

Chapter 21: War and Gore

"I'd like to hear you tell me that your little problem is more important than the possible return of Sephiroth."-Reeve Kazuma

"WHAT?!"

Kiyara winced as the high timbre of Reno's voice rose, startling a flock of birds perched outside the open window of Tifa's bar into flight. The brightly colored creatures winged off into the early morning sunlight, toward the fluffy white clouds in a blue sky. And for a moment, leaning on the windowsill, Kiyara wished that she could join them.

"But Reeve, this is incredibly important!" Reno protested.

Reeve groaned. "Reno, can't you ever let me enjoy my morning coffee in peace?" There was a pause. "Wait, don't answer that. I already know the answer."

Reno continued to whine. "But Reeve—"

Reeve cut him off. "Well, Reno, this is incredibly important too. In fact, I'm willing to bet that this is more important." The former executive sounded tired and cranky. "I'd like to hear you tell me that your little problem is more important than the possible return of Sephiroth."

Reno stopped thinking for a moment, eyes widening. "Sephiroth?!" He dropped into the nearest chair in shock.

Kiyara whirled from watching the birds at his outcry, eyes asking a silent question.

He held up a hand and ignored her. "But I thought that the Ava-frea—um, Avalanche members killed that bastard!"

Reeve sighed. "I thought they did too, especially since I saw him die through Cait Sith."

The wheels in Reno's head began to turn. "Actually...my problem kinda ties in with this."

Reeve finally sounded interested in what he had to say. "How so?"

"The her that I mentioned yesterday? She's a former research specimen of Hojo's."

Kiyara came and sat down across from him, listening intently.

Reeve sounded panicked. "Oh shit. Is she suing?!"

"No, Reeve. Calm down, man. She's not suing."

Looking at Kiyara, Reno thought she seemed to be suppressing laughter at that.

"Actually, I think she knows you," Reno went on.

Kiyara's eyes widened, and she hissed, "Reno, what are you doing?!"

He ignored her as Reeve asked, "Knows me? Who is she?"

"I think you would know her as Kiyara Maiden Shinra."

Reeve had apparently just taken a sip of that aforementioned morning coffee, because there was a spraying sound from the other end of the phone line. There were some weird coughing noises after that, and Reno asked, "Hey boss, you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," Reeve rasped after a moment. "But...I thought she was dead!"

"Nope. She's right here with me."

"How..." Reeve trailed off.

"She doesn't quite know yet, Reeve. She doesn't remember everything. In fact, she doesn't remember much at all before she fell into Hojo's hands."

"Hojo's hands...Oh gods. Oh gods! Is she all right?!"

"Calm down, Reeve. She's not horribly mutilated or anything."

Kiyara raised an eyebrow, which Reno, again, ignored.

There was silence from the other end, then Reeve asked in bewilderment, "I'm very happy to hear that she's somehow alive, but what does she have to do with the possible reappearance of Sephiroth?"

"We think that she was some kind of a backup for Sephiroth. Like if he died or something happened to him, Hojo would still have her."

"Shit..." Reeve said again. He was again quiet for a minute, then went on. "Reno, I want the two of you at the Gainsborough Building by ten o'clock. That's when the troops that I sent are breaking into the Northern Crater. I need as many of my executives as I can get, and I think we could definitely use Kiyara's insight."

Reno chose his words carefully. "You sure you want us? Some of Hojo's old buddies are still after her, and they've been chasing us all over the place."

Reeve moaned. "Things are just never simple, are they? Well, just take care not to be recognized, and I'm not worried about being able to protect her and ourselves in the building. There's enough security."

"Okay, Reeve." Reno sounded strangely docile.

"Hey Reno, is Tifa around?"

Reno frowned. "Why d'you want her?"

"Reno." Reeve's tone was commanding.

"Okay, okay. She's downstairs. You want to talk to her?"

"Yes, I do."

"I'll go find her. Bye Reeve." Reno stood.

"See you soon, Reno."

Reno went out of the room and down the stairs without a word to Kiyara. He came back in a few minutes, minus the cell phone.

Kiyara looked to him expectantly. "Well?"

"I think I just about gave Reeve a heart attack with the news about you," Reno said with a crooked grin.

"And?" she fished.

"We're headed to the Gainsborough Building once Tifa gets off the phone with him. Apparently, there's some type of trouble with Sephiroth resurfacing in the Northern Crater, and he wants all of the executives there. He also wants you and Tifa there, figuring that you girls can give him some sort of insight." Reno sank back into his chair only to find himself being pulled up by his ponytail. "Owwwww!" he howled.

He found Kiyara grinning at him. "What're you waiting for? Let's go!"

Muttering and rubbing the back of his head in pain, he reached for her own, waist-long ponytail, but she evaded him, laughing, grabbed her jacket from the back of a chair, and ran out the door.

"What made her so happy?" he growled, following.

Tifa was waiting for them downstairs, shrugging a coat on over the white long-sleeve top and ankle-length black skirt. Reno noticed the change in her attire, but wisely decided not to comment. "Ready?" she asked.

Reno looked around. "Where is she?" he asked.

Tifa frowned. "I thought she was with you."

Rapid footsteps came down the stairs. "I'm coming!" called Kiyara's familiar voice. She jogged over to the two of them, and tossed Reno a hat.

"What's this for?" he asked, looking at it in distaste. It was an ancient bowler hat that looked like the type that his grandfather must have worn.

Kiyara ignored him. "You don't mind if he uses it, do you, Tifa?"

Tifa shrugged. "It's fine by me. I certainly don't wear it."

"Put it on," prompted Kiyara. "And pull up the collar of your jacket. It'll hide your hair."

Sighing and making a martyred face, Reno pulled the hat on and yanked the collar of his coat up. "Better?" he asked sourly.

"Much," replied Kiyara, grinning.

"Oh quit it." He took a halfhearted swipe at her, which she dodged with ease.

"C'mon kids," Tifa said, rolling her burgundy eyes and ushering them out the door.

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Kicking dirty snow clods as she moved down the sidewalk, Tifa hunched her shoulders against the biting cold and jammed her numb hands further down into her pockets. "Damn it's cold!" she exclaimed, not for the first time.

Seemingly recovered from his grumpy mood, Reno draped an arm across Tifa's shoulders playfully. "Y'know, babe, I've got a few suggestions that would warm you right up," he said with a crooked smirk.

Tifa shook off his arm and held up a clenched fist in warning, eyes flashing furiously. Reno rolled his green eyes slightly, but went silent.

"Now who're the children?" Kiyara muttered to herself, stopping at a crosswalk to wait to move across the crowded street.

As the trio moved across the street and down into the subway station, they were strangely quiet, each ruminating on what this trip to the Shinra headquarters meant to him or her. They were silent the rest of the ride to the Gainsborough Building, all three keeping their heads down so as not to be recognized.

After that train ride and a short walk in the frigid air, Kiyara found herself looking up in awe at the immense Gainsborough Building.

"It's...huge," she breathed.

Reno grinned at her. "We're headin' to the very top floor."

Tifa was looking up with interest. "How high is this one?"

"Forty stories," was Reno's answer. "And growin' still. As more and more of the Planet is beginning to rely on Shinra for their electricity, the company is gettin' bigger. And that means more employees." He began to move toward the front door, and the two women followed.

Two guards in full blue armor stopped them just in front of the large glass doors. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but I'm going to need to see some identification," one said.

Reno fished in his pocket for a moment, then came up with a small plastic chit, which he handed to the guard, removing the brown hat and smoothing the collar of his jacket as he did so.

The guard studied the card for a moment, comparing the picture on it to Reno, then he gave it back to Reno. "Sorry about that, sir. You're free to pass." Reno stood to one side to wait as Tifa also gave the guard a card.

At Kiyara's questioning look, the brunette replied, "Reeve sent all of us permanent visitor cards, so that we can come through when we need to."

"You're good to go too, Miss Lockhart." The man put the card into her waiting hand. Then he looked to Kiyara.

"And what about you, miss?"

Kiyara looked to Reno, who shrugged. "I don't have one," she told the guard.

"I can vouch for her," Reno offered.

"I can too," Tifa put in.

The two guards exchanged a glance, then the second one spoke up. "I'm sorry, but no can do. We've been instructed to let

no one pass unless they have an ID card. Mr. Lynley and Miss Lockhart may go through, but miss, you may not." This last was addressed to Kiyara.

"Let me serve as her ID card, then, lieutenant," a new voice broke up. The two guards whirled and froze, wide-eyed, for a second before saluting crisply.

"Sorry Mr. President, sir," one began.

"But our orders were to not let anyone in that didn't have a card. We didn't know that you knew her, sir."

"It's all right, soldiers," Reeve said, beckoning to Reno, Tifa, and Kiyara. The three followed him inside the building, and the glass doors shut, closing out the sounds of the noisy, cluttered street behind them.

Tifa stared at Reeve's back, a small flush coming to her cheeks. He was more handsome than she had been prepared for, despite that she had seen his face in the news all the time and that he was a good ten or fifteen years older than her. She pinched herself. Tifa Lockheart, you stop ogling that poor man this instant!

They all paused in the lobby, and Reeve looked Kiyara over, smiling broadly and unknowingly giving Tifa time to recover. "Well, Kiyara, you certainly have grown since I last saw you."

Kiyara gave him a shy smile. "I should hope so. It's good to see you, sir."

Tifa and Reno were both frowning as they looked on, though for different reasons.

Reeve waved her off. "No, no sir. Just Reeve, please. It's so nice to have people refer to me by my name instead of a title once in a while."

"You guys know each other?" Tifa asked.

"Well, my parents knew Reeve, but I don't really remember him," replied Kiyara.

Before Reeve could say anything, Reno broke in quickly, "Yeah, Reeve knew Kiyara's parents well." He shot Reeve a meaningful look, while still studying the two of them. There was something about Kiyara that reminded him of Reeve; maybe it was the smile or the air of intelligence behind the calm brown and stormy blue eyes. He wasn't quite sure what it was, but he promised to himself that he'd ask Tifa if she noticed it as well the first chance that he got.

Reeve seemed to wince at his comment, but caught the meaning of the glance and gave a small, almost imperceptible nod.

"I haven't seen Kiyara since she was nine years old," he said with a friendly smile. "Oh, what embarrassing stories I could tell!"

Kiyara laughed, as did he and the other two.

"And Tifa, it's very nice to meet you, by the way. Thank you for coming." Reeve extended a hand, which Tifa took to shake after a moment's hesitation.

Tifa recovered quickly and nicely. "I'm glad to finally meet you too, Reeve. Thanks for calling. I want to know what's going on as well."

Reno blinked. "You guys have never met?!"

Tifa laughed at his surprise. "Only through Cait Sith."

"Now, they're all waiting for us upstairs," Reeve said. "Right this way." He ushered Kiyara and Tifa ahead of him. He lowered his voice to a low murmur in Reno's ear. "Should I acknowledge her to the other directors?"

"Yeah," Reno hissed back. "Tell them who she is and why she's here. You'll get a reaction from Tifa over that, because she doesn't know. But refer to her as Kiyara Maiden, not as Kiyara Shinra."

Reeve nodded. "Okay." Then, to the women: "The elevator please, ladies."

They all filed in and it shot to the top floor swiftly. The outer wall was glass, and Kiyara and Tifa stared in wonder, faces pressed to the glass, as the ground shot away and they were treated to an excellent view of the city.

The ride was over far too fast for the two women, and Reeve led them out of the elevator and into a lavish, expensive looking hallway with thick, plush carpeting and creamy white walls. He stopped when they reached a door several doors down from the elevator, turned the knob, and pulled the door open.

Kiyara went in first to find a well-sized, well-furnished room, with an immense glass window lending a view of the cluttered city far below. A large rectangular oaken table was in the middle of the room, and was surrounded by at least 20 chairs. Each chair had a placard on the table in front of it, but none of the chairs were being sat in. Instead, the occupants of the boardroom were gathered in front of a small, color television set sitting on a table in a far corner.

As they moved into the spacious chamber, most of the crowd of people gathered around the TV glanced up quickly, but only three moved to greet them.

Tifa stopped short in surprise as a familiar figure bounded toward her. "Red?" she asked tentatively.

He halted at her feet and grinned up at her, sharp canines flashing. "In the fur!"

She bent down and hugged him, a smile lighting up her beautiful face. Several of the men surrounding the television were now openly eyeing her. "Red! I haven't seen you in such a long time!" She scratched that special place behind his ear, and he fairly purred in pleasure.

Behind them, Kiyara stared at Red strangely until Reno pinched her arm. She glared daggers, but for once didn't hit him and stayed silent.

The second to come to greet them was Bugah, and he smiled at the two old friends and nodded to Reeve.

The final man who had moved to see them threw an amused look at Reno. "Ah, Lynley. You finally decided to rejoin us?" Reno muttered something inaudible, the black look on his face making it clear that whatever he was saying was not something that the other man would appreciate.

The man's keen gray eyes raked over Kiyara, standing behind Reno, with obvious interest, taking in the long slim leg apparent through the slit in the blue skirt that she wore. His stare moved upward from there, and Kiyara squirmed inwardly at how wrong that gaze felt. But outwardly, the only sign of that discomfort was a slight flush to her cheeks, and she raised a golden eyebrow ever so slightly at him.

While still looking at Kiyara, the man finished his comment to Reno with: "And you brought back a...friend." There was no doubt as to what this tall, stately man with gray hair was calling Kiyara.

There was a shocked tense silence for a moment, in which the air seemed to crackle with more energy than Reno's nightstick could produce. The owner of the aforesaid nightstick was ready to explode with anger, but Reeve grabbed his

arm with a look that said clearly: 'Don't.' Reno fumed, but he did so silently.

Then Kiyara stepped forward, face wreathed in a friendly smile. But there was an underlying flinty edge to her voice, her grin, her blue-gray eyes. "I don't think we've had the pleasure of being introduced, Mr..." She trailed off, obviously fishing for a name.

"Ah, my mistake," he said smoothly, giving a stiff bow. "I am Kai Anisah, vice president of the Shinra company."

Kiyara gave a small bow in return, not wanting to go through the physical touch that would be necessary for a handshake. There was something familiar about this man, and whatever it was, it sure as hell wasn't a good thing.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Anisah. My name is Kiyara Maiden, and I only hope that I can prove to be some assistance in this crisis."

"What kind of assistance, Miss Maiden?" Anisah asked curiously.

Reeve finally stepped in. "It will all become clear in a moment, Kai." He motioned toward the large wooden table. "If you would be so kind as to take a seat?" The older man nodded and moved off to a chair at an end of the table.

Reeve stared at the group of people huddled around the TV for a moment; almost as if, Tifa thought, he was wondering how to address them.

Finally, he spoke. "People!" For such a quiet, unassuming man, he had the chattering executives' silent, total attention with that one word. He smiled, and Tifa finally figured out what had carried this deceptively meek man so far. Charisma, she thought, the full, heated radiance of that smile and those warm brown eyes washing over her.

"Thank you," Reeve said. "Now if you would please take your seats?"

Tifa shook her head slightly at herself as the executives shuffled to their chairs. Tifa Mae Lockhart, what are you doing? But another, deeply buried part of her was enjoying this. So you've got the hots for the little executive, eh? It's about time you took some interest in your love life again. Tifa growled a wordless, silent reply at the inner voice and returned her attention to the matters at hand.

Reeve was beckoning to her, and, blushing at her momentary lapse, she moved to stand by his side. Red grinned at her around Reeve, and she lifted one hand in a small greeting to Bugah, who smiled at her. Kiyara stood beside Tifa, fidgeting.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you our panel of experts on the Great Glacier, the Northern Crater, and Sephiroth. I believe you all know, or at least know of, Tifa Lockhart and Nanaki of Cosmo Canyon. Bugah here is a scholar of the Planet. And Kiyara Maiden is an ex-research specimen of Hojo's." His brown eyes swept the room during a brief pause, and most people looked away from his gaze uncomfortably. "We have reason to believe that Miss Maiden was intended to be some type of a backup for Sephiroth, in case something happened to him. So she may be able to give us a fresh viewpoint on Sephiroth, if that's what this disturbance is."

Tifa's quiet gasp reverberated in the suddenly silent room, then a babble of excited questions and voices broke out, and continued until Reeve finally managed to regain order.

"And on a lighter note," Reeve went on, "Mr. Lynley is back after safely escorting Miss Maiden to us."

There was mock applause from several executives, and Reno stood from his seat to give a deep bow, mouthing, "Thank you, thank you."

Looking amused, Reeve waited for several long seconds before asking, "Are you finished?"

Reno dropped back into the chair in front of the plaque that read, 'Reconstruction of Midgar,' sprawling across the piece of furniture languidly. "As finished as I'll ever be."

Ignoring the comment, Reeve pressed on. "But unfortunately, Mr. Texihera and General Sader are still out searching for Mr. Lynley."

That drew some laughter as Reno frowned and said, "I was wondering why they weren't here..."

One woman frowned, pudgy fingers tapping idly against the placard reading 'Mako Security.' "But President Kazuma, if Elena is gone, how did you send out those troops? Theoretically, aren't troops not supposed to move without the signature of the head of the military?"

"Theoretically means jack shit in this situation, Minerva," Reeve replied bluntly. "It was an emergency, and I couldn't get through to her." He gave a small, humorless smile. "I found out that the title 'president' carries a helluva lot more weight than I initially realized."

A phone rang in the strained silence that followed his comment, and they all fumbled for cell phones. Peeved, Reeve pulled the small phone out of a pocket and snapped, "What?"

"Geez, no need to sound so pissed, Reeve," came Elena's voice from the other end.

Reeve signaled to the occupants that the meeting was having a slight break, and the hum of conversations picked up as he moved away from the main body of people. "Elena, why the hell haven't I been able to reach you?"

"Rude lost our phone," was her bemused answer. The deep, low voice said something in the background, which Elena apparently ignored. "But we have a lot to report. Although we haven't found Reno, we know where he is."

"Elena, that mission's over. I've got Reno right here with me."

There was dead quiet for a moment, then: "Okay, never mind that part of the report, then. But you've gotta hear the rest of thi--"

"Make it quick. I've got a room full of scared executives waiting for me."

"Okay; I can do quick. Me, Faye, and Rude ran into Cloud Strife in Costa del Sol. Long story short, we ended up being chased out by some girl named Amaani and a bunch of muscle m--"

"Yeah, yeah," interrupted Reeve. "I've already heard all of this, remember? You guys called me to request the helicopter pickup. Go on from the heli pickup."

Elena took a deep breath. "We flew to Rocket Town, and got there to find the entire town battling against Amaani and her buddies, who had gotten there ahead of us. We were losing until Faye got an idea. She wasn't fighting; she was off to the side. Amaani was jamming the area, so we couldn't get any calls or radio calls out, but we could make calls within the town itself. Faye found someone who had a shortwave radio in their home, and sent someone else up to the airstrip control center. Then they held a conversation, Faye being the terrified Rocket Town citizen, and the other guy being Midgar. Midgar man said reinforcements from Shinra were on the way, Amaani picked up the transmission, and skedaddled."

"Shit..." breathed Reeve for a minute. Then: "Anything else?"

"Amaani's full name is Lady Amaani Hojo."

"WHAT?!" Reeve yelled. Everyone turned to look at him strangely, but he ignored them. "Please tell me you're joking."

"Sadly to say, I'm not."

"Alright, what else, Elena?" asked Reeve, resolving to go back to the Hojo comment.

"Strife battled Amaani, your helicopter pilot got seriously injured, we picked up a creature by the name of Rahilah who claims to know Red XIII and is the same species as him, and we've joined forces with Cid Highwind."

Reeve's head was beginning to ache. He held the phone away from his ear for a moment and called out, "Nanaki, could you please come here?"

The great red beast padded over. "Yes, Reeve?"

"Do you know someone named Rahilah?"

Red stiffened, but nodded slowly. "Yes, I knew someone named Rahilah."

"She's apparently in Rocket Town as of this minute."

Red sat back on his heels, one eye wide and posture suggesting he was shocked. "What?!"

"Not possible?"

"Definitely not possible! Rahilah is dead! She died years ago!" exclaimed Red.

Putting the phone to his ear, Reeve said to Elena, "He says she's dead."

"Well, she's sitting right over there..." replied Elena.

Running one hand through his dark hair in exasperation, Reeve sighed. "When are you guys coming back here?"

"As soon as we can convince Highwind to leave his people and bring us there in the Highwind."

"Do some convincing. I need you two back here."

"Will do. And what about Rahilah?"

"Bring her with you, but watch out for her. Don't trust her."

"We can do that. S'that all?"

"That's it," confirmed Reeve.

"See you in a while, Reeve." The line went dead.

Looking disturbed, Red went back to Tifa. Reeve walked back over to the group just as the man sitting in front of the card reading 'Aeronautics and Space' pointed to the TV screen. "I say, he wasn't there before, was he?"

The commander of the troops had his face in the camera, and appeared to be saying something that wasn't being picked

up. In the background behind his mahogany face, the marching soldiers of Shinra Inc covered every visible inch of snow.

The executives all sprang out of their seats and moved as one to surround the television set. "What's he saying?" "Are they there yet?" "How come we can't hear him?"

Reno pushed his way through the crowd ahead of Reeve, muttering something about geezers still living in the Dark Ages. Upon reaching the TV, he bent down and began fiddling with some knobs.

"What's wrong with it?" someone called out.

Reno turned to grace them with an incredulous look. "It was muted."

There were sheepish murmurs and shuffling of feet.

Reeve came up, ushering Tifa, Kiyara, Bugah, and Red in front of him. Giving a few quick orders, the television was turned and people sprawled—or sat primly—across chairs, the table, the floor, and whatever was available. Reeve and Tifa sat together on the table, Tifa looking down uneasily as the table creaked, but Reeve blithely ignoring it. Red sat next to Tifa's feet, preferring the floor to a chair. Kiyara and Bugah had managed to scrounge chairs that had good views of the TV and were seated comfortably.

The colonel's voice came through. "Midgar, you there?"

When Reno looked to Reeve, the black-haired man nodded. "Take it, Reno."

Reno pulled a sleek set of headphones with a built-in microphone out from under the TV and placed them on his head, adjusting the fit slightly. Then he spoke. "Midgar here."

"This is the very latest in technology," Reeve murmured in Tifa's ear. "It's got some problems, like a slight lag, but it works fairly well. We can see him, and he if had a television, he could see us."

"Hmmm," Tifa agreed, trying to ignore how close he was leaning to talk to her.

"W—"

Reeve was interrupted by the bass rumble of Odingo's voice. "All four platoons have visual contact with the lip of the Crater, and are getting still closer. What are my orders?"

Reno looked to Reeve. The executive-turned-president hesitated for a moment, then said, "Tell him to show us what's going on."

Reno nodded, and said into the microphone, "Sweep the camera, Colonel."

After a delay of several moments, the scene suddenly changed as the camera operator panned the machine. The view moved in a broad circle, and the occupants of the boardroom looked on in awe. Every inch of snow was positively boiling with blue-armored, marching troops as far as the eye could see. Snowmobiles zipped in and out of the organized chaos, sending up huge plumes of snow to shower down in icy crystals. But while the vista of man's might was incredible, the sight of nature's was enough to take one's breath away. The jagged, sheer walls of the Gaia Cliffs rose in the background, while the edges of the Northern Sea lapped at snow-covered beaches. And when the camera finally came to a halt again, it was looking at the nearing Crater. The tremendous blackened hole in the Planet's surface was miraculously clear, as if the snow and sparse animals disdained to land there. Tall spires of rock jutted into the air, obstructing any hope of seeing anything beyond the first 100 yards into the Crater. Unspeakable horrors could be hidden within, and no one would be the wiser until it was far too late.

The colonel seemed to be well aware of this as he shifted nervously, awaiting his orders.

Reeve chewed at his lip slowly, then began to speak. "Tell them to keep advancing. Once they reach the edge of the Crater, send in the--"

He was cut off once again as another heavily bundled soldier, this one with the rank insignia of a lower officer, blundered into view. "Colonel Odingo, sah!" He threw a shaky salute, and Reeve was alarmed to see that his face was chalk white under the wrappings.

"What, Lieutenant?!" snapped Odingo.

"We're getting distress calls from Orion and Leviathan companies, sah! They claim to be under attack by huge, dangerous monsters."

Odingo frowned. "I was told that the monsters would run from a formation of our size."

The little lieutenant shrugged, then said in a quieter tone, "It must be something bad, sah, if I may say so, because their screams are awful." He shuddered.

Odingo pressed on. "Where are Orion and Leviathan companies stationed?"

"At our right flank, sah."

"Send Dual and Solar companies from the left flank t--" A low-pitched growling noise began, and the ground began to shake and drum, as if being pounded by a million running feet.

"What the devil is that?!" roared the colonel, fighting to keep to his feet.

The camera view shook wildly as the lieutenant yelled back over the growing din, "This is what the Leviathan and Orion boys were screaming about just before the attack! They said that the ground was shaking, and that something came out of the Crater!"

The colonel whirled at his words to stare at the Crater; everyone who had been in earshot doing the same.

"This all happened minutes ago, dammit! Whatever we do, it's too late! Too late!" hissed a voice from behind where Reeve was sitting. And with a heavy heart, Reeve knew that the man was right.

That was when the first of them crested the Crater. As if propelled by a huge explosion, the wave of black burst over the lip of the giant depression in the Planet's surface. Streaming down the sides, the forerunners of the roiling dark mass moved forward across the snow-covered fields, stretching side-to-side and back as far as the eyes could see.

The little lieutenant recovered his voice first. "Fuck! What the fuck is that?!"

Odingo muttered under his breath in a foreign sounding language, and Reeve realized with a jolt that Jomas Odingo, the officer famed for his calm and bravery in the face of battle; the soldier who had been nicknamed, "The Iron Man," was praying.

There was dead silence in the boardroom for the first time that Reeve could ever remember.

"Colonel Odingo, sah, what do we do?!" demanded the lieutenant, sounding panicky.

Odingo blinked, then nodded and sprang into action. "Lieutenant, you go and find me a radio that will let me talk to the leaders of the companies."

Looking relieved that he had a mission, the lesser officer dashed off.

Odingo turned to the camera. "Can you zoom in at that monster?"

"Yessir," came the immediate response of someone behind the machine.

Everything on the screen grew larger as the operator fiddled. For a moment, it was blurred, then suddenly came into focus. There were sharp intakes of breath in the boardroom, but no one said a word.

"What do you see?" asked Odingo.

"Sir...wow, this is amazing...Oop, sorry, sir. Colonel, this thing isn't an it; it's a they. There must be millions of those things!"

"Millions of what things, soldier?" Odingo barked.

"Uh...can't really tell. Let me zoom in more, sir..." Everything onscreen became still larger.

There was a deadly, ominous silence as the executives took in the sinewy black creatures with four paws, thick gray manes, nasty looking teeth and claws, and, most damning of all, long tails with blue flames dancing on the ends.

Red made a strangled yelp, and Reeve got past his own surprise fast enough to jump up to forestall the inevitable outbursts. "No one say a word. We need to watch what's going on, not argue about these beings. Nanaki's integrity is beyond question, so we will discuss this later. Agreed?"

There were a few sullen mutterings, but no one spoke out.

"Thank you." Reeve sat back down on the table and turned his attention back to the television set. He would push this to the back of his mind—for now.

Onscreen, the soldier behind the camera had just finished describing the creatures to Odingo.

"Why can't he just look through the camera himself to see them?" murmured Tifa, her breath tickling the back of his ear.

Reeve jumped, having almost completely forgotten that she was there. "Agh—Oh, sorry, you startled me. You mean the colonel, I take it?"

"Yeah, him."

"See, that camera is strapped to the soldier's helmet. There's a little lens right in front of his eye that projects what the camera is recording. There's just that; no lens to look through on the camera itself. It takes a long time to get the whole thing off the operator's head; too long, in this care."

She nodded, absently reaching down to scratch that place behind Red's ear that he liked. There was a low rumble from where the great beast was stretched out on the floor, and half of the executives in the room jumped in fright. Reeve hid a smile as he recognized the sound as a purr.

Reeve's mirth faded as he turned back to the screen. The creatures were still pouring out of the Crater, and the first wave of them was completely on the flat snow, coming faster and faster and faster as the seconds rolled by. Reeve realized that they would hit the army far faster than anyone had realized.

Odingo apparently saw this as well, because he turned to the camera quickly and said, "Well sir, I guess you heard all of that. I realize that you will be getting this too late to do anything, so don't bother to send reinforcements. If I'm correct, we'll all be dead by then. This is Colonel Jomas Odingo, signing out." He gave a crisp salute, looking completely calm and in control of himself.

His gave went down, and Reeve saw that he was looking at the man operating the camera. "Can you carry that thing through battle, private?"

"Yes sir!" came the immediate response.

"Good show. Do that, and whatever you do, keep the camera running. Understood, soldier?"

"Yes, Colonel."

"Good," said Odingo, then he was gone; out of the camera's view. But his bellowing voice with its distinctive accent, precise accent could still be heard. "Captain! Is the heavy artillery still in the back of the lines?"

A woman's voice returned, "Sir, there's one rocket launcher and a group of four with bazookas at the front. Everything else is behind the main body of soldiers, and would hit the men if they tried to fire."

"Order the ones in the front to bloody fire already!"

"Yessir!" A crisp, barked order rang out. A symphony of light and sound boomed as four bazookas and one rocket launcher fired in unison. Huge fireballs exploded into being in the ranks of the opposing creatures, and ebony bodies flew in the resulting chaos. But as the smoke cleared, it was blatantly obvious that it hadn't done enough damage. The explosions hadn't even scratched the surface of the opposition. And then, before any more actions could be taken, the creatures were upon them.

Shrieks, roars, screams, and gunfire heralded the meeting of the front ranks of both armies, and Reeve found small comfort in the fact that Odingo had been correct in his assumption that the tawny beasts weren't friendly. Not at all.

The camera was perfectly still as the soldiers around the soldier wearing it held their ground as well. The rasp of swords and guns being drawn could be heard, and then the first of the inky beasts came into view. Moving with the lightning fast speed and grace that Reeve had come to associate with Red XIII, it leapt and tore the throat out of one man in a shower of blood while slashing at the soldier's companion with clawed paws. It yowled as a spray of bullets hit it, but continued to fight relentlessly until one soldier managed to cut its head off. Then the creature's companions were among the ranks of the camera operator's company, and the camera shook wildly as the man running it began to fight.

A loud scream rang out directly next to the camera's sound receptors, and the camera view spun to find a man frantically slashing at the black beast sitting on his chest. Gunfire sounded, and it took Reeve a moment to realize that the camera operator was shooting the creature. The animal gave a hideous scream, and bit deep into the man's throat in retaliation. Crimson blood seeped around the sharp canine teeth, and dripped from the mouth of the animal as it raised its head to look at the soldier with the camera. The soldier that it was sitting on sucked in a breath, then the light went out of his eyes.

Another trooper drove his sword deep into the chest of the animal, and it slumped.

A shaky but calm voice spoke as the camera operator moved through the chaos, slashing and shooting wherever needed. "I

have honestly no idea who's seeing this tape, but I guess I'd better explain what's going on. I am Private Ebe Polier, of the Shinra Army, and I'm from Junon. Colonel Odingo put me in charge of filming what's going on. Just a few minutes ago, we came under attack by an unknown species. The situation appears to be critical, as the creatures outnumber us by an awful lot."

He was silent for several moments, kept busy fending off one particularly nasty beast. Then, the area around him relatively free of enemies, he turned slowly in a circle. Organs, and severed limbs littered the ground, along with mangled, groaning bodies of both human and non. The snow was stained with the colors of bodily fluids, and corpses were trampled into the ground everywhere. And above all, blood. Blood was all over everything; the snow a deep crimson color. Even as they watched in horror, blood from a nearby skirmish splattered onto the camera, and Polier reached up to wipe it off of the lens.

Reeve heard several retching noises from behind him at the sight of the carnage, and he did his best to ignore the wave of queasiness he felt himself.

A loud moan came, and Polier bent down to find a human grasping his foot. The camera view first focused on the hand clutching the boot, then slowly moved up the arm, chest, neck—and stopped on the face.

The soldier's mouth was opening and closing wordlessly, his expression one of deepest horror. His face bled profusely from the claw marks that marred his face, the white bone visible inside the deep gouges. But worst of all were the eyes. More correctly, what used to be the eyes. Twin gaping holes marked the places where eyes had once been on the inhuman face, blood pouring down from the empty pits to stream across cheeks.

There were groans and gasps, and the stench of vomit reached Reeve's nose. He turned away from the screen for a moment, fighting desperately to control the wave of nausea. Tifa was sitting board-straight beside him, face white. On the floor, Red's hackles were raised as he growled low in his throat. Across the room, most of the executives were turned away, and a majority of those were retching. Bugah held a disturbed expression on his face, and Kiyara was clutching the sides of her chair tightly, staring intently at the screen. The only outward sign of any emotion from Reno was one raised eyebrow.

Reeve turned his attention back to himself. Get a hold of yourself, Reeve. You sent them in there, to their deaths. It's your fault, so you had damn well better watch.

He forced his eyes back to the television set to find that Polier was under attack by another of the creatures. And this time, he seemed to be in trouble. He was slicing frantically with his sword, grunting and cursing, but the ebony beast was much too fast. The animal slipped through his guard and dove at him, knocking him over. There was a high, shrill scream, and blood splattered across the lens of the camera again.

The camera held still, view that of a gray sky, scudded by clouds. Reeve shook his head slowly to himself. The voices in his head just wouldn't shut up. Yet another that you killed. Murderer. Murderer. Murderer! The Wutaian man buried his face in his hands.

There was another collective gasp, and Reeve groaned softly to himself. What now? He raised his head to find that the camera was bouncing along about two feet above the ground. He looked to Tifa in confusion.

"It picked the camera up," she said quietly.

Reeve blinked, mind working slowly. It pick—Wait. She must mean that black creature that killed that man by 'it'.

The camera traveled for several more minutes, across snowy ridges, huge pools of blood, bodies, and through thick fighting. There was a dead quiet in the boardroom as the journey took place. Finally, the camera was set down on the ground gently. Reeve noticed that there didn't appear to be any battle debris on the snow, which meant that the camera had been brought away from the skirmish. The camera suddenly rose into the air again, but much higher. It was turned around and around, as if someone was trying to figure out how it worked. Then it happened.

A male face loomed in the camera, green eyes glittering behind crystal spectacles, greasy black strands of hair falling to obstruct his vision.

Reeve stared blankly. No way...

A quick, startled oath came from Reno and one or two of the execs who had worked for Shinra in the old days. There was a thud to the left of Reeve, which he took to be the sound of Kiyara falling out of her chair. Glancing over quickly, he found that he was right.

Beside him, Tifa was gaping, mouth working furiously but no sound coming out. A low growl drew his attention to the floor, where Red was standing, yellow eye glaring and fiery hackles raised.

"That sonuvabitch Hojo is still alive!?" Kiyara shrieked, now standing, hands balled into tight fists and blue-gray eyes crackling.

"Hojo?!" screamed the executives who hadn't recognized him.

The man on the screen seemed to realize what he was looking into, because his expression grew startled, and he dropped the camera to the ground. The last thing that could be seen was a booted foot coming down, then the screen went black.

There was a dead silence until Reeve raised his hand wearily. "Who else votes we call in the rest of Avalanche?"

Twenty-three hands shot into the air.

"First unanimous decision ever..." muttered Reeve.

Notes notes galore: Mwahaha, I'll bet you can see where this Tifa thing is going, can't you? I'm just too obvious sometimes...

Also, my apologies to you for the length of the chapter, and the length of the time that it's taken me to post this chapter. Henry4th of FF:WA's suggestion for the title of the sequel (The Star That Fell) won by a landslide, so Henry, contact me to claim your prize. (A short story about any subject that I'm knowledgeable about)

Thanks for reading this far, and please write me a review or comment!