

This was a Catching Glimpses chapter written as an April Fool's gag by the wonderfully talented and hilarious Steele, with minor input (mainly grammatical) from me. I wrote a chapter of his fic, Redux, Remix, and Revenge, as well. It was an exchange of sorts. He was kind enough to keep my chapter and incorporate it into the canon of his fic. Sadly, I cannot do so with Confrontations, but I can (and will) share its brilliance with the world. It is soda-out-your-nose funny, and still makes me cry with laughter. And at several points, it skewers me utterly, which I love even more. I hope you like it as much as I did. =)

P.S. - Parts that I was particularly struck by have comments in parenthesis after them.

Chapter 29: Confrontations

"I got kissed by a fuckin' guy!" –Reno Lynley

"Goddammit all, this place is cold," muttered Barret as he protectively clenched his thick coat around his massive frame even tighter. "Almost makes the Shinra not seem so bad in compar'son..." This wind had picked up further, carrying specks of frozen cold, which almost stung as they impacted against the unprotected faces of the advancing party.

"You said that last time we were here," Yuffie snapped, the cold getting to her. Even her thick garb could not completely protect her scrawny body from the harsh elements of the Northern Continent.

"Sorry, must be b-brain fuh-freeze."

"Barret apologizing to Yuffie?" Cid cried out in partial shock. "Holy fucking shit, the weather's worse than we thought; Barret's getting delusional!"

"Hardy har-har," the large black man replied bitterly.

Red stayed silent, shaking his head as the four companions continued to trek through the mild blizzard, seeking shelter. They were not yet aware that Reno and Kiyara were no longer in the procession, and so they found no need to slow down.

Which was a costly mistake.

Reno and Kiyara were walking alongside the Gornay River, playing around by pretending to push one another in, when movement caught the blonde woman's eye. What she saw was not the nature of the beast so much as the speed it traveled at her, along with the fact that it had managed to erase all sense of its presence before, like a ninja lurking silently in the darkness.

But this was no ninja. Nor was it even dark outside, which caused Kiyara to mentally smack herself for dropping her guard and being so careless. Still, she had a brief moment to put up her guard before...

...The creature misjudged its angle of attack, looped back around, and flew straight into the river.

Reno blinked and cocked his head, watching the white-furred monster as it was carried away by the rough, overpowering current of the great river. "Well, that was fucked up."

Kiyara turned to her red-haired companion and asked sarcastically, "What makes you say that?"

"...I dunno. I just get the feeling that things are really fucked up right now."

"I'll say. You're talking funny; everything okay?" There was a hint of concern behind the mockingly sweet tone.

Which Reno ignored. "I just said I don't fucking know!"

Unbeknownst to the two, they were still being watched. Except this time, the eyes were mechanical in nature, and not biological. The tiny camera rolled along behind the two, and recorded their conversation as they walked through the frozen snow. The device transmitted this information to a screen on a multi-monitor display not terribly far away.

The rest of the screens were dark, allowing the occupant in the chair in front of the large contraption to focus solely on the golden-haired woman. There was no other source of light in the large, stone chamber, making the man cast a disturbing, fluctuating silhouette across the smooth granite floor. The figure shuffled slightly and snorted in a combination of pleasure and annoyance. The object of his attention was coming right back to him of her own accord. No more need to send out his death squads. On the other hand, her companion wouldn't shut up, and his seat was uncomfortable.

"Amaani!" the man with the tied back, oily hair called out in an irate, nasally voice. After a moment of silence, he looked off to his left, towards the open corridor. "AMA--"

"Yes?" came a voice to the man's right, surprising him and causing him to almost jump out of his chair in shock. He swiveled around and glared up angrily at the white-haired woman, who maintained a stoic expression as he began to berate her.

"I told you to never sneak up on me like that," he spat. "I made you the way you are so you could destroy my enemies, not so you can scare the living excrement out of me!"

"Might I remind you, Father, you're no longer technically 'alive'," the woman dared to correct the small man.

"Oh, yes. I suppose you're right. Regardless, cut that out."

"As you wish, Hojo-Sensei. Why have you summoned me?"

Hojo smirked, folded his hands and put his index fingers to his chin. "I want you to pull back our forces. Let Kiyara and the others come to us. The main specimen is not to be harmed. If you can help it, Strife and the two Tanduri are to be spared and restrained, as well. The others are expendable."

"Brilliant, father. Your will shall be done!" And with that, the female strode away down the scarcely lit tunnel, making barely a sound as though she were a ghost, her fluttering white robes helping to convey this illusion.

Hojo turned back to the computer setup before him and activated a few more monitors. One was an overhead view of Cid, Red, Barret and Yuffie; another was of Tifa and Rahilah. The third one displayed Reeve walking by himself, and tagging far behind him was Cloud.

The scientist squinted his eyes, and looked at the four screens again. Something, make that someone, was missing. The obnoxious Mog-riding cat wasn't with the group, but its controller, Reeve, was there, so that explained that. But there was one other, he thought.

The tall, dark figure stood before him, tangled hair and a tattered cape flowing ominously in the vicious wind. He held a long, metallic object in his good hand, and stared down at him with blood red eyes, full of hatred and a thirst for vengeance. Hojo had been beaten down and weakened, unable to process a new way to defend himself against AVALANCHE. And this is how his life would end, a bullet to the head. Such a wasteful, pitiful end to such a great existence, the smaller man had thought to himself.

However, he was wrong. A bullet would not finish him, as he expected. The man's small red eyes began to expand as his torso started to balloon into an inhuman form. The fluttering cape was replaced by large, strong demonic wings as the entity's anger had roused the power inside of him, an unwanted power given to him by Hojo himself. It was irony at its

finest, though neither of the two appreciated it quite that much, as one was currently in a blood rage, and the other was watching his intestines get splattered across a railing twenty or so feet away.

Hojo blinked, and looked up as he stirred himself out of his troublesome meditation.

“Valentine,” he hissed to himself.

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Thousands of miles away, in the damp, cavern-like basement of the Shinra mansion, a solitary figure stirred, then sneezed. Vincent Valentine drew a mess of long, dark, unwashed hair away from his pale, effeminate face so he could wipe his nose upon his sleeve. Letting out a mild snuffle, he turned his attention once again to the aged tome before him.

And so shall the maer’eisoo or the bee-shon’n triumph, but perhaps not with the loss of the other. So too shall the former hero claim redemption, but again not without cost. And he, or it, which dares not tally in the affairs of his fellow man, may find himself to play the most important role of all. But perhaps not before a great evil casts its influence shall anything come to pass. So has been predicted, so shall it may be.

“Amazing,” Vincent pondered to himself, “that a civilization thousands of years old can so precisely see the future, while modern weathermen seem unable to tell whether it is going to rain tomorrow or not.”

Flipping carefully through the layers of parchment, the lone figure gazed intently upon the passages until one in particular struck him like an iron fist. Reading it slowly, dread began to appear in his otherwise empty, crimson orbs. His mouth began to open in awe at the prospect of a slightly different prophesy, this one bearing much worse news than those previous.

Vincent knew from the late Professor Gast’s records that when the planet is in danger, it will create a WEAPON, a nearly invulnerable being of massive power to counter the threat. That alone ordinarily would not be such a concern. However, he also knew from reading the ancient texts that when a “force of poison or evil”, such as Jenova or Sephiroth, dies and becomes one with the Lifestream, it starts to become sick and weak. Given this, the planet will usually do its best to have such evils quarantined.

If Hojo himself was truly resurrected by the planet, that would be an indicator that the Planet was not well enough to handle him. And given that, any attempt to kill him (again) would be considered a danger so great, that the Planet’s very life would be at stake. Ergo, It would likely resist any efforts to subdue the scientist... with a new, more powerful WEAPON than any seen before.

Vincent suddenly realized this, and muttering a rare obscenity, quickly got up and strode hastily to a nearby cabinet. Not wanting to deal with the lock he himself placed on there, the suddenly panicked man threw his metallic claw into the wooden door like paper, sending splinters flying away as he grabbed at the lock hatch and tore it away. The twin doors opened, revealing a small trove of weapons and Materia. He reached for his Death Penalty, a sniper rifle of deadly accuracy, but then thought better of it, as that’s what he always seemed to use.

The long haired man grabbed a double-barrel shotgun, a pistol, and a few of the semi-translucent, magical orbs. He strapped on the weapons and pocketed most of the Materia, save one. He clutched it hard, knowing that using this particular one in the way he was planning came with great physical risk. It was called “Exit”, even though its basic application was teleportation. It never took the user far, but in order to warn his allies in time of their impending doom, he would have to muster every last ounce of will power and strength to make it take him as far as possible. And do it over, and over, and over again until he actually got somewhere.

But he had no choice. With a deep breath, and concentrating so hard that he almost fell into a meditative state, the air around Vincent began to ripple as the small orb let out a pale, grass-colored light. Coming to a peak, the waves of distortion let out a final blast of energy, as Vincent disappeared in a flash of shattering glass.

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"Well, this is real fuckin' peachy. Which one of you geniuses has the map?!" Reno spat. Everyone was together now, as a large chasm prevented them from proceeding any further. It was about twenty yards wide, went on in both directions for miles, had to have been several hundred yards deep, and was saturated with sharp, rough outcroppings.

"I don't think we have one," replied Tifa hesitantly.

"Great. Just great. Leave it to AVALANCHE to completely screw things up!" the red haired Turk lamented, throwing his hands in the air out of frustration.

"Say what?!" Barret retorted, taking a threatening step towards Reno. Reeve looked between the two men with his head down, sad, helpless eyes darting between the two as Reno turned to face the larger man, sizing him up, knowing full well that shit was about to fly.

"You heard me, you people never do anything right!" While that may have sounded like a jab, there was little humor behind the smaller man's voice. "You wouldn't have been able to get Sephiroth if we hadn't taken down his shield. When you first started up, you did a great job rousing public opinion. Destroy some reactors, and cut power to homes, police, and hospitals. Yeah, that was a real stroke of genius, Wallace. What were you gonna do next, go out and kill civilians so there'd be no one left to pay Shinra taxes?"

Barret's dark face began to redden, his large body shaking with rage as his eyes narrowed down to focus on the Turk. "You the one who kidnapped an' murdered people for a livin'! You ain't got no right t' judge me or what I done! Yeah, we made some stupid mistakes, an' I regret it every day. But I ain't gonna take none a' that shit from you! You're the one who purposely killed hundreds a' innocent people by makin' the Sector Seven plate collapse!"

Reno was about to open his mouth in defense as he took a step forward, but Barret continued to berate him, almost on the verge of screaming.

"An' dun gimme no shit about 'followin' orders,' or I'll rip yo' scrawny Woody Woodpecka head off! You pushed that button. You killed all those people, on and under the plate! So don't you go judgin' me!"

"And that's why you're the fuck-up," Reno hissed slowly, his own usually emotionally masked face displaying anger and sadness. "You didn't stop me."

"Wait, what?! What the fuck are you..."

"Because you people," Reno began, looking between Barret, Tifa, and Cloud, "were so incompetent and screwed everything up. In case you didn't notice, I gave you a good five seconds to get me before I pushed that button, but you all stood there like idiots!"

Everyone stood in silence at what Reno almost seemed to be suggesting. "You stood there. It would have taken you half the time it took for me to hit that button to shoot me, bolt me, tackle me... Do something. But no."

"You..." Tifa started, her own anger building, as evidenced by her raised, shaking fist. Barret was too emotionally conflicted to say anything. "You can't blame us! You killed those people, and you know it, so stop being in denial and trying to blame us!"

Reno couldn't hold it in anymore. "Oh, so I should say that I'm the one who killed my daughter?!" he almost screamed. The words "my daughter" echoed through out the snowy valley as everyone stood in stunned, wide-eyed silence.

"Your what?!" Yuffie stammered in disbelief, blinking roughly.

Reno turned around to start walking along side the cliff, but he found himself grabbed by Barret's good hand and spun around.

"You're makin' that shit up!" the black man growled loudly, offended that Reno would dare to tease about such a thing.

"Fuck you, Wallace!" Reno responded, adding a palm-strike to Barret's face in the mix. The larger man let go of him and stumbled back a few steps, recoiling from the impressively strong strike. However, before Reno could savor the minor victory, Tifa had charged at him, sending her boot hard into his gut. He rolled with the impact and fell to the ground, causing a small explosion of snow to fly around his body as he impacted.

"You really know how to pick a losing fight!" Tifa growled, standing over the fallen Turk.

"Yeah, maybe..." Reno conceded, holding his stomach. "But I ain't lying, either."

Cloud chose this time to confront the red head, striding up to him while holding his still-sheathed sword. "Well if that's true," he started, his voice calm, "then why'd you do it?"

"Why do you think they made me press the button?" Reno countered. "It was a test of my loyalty. I had no choice. My daughter was going to Sector 7 on a field trip, and I didn't know if she was still there or not," he said, emphasizing that last point. "It was either her... Or her and me."

"Bullshit," Barret spat. "You sayin' you risked your daughter's life just t' save your own neck? That's fuckin' low, even for you. And you make it sound like ya wouldn't've cared 'bout the rest of the people who died?"

"That pretty much sums it up," Reno replied distastefully, standing back up.

"This is such a load of shit," Cid muttered to himself, lighting up a cigarette.

"I do not believe so, given his mannerism," Nanaki observed.

The redheaded Turk had turned around again and started to walk again, hands jammed deep into his pockets, as everyone eyed him. Some thought he was lying. Others were convinced he was telling the truth, but still didn't feel too sorry for him. Only Kiyara had complete and utter sympathy for the disenchanted man. She believed him.

Well, it was probably mostly due to the fact that she had seen a photograph of him and his daughter at his apartment in Midgar, but she believed him. She thought about trying to catch up to him for a moment, but quickly decided that the overture wouldn't be too well received.

Suddenly, Reno literally dropped out of sight. Literally, as in he seemed to have fallen.

"...Reno?" Kiyara tried. When no response presented itself, the young woman bolted forward, the others following. Snow and ice scrunched under the party's feet, as if ready to give as they plowed through it, and when they had arrived at where Reno had fallen, a small gap in the ground had presented itself. It almost looked like a tunnel slide, which angled off so that the bottom could not be seen. "Hey!" Kiyara yelled out. "Are you okay? Can you hear me?"

There was a tense moment of silence, as a more than a few present began to think something along the lines of "He deserves whatever happens to him," before Reno's voice called back.

"I'm okay... but I can't hear you!" the redhead's voice echoed back.

Everyone looked at each other, puzzled by what the hell that was supposed to mean. The blonde woman crouched down and shouted into the hole, as if that would somehow make Reno able to hear her better. "Where are you?"

"A big, smelly hole. Familiar territory, now that I think about it!"

"Oh ew," Tifa mumbled, while Kiyara was thinking much the same thing. Yuffie's face scrunched up in anger, her eyes shooting daggers down the small hole.

"What's bugging them?" Cloud asked Cid.

The pilot glared back at the younger man and grunted in annoyance. "Like you'll ever know. And stop talking to me," he growled, grinding on his cigarette. He took a few steps forward to put some distance between Cloud and himself, afraid that he'd be forced to punch him sooner or later.

Rahilah peddled over to the evidently not-too-popular young blond and looked up at him. "I have received the impression that you are not exactly loved by our traveling companions," she stated, studying him for a response.

Cloud narrowed his eyes and glared off in the opposite direction. Finally, he muttered something along the lines of, "Not really."

"Any idea why?"

"Other than the fact that the gods themselves hate me? Yes."

Curiosity overtook the female creature, so she pressed on. "And so why is that?"

Cloud looked down at his snow-covered boots in shame, then slowly turned his head so that his eyes met Rahilah's canine-like orbs. "Because I broke a promise," he said, starting to wander off.

The female Tanduri cocked her head, staring at the blond's back as he stood, almost like a statue, not far away after he had stopped. She turned her head over to Nanaki, who had come up beside her. She studied Red's gaze as he watched Cloud for a moment, and the way he looked at the former SOLDIER with suspicion and a hint of dislike was not consistent with what she knew of him.

"What did he do that was so wrong?" the gray furred beast asked of her reddish colored companion.

Nanaki took his time formulating an answer, though he eventually managed. "One night, shortly after we helped save the Planet, Cloud decided to force himself on Tifa, and then proceeded to belittle and verbally assault the rest of us. To be honest, the execution was somewhat weak, but the mere intention was enough to leave a bad taste in our collective mouths."

"Was there any sign he was going to act this way? Was he always such a despicable person?"

"Of course not," answered Red. "We got to know him as a relatively kind man; whenever there was an argument within the group, he would be the one to either mediate or break it up, and he had a penchant for letting our enemies live if he knew we could trust them. This is why the Turks themselves are still alive, after all. Even after all they had done and all the times we fought, we had a final confrontation in Midgar, but Cloud chose to avoid a potentially deadly battle. In fact, if not for him, the rest of use might not even be alive, or our lives empty and unfulfilled."

"So, what happened to change that?"

Nanaki paused for a moment, and gave her query some thought. "I... Do not know. The only time he ever lashed out at any

of us was when he was being mind controlled by Sephiroth. But since Sephiroth has been dead for quite some time, we disregarded that scenario as a potential cause for his behavior.”

Rahilah waved her tail, and gave the male creature a wry glance. “Yes, because I’m sure that someone else having taken over his mind was completely outside the realm of possibility.” Just after she said this, she sauntered over to the small hole, which had occupied the others’ interest, leaving Nanaki to contemplate her words. Perhaps there was more to the whole Cloud situation than what met the eye. But before he could contemplate other alternatives, Cid’s voice called out.

“Hey Red, get over here, we’re goin’ down!” He then added bitterly, “You too, Strife.”

“So who’s goin’ first?” asked Barret, peering down the ice-slide.

Yuffie gave the large man a gentle push from behind. “That’d be you. We need a nice, soft cushion to land on, after all!”

“Who you callin’ soft?!” Barret retorted as he began to lose his balance. “Ah sh—” And with that, he tumbled down the hole.

Tifa looked over to Reeve with concern, and put her hand on his arm. “You’re in a pretty bad state, are you sure you can manage?”

Knowing that he didn’t have a choice, as people were already on their way down, the Shinra president gave a resigned shrug. Feigning a brave look on his face, he nodded and walked over to the small pit, Tifa still lightly attached to his arm.

It was then that Cloud walked by. He glanced at the pair for a brief moment, and seeing Tifa with Reeve caused him to cast an angry, jealousy-fueled glare. Reeve returned the gesture with a sour look of his own, filled with contempt as his nostrils flared so he could breathe deeply. Tifa’s large, burgundy eyes belayed hurt, confusion, and desire all at once.

Here we go again, an all too familiar, uninvited voice teased inside the woman’s head. Trying to play the innocent little girl, huh? Why don’t you just go ahead and ask for a threesome already, you little slut.

Tifa closed her eyes tightly and looked away, praying for the vicious thoughts to go away. Of course, as she did this, she happen to have been turning away from Cloud, who gave a regretful snort and turned away.

Dumb shit, he’s going; go after him!

Tifa gave a half turn, realizing that she needed to apologize. It wasn’t Cloud she had been turning away from...

What, you’re just going to leave poor Reeve standing there by himself while you try to go after someone who did to you what he did?! Are you nuts? Actually, I think we’ve been through this before, little miss “voices in her head”.

Trying to ignore the sensation, but realizing it had half a point, Tifa paused before she even took a step away from Reeve.

What, you’re giving up on your childhood friend and love of your life to comfort a man old enough to be your father and then some? You’re disgusting! Cloud obviously needs a friend right now, and you’re hanging with some creepy ancient man who probably only wants you for your disgustingly overdeveloped body?

Tifa closed her eyes again, this time even harder, and tilted her head to cover her quivering lips from anyone who may have been looking. Why was this happening to her? Why was she going crazy? What had she done to deserve this torture?! Why couldn’t things just be simple again?

SIMPLE?! Ha ha ha haaa... He he hee heh... HAHAAHAHAHHAAAAAAA!

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!" Tifa finally said aloud, covering her ears and shaking her head. This drew strange looks from Reeve, Cid and Yuffie, as everyone else by this point had already proceeded down the shaft.

The pilot looked at Tifa, who stared back at him with an embarrassed, almost scared expression, then to Reeve, to whom he sarcastically remarked, "Yeah, Reeve, keep it down, sheesh."

"That is not funny, Cid," Tifa growled as she pushed past him to head into the hole.

After she had disappeared into the small subterranean tunnel, Cid looked between his two remaining companions. "What's up with her?" he asked indignantly. Yuffie gave the pilot a semi-sour look, but then shrugged. Reeve looked just as perplexed as Cid and gave a shrug of his own.

"Ah well, she'll be okay. That girl's as tough a cookie as I've ever seen," the smoking dragoon said dismissively, just before heading into the hole.

"You first, mataitoko."

Reeve blinked in mild surprise at being called that, a somewhat formal Wutainese title roughly meaning "distant cousin".

"I know the rest of my family might not like ya for running off and joining the Shinra," Yuffie started as an explanation, "But, I think you've made up for it."

Reeve gave the young woman a warm look, and tried to manage a slight smile.

"In fact, when this is all over," the young empress continued, "I'll talk to Dad, see about getting that whole bad blood business cleared up."

Unable to respond verbally, Reeve closed his eyes and gave Yuffie a formal bow to express his gratitude.

"We still gotta get this over with, though, so come on!"

Once the group had congregated, they explored their surroundings. It was a large, blue-tinted chasm, covered in ice and granite. However, the one thing they all found odd was the lack of other cave-like features, such as stalagmites and stalactites. The rocky walls were somewhat smooth, and gave off a very faint glow, illuminating the cavern just enough to let everyone see.

"Umm, this is going to sound stupid," Cloud started, "But why are we even down here?"

"Because in case you weren't paying attention," began Reno spitefully, "We really didn't have anywhere else to go. Besides, I found some caves, and they seem worth checkin' out."

"And how do you figure that?"

"Well, just shut your mouth and listen."

And so he did. Everyone remained quiet until a very, very faint sound filled their ears. It was a series of distant hums, clanks, clicks and beeps.

"...Machinery?" Kiyara noted.

"In an underground cave, on the most uninhabitable part of the planet. Totally legit," Reno replied with a smirk. "Oh, and then there was that," he said, indicating off to the right.

There was a wooden sign made to look like an arrow pointing into a cave, the only such one anybody could see, in fact. It was covered in green, painted letters, which read "Secret Hideout".

"This is so fuckin' bogus," Cid remarked, his mouth agape.

"We are close," said Rahilah, sniffing the air. "There are other of my kind around, I can smell them."

"As can I," Nanaki confirmed.

"I wonder if they can smell us," Cloud mused.

A series of stomach-curling growls presented itself from the distant darkness.

"A jinx! You're a fucking jinx, Strife, I swear to Bahamut!" Cid cursed, clutching his Venus Gospel.

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Hojo watched the intruders from his monitor station, a puzzled look on his face. "Amaani," he called out. She was at his side in a moment. "I thought I told you to pull away our forces."

"And so I did," the lithe woman responded.

"Well, if that is true, then why are your pets surrounding out guests in chamber 38-b-alpha?"

Amaani blinked, at a loss for words. "I... I'm afraid, that's where I pulled them back to. I did not think that the interlopers would find that chamber!" Her voiced started growing upset. "Please, Father, do not be angry; I am terribly sorry!"

"I suppose that's not your fault," the scientist said with disinterest. "Though I suppose a more important concern is... what is he doing here?"

Both the occupants of the chamber looked off to the left, where a young male of maybe seventeen years, wearing baggy blue jeans, and a red polo shirt and cap was standing and holding a pizza box.

"Umm. Did somebody here order a pizza?" the youth asked nervously.

"Who in the world are you, and how did you find this place?!" Hojo hissed as Amaani drew her Masamune.

"Uhhh, pizza delivery! I... I got a call to bring a pizza to '1040 Hotsprings Drive'...?"

"Does this look like Hotsprings Drive?!"

"Yeah, you know, I was kind of wondering about the lack of houses around here."

Hojo sighed. "Well, I suppose I'll take it. What kind of pizza is it? Is it evil? I'll only eat it if it's evil."

"Umm, stuffed crust with onions, olives, pepperoni, and anchovies."

"I don't think that sounds very evil."

"Oh, and the delivery charge is 3,420 gil."

"Now that's evil!" Hojo gleed, grabbing the box. "And so is this: Amaani, kill him."

"Yes, Father!"

As the youth's tortured screams filled the cavern, Hojo placed the box down on a nearby lab table, having to clear away some debris, including a fancy-looking sword hilt to do so and opened it. He gave the pizza a dissatisfied look, grunting something about there being olives. The mad scientist invoked his true calling and grabbed two containers from a shelf. One contained a glowing green liquid, and was labeled "Mako"; the other was a multi-colored powdery substance labeled "J-cells". He dabbed generous portions of both substances onto the pizza, and watched with pleasure as the once inanimate food began to gurgle and move while giving off a creepy greenish glow.

Of course, he got more than he bargained for when the middle of the pizza rose up into a mound, and presented a mouth and two empty, glowing eye sockets. The monster let out a high-pitched growl as clawed appendages grew at its sides, then began to look around in confusion, not knowing what to make of its brand new existence.

Observing his creation for a moment, Hojo shrugged as he ripped a slice off the creature, causing it to scream out in pain and thrash around wildly as sauce bleed out of its torn body. It clawed at the scientist, but its appendage merely slopped against the human's arm, staining his lab coat. Hojo scowled, but ignored the creature as he took a bite out of the slice. Agony filled the creature even more so as it could feel itself being eaten, despite the fact that the part being digested was no longer attached to its main body. It screamed and cried out in pain, wondering why its short existence had to be filled with nothing but agony and despair.

Amaani had come back from dispatching the pizza boy, and when she saw the screaming, thrashing pizza-thing, she instantly put up her sword and hissed a warning. "Father! What... what is that thing?"

"Pizza," said Hojo between bites. He tore another glowing slice off the being, resulting in another fit of pain-filled screams and cries, and handed it to the woman. "Would you like some?"

Amaani paused, blinked, and went a little paler than usual. "Forgive me, but I believe I shall pass."

"Suit yourself," Hojo replied with disinterest, sitting back down in front of the monitors, where he watched the intruders battle against Amaani's pets. "Nothing like watching a good fight and eating some pizza," he stated, taking another bite. This caused more screams from the newborn entity, which Hojo seemed to take some kind of demented pleasure in hearing. He then sat back and gave some thought to the situation. "Amaani, go greet our guests."

A wicked smile formed on the woman's face as her eyes glistened in anticipation. "With pleasure."

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An ink-black Tanduri lunged itself blindly towards Barret, who shot it repeatedly as it flew through the air. It was dead before it hit the ground, causing Barret to grin in satisfaction. "Got one!" he boasted to Yuffie, who launched a pair of throwing stars at two of the creatures' heads, killing them both.

"Got two," she gloated proudly in return with a sweet smile.

"Focus, you two. Cripes!" Cid complained, all while lunging his Venus Gospel into the gaping mouth of another one of the beasts.

Another one of the Tanduri sniffed out Reeve as having already been injured, and ran in to attack. But the president of Shinra Incorporated would not be taken by surprise again. He took two inconspicuous-looking dice out of his pocket, and chucked them at his attacker. The small, marble cubes grew in size and volume as they soared through the air, so that by the time they smacked into their target, they were of sufficient mass to crack its skull and do enough damage to send the beast down.

"What in the world were those?!" Tifa asked Reeve, forgetting for a moment that her new sex toy was currently mute. Even if Reeve could have answered her, she would have had to ignore him anyway in lieu of kicking away an approaching Tanduri.

Cait Sith may be collecting dust in a closet, Reeve thought to himself, but that doesn't mean I can't borrow some of his toys. He then reached into his pockets, produced several small soldier figurines, wound them up, and set them on the ground to hobble towards the advancing Tanduri. The dark creatures just watched for a moment, then their great mouths opened in approximations of smiles at this display, knowing the small objects to be simple toys. However, they were proved wrong as the tiny machines aimed their tiny rifles and opened fire, killing a couple nearby enemies, and wounding several others.

The monsters began to double back, taking their opponents more seriously, when a whistle emanated throughout the large cavern. They stopped, all looking up towards the general direction of the sound. Smiles came to the Tanduri's faces upon recognizing their master, Amaani.

Cid too, recognized the woman. He didn't smile though. Instead, his already present grimace faded into an angry frown. "You!" he spat, not trying to hide the anger in his voice. In an overly characteristic show of acting before thinking, the cagey pilot charged, aiming to gouge the lithe swordswoman's black, hollow heart out.

With a giggle, Amaani side-stepped at the last moment, drawing her sword and tapping the tip of Cid's weapon off to the side just as it came within range, redirecting the momentum of his attack away from her.

Undeterred, Cid brought the over-glorified spear back up and around, slashing madly at his opponent, who deflected the attacks with ease. Finally, the two locked their weapons together, resulting in a pushing match between the two combatants.

All of a sudden, Cid detected a flash of movement behind him. Daring to look behind himself for a split second, he barely got a look at Cloud, who was flying towards the two with his sword raised above his head, poised to strike. Calculating that he was in the way of the swordsman's strike, Cid pushed himself away from Amaani as Cloud swung down, missing both of them.

"Back off, Strife!" grunted Cid. "The bitch is mine!"

"Actually," Cloud corrected coolly, "she's mine." With that, he put an arm around the woman's waist, pulled her towards him, and they shared a brief, but passionate kiss. When they finally disengaged, the pair gave the others the same wicked, confident stare.

(Cue my hysterical, hysterical laughter.)

Tifa could only look on in wide-eyed, open-mouthed shock at the spectacle, her mind totally unable to process what had just happened, let alone what it meant for her and her friends. Reeve sought to comfort her, but dared not get near the woman, as the air around her seemed to flare up with tension. However, she remained still. She did not yell, she did attack, nor did she break down and cry. She simply stood there.

"Wait... you... you're in league with these people?!" Yuffie stammered in disbelief, pointing an unsteady finger. That finger wound up bending back into her hand so she could ball up her fist.

Barret cursed out a string of profanities as he and the ninja girl readied their weapons. But despite everything, they were hesitant to let loose. Next to them, Nanaki raised himself on his haunches while growling, with as angry a look in his eye as he had ever had.

"I knew it..." Reno muttered. "Damn, I shoulda' made a bet with someone; I'd've made a fortune!"

"You crashed the Highwind," Rahilah presumed, getting into an attack stance as well.

"What? Of course not! I'd never do anything like that!" Cloud responded, acting shocked and hurt. However, the façade quickly faded, as a cruel grin came upon his face. "It's not my fault Cid can't fly!"

"Y'know, Strife," Cid started, his voice trembling as his body shook with rage. "I almost had a glimmer of faith back in you... Instead, I'm gonna kick your fucking, cocky, arrogant, every-day's-a-bad-hair-day ass!" He leapt forward, holding his weapon like a harpoon. Admittedly, it was bad form for his fighting style, but at the moment, he wasn't allowing himself the luxury of strategizing.

But something stopped him. A black, gooeey, tentacle-like object grew out of thin air, and wrapped itself around him like a boa constrictor. He lost momentum, and crashed to the ground, though the "substance" for lack of better understanding, broke his fall a bit.

Just as the others acted to respond, they too found themselves becoming entrapped by the gigantic, onyx-colored, slug-like things.

"Where the fuck did these come from?!" Kiyara yelled at no one in particular, struggling against her living bonds.

A voice presented itself, one which, while it did not come from anyone currently in the room, everyone recognized. "I really wish you people wouldn't start a fight here; I just had the place decorated!"

The vulture-postured, lanky mad scientist strode slowly into the cavern, inspecting his query. "I hope you all don't mind, but I've learned a few tricks since we last met."

"And when we last met," Nanaki started with a growl, having been forced onto his side by the organic restraints, "you had been most severely butchered. We saw you die!"

"Yes, well, I got better!" Hojo gloated with an exaggerated shrug. "More specifically, the Planet, terrified of my genius, has decided to make me the problem of the living as opposed to having to deal with me itself."

"How much ya wanna bet it just found your constant pasturin' annoyin'!" Barret retorted.

" 'Pasturing' is something cows do," Yuffie corrected lamely. "I think you meant 'posturing'?"

"Hey, shu'up, squirt! Who's side you on?"

Before Yuffie could respond, another one of the mysterious tentacles appeared around her and Barret's mouths in an attempt to silence them both. However, they continued to let out audible muffles and growls at one another.

"Okay, Hojo," Reno began, calculating a way to insult the scientist, yet not so much that it'd cost him his life, "Ya got us. Now are you gonna do anything, or can we go home now?"

Beside him, Kiyara held stock still in the grip of her personal snail-thing, the icy hand of dread beginning to squeeze at her chest and make it difficult to breathe.

"Oh, I'm going to do lots of things!" Hojo teased wickedly, rubbing his bony, oily hands together. And his eyes fell on Kiyara.

Her eyes widened substantially and her face immediately drained of all color.

"Really, come on now," Reno began, with a quick, worried glance at the woman beside him. "Have some pity. On me, at least. I got dragged into all this on my day off; I don't deserve this!"

Hojo turned to Cloud, his green eyes glowing for a moment, causing Cloud to stand upright under the sudden scrutiny. "Shut him up! He's not worth wasting any more Jenova slugs on!"

"Yeah, come on, Cloud, show me who the biiigg maaan is!" Reno taunted. "You know you couldn't beat me if I wasn't tied up!"

"What about during the pillar raid? Or in Gongaga? Or in the Gelnika? Or how about an hour ago when I one-punch KO'd your pretty little face into the snow?" the blond retorted cockily.

Reno, uncharacteristically silent for a moment while he calculated a response, was taken by surprise as Cloud took two steps forward, jerked him up roughly so that their eyes were level...

... Then opened his mouth and kissed him.

(Hysterical, hysterical laughter.)

This took everyone by surprise. Nauseating, illogical, completely random surprise.

"Cloud, you idiot of a failure!" Hojo spat in annoyance. "That only works if you're a girl!"

The blond swordsman took his tongue out of Reno's--who was too stunned and revolted to respond--mouth and dropped him like a sack of potatoes, turned to Hojo and shrugged. "Worked anyway, didn't it?"

Hojo put a hand to his shaking head, and with a sigh of exasperation, turned back towards the cave, muttering something to himself. Thinking they were going to be left to rot in the cavern, the companions found themselves proved wrong as the tentacles slithered rapidly across the ground, dragging them all behind the scientist as he proceeded down the naturally formed corridor. Cloud and Amaani brought up the rear, just in case.

Tifa was able to turn her head and observe the two, a flood of negative, and other unwanted, emotions overtaking her. She felt betrayed and violated in every sense of the two terms. Her heart ached with jealousy, while her mind plotted revenge. But through it all, she was in denial. She couldn't believe this was real, that it was really happening, or that there was more going on than what met the eye.

Her thoughts became interrupted as her living bonds came to a sudden halt. Looking up, she saw that the hallway continued on, but also branched off to her right.

"This will be your new home; you had better learn to enjoy it!" Hojo proclaimed, motioning towards the smaller passage. Yuffie's bonds slithered up to the doorway, unraveled themselves, and tossed her in. She fell down a steep, roughly twenty-foot incline. She tried to stop herself from falling too far, or at least slow down, but her efforts were in vain. She eventually crashed hard down at the bottom with a slight whine.

The slug-things holding Cid, Tifa, Nanaki, Reno, Barret, and Reeve all clumped together near the entrance to the corridor, while Kiyara and Rahilah's held back.

"Kiyara and I are to enjoy a special suite, I assume?" Rahilah inquired with bitter sarcasm.

"You of all people do not have the right to take that tone with Father, traitor!" Amaani spat with a sudden outburst of barely contained rage, silver eyes flashing and her sword appearing out of nowhere to prick the female's neck.

"Leave her be," Hojo said to Amaani reassuringly. "She'll eventually learn respect again. And you will, too," he added, turning to Kiyara. As he said this, the scientist bent down to the blonde woman and clutched her jaw hard enough to leave imprints of his fingertips, pulling her head to face him. "Won't you?" he hissed as a threat. In the background, Amaani's face lit up with a huge smirk.

His prized experiment was visibly shaking and extremely pale, eyes squeezed shut, and the only sound that she made was the rapid hiccup of her breathing.

"You leave her the fuck alone," came the sudden, growled threat.

Hojo let go, stood up straight, turned, and looked amused by the sight of Reno--completely immobilized on the floor--glaring up at him in cold rage. Rather than responding, he gave a confident, wicked grin and turned back to the woman.

"I will kill you, you son of a bitch!"

Hojo ignored the death threats emanating from the redheaded man now struggling behind him. "I lost quite a few years of research due to you running off on me," he continued, voice turning hard and annoyed again as he turned around and started to walk, Kiyara and Rahilah being dragged along behind him. "And while I would dearly love to resume right away, I have other priorities." He looked down at the Tanduri ominously. "Such as dealing with insurgents." He stopped walking for a moment, and the tentacles halted with him. "Strife!"

"Yeah?" Cloud questioned, drawing a sour look from the other man as he walked up beside him.

"You know where to take them; go there and wait for me. I'll be along in a moment or two."

The blond swordsman nodded briefly and strode off down the corridor, the slugs following with their precious cargo.

Hojo glanced down the corridor at the rapidly disappearing Kiyara, then at Reeve, giving him a knowing grin. The president's face scrunched up and reddened with anger, which Hojo found extremely amusing and gratifying. As the organic shackle holding Reeve prepared to toss him into the hole as well, Hojo gave him a swift kick to the behind, sending him tumbling down the smooth, but rocky slope. Cid was next, followed by Tifa, Nanaki, Barret, and finally, a still-fuming, threatening Reno. With a snap of his fingers, Amaani grabbed a nearby bolder, and slid it in the way of the opening, ensuring that the captives stayed imprisoned.

* * * * *

"Well this's just fine and dandy," Cid remarked sarcastically, taking in his surroundings. The small cave was much like the large cavern they had been in before, made up of granite and some other crystal, which emitted a soft-blue glow. However, there was not enough of the unknown substance to light up the entire cave. Tifa was crouched near a wall, almost ready to go into the fetal position, while Nanaki, Barret, and Yuffie explored the small makeshift jail cell. Reno was sitting in a corner with a stupefied expression on his face, his right eye slightly twitching as he stared off into space.

"What's your problem, Lynley?" Cid grunted to the Turk, taking a drag off a newly lit cig.

Reno took a moment to respond, still reeling. "Did you not see what happened back there?!"

"What, Kiyara gettin' dragged off?"

"No. I got kissed by a fuckin' guy!"

"Given your long hippie hair and skinny-ass body, maybe he thought you were a woman. Anyway, I don't see why it's such a huge deal. Get over it already."

"Fuck you, Highwind! And I'm not freaked out because he kissed me, okay?"

"Then why?"

"... I think I liked it."

Cid took a worried step back, and glared at the redhead suspiciously. "Shit, that is bad!"

Suddenly, there was a faint sound. No one knew exactly what it was, though. It almost sounded like a murmur, or a mumble. But no one present had done anything of the sort, leaving the members of the group in a state of mild confusion.

"Anyone else hear that?" Barret asked.

"Indeed," Nanaki responded, looking around. "Though even my own highly developed senses are not picking up anything."

Yuffie decided to interject. "Maybe we should check out that darkened corner way over there that we haven't been to yet," she said while pointing her finger off towards the shadows.

"Yeah, good luck with that, brat!" Barret replied a bit nervously. "We had too much shit jumpin' at us outta shadows lately. I ain't goin' in there!"

"You're going to make me, a little girl and also coincidentally enough the heiress of Wutai, go off into possible danger all by myself?! How utterly irresponsible of you!"

Nanaki sighed. "Forgive my use of this expression, but would both of you kindly 'shut the fuck up?!'"

Yuffie and Barret looked at each other, then back at Nanaki... and started cracking up.

"Ain't that cute? Our Reddy learned how ta swear!" Barret observed, while repressing a chuckle.

"Not too effectively, though!" Yuffie put in.

"And look," Nanaki began to retort, "Barret learned how not to swear, and Yuffie used a multi-syllabic word. I guess today is just full of surprises...least of all that we're in immediate peril and you two are acting like a pair of giddy children!"

"Bar...ret? Yuh...Yuffie?" came a voice of unknown origins. It was weak and raspy, whoever having said it obviously being very tired or injured; perhaps both.

"The shadows jus' said our names," the large man gulped, raising an eyebrow.

"Who are you? How do you know us?" Yuffie called cautiously towards the darkness, taking a few brave steps forward.

Reeve approached the trio silently, startling them all once he made his presence known by crushing a tiny stone under his boot. He, too, wished to see who else was in the cavern with them all. As the four made their way further into the cold, unyielding darkness, their eyes fought to adjust accordingly. Finally, a form presented itself.

Upon closer inspection, the friends began to make out two frail arms protectively clenching themselves around a scrawny, beaten body. Torn, muddied and smelly remains of what must have once been pants barely covered and protected the figure's lower half and bony legs. The figure was excessively pale, from an evident combination of exposure to the cold and lack thereof of the sun, not to mention that it probably rarely had the opportunity to eat anything of substance.

But the mere thought of what tortures this poor person must have been put through was not what shocked the members of Avalanche. Although its face was covered in a dirty, ragged beard, and the barely-blond hair was a long mess of oily tangles and knots, there was no mistaking his eyes.

Big, glowing, blue eyes.

Despite all logic, all that they knew to be true, and everything that had happened, the four were thinking the same thing but refused to acknowledge it aloud, afraid of being wrong, and more terrified of what it could possibly mean if they were right.

That's when Cid, Tifa, and Reno approached to see what the others were in a hushed huddle about. It was the brunette woman who, when she saw that mess of a former human being, confirmed everyone's thoughts when her own eyes went wide in shock, confusion, and sadness, and yet with a glimmer of hope, and she threw herself to the man's side, and yelled out his name.

"Cloud?!"

* * * * *

"Cloud!" Daei Hojo's voice echoed as he snapped acidly at the mercenary. "Quit making out with Amaani and watch the prisoners!"

(classic line. hahahaha.)

Before the blond swordsman could protest, Amaani put a finger to his lips as they came away from hers and spoke almost warmly. "Father is right; we have priorities."

"Like we could really do anything," Rahilah grumbled, struggling against her organic bonds, which seemed to have limitless durability and while semi-elastic, preferred to keep her slightly compacted.

"Silence!" the scientist demanded, straining his fingers as though struggling to clutch them into a fist. He turned back to his computer console, clicking several buttons, once in a while gazing towards Kiyara, each time sending chills down her spine and throughout her being. "I'm annoyed enough as it is. Still, I suppose I have a lot to be happy about."

"What's got your panties in a bunch?" Cloud asked, inspecting a gold and violet sword hilt that was lying on a nearby table.

Ignoring his slave's rudeness, Hojo went on to explain himself unnecessarily. "The reactive feedback unit we placed inside the Junon reactor either keeps disarming itself or its signal amplifier has been damaged."

"Reactive... what?" Kiyara dared to ask.

Hojo's lips turned up into a cruel grin, as if he was satisfied that his former specimen was taking an interest in all of this. "As you may know, Amaani and her troops have been visiting various reactor sites to drain them of Mako. However, their missions in these locations were two-fold."

"Wait, what?!" the Tanduri female asked, not knowing of any secondary purpose for the visits to the old reactor sites.

Ignoring the beast's outburst, the scientist continued, "Within a half an hour, all the devices will detonate, injecting the planet with Jenova cells. In response, the Planet will eject the foreign substance and will most likely shoot it out the way it came in, back through the reactors."

Rahilah's amber eyes expanded slowly as fear and understanding began to emerge within her. "But if too much Mako attempts to flow through a reactor at one time..."

"That's right. The pressure will build up in the reactors' reserve and primary storage compartments until there's no more room left. The reactors will then automatically reactivate and try to flush the excess Mako back into the Lifestream... which will cause it to push back harder. This cycle will continue until something gives. And that something will be the reactors. I have determined that the Planet will be forced to eject Mako at roughly a force equal to five-hundred million cubic tons in order to compromise the reactors."

"But, explosions that big..." Kiyara murmured, also beginning to understand Hojo's plan.

"That's right. J-cell infected Mako will spread across the planet within moments, becoming one with the air. A lucky few will die an instant, painful death. However, up to 90 percent of the survivors will be afflicted with Mako poisoning infected with Jenova cells. Within one week, the world's population will be cut in half, and those who are left... hee hee hee... Those who are left shall be under my control! And anyone who isn't and dares to oppose me shall fall before my army!" As he finished his rant, Hojo went into a fit of cliché maniacal laughter.

"We'll stop you!" Kiyara rebutted bravely. However, her captor found her words humorous, causing him to laugh even more. And just then, she realized why he found her so funny; she and Rahilah were tied up by tentacles and unable to move, while the rest of the team was locked in a cave. Hopelessness set in like a sun being slowly consumed by the night sky. But this sun wouldn't rise in the morning.

No, there would be no morning.

* * * * *

"You've gotta be shittin' me," Reno mused in confusion, raising a suspicious, crimson eyebrow.

"I..." the man started, before he was interrupted by the need to cough. He cleared his throat, then tried to sit up, a task which Tifa carefully assisted him with. "I know you'll all find this hard to believe, but Tifa is right; I am Cloud Strife."

"That's funny," Cid began, "Seein' as that's the same bastard who just betrayed us and locked us all in here!"

"And the real Cloud would probably be a lot more happy to see us," Yuffie added. "And you haven't even blinked at the fact that Reno--of all people--is in here with us."

"That's because..." the shaggy stranger tried before going into another coughing fit. He regained control of himself before speaking again. "Because I know everything that's goin' on. My doppelganger and I share a... telepathic link, or something. I'm kinda fuzzy on the details myself. He's one of the remaining Sephiroth clones, who Hojo co-opted and made try to replace me. But Hojo lost track and control of him as soon as I was captured, which was... Gods, I've completely lost track of time here."

"Well, why don't you try from the beginning?" Nanaki inquired, as though believing that the man before him really was Cloud.

"Okay... I... I left Tifa's one day, I think I had to get something for our holiday get together or something, I forget. As I came out of the store, a man in black came out of nowhere, producing a gun of some sort. We tussled, and only at the last

moment did I realize another person had joined the fray, and... that's it. I think I was knocked out or something.

"After that, I found myself in this cave, except every time I closed my eyes, I saw... visions... or... something. It was as though I was looking out somebody else's eyes. I was confused for a long time as to what was going on. I never had time to try and put it together, because every so often, Hojo would use me in another one of his experiments." At that, the blond scrunched up into a protective ball and shivered, but not exclusively from the cold. He continued with his story from that--slightly ridiculous--position.

"Recently though, the visions have been getting much more lucid. I could hear voices and see things, almost as though I were really there. Turns out, I had been experiencing everything the clone was, and..."

"Wait a goddamn minute!" Barret interrupted. "If that jackass out there is just a clone under Hojo's control, then why ain't he killed us yet?"

"Because he thinks he's really me," the man answered. "A twisted, insane version of me who's controlled somewhat by Hojo... but still me. He believes this enough that he regrets the bad things he's done, to a point," as he said this, he glanced at Tifa, giving her an apologetic look. "But his mind is too far gone and twisted. To be honest, I don't even know how much influence Hojo has over him."

"This's bullshit," Cid stated. "He gave that bitch Amaani hell before. And regardless of whether or not we hate his guts, ain't no way you're convincing' me that that ain't Strife out there! The way he fights, talks, looks..."

"Smells," Nanaki put in.

"Er, yeah. Everything. That's Cloud; you're some impostor planted by Hojo!"

"He gave her hell... didn't kill her, though," the man half-sneered. "And do you want to hate me that much, that you refuse to believe that I'm actually not responsible for all the wrongdoings done by the man you believe to be Cloud Strife? The one who hurt you all so much isn't Cloud. I am. So hate him... not me."

The ragged man went into another bout of dry heaves, clutching his weakened body, while the others gave each other a series of mixed looks, not being sure what to believe. They unanimously decided to get some distance from the stranger so they could confer in private.

"This is too weird," Yuffie started, giving the man in the corner a quick glance. "Clones, mind manipulation, and body doubles... it's... it's..."

"Exactly what we had to deal with three years ago," Nanaki pointed out. "And while his story may have some holes, I'm certain of one thing; the person in that corner is as much Cloud as the Cloud who just betrayed us."

"You sure 'bout that?" Barret whispered.

"On a physical level, yes. I was smelling him as best I could, and I noticed several things which back up his claim."

"Such as?"

"Remember when it was revealed that Cloud had suffered an injury in the Nibelheim reactor when fighting Sephiroth? If I recall, Sephiroth stabbed him in the chest, where after Cloud picked him up by the Masamune--while still impaled--and tossed him into the Mako pool."

"What's that gotta do with anything?" Cid grunted.

Reno interrupted with, "Whoa whoa whoa. Wait, that squirt picked up General Sephiroth by his sword while shishkabobbed, and tossed him?!"

"Yes, and while still a youth, no less," Nanaki half-gloated. "Anyways, 'Cloud' here has a matching scar on his own chest which would be consistent with such a wound. I do not know how precise the clones' shape shifting abilities were, but I do not think duplicating scars is within their repertoire. Furthermore, all of Hojo's experiments bore a tattoo on their appendages, which shape shifting never seemed to erase. Such a mark is missing on this man's body."

"I still don't believe it," Tifa interjected, holding her arms around herself while keeping her head down. "I saw into Cloud's eyes before we left Midgar and while we were walking here, to see if he was being honest, and everything inside of me told me he was telling the truth."

"Maybe 'cause he thought it at the time," Reno mused. "You can tell a good liar by one who fools even himself. Besides, Lockheart, you're the one who jumped in his lap and called him 'Cloud', and now you're saying you're not convinced?"

"One, I did not 'jump in his lap'; and two... I-- I dunno. It was like, feminine instinct or something; I don't know!"

"Feminine instinct, heh," the redhead replied half mockingly, though then his voice faded to mostly seriousness. "I think that tears it then. That's Strife."

"Why the hell do you of all people believe him?" Cid wondered.

Reno put a thoughtful expression on his face and gave everyone a knowing grin. "He has to be telling the truth; only a completely mental fucktard could come up with a story like that."

"Cloud is a completely mental fucktard," Yuffie pointed out.

Reno's grin deepened as Yuffie's words began to sink into everyone's heads. "So it's him either way!"

Reeve put his hand to his face and shook his head, and would have groaned if it wouldn't have been so painful.

"Oh shit," came the man's voice from off in the corner.

Everyone turned around and wondered what in the world could have provoked that, seeing that his glowing blue orbs were opened wide in terror.

"Something wrong?" Tifa dared to ask.

"You know that 'telepathic link' I told you all about? Well, it just kicked in; apparently, Hojo's about to set off a bunch of bombs, which will pretty eradicate all life on the Planet. We have about 30 minutes to either stop him or get good seats for the fireworks." The man stood up, a bit wobbly at first, but after a moment, he steadied himself enough to walk.

"What's this 'we' business?" Cid yelled, making a reach for his spear, which was set against the wall. Faster than the pilot could blink, the newcomer's hand had intercepted his just short of the weapon. The man slowly let go of Cid's wrist, took a light hold of the Venus Gospel, and gave it to its owner as a sign of good faith.

"Ready yourselves and let's mosey," the blond said, marching up the steep slope that lead to the only entrance/exit of the small prison while everyone looked on for a moment.

"Okay, okay, I'm convinced," Cid grumbled to himself, making his way up after 'Cloud'. "So, uh, Spike... How're we gonna get this huge ass boulder out of the way?"

"Boulder nothing; it's a cardboard stage prop," the shaggy man explained, pushing the obstacle out of the way with one hand, letting it roll away with minimal sound.

"What the... you coulda escaped this whole time?!" Barret yelled.

"Nope, needed to be here to facilitate a plot device."

"What'd he say?" Barret whispered to Nanaki.

"For once, I am as perplexed as you are. And I must say, being on this side of a confusing exchange of words is a frightening notion."

"Goddammit, don't no one speak ebo...er, English 'round here?"

"Sumimasen, baka!" Yuffie declared in a high pitched voice, leaping away as Nanaki repressed a chuckle, understanding that she said something along the lines of 'Sorry, idiot!'

The group finally made their way out of the cave and into the corridor, breaking off towards the right where Hojo had to have gone. Nanaki lead the way, letting his nose pick up the trails of Kiyara and Rahilah. He needn't have bothered, as the way to Hojo's main cavern was fairly linear and only about 30 meters from where they had started. They treaded quietly, sticking to the darkened part of the wall, hoping to avoid early detection.

Soon, the party found themselves in a larger cavern, much like the one they fell into when they first arrived. Except this one had computer stations and artificial lights strewn about. All in all, it was pretty much like what one would expect an arch villain's subterranean lair to be like. About fifteen yards away, Kiyara and Rahilah were restrained against the wall, and just past them were Amaani, Cloud, and Hojo, who sat in a large chair and busied himself with the large computer in front of himself.

Amaani instantly saw the intruders, and called in surprise, causing Hojo to spin his head in surprise. "You again?! How did you all escape?!"

The group answered by charging forward. Cid took the lead, hoping to save the woman for himself. He spun his spear as best he could, given his injured hands, and thrust forward, barely missing the warrior. He swung madly, as fast as he could, just hoping to get lucky and injure his hated opponent. However, Amaani blocked or dodged every blow with seeming ease.

"Highwind!" Rahilah yelled out. "Amaani is afraid of getting blinded! If you can obscure her vision somehow, she just may drop her guard!"

"Be silent, traitor!" Amaani hissed, giving the feral beast a scornful look while deflecting another one of Cid's attacks.

This gave Cid an idea. He backed up, lit a cigarette, puffed on it, but held the exhaust in his mouth. He then charged again, but instead of attacking with his spear, he blew out the dark, cancerous smoke right into Amaani's eyes. The grayed air stung the woman's eyes, prompting her to shriek and arch back, swinging her sword wildly. Cid found a sizable hole in her defense and exploited it, creating a physical hole in her gut.

Amaani tried to shriek out as pain exploded throughout her body, but her voice was silenced by her own blood, which rushed up and out her mouth. She looked over to Hojo with pleading eyes for some kind of guidance or support, but even amid the chaos, he was ignoring everything and concentrating on something else. The pain of a spear gouged in her gut suddenly didn't feel so bad in comparison to the pain of being ignored by her father, the only person in the world she had any love for at all. She crumpled and surrendered to the growing urge to fall, the insult being far more unbearable than the

injury.

Reeve, Reno and Nanaki went over to attempt to free Kiyara and Rahilah of their living bonds while the others fought. They pulled and tugged on the organic things, but they refused to yield. Reno hid his annoyance with a smirk, taking out his rod and poking the slug that had Kiyara in its grip.

“Uhhh, Reno...?” the woman gulped, getting a terrible feeling that Reno planned to shock the thing off her, which could very well result in her getting electrocuted, as well.

“Relax,” the redhead said reassuringly. “I know what I’m doin’!” And with that, he pressed a button on the handle, causing a spark of electricity to fry the odd monster.

Kiyara jumped, closed her eyes and let out a slight shriek, just barely able to feel the charge that coursed through her captor’s body. But she remained relatively unhurt as the tentacle dropped off of her and disintegrated. She let out a mildly annoyed sigh, but gave Reno a smile. “Thanks. I’m just glad you knew what you were doing for a change.”

“Actually, I lied about that,” Reno teased, gaining an ireful glance from the others.

Barret, Yuffie, Tifa, and their new companion cornered Cloud, who stood with his sword at the ready in front of himself. Barret let loose a volley of machine gun rounds, aiming to graze the blond’s shoulder, but wound up missing as the swordsman ducked away with catlike reflexes. The traitor then jumped up with his sword behind himself, poised to strike at Barret and cut him in half. Tifa stepped in front of the large black man, and looked up at the traitor.

Time slowed down as the two’s eyes met and locked. There was a spark of regret within Cloud’s eyes, as though he were truly sorry, but that spark was swiftly snuffed by steely determination to do what he was being commanded to. Tifa realized this, and only seemed to wish to be the first to fall. To make it end. And as Cloud landed to begin bringing down his blade, it looked as though he were about to grant her wish.

But something stopped him. Not an internal form of regret, though, but something far more physical: the ‘other Cloud’ had grabbed his hands and prevented him from striking. Their identical blue orbs locked upon one another quizzically. It wasn’t often one got to see themselves outside of a mirror.

“Hello,” Cloud said flatly, a slightly malicious grin on his lips. The ragged man pushed him back in response, giving him a cold stare.

“Outta the way, scrawny!” Yuffie called out. “You’re blocking my shot!”

The bearded man turned his head to look behind himself at the young woman. “Sorry, but I’m taking him out. After all he’s taken from me and done to my friends--” As he said this, his head turned back to his opponent. “--I have a lot of payback to dish out.”

“And just how do you plan on doing that?” Cloud mused, raising an eyebrow and dropping his guard in a cocky manner.

“Well, as you all know,” the man announced, “the Ultima Weapon is bound to my life force, and my life force only. And with it, I’ll prove that I really am Cloud Strife. Then I’ll use it to kick your butt.”

“Nice speech,” the swordsman replied with a yawn. “That still doesn’t... I mean, without the Ultimate Weapon... wait, what?”

“You lost me, jackass,” Barret said, scratching his head.

The scrawny, bearded man shook his head, looked off towards his right and spied the gold and violet sword hilt which had

been sitting there. He held out his hand and grimaced, as though in concentration.

"Aw shit," Cloud lamented.

Everyone watched wide-eyed as the hilt began to vibrate, stand up unsteadily on its own, then shoot itself in a spin towards the man, landing firmly in his hand. Not sparing a moment, he swung the hilt in front of himself as though it were a full sword and gripped it with both his hands, getting into a familiar fighting stance.

There was only the slightest moment of stillness and silence before all hell broke loose. A wind picked up as white and purple bolts of energy erupted around the man, and seemed to heal him in that his body became more full and muscular before everyone's eyes. His scraggly beard disappeared, and his hair formed back into bright, gravity defying tufts and spikes. The bolts of power finally swirled and collected themselves into the golden hilt, and in an explosion of energy, a large blade of energy grew out from the hilt with an electric hum, coming to a point about five feet out.

"Shit, we gonna get sued!" Barret observed, taken slightly aback.

(Mad giggles.) "It... It really is Cloud!" Tifa realized, the white glow reflecting off her face second only to her own inner glow of happiness.

"No! I'm Cloud!" the first swordsman cried out, lunging at the second. He swung the blade fiercely, but all for naught as the second Cloud parried the blow, shattering the Ragnorok with the Ultima Weapon.

"No, you're an impostor, and your time trying to be me is finished," the true Cloud stated calmly. The air became hot with energy as Cloud focused his rage and anger, and calling upon every last ounce of his skills, he charged at his doppelganger...

What happened next was a spectacle to those who had seen it before, and more so to those who hadn't; the Omnislash was a technique of thrusting one's weapon so fast, that the air itself crackled and light up from the friction of the blade rubbing against dust and other airborne particles. Countless blows later, Cloud leapt into the air, ready to finish him off. And yet, while hanging up there for a brief moment, he found himself looking back at Tifa, and a thought occurred to him.

Calming down and landing without implementing his finishing strike upon the dazed and bloodied impostor, the true former SOLDIER looked back at his childhood friend and offered her a warm smile, while his eyes shone an unusual mischievous light.

"He's hurt you the most. I'd be remiss if I didn't let you finish him off," he said invitingly, holding out a hand.

"With pleasure," Tifa replied with a smile mirroring Cloud's. She charged towards the man who lied to her, hurt her, belittled her, and caused her and her friends so much grief and pain, and allowed herself to enjoy every bittersweet, bone-crushing impact of her fists and feet on his body. After a few hits, she jumped up and did a flying backwards-aerial spin-kick to his jaw. Then she dropped and did a spinning trip-kick, breaking one of his legs. But before 'Cloud' could cry out, he found himself lifted up over Tifa's head and flipped into the ground, a blow which displaced some parts of his spine. He found himself forced up again as Tifa delivered an elegant but powerful uppercut, which would have sent him down had the woman not grabbed him and thrown him into the ceiling and sent him crashing head-first with a pile-drive into the ground.

A cruel twist of fate had kept the impostor alive up until this point, perhaps as fitting penance for his crimes. He found himself getting grabbed by the collar, and yanked up with one of Tifa's hands while the other pulsed behind her with energy. He knew that Tifa was about to inflict a move called 'Final Heaven,' a devastating punch with the power of a large explosion. Or at least, he thought he knew this, but apparently Tifa had a new trick up her sleeve.

The petite brunette thrust her glowing hand forward, connected it with the other, and shouted the word "Hadoken!" This created a beam of swirling hot blue energy which incinerated her opponent, and threw what little of him that was left

through the cavern walls for the next several hundred yards.

"Holy shit," Cid mumbled to himself, in awe of the spectacle that just occurred.

"Hey Highwind," Reno started as he came up behind the pilot. "Remind me to never piss her off again."

Rahilah--who had been freed in the meantime--looked between the "new Cloud" and the others in confusion. Obviously, whatever just happened would have to be explained to her later. But for right now, Hojo had to be dealt with. She looked off to her right, and found him still fiddling with the computer controls.

"Hojo!" Reno said threateningly. "Get your ass away from the porn collection and surrender peacefully, or... ah, who'm I kidding, we'll just kick your ass anyway!"

"If you injure me," Hojo said with a wicked, cocky smile, but not looking at the intruders, "Who will operate this equipment and deactivate the bombs?"

"Goddammit!" Barret growled, stomping his foot. "You always get us with that one!"

Hojo swiveled out of his seat and stood, looking at the mess around him. "Tsk, poor Amaani. Is it too much to ask that someone be able to defend themselves without being invincible?"

"You son of a bitch, deactivate those damn bombs! This is crazy!" Kiyara tried.

"The only way to turn off the bombs is to detonate them," Hojo teased, producing a remote. "So, if you insist!"

Everyone reached out to try and get the remote away from the madman, and time seemed to slow down as Hojo laughed in his trademarked manner, his thumb inching closer to a large, red button in the middle of the small device. It was hopeless, the possibility of anyone being able to reach the madman in time being completely and utterly impossible.

They needed a miracle.

Suddenly, the air around their adversary began to become distorted, as refractive waves of energy emitted from the center of Hojo's person. Looking down at himself curiously, the scientist studied the phenomenon with interest for a moment...

-SPLAT!-

Hojo's body erupted in a disgusting explosion of light, sending body parts flying everywhere as though a small bomb had just gone off inside of him. Reeling in shock, a tall, dark figure stood in the space Hojo had occupied not a moment before. He looked exhausted, and half-collapsed onto the computer setup.

"Who the hell is that?!" Kiyara asked.

"Vinnie?!" Yuffie called out, prompting the newcomer to snap his head up, and glare at the girl with annoyed, blood-red eyes.

"He's kinda sexy in an effeminate kind of way," Kiyara mused quietly to herself, yet just loud enough for Reno to hear.

"I... told you... not to... call me... that," Vincent managed between heaves while trying to control his shaking body. "Luh-listen... to me... You... must not... kill Hojo. If... you do... the Planet... it..."

"Uh, bad news, man," Barret interrupted. "We can't kill him, 'cause you just did when ya teleported in!"

Vincent blinked, his tired expression becoming slightly more lucid. He looked around, observing Hojo's scattered remains spread throughout the cavern. "..."

"What were you saying about not killing Hojo?" Cloud asked.

Vincent stood up straight as best he could and collected himself before trying to talk. "The Planet... treats beings such as Hojo like a poison... and killing him would be like introducing a poison to the Planet..."

But before Vincent could get much further, an eerie green glow emanated from a point not far away; inside of the glow was a gooey mass, which formed itself into a small, humanoid-like shape, and in a flash, Hojo was standing there, a confused expression on his face. It was at this point that his former body's scattered parts disappeared.

"Gah!" Yuffie yelped, tossing her Conformer on instinct. The large projectile sliced right through the resurrected scientist's neck, decapitating him.

"I said don't kill him!" Vincent reprimanded.

"Uh, oops," Yuffie responded.

The green glow appeared again in the opposite corner, behind the group. Barret, not paying attention, turned around and opened fire, killing Hojo yet again.

"Stop that!" the long haired man screamed, as though on the verge of freaking out.

Hojo reappeared again, this time near Cloud, who, despite Vincent's protests, stuck his blade right through the scientist's chest. He then appeared near Reeve, who punched him in the nose, sending the bridge of it up into Hojo's brain, killing him.

And again he came back, this time near Kiyara, who punched him so hard in the face that his neck snapped.

"What part of 'don't kill Hojo' do you people not understand?!"

"It's like Whack-a-Mole, but more fun!" Cloud responded, his two years of imprisonment obviously not having had much of an effect on his sense of humor.

"Listen to me!" Vincent warned. "If you continue to kill Hojo, you'll all be in grave danger! So for your own safety, the next person who kills Hojo gets shot in the face!"

Hojo then respawned right behind Vincent, much to their mutual thanks. This time, the scientist was wearing a sign which read, "Please stop throwing your trash into our dimension."

(hahahaha) "I feel so unloved," Hojo whimpered.

"Shut up," the taller man warned, giving the scientist a cold glare. He then looked back at the others. "Like I was saying, killing Hojo is a threat to the Planet, and as we've learned from our travels, the Planet responds to threats by creating WEAPONS, so if we continue to keep killing him--as weird as that sounds..."

Suddenly, Vincent felt the weight on his body become lessened, and he spun towards Hojo, who had stolen one of his pistols and was waving it threateningly. "Give that back," Vincent demanded, making a grab for the weapon with his clawed hand. He tore the small firearm away, but much to his horror, realized he took Hojo's hand with it.

“AAAAAGHH!” the scientist yelled, gripping his stub of an arm. In a panic, he backed up, tripped, and smashed his head open on the ground.

Everyone looked at Vincent, who stood there with a dumbfounded expression on his face as Hojo’s body once again faded away.

“Does this mean we get to shoot him in the face?” Reno deadpanned, pointing his finger like a pistol at the goth-wannabe.

“Er, no, wait, that one doesn’t count!” Vincent tried, holding out his hands and looking around in a slight panic.

Suddenly, there was an audible cry of some sort. It was an eerie, almost growl-like sound which had no discernable source which most present recognized as the cry of the Planet. Except this time, instead of a cry for help, or the whimper of a helpless child, it was a threatening sound which chilled everyone to the bone far worse than the climate on the surface had.

The area then began to quake, as another growl-like sound presented itself. “What’s going on?!” Rahilah wondered out loud.

“Like I was trying to say,” Vincent said, raising his voice to compensate for the combined noises of the crumbling cavern and the increasing amounts of roars, “Killing Hojo is bad for the Planet, and now it’s pissed off and we’re all going to be crushed!”

“Well, why didn’t you say anything before, you ass?!” Cid cried out.

Vincent didn’t dignify that with a verbal response, but simply gave the pilot an annoyed stare. He didn’t have time to say anything anyway, as the cavern began to quake more, the walls and floor starting to split open.

“Hey guys, I think we should run!” Cloud called out.

“Run?!” Barret asked in response. “Damn foo, where’re we gonna run to?!” He then muttered to himself, “How’d he ever get to be leader, comin’ up with ‘run’?! I coulda’ come up with ‘run’...”

But before anyone could get very far, the walls opened up, and rocks shot up from the ground as the whole cavern began to get torn apart like a poorly made piñata faced with the sugar-hungry wrath of a hyperactive ten-year-old. White and green light filled the cavern, momentarily blinding the heroes. Everyone simultaneously became consumed with fear and dread as a shape emerged from the oddly ominous brightness. It was only a little larger than them, and possessed a purple, blocky body with a fuzzy green underbelly, and let out a terrifying sound...

“Iiii lllloooove you, yooouuu looove meeee, weeee’rrre aaaa haaappppyy faaamiillllyyy...”

And at that moment, they knew they were doomed.

* * * * *

Mwahaha, another cliffhanger! Will Kiyara, Reno, and the others be able to fight off the great threat that is Barney in time to deactivate the bombs? Will anyone remember that Reeve was in this chapter even though he couldn’t say anything?! What the hell happened to Amaani’s lackeys? WHERE THE HELL DID I PUT MY CAR KEYS (sorry, but it's really starting to piss me off...)?! Find out when I update again sometime next year!

...Sorry; had a wee bit too much sugar while writing the author's notes.