cloud," Tifa whispered, her eyes locked on the wicked edge of the sword. "Don't."

Cloud raised the sword slowly. "Oh, God, Tifa." His voice became laced with desperation. "Run! Run!"

The sword came crashing down.

Aeris' eyes gleamed with pleasure.

It clanged sharply against the hard stone floor, jarring Cloud's arms.

Tifa was gone, running. And running.

~*~

"Ya still haven't quite explained what's going on." Barret grumbled as he trudged through the archway that marked the entrance to the City of the Ancients.

Cid frowned as he picked a direction. "You're guess is as good as mine," he declared, sliding down a small incline that was built from loose rocks. "It probably ain't good, though."

"Hey, you seem to know somethin' the rest of us don't so spill it." Barret's eyes narrowed as he stared at the back of the pilot's head.

Cid turned around to meet Barret's gaze. "I dunno anything that I haven't told you already." He started walking again, rounding a corner.

A force caught him off-guard, knocking him backwards. The force fell over him as he lost his balance and tumbled to the ground. His head hit the ground with a crack. He grimaced. I'm gonna feel that in the morning, he thought, rubbing the back of his head with one hand as he pushed himself into a sitting position under the heavy body of a familiar person.

"Tifa, what the hell...?" Barret muttered a few more choice words under his breath in confusion. "What's going on here?"

Tifa pulled herself from the entanglement of limbs, standing shakily. As she gasped for breath, her heart pounded both from the exertion of her muscles and from an undeniable fear. It wasn't a craven's fear for her own life, but she felt the horror deeply for what had happened to Cloud. What had Aeris done to make him do things against his will?

"Barret! We gotta help him," she stated around her gasps.

"Huh?"

Cid stood, wiping himself free of dirt and dust. He shook his head. "Cloud, you idiot."

Barret's face tightened in anger, but he ignored the comment. "Where is he?"

Tifa shook her head, glancing back down the way she came. Hundreds of twists and turns and forks in the road made it suddenly seem that much hopeless. "I don't know. I wasn't exactly leaving a trail of breadcrumbs."

Red XIII clicked his teeth together in thought. "I don't think we should move from here until we know where we're going," he declared, swinging his head around to look at Tifa.

"Nah, that don't matter," Cid said, starting to walk again. Tifa followed suit, the others at her heels. "She'll come to us when she's ready to play."

~*~

"The moment of truth is upon us," Aeris declared, wringing her hands in anticipation. "You do know what happens next, don't you, Cloud?"

He didn't answer, his eyes blank as he clutched the Ultima Weapon with a white-knuckled grasp. What had he done? Why had he done that? There were no answers to his question just like there hadn't been one to Aeris'. The voices battling inside his head was all he heard now, and they gave him no answers, only orders. Like Aeris had. And he carried them out like any good soldier. Had he lost the ability to question immoral orders, or had he actually wanted to play the part of the puppet once more?

puppets with strings that are cut will make more... they can't survive without the guiding light of another because their will has been oppressed...

because they are weak... wills matter not in the world where strength rules all... wills are meaningless unless they can be backed up... silly puppet has no strength... except his pride...

"Go away," he muttered, dropping the hilt of the Ultima Weapon as he clutched at his head. The arguing voices inside his head began to scream at each other, spiting each other at every turn of their disagreement. There was nothing on which they could agree. Absolutely nothing. And their screaming and shouting and hissing and fighting was threatening to rip again his mind.

He would do anything to make them stop. "Go away," he murmured though they would not heed any of his words. "Go away, go away... leave me alone."

Aeris feigned sympathy. "Poor Cloud. Do you enjoy long, satisfying chats with your psyche, or is this just a passing phase?"

Cloud scowled. "I hate you," he declared, clenching his teeth with his barely contained rage. He wished he could just take the large sword sitting by his side and just kill her with it. One, easy stab. But he couldn't. The reason he couldn't was another one of those questions with no answers. He wanted to; he just couldn't. "Why?"

Aeris' eyes flashed with anger. "Make sense, Cloud. 'Why' what? Why do you hate me?" She smiled wickedly. "Or why you can't defy me?" He glowered at her ability to read what he was thinking. "Oh, that's it, huh? You can't kill me, Cloud, because I am the world to you. Without me, you are nothing." She paused. "And you know that, too."

Cloud took a deep breath, standing up, his sword in hand. "Then I'll be laughing my head off when you're burning in Hell."

"I doubt it."

He bit his lower lip, sweat beading on his brow in concentration. He tried to raise the sword up so he could somehow attack Aeris. He wanted to. He knew, and they knew it. But they wouldn't let him.

don't kill her...

we need her...

we don't want to be puppets...

... puppets...

His eyes narrowed at their words. Don't want to be a puppet, huh? He sneered angrily. Neither do I.

His rage broke their control for a second during which he swung the sword wildly at Aeris with one thought in mind: kill.

Aeris stumbled back as the fine point of the Ultima Weapon sliced along her face. The wound burned, and she let a small yelp of pain. Her hand touched her cheek where blood was now flowing freely from a long gash along it. She smeared the crimson stickiness on her fingertips, frowning as she looked back to Cloud.

"You are unpredictable, aren't you, Cloud?" she asked, seemingly indifferent to the situation. "Oh, well, we can fix that."
"You aren't going to fix anything, Aeris. Cloud is perfect the way he is."

Aeris turned slowly, slightly surprised to see that Tifa had brought along a few more of her friends. And the White Materia. This was too easy. Her eyes glowed with mirth. "Him? Perfect? Oh, don't make me laugh. He's about as perfect as a one-winged angel."

"Perfect to me," she growled.

Aeris shrugged. "You want him? You can take him home." She leaned forward conspiratorially. "He's a little crazy. Go easy on him, huh?" She looked back to Cloud. "Go on, go home to your Tifa."

Cloud looked around tentatively, expecting some sort of a trick. She wouldn't let him go. She "loved" him far too much to let him escape with her adversary. Escape by himself, so she could reward him with a whack for his ingenuity, that she would allow. But never this. It had to be a trick.

Tifa was thinking the same thing. "What do you mean?" she asked. "You wouldn't want your favorite prize to slip through your fingers like that. What do you have planned?"

Aeris shrugged. "Oh, nothing. Just plain curiosity. I was just wondering how he would react when he saw his new best friend. Say hello to Cid Highwind, Cloud. He has something you don't want."

Cloud's eyes scanned the small group huddled near the door of the room. They finally locked on Cid's, blue on blue. They stared into each other's eyes for what seemed like an eternity. Cloud's mind screamed for him to do something.

kill him... the puppet's master...

kill him... the one controller...

he'll take us, break us, make us his toy... kill him before he kills our will...

cut the strings...

... puppet... puppet...

All Cloud felt, however, was an indescribable rage, coursing through his body like the blood in his veins. He had only felt this anger once before at the Final Dungeon when he had been fighting with him. When he had faced him alone on the tiny plane, the puppet against the master. He didn't know the truth value of that statement; he didn't even know if he had been real or just some figment created by his imagination because his mind needed a sense of closure. It didn't matter. It was happening again. He wouldn't let it.

A red halo shone around him, lighting all corners of the room with an incandescent glow. The crimson light disappeared in a flash of pure white, a color that seemed to lull the room into peace. It was cut by a war cry erupting from Cloud's mouth. The world was shocked back into reality as the Ultima Weapon sliced through the air quickly and accurately, an indistinct blur of white and green.

But not one blow actually hit its mark.

Cloud growled an oath in increasing anger, jumping up into the air to slice down into this unbeatable foe. His sword raised high, he started for the killing blow, wanting more than anything for the stings to be cut. With this death they would be cut. Silence blanketed him as he descended upon the puppet master. With this cut, he would be free.

Cid watched Cloud attack him dispassionately. Funny how it hurt so much the first time Cloud betrayed him and how he was doing nothing this time but turning the other cheek. It wasn't really Cloud this time. It was a man torn between light and darkness. It was a man who needed something to sew the halves of him back together as one. He knew what would be the thread. He knew what would be the needle.

Cloud rose high in the air with what would be the killing blow. The arc of the Ultima Weapon never touched him, never scratched his flesh, never drew any blood, but he felt his life leave him as the pure white light returned to banish the darkness from the room.

One final whisper from the light of the Planet filled his head. I'm sorry.

He slowly shook his head, the blinding light filling his vision. No, you're not.

The white faded to black.

Cloud dropped the Ultima Weapon, holding his hands about him as though he could feel the light like it was something tangible, something palpable. The tendrils wrapped around him with soothing care, so different from the yanking clutches of the Lifestream as it had ripped his mind apart.

Now his mind was being pieced together.

No voices. No screaming Planet to fill his ears with its throes of pain. No soft whispers that spoke to him and told him things he'd rather not hear. No thoughts intruding on his own. Only blessed silence. And a dim purpose.

So this was what it was like to be a puppet.

The light faded, the darkness coming back to creep into the corners of the room, a dismal presence. But, even in the dark, everything was suddenly clear. The lies which had been told to him were banish from his mind, leaving him to coldly pick the truth. Not his truth, not something he had made to relieve himself of blame. The Planet's truth. He looked, and he saw, and he knew what needed to be done.

He picked up the Ultima Weapon, ignoring the unmoving body of Cid Highwind. It was cold, he knew. But puppets couldn't have feelings simply because they were being used. When you were being used, you didn't think for yourself, and you had no regrets. No regrets.

Feeling the comfortable presence of his weapon in his hands, he turned from the group watching shocked from the door. His eyes found the two emerald orbs that stood defiantly against him. A smile lit her lips.

"Find the Promised Land for me," she whispered, her voice shaking with only one emotion. Fear.

Cloud shook his head slowly. "You can't find it," he declared, a chuckle in his voice. "Not in life. I can get you there. I can let you dwell within it for an eternity. Do you want to find it?" His blue eyes glowed coldly. "Do you want to die?"

Aeris took a step back, but she couldn't run from him. There was nowhere she could go that would make her far enough away from him. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. His purpose was clear. He would give her what she asked. He would give her the Promised Land. She steeled herself for what was coming.

The darkness crept up on her, twining around her body, stealing her heat with its cold void. She felt tears streaming down

her eyes as the cold approached her head. "It wasn't supposed to be like this," she cried, her tone quivering.

Cloud shook his head slowly. "Nothing ever is."

The black engulfed her entire body, an oppressive tyrant that crushed her very livelihood. Her scream was silent as her soul was leached away from her, her warmth and light being sapped by the darkness, her mind slowly destroyed. The dark was broken by the light.

A holy explosion rocked the darkness, ripping apart her body as the black had her soul. It filled the whole room, far too bright to be looked at directly. The people watching Cloud's destruction shielded their eyes from it, looking away as though it was a bright star shining within a curtain of forever black. Cloud looked at it, satisfied that a part of his job was completed.

The light melted away, giving passage to the normal light and darkness of the room. Lightning illuminated the room in a blinding flash, casting a dark silhouette along his impassive face. Rain scoured the earth in an unnatural thrum, the clouds' anger released in a torrent of destructive power.

The heavens shook with rage, for, borne of the flesh of man and the blood of the Planet, the Destroyer had been forged to unleash his power and wreak havoc on the world.

The Destroyer had been created, and the Planet trembled in fear.