

Author's quickie notes-These two story lines in this chapter are NOT NOT NOT set at the same time. The part in Midgar is set directly after the Reeve part in the last chapter, but the part in Rocket Town is set.....uhh... I think the day before; a few hours after Cid had dropped Reno and Kiyara off with Tifa. Oh yes, one more thing. It was brought to my attention by a reader (you know who you are) that they hadn't even realized that there was a baby in the Highwind family. Just in case anyone else has forgotten too, this is just a friendly reminder. Raven is Cid and Shera's own child. Remember? She was flinging Cheerios in the scene where Kiyara remembers her real name. Now, bon appetite!

Chapter 18: What the Hell?!

"Damn, Shera, that's one hell of a gun!"-Cid Highwind

For the next 45 minutes, Red and Bugah watched in awe as Reeve worked the phone and computer. He was at times demanding, cajoling, kind, and downright nasty as he held the phone tightly between his ear and shoulder and pulled up information on his laptop.

"And I always thought that he seemed to meek to be president..." Bugah whispered, listening to Reeve fight with the Wutaian diplomatic offices.

Reeve raised an eyebrow but continued to speak in rapid-fire Wutaian over the phone. Bugah felt his tired, weathered old cheeks flush. Apparently, the man had sharp ears.

Reeve talked for several more minutes, then hung up the phone and looked across the heavy oaken desk at his visitors. "Sorry about the wait. I can't get a hold of the man who's in charge of the military, and I had to go through all of his damned subordinates."

"So, President Kazuma, what was the purpose of all of that shouting?" asked Bugah jovially.

Reeve tapped several keys, then answered. "I sent three platoons from across the Planet to the Great Glacier, where they'll be arriving in..." He glanced at his watch. "Well, the last of them, coming from the station near Wutai, is going to get there in about three hours."

Red did some quick computations in his head. "You can move 1200 men that fast?"

Reeve smiled. "I've got the resources of a multi-billion gil company at my fingertips. It was easy."

Bugah was frowning. "Wait, wait. From what I have heard from Nanaki of the Great Glacier, it is not possible to land aircraft there."

Reeve nodded. "You're quite right. It isn't. The soldiers are going to be parachuting in, then climbing the Gaia Cliffs and into the Crater from there. They've got several video cameras that will send instantaneous feedback here, and myself and the Board of Directors are going to be watching the whole thing. I was also thinking about having Tifa Lockheart as an advisor--and you too, if you're willing, Red--because you guys have been there. You know where things should be, and what should and shouldn't be there."

Red nodded solemnly. "I'd be glad to help."

Reeve smiled, then looked down at the expensive watch on his arm again. "Wow. It's late." He glanced at the computer screen. "And the platoons aren't going to break into the Crater until at least late tomorrow morning. Tell you what, I can put you two up at a hotel for the night, if it's not an inconvenience. That way, I can have you here as advisors tomorrow when they get into the Crater." Then he paused for a moment, and dismay came onto his face. "Oh shit."

"What is it?" asked Red.

Reeve rubbed the back of his neck wearily. "I had promised Re--a friend that I would give him a hand tomorrow. This is more important, though, so I think I'll have to take a rain check." He waved a hand. "Forget about my social problems. Would you be willing to be put up at a hotel tonight, though, gentlemen?"

Red glanced at Bugah, who nodded. "That would be fine, as long as you can find a hotel that does not object to my presence," Red replied.

Reeve flashed him a grin. "With my credentials, no one would dare turn you down."

A few phone calls later, they were standing in front of Reeve's desk to say their good-byes. "You're at the Fiore, on Ardiente Ave," Reeve said. "Emmanuel will be waiting for you just outside of my door, and he'll make sure that you get there." Reeve sat back down, loosening the crimson tie that he had been wearing.

"Thank you, Reeve," answered Red.

Reeve nodded to him while fighting with the knots in his tie.

Bugah, with his typical perceptiveness, looked at Reeve, who didn't seem to be inclined to be leaving with them. "Isn't there someone waiting at home, President Kazuma? A Mrs. Kazuma, perhaps?"

For a moment, an immense sadness flared in the dark-haired man's brown eyes, and Bugah was almost sorry he had asked. Then Reeve shook his head slowly. "A long time ago, there could have been..." He seemed to be lost down memory lane for a moment, a small, bitter half-smile forming on his lips, "but not now. There's no one waiting for me at home. Actually, I spend more time here than I do at my home. I've got my own rooms here in the building just for that purpose." He grinned rather ruefully. "If I get any sleep at all tonight, that's probably where I'd be."

Bugah marveled at the way that Reeve had been able to change the subject, but answered simply, "Thank you, Mr. Kazuma."

Reeve smiled. "Don't mention it. I'm the one that should be thanking you. See you two in the morning."

"Good night, Reeve," Red called, prowling over to the door.

Despite the general air of jovialness, Red felt that an aura of melancholy had settled over Reeve. His glance back as he and Bugah moved toward the door proved his idea. Reeve's figure was outlined in front of the large window that showed the panorama of the Midgar nighttime skyline. He was slumped over his desk, head in his hands, and his shoulders appeared to be shaking slightly.

Red felt a flash of compassion for the solitary figure, then the door closed on the sight.

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A scant few hours after returning from Midgar in the Highwind, Cid, as the unofficial mayor of Rocket Town, had called together an emergency meeting of the small community. They had assembled in the village center; the only place large enough to accommodate them all. The villagers were seated in the recently shoveled town square in their thickest warm clothes, because winter still had not released its icy grip on the town. Cid and Shera stood in front of them. And despite the fact that an unknown, and potentially strong, enemy was on its way, everyone seemed fairly relaxed. Well, except for Vashar.

"So we're covering for a Turk and some girl who most of us don't even know?" called out the town troublemaker.

Cid groaned inwardly. Vashar again.

Vashar Rya was new to the town, only having been around for a few weeks, but he had already proved himself to be the biggest pain in the ass that the town had ever seen. Vashar had a big mouth that never seemed to stop flapping about the latest disaster that was sure to befall the small town, and was an incurable surly pessimist. Vashar was standing in the back, arms crossed over his barrel chest and eerie blackish eyes dancing at the prospect of stirring up unrest. He was very short, with stubby, well-muscled limbs. A bushy black beard and mustache hid most of his face, and he had wild black hair. He didn't like anyone in the town, but he seemed to have it out especially for Cid.

"Basically, yes," Cid replied, tired of the constant bickering. He felt a pain in his leg as Shera kicked him. "Ow! I mean, no, it's not like that at all," the pilot corrected himself, rubbing at his leg and making a rude hand gesture at Shera behind his back. She kicked him again, and he hissed obscenities to himself.

Vashar looked to Cid condescendingly. "By all means, Captain, explain it to me then."

Cid was momentarily lost for words, still holding his leg. "Uhh..."

Shera stepped in smoothly. "Let me handle this, Cid," she whispered as she moved past her husband. Cid stepped back a pace, grateful for the respite.

From somewhere in the audience where she was sitting with neighbors, Kat yelled out, "Gooo Mommy!"

A much-needed laugh rippled through the crowd, and Shera smiled. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, Kat." She continued, "Now, let me explain in possibly a little more detail." "The less you know, the better off you are, so I won't tell you too much. Basically, you all saw the blonde woman that was staying with us this week, right?" There were nods. "Well, she is an escaped research specimen--of Hojo's."

There were audible gasps. After the scientist's death at the hands of Cloud Strife, Vincent Valentine, and Tifa Lockhart three years ago, word of his horrible misdeeds had spread, and the name of Daei Hojo became universally known and feared. Compassion and kindness had been showered on the very few specimens of his that had been found alive in a small, relatively unknown laboratory several years before, and Shera was counting on those same feelings being in evidence with this new information.

"That's right. After she escaped, Hojo's goons chased her across the Planet. Even now, three years after he died, they still follow her."

A woman shouted out, "And what about the red-headed Turk that was traveling with her?"

Shera took the question in stride easily. "They met up a while ago and have been traveling together ever since. In this case, Reno's actually in the right, because he's been protecting her." As she spoke, she could practically feel the people's support and outrage at the treatment of Kiyara building.

"So if these goons of Hojo's have been tracking her this whole time, wouldn't that mean they would track her to here?" yelled an astute teenage boy.

Shera hesitated, then nodded. "Yes."

There were more gasps and sharp intakes of breath.

The same young boy pressed on. "And are you expecting violence from them?"

Shera paused longer, then reluctantly nodded. "In all probability."

Excited, frightened chatter broke out. Shera tried to speak to calm them down, but she couldn't be heard over the clamor and din.

"Hey!" A voice carried above the noise of the crowd. Everyone went silent and turned to find Jasu Kei, the young pilot of the Highwind, standing. "That's better." The black-haired prodigy turned to face Cid and Shera. "Captain, Shera, I'm sure that we all appreciate this warning, but what exactly do you want us to do?"

Cid and Shera exchanged glances before Cid came forward again. "If you're asked about Reno and Ki--Dinah, say that you don't know where they went, and that you only remember seeing them briefly once at the airstrip. The records in the control tower have been altered to show that a cargo plane to Nibelheim took two passengers on the very day that they arrived here. Hopefully, we can get these people to believe that Reno and Dinah came through and left right away. "Now all we need is your cooperation." He looked down at his booted feet for a minute, then back out at his friends and neighbors. "However, if you really need to, go ahead and tell them where Reno and Dinah really stayed. But if you do, please, keep my kids out of i--"

He was cut off by cries of outrage. "We'd never tell, Cap'n!" "Your secret's safe with us!" "You actually think we'd tell them?!"

Cid smiled. "Thanks guys. We'll just hope all they do is ask questions."

"And if they do more than ask questions?" Vashar's unmistakable booming voice called.

Cid grinned. "I can still twirl a lance, m'boy!" Then he sobered. "But what you all do is up to you. I'm not gonna ask ya to fight."

There was silence for a moment. Shera moved closer to Cid and put her hand through his, silently signifying that she was with him. Cid turned for a moment to make a disapproving face at her. Shera just shrugged.

Then a voice cut through the quiet. "I don't know about everybody else," Jasu called, "but we're with you, Captain." His younger sister, who was set to graduate from high school soon, if Cid remembered correctly, was standing beside her brother, and Jasu's arm was thrown across her small shoulders. She nodded her freckled head resolutely.

"Aye! I'll fight with ye, Cap'n!" The grizzled old man who continually watched the rocket was standing proudly, leaning heavily on his cane. "Them bastards don't stand a chance! Why I'll--" The rest of what he was saying became indecipherable as he swung wildly with his cane.

"Take it easy there, Darius!" Shera called out. Darius put the end of his cane back down on the ground and saluted her crisply.

"And us! And us!" Josh and Kat were jumping up and down, Kat doing her best to hold onto her baby sister. Laughter went through the crowd as Shera shook her head. "Oh no you don't!"

They stopped bouncing and pouted.

What looked to be the entire crew of the Highwind stood next. "We'll get 'em, Captain!" "We're with you all the way!" "You saved us from Shinra's service. Now it's time for us to return the favor!"

Every man, woman, and child in the town stood.

Cid blinked at the overwhelming display of support. "Wow... Thanks everybody!"

"Let's all hope that it doesn't come down to violence, but we have to make plans in case it does," Shera out in, glancing significantly at the youngsters in the crowd. And so the meeting went on...

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A good hour later, just as the crowd was breaking up, the shrieking of engines was heard. Heads shot up to see a shiny black mass scream by overhead.

"What the hell?!" seemed to be the general consensus.

Then Cid heard Jasu's voice above the rest. As usual, the quick-thinking young man had comprehended what was going on before anyone else. "Holy shit! It's an airship!"

And taking a second look at the underside of the shiny black mass, Cid realized that the pilot was right. It was a long, sleek airship that had been painted completely black. It was in the same style of the Highwind, but there had been changes. Large bulges in the structure suggested hidden weaponry, while the viewing deck had been covered completely by on-deck machine guns and other war materials. The entire aircraft seemed wider as well, as if it had been constructed in mind of holding a large number of people. An eerie, blue-green trail was left behind as the ship, its speed belying its size, banked over the town to land somewhere just outside of the small community.

"Those idiots..." breathed Shera, craning her neck to get a better look. "They're using Mako as fuel!" Her words echoed in the silence as the entire crowd of mechanics and pilots gaped at the tremendous machine.

Cid broke the spell. "Those would be our distinguished visitors, I do believe."

There was laughter.

"Get outta here!" Cid waved an arm. "Follow the plan we made!" He smiled fleetingly. "Clear skies."

"And fair winds!" was the chorus of replies. Then they were all off, running to their positions. Doors were slammed, old rusty rifles were taken down from above the doors, chains were bolted, and curtains were opened as worried faces appeared in the windows.

Cid dashed into their own house quickly, looking up at the whapping sound he was hearing just before he ducked through the door. "Helicopter," he grunted, seeing the silver shape appear far off, over the trees. "Must be some of their big brass..."

"Mommy! Mommy!" Josh came running up to Shera, with Kat following more carefully, carrying Raven.

Shera's heart leapt into her throat. "You guys were supposed to go with Melody and Tano!"

Kat stopped, blinked, and said, "Whoops." She shifted Raven in her arms awkwardly.

Shera looked around wildly. I can't take them with us! They could get in the way or hurt! Melody and Tano are in the rearguard, and therefore not at their house, so I can't send them there either. And look, dammit! Those...people are getting out of their airship now! If I try to send them to someone's house, it would take too long to get them inside. They'd be seen! Swiftly, with a hand on either of the twin's backs, she turned them around in the direction of the Highwind home. "Get inside. When it looks like the bad people aren't looking, go out the backdoor, run through the backyard to Jasu's house, and knock on the backdoor," she ordered tersely. "Mrs. Kei will let you in."

Kat looked up at her mother, her small face worried. "Whassa matter, Mommy? You look angry."

Shera smiled at her quickly. "Do I look angry? It's only that I'm angry at the bad people, okay, honey? You guys haven't done anything wrong." The brunette kissed each of them on the forehead. "I love you very much, okay?"

Two frightened faces nodded. She gave them a small push. "Now go!" They took off running.

Cid came out of the house at a dead run, now carrying his lance and a small pistol. He gave the kids a strange look as they dashed past him, but he continued on to where Shera was waiting for him.

Tossing her the gun, he asked, "The kids?"

Shera tucked the weapon into a pocket of her coat, where it made a suspicious bulge, and they dashed down the path. "They're making a run to the Kei's house as soon as it's safe." They came to a halt at the beginning of the path. The airship was sitting across the fields, and the shouts of men came to them as the black-clad commandos swarmed over the ship.

"Shit, there's a lot of them," Shera hissed.

Cid shot her an amused glance. "You stole my line." He leaned lazily on the Venus Gospel, driving its razor sharp point deep into the icy ground. "Here we go. Love ya, Shera."

Shera smiled at him for a moment. "I love you too." She glanced over her shoulder quickly, and saw the door close behind Josh, Kat, and Raven. "They're in."

Cid breathed a sigh of relief that caught in his throat. "Holy shit..."

Shera spun to find their visitors making their way toward the two solitary figures. She stared. "Az wasn't kidding when he nicknamed her Whitey!"

Amaani was moving across the fields with an eerie, cat-like grace. Long white hair and matching spotless robes streamed behind her on the breeze. Inhuman silvery-gold eyes glinted cruelly in the sunlight. The snow crunched underfoot, and she had a large, menacing looking sword that she seemed to be using as a machete, beheading the waist-high icy, brittle grass, leaving a trail in her wake.

Cid swallowed hard. "That's the Masamune; I'd stake my life on it."

Shera's eyes widened at the statement.

Flanking Amaani were two men, both wearing jet black. One was huge and heavily muscled, with a shaved head and a look that fairly screamed military. The other was short and weak looking. He seemed to be fighting desperately to keep up with his companions, he dragged a twisted and crippled leg behind him, walked on a crutch, and he was short and rail-thin, with a mop of thick black hair and dull brown eyes.

Cid, recovering from his shock, reached over and gently closed Shera's mouth with one finger. "Remember, be laid back."

Shera nodded, her loose ponytail flapping around her face. She pulled her glasses off of her face and shoved them up onto her head with one hand. Shera and Cid stood motionless, watching Amaani and her small entourage approach.

Amaani halted in front of them and raised one white eyebrow in mock surprise, replacing the Masamune in its sheath at her side. "My friends, why do you feel the need for weapons?"

Cid looked at her levelly. "Monsters tend to congregate in this part of the continent. I've found that it pays to be prepared."

Amaani laughed lightly. "Touché. Now, who do I have the honor-" Her mouth twisted into a sneer. "-of addressing?"

Cid bowed his head ever so slightly. "Cid Highwind."

Shera also inclined her head a tiny bit. "Shera Highwind."

"Charmed." Amaani covered a yawn with the back of one hand.

"How may we help you, Miss..." Cid trailed off, fishing for a name.

Amaani straightened proudly. "Hojo. Lady Amaani Hojo."

Shera heard a soft curse from beside her, and she found her own mouth hanging open in shock.

Amaani studied them both with an amused look upon her regal face.

That shook Shera out of her surprise, and she asked, "Well, Miss Hojo-" She nearly choked over the name while making a point of mis-saying Amaani's title, but she hurried past it. "What can we do for you?"

"Are you the leaders of this...village?" Amaani made the word sound distasteful.

Cid and Shera glanced at each other, Cid bristling. He waited a minute, giving himself time to calm down before answering. "Well, I s'pose you could say that I'm the unofficial mayor of Rocket Town."

Amaani nodded. "Good. I'm looking for someone."

Shera raised an eyebrow. Her neutral expression turned to one of scorn. "There are quite a few people in this town, you do know, so I think I'm going to need you to be a bit more specific."

Cid hid a grin at the peeved look on Amaani's face. Thatta girl. Piss her off. She'll be less on her guard if she's angry.

With a glare in Shera's direction, Amaani replied, "A woman who goes by the name of Dinah Selby, and her companion, Reno Lynley."

"Yeah, we saw a girl come through with that bastard of a Turk," replied Cid, glaring at the mention of the aforementioned Turk.

"When, and where were they going?" asked Amaani.

Cid frowned in pretended thought. "They came through... last week, I'd say." He looked to Shera. "Where'd they go to again?"

"Hmm...Wutai? No, no," replied the brunette. "Oh! Nibelheim!" Shera turned to Amaani. "Those two bribed a pilot to take them to Nibelheim as soon as they arrived."

Amaani shook her head in admonishment. "Tsk, ts. Don't lie to me. I know how long they stayed, where they stayed, and what they did each and every day. Hell, I know what they ate for breakfast. No, what I want to know is where you took them on the Highwind. Tell me." Her eerie white eyes drilled into them, and her voice turned menacing. "Now."

Cid lost his air of languidness, and his own icy blue eyes grew hard. "No."

Amaani looked at him with a mix of mild surprise, anger, and scorn. "You won't tell?"

Cid set his mouth determinedly.

Amaani shrugged. "Very well." Her long muscled arm shot out, grabbed Shera by the throat, and lifted the smaller woman into the air, gagging.

"Hey!" Cid started forward, the tip of his lance pointed forward instead of digging into the earth, but was stopped by the suddenly visible guns of the two men poking into his chest. He watched helplessly as Shera kicked and struggled.

"Now feel like talking?" Amaani asked.

Cid didn't even hesitate, certain that help was on the way. "No."

"Maybe this will change your mind," replied Amaani. She waved the hand that wasn't choking Shera in the air, and more of her huge, muscled troops appeared, coming from the town. They had found the men and women that Cid had positioned as guards and sentries against something like this happening, and were forcing the six townspeople forward at gunpoint.

"Sorry, Captain!" one man called, but the soldier just pistol-whipped him with his gun for speaking. The six men and women were marched further up the path and into the town.

Cid groaned slightly.

All of the attention was on the marching townspeople, so no one noticed as Shera strained to reach a hand into her coat pocket, gasping and choking as she tried to breathe.

"Keller, tie him up," Amaani said, gesturing with her free hand to the blond pilot. Cid, with the guns of the two men now at his back, was forced to drop to his knees, set down the Venus Gospel, and hold his hands behind his back as the weaker of the men bound his hands together tightly. Then the larger man pulled him to his feet, and Cid was glowering at Amaani in no time.

"Put her down," Cid growled, nodding to where Shera was turning blue in Amaani's iron grip.

"You're hardly in a position to be making demands," grinned Amaani. "Now, Keller, Rawley, if you please." She jerked her head at the town. Rawley saluted, while Keller gave a shaky, "Y...yes, M...Milady."

Both of them grabbed one of Cid's arms and they hauled him up the path to the town, Keller barely holding up his end. Amaani followed with Shera. She halted them when they reached the town square, where the six townspeople and Cid's other guards were gathered, guarded by soldiers with machine guns. Rawley and Keller threw Cid to the ground, and there was an angry roar from the townspeople, which was quickly quieted by the soldiers clubbing out with their guns.

Cid winced at the cries of pain he heard, and bowed his head slightly. I'm too old for this...

Shera's fingers slipped into the elusive pocket and closed around a cold, hard object.

Keller's eyes widened, and he jumped forward. "Milady! She has a gu-"

The roar of the small gun seemed deafening, and Cid coughed in the powder cloud that erupted from the pistol. "Damn, Shera, that's one hell of a gun!" he said over his shoulder to the person that he could feel untying his hands.

"It was a smoke grenade," she rasped from behind him.

The ropes fell, and his hands were free. Feeling around in the darkness that had erupted from the gun, his hand closed on the long, cold form of the Venus Gospel. Hefting it, he stood and groped blindly behind him. His hand slipped into Shera's, and he pulled her with him into the weak light that he could see. They burst into the sunshine, and Shera doubled over hacking and gulping great gasps of air, her face slowly returning from the purple color to its normal peach hue.

"You all right?" asked Cid in concern, bending down beside her.

She nodded, massaging her slender throat, where mottled fingerprints were now visible. "I'll be fine." She gave a small smile. "You're just lucky that you grabbed the wrong gun." Suddenly, her eyes, looking over his shoulder at the smoke cloud, widened. "Look out!"

Cid didn't waste any time wondering what he should be looking out for; he flung himself to one side, tossing his lance out of his way. The long, shiny Masamune embedded itself in the soil where he had been sitting a half-second before. He rolled, then came up in a crouch, hand instinctively grabbing the hilt of the Venus Gospel. Standing, he dodged back several paces, and the Masamune was once again whistling through the air where he had just been. A tall, enraged Amaani, gray smoke literally rolling off of her, was coming after Cid with a vengeance. She swung, he ducked. She sliced, he parried with his lance, the force of the two blades coming together driving him back.

"Stop!" a voice roared in desperation. Cid recognized the voice right away. Shera...! Cid, not daring to look away from Amaani, was horrified to see Amaani's attention move away from him.

What the hell is Shera doing!? She's defenseless!

Amaani backed away from him and began to move toward Shera. Looking to Shera, he saw that his wife was holding up the tiny grenade launcher as if it would protect her.

"Don't move any closer," Shera warned Amaani in a steely tone. "This may not look too deadly, but it blinds at close range."

And to Cid's surprise, Amaani halted, sword still held in front of her. Even more to his shock, for the first time since he had seen her, she looked...frightened.

"Cid." Shera was beckoning to him, and he went to her. He stood beside her, watching Amaani warily.

Amaani began to inch forward, and Cid's lance immediately went up, while Shera brandished the small gun.

"I can shoot this before you can stab me," Shera informed the white-haired warrior coldly. And again, Amaani stopped.

Suddenly, Keller and the military man appeared, but on the opposite side of the smoke cloud.

Amaani began to shout to them, but stopped when Shera called, "If you come any closer, I'll shoot and your lady will be permanently blind."

Amaani, eyes wide, fairly screamed, "Don't come closer! Don't come closer!"

The two men froze in their tracks.

Cid felt something round and cold dig into the back of his neck, and he gave a sigh. "Damn."

"Damn is right, scum. Drop that stick and reach for the sky," came a stentorian order. Cid looked over his shoulder to find one of the townspeople's guards holding a gun pointed at the pilot's head.

He heard a similar order given to Shera, and heard the thud as the small grenade launcher hit the icy ground.

Amaani was immediately in charge again, pacing in front of the pair. "All right, then, tell me wh--"

She was cut off by a loud, booming voice. "Milady!"

Cid felt his stomach drop at those three syllables. He recognized that voice. Vashar... Angry buzzing began to come from the townspeople, and someone shouted out, "No!"

Amaani was smiling at whatever Vashar was doing behind Cid, and Cid felt his spirits sink even lower. "Turn around," she ordered, poking Cid in the cheek with the tip of the Masamune. Cid winced as he felt warm blood dripping down his face from the cut, but slowly turned to find that things were even worse than he had expected.

Vashar and two more of Amaani's soldiers were coming their way. Vashar was carrying a struggling Katania and was holding a gun to her head. The other two were holding Josh and Raven in similar positions, although the man with Raven just had the baby tucked under one arm easily.

Shera moaned softly and sagged against Cid.

"Look what I found," smirked Vashar.

Amaani applauded, the sounds of her hands coming together and the children's outcries being the only sounds in the suddenly silent town square. "Nice work, Rya. Whose brats are they?"

Cid's eyes burned into Vashar. "I am going to kill you one day, Rya," the pilot hissed as the man went by on his way to Amaani. "And I am going to enjoy every scream you make, traitor. You're how they knew that they stayed with us, and how they knew that I was posting guards, and how they knew their way around the town. You're how they knew everything."

Vashar looked uncomfortable at Cid's intensity, and, coming to a halt in front of Amaani, gestured to Cid and Shera with his gun in answer to her question.

Amaani raised an eyebrow as she looked from the obviously Wutaian features of Josh and Kat to the blond Cid and brunette Shera. She leaned in close to Shera as if imparting a secret. "Tell me, dearie. Who is the real father?"

Shera, angrier than she would have thought possible before now, struck out. She slapped Amaani, hard, letting the growing red mark on Amaani's cheek and her flashing eyes speak for themselves.

The guard that had ordered Shera to drop her grenade immediately clubbed her down to her knees with his own machine gun, but Shera's brown eyes still glared their hatred at Amaani.

Amaani, with a hand to her flaming cheek, glowered and ignored the fact that Shera was even there as Cid pulled his wife back up to her feet. The warrior turned to Cid. "Let me put this bluntly, Highwind. Tell me where you took the girl and the Turk, or I have my men shoot the brats." She smiled craftily. "But if you tell me, and the truth, mind you, then they, and everyone else in this miserable little town, shall be spared."

Cid bowed his head and closed his eyes for a moment, and his face seemed to gray and age. Then his head came up, eyes open a sparkling, snapping, angry blue, and mouth bared in a snarl. "Fuck you. And you know why? Because I know that whatever I tell you, you wouldn't spare anyone. You're that much of a cold, heartless bitch." He spat at her.

There were cheers and laughter from the townspeople, which were again silenced by violence.

Amaani slowly wiped at the gooey trail making its way down her face, and the soldier behind Cid stepped forward to slam the butt of his gun into the back of the pilot's head.

Amaani held out one hand, halting the trooper. "Don't." Her eyes bored into Cid's. "I want him to be fully conscious for this." Her attention shifted from Cid to Vashar swiftly. "Rya, are you ready?"

Vashar saluted her with his gun.

Amaani nodded to him and the two others. "You may fire when ready."

Kat looked up from Vashar's arms, terrified. Her wide eyes found Cid's. "Daddy!" she screamed. "Daddy, help me! Please!"

Josh added his own cries. "Daddy!" he wailed.

Cid stared at Kat for a moment like a chocobo in the headlights of a truck, then he made his decision. He threw himself forward, battering off the soldiers who were suddenly swarming to grab him. "Dammit, no!" he bellowed, shaking off the soldiers who attempted to stop him. He heard an angry scream, and for an instant, saw Shera fighting off two of the soldiers. His hand reached for Kat, fingers brushing hers, her face lighting up for that one brief second as she thought she was saved, and he suddenly found himself face down in the dirt. A soldier had grabbed his ankles and pulled. He tried to throw himself forward again, but several soldiers had a good hold on him, and while they were kept busy trying to make sure he wouldn't get away, he couldn't break their grasp.

Amaani appeared in front of him. "Does this mean you've changed your mind?" she asked of him and Shera, who had just been dragged forward to stand, raging, beside him.

Cid bowed his head for a moment, then looked up to meet her grasp. God help Reno, Kiyara, and Tifa now... "Yes," he whispered hoarsely.

"Good," she said. Then, to Vashar, sounding annoyed: "I said you may fire when ready."

Vashar sounded puzzled. "But Milady, I thought you wanted t-"

"Do not presume to tell me what I want, Rya," she snapped dangerously. "Shoot them!"

Shera surged forward, aware of Cid at her side doing the same. "What are you doing!?" she shouted. "He's going to tell you where he took Reno and Dinah!"

"I am well aware of that," replied Amaani coolly. "But you two have made me very angry with everything that has happened thus far. And people who make me angry have very bad things happen to them..." She smiled deviously. "In your crude usage of language, I'm doing this to piss you off just for the hell of it. I can always torture the information I want out of you later." She looked to Vashar. "Rya?"

Vashar's voice boomed. "Fire on my command! Three..."

"Mommy!" shrieked the terror-filled children. "Daddy!" Tears were streaming down faces to run into the snow. Raven, as if sensing her siblings' distress, began to wail.

Shera buried her face in Cid's chest, doing her best to close out their cries. She just couldn't look.

"Two..."

"Don't you love us any more?" sobbed Josh.

"Please!" screamed Kat. "Please! I'll be extra good and clean my room when you tell me to, I promise!"

Shera felt Cid's arms encircle her and hold her tightly as his chin came to rest on her shoulder. He was breathing fast, as was she.

"One..."

"We won't make any more inventions!" cried Kat, giving the ultimate sacrifice.

"Or make you mad any more!" added Josh.

"Just please, Mommy, Daddy, come and get us!" wailed Kat.

"Fire!"

Three gunshots rang out simultaneously. The wracking sobs that Shera had been holding back tore through her body, and the tears ran down her cheeks, past her tightly shut eyes to puddle at the corners of her mouth and then drip from her chin.