

Hi. A few side-notes before you read this. There's a conference in this chapter between all of the leaders of the world. You'll notice that several--well, most--of the leaders have names and looks similar to certain cultures in our world. That was done on purpose. You'll probably also figure out that most of these cultures and names and such are based off of European cultures and names. That was done because I'm more familiar with Europe than I am with Asia or Africa, not because of any prejudice or que ever. There are a whole lot of people, so at the end of this chapter, there is a list of who represents what city. If you get confused, take a gander at that, and it should clear some things up. Also, I studied the FF7 map and have decided that there are five continents. Northern, Eastern, Western, Southern, and Mid (short for middle. I know; I'm too creative.). I made it up. Someone yell at me if they said there are only four continents in FF7 or something, and I shall fix everything. Without further adieu, enjoy the next 42 pages.

Chapter 26: The Calm Before the Storm

"That whack job don't come outta his basement for nothin'."-Barret Wallace

Reeve's eyes opened slowly, eyelashes fluttering against the intrusion of a bright light, before finally fully lifting his eyelids with a twinge of confusion.

He was lying on his side facing the window--the source of that annoying light--with Tifa's peaceful, slumbering face directly in his, so close together that the tip of his nose was brushing lightly against hers. They were wrapped in each other's bare arms, the off-white sheet nearly as tangled as their bodies in the large, king-sized bed.

The dark-haired man managed to extricate himself from Tifa's limbs, leaving an arm draped over her and turning onto his back to help shield his eyes from the sun. Gods, she's just a kid. What the hell were you thinking?

Tifa gave a tired moan and flopped onto her stomach, resting her cheek against his bared chest, right arm leaning on the opposite side of his chest and shoulder.

All negative thoughts flew from his head, and he had to just smile and idly stroke her glossy brown head as he looked to the digital clock on the nightstand beside the bed.

"What time is it?" she mumbled groggily into his rib cage.

"Seven-thirty," he replied. "We've got to get up soon."

Tifa groaned, crawling further up in the bed to thud face-first into a downy white pillow beside him. "Sleep would be better."

"You can sleep in the meeting," he suggested, amusement evident in his voice.

She laughed quietly, lifting her head and leaning over to give him a peck on the cheek that turned into a full-fledged make-out session when he turned his head and caught it on the mouth.

"What time's the meeting?" she asked after several moments, with him now balanced on top of her.

"Eight," he answered, ducking down to kiss her again, her arms wrapped around his back and neck.

"I think we should--"

"Stay in bed a little while longer?" he finished with a rakish grin.

Her own smile was quite confident and devious. "I think we've got enough time."

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" 'Reno, you shouldn't sleep in your apartment,' " the red-headed man mocked, tossing the battered mustard-colored duffle bag onto the queen-size hotel bed and zipping it up quickly. " 'It's not safe there with Hojo looking for you and Kiyara.' " He did an almost perfect mimicry of Reeve, right down to the calm, even tones and the faintest of Wutaian accents.

Reno's crimson ponytail was dripping onto his gray "Recycle Your Animals" T-shirt and sliding down his back, several water droplets continuing down the leg of his jeans. He tossed the beat-up bag over his shoulder with his right hand while giving a wordless groan of annoyance, and used his left to wring all remaining moisture from his hair. Water pattered onto the expensive carpet, and he gave his first amused grin of the morning, green eyes glowing with a faint sense of their normal twinkle.

He glanced around the rich, luxurious room for a moment, taking in the large bed, creamy white walls, paneled mahogany cabinet, expensive paintings... and sighed. "You'd think they'd at least have a working TV in here." He glared at a chair leg, imagining it to be Reeve's face. "And you just had to put me in a non-smoking room, didn't you?"

He ducked out of the room and slammed the door, storming into the well-lit carpeted corridor beyond. Unfortunately, he was so caught up in his annoyance that he didn't notice the woman until it was too late, and he slammed right into her with a dull thud.

Both of them barely kept to their feet with the force of the collision, and Reno--in true Reno fashion--just began to move toward the elevator, totally ignoring the woman and her apology.

"I'm sorr--"

They both froze, and he spun to look at her. Sure enough, it was Kiyara, standing there holding the handle to a small wheeled black suitcase, wearing a pair of gray jeans, a multi-colored long-sleeved shirt with sixties-type designs, red sneakers, and a navy blue parka.

She raised a dark-blond eyebrow in amusement. "Reno. Now you're stalking me?"

"No, no. See, it's you who can't get enough of me," he corrected arrogantly.

"Of course. How could I forget." The amount of sarcasm in her voice could choke a large chocobo.

"Yeah. S--" He stopped short with a frown. "What happened to your hair?"

It was cut in straight layers, the longest of which fell to her shoulder blades, and the shortest reaching halfway down her cheeks.

"Polite, Reno," she congratulated him. "And your little friend Xavier did this to me last night when he was doing my hair. He cut off nearly twelve inches!"

He shrugged. "Looks fine. So what about this marriage thing?"

"My, you're direct."

"I'm not one to skirt the issue," he said, mocking her polite tone.

"No, you'll lift that skirt right up and drop your pants, won't you?"

He staggered backward, nearly bumping into the corridor wall in the process, hand over his heart. "Oh, that hurts, Kiyara. Really." His expression soured, and he skewered her with a sharp green glare. "And stop avoiding the question."

"Who's avoiding what question?" she asked innocently, eyes wide.

He scowled at her in annoyance.

She sighed in defeat, beginning to walk down the hall, pulling her suitcase along behind her. "All right. Jeez, someone's bitchy this morning."

"And you're bitchy every morning. Every day, actually."

"Ooh. Good one." She punched the glowing orange button to call the elevator, then said, "My husband's name is Perrin."

"That tells me shit, except for the fact that he's got a pansy-ass name."

"Shove it up your ass, Reno," she told him sweetly, stepping through the now open elevator doors behind him and leaning against the handrail in the back as he pressed the 'lobby' button.

"That's your favorite insult, isn't it? Where is 'Perrin' right now?" There was a slight jolt as the elevator began to descend.

"Perrin is in his hometown--where I met him when I first ran from Hojo--right now, partly because I didn't want him to be in danger because of me, and partly because somebody needed to take care of the kids," she answered evenly with a hint of deviousness behind the blue eyes.

Reno's jaw dropped and he blinked heavily, speechless for a long moment. "...Kids? Not even kid, but kids? As in plural?"

"Yes, Reno, the 's' in kids does imply more than one child. Mose is fifteen, Gia twelve, and Genevieve one."

Absolutely bewildered, he seized upon the first thing that seemed amiss in her story. "Fifteen? How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

Both red eyebrows skyrocketed. "Someone matured early."

Blue-gray eyes rolled in disgust as she snapped, "Pervert. Mose and Gia aren't technically my biological children; Hojo did something with my DNA and formed them. I took them with me when I escaped two years ago."

"What about the other one? Jenna-whatever."

"Genevieve," she corrected with a trace of snap to her voice.

He waved her off rudely. "Ehh, whatever."

"She is my daughter, and Perrin is her father."

Reno muttered something to himself involving the term "pansy-ass" once again, and the blonde woman shot him a sharp glare.

The elevator made a cheery ringing sound, and Kiyara stepped out through the open doors, Reno following, shaking his head at both the revelations and at the expansive lobby that he had nearly slept-walked through the night before on the way to his room. "Oh, wait, I get it." He began to laugh, jogging the several feet forward to walk beside her.

She glanced to him inquisitively, sunlight pouring through the large bay window to alight on her face as they ducked around a rarity for the expensive hotel--a family burdened with stacks of little pink backpacks and suitcases. A smile hovered around the blonde woman's lips as she watched the harried parents try to shepherd the four screaming children across the black and white tiled floor.

"You're making this shit up t--"

Kiyara held up a finger to him, signaling Reno to wait for a moment as she stopped at the ornate brown countertop and coughed politely at the male clerk sitting behind the desk, chattering on the phone.

Rolling dark eyes at her, the hotel employee moved the telephone from his ear and hissed in annoyance, "One moment, ma'am." He continued with his conversation as though she weren't even standing there. "Nothing, Gherk, just a customer. Now did you s--" His eyes peered past Kiyara, and his peeved expression melted into dreaminess with startling speed. "May I help you, miss?" he asked, so preoccupied that he didn't notice hanging up the telephone in his cup of coffee.

"I'd like to check out of room 253," she said, beginning to comprehend the change in personality.

The dark-skinned clerk nodded in immediate understanding. "One of the Shinra rooms. You're free to go, with the hotel's compliments, miss. Everything has already been arranged." His eyes continued to slip to stare behind Kiyara, and she stifled laughter as she stepped to one side.

"And how about you, sir? How may I help you?" said the employee to Reno effusively, falling all over himself in an effort to be helpful.

Reno, in direct contrast to her polite manner, sprawled all over the desk, grabbing several candies from the elaborate crystal dish and drawling, "Yeah, check me out of 213."

The man flashed a brilliant smile at Reno before hitting several keys on the computer sitting beside his hands. "Everything is all set. If I could just have your key...?"

Reno looked blankly at him. "My key?"

Kiyara leaned around him to hand the clerk a small white plastic card. "Here's mine."

The red-headed man stared at the card and groaned. "Hang on a minute." Unzipping his duffle bag, he began rifling through it, muttering curses to himself. As he searched, Kiyara reached into the back pocket of his jeans, slipped his wallet out, plucked the white card from a pouch, and handed it to the young man.

"You're good," Reno informed her, sheepishly putting his bag back in order. "I almost didn't notice that. You prob'ly could've been a professional pickpocket."

"Nice to know I'll always have an alternative career option," she replied wryly, returning his wallet and beginning to walk, the wheels on her small suitcase squeaking slightly as she crossed the black and white floor.

As he walked toward the revolving door, he noticed her mouth quirked. "What the hell're you smiling at?"

"That clerk was checking you out."

Reno scoffed at her. "He was not."

She glanced back quickly and said dryly, "Then I guess he's just watching your ass to be friendly."

He shrugged carelessly, voice coming to Kiyara through the glass partition of the revolving door that now separated them. "Even men can't resist me. What can I say."

"Modest." She drew up her collar against the crisp, cold air, pulling the suitcase over a chink in the sidewalk with a low thump, ducking through the waves of pedestrians walking the opposite way, toward downtown Midgar, where many worked.

"What I don't get," said Reno from beside her while easily forcing his way through the pedestrian traffic, "is why you were interested in me in the first place--and you know you were--if you're such a faithful little wife."

"I can love my husband very much and still be attracted to other men," she answered blandly, stepping to the curb--where packs of automobiles whizzed past--and raising her hand in an authoritative gesture.

A yellow taxi-cab pulled up alongside her, and she opened the door and slipped inside. The red-headed man, shaking his head to himself in confusion, stepped in behind her. "What about a wedding ring?" he asked right when the female cab-driver said in broken, accented speech, "Where go?"

"Gainsborough Building." When the woman's brown eyes continued to stare at her in confusion, Kiyara added, "Shinra...?"

"Ahh. Shin-Ra." The curb swiftly vanished as the car darted back out into traffic.

"As for your question, Reno, I don't wear my ring because it'd be disastrous if I was caught. They would learn that I have a husband, and they would search for him ruthlessly."

"And for that reason, you also have no pictures?" he asked, dropping his still-wet head onto the back of the seat.

"Right," she replied, tracing her fingers along the torn, brown leather upholstery as the car came to a screeching halt at a red light.

He laughed. "Damn, you're good."

The blonde woman frowned, face creasing. "I know, but at what now?"

"You've got no proof at all that they exist, and you've managed to make it plausible that you have no proof."

She shrugged lightly. "Glad to please."

"And you do realize that I don't give a damn if you're married or not?"

Kiyara snorted, watching the icy sidewalks and snow-covered buildings slip by. "Yeah, I know."

He studied her for a long moment, emerald eyes half-closed in thought. She was sitting with her feet propped up on her suitcase, a smile unconsciously playing across her lips at the warmth of the sun pouring through the car window to land in her lap.

With a grin of his own, he shook his head. "That's a nice load of bullshit you've dropped on me."

"Bullshit?" she asked in bemusement as the cab pulled over to another curb and slowed to a halt, brakes squeaking in protest.

"Yeah. You haven't gotten pissed at me once yet. You've been respectful, nice, informative, friendly, business-like, calm, and incredibly boring. You're obviously lying." He pulled open the car door and stepped out while she gaped after him.

While he leaned in through the front passenger window of the cab and paid the driver, Kiyara slid across the backseat and out of the taxi, yanking her suitcase after her before slamming the door. They were standing before the massive main entrance of the Gainsborough Building once again, pedestrians flowing all around them.

As the yellow car drove off, Reno turned to her and continued, "So, since I know you're lying and don't really have a good reason not to like me--everybody likes me--I'm going to do this." He pulled her to him in the middle of the sidewalk and brought his lips to hers in a passionate, rough kiss, exploring her mouth with his tongue. One arm wrapped around her waist and the other across her back while his hand clamped down on her shoulder, holding her in place with an iron grip. Her hands were balled into fists at her side, and though he would swear that, for a split second, she returned the public display of affection, she always maintained that she refused to have any part in it.

There was scattered applause from passersby. Kiyara jerked her head back from him amid catcalls and hooting, and stared at him for a long second before murmuring softly to him, "I hate to be stereotypical, but..." She yanked one hand free, drew it back, and slapped him harder than he'd ever been slapped in his life, the loud crack ringing across the noisy voices and car horns.

As he dropped his arms and instinctively put one hand to his injured face, she snatched up the handle of her suitcase and snapped, "I'm very happily married, you ... you ... dickweed!" Her footsteps were hurried and angry as she stormed away.

Reno's green eyes followed her progress up to the guards stationed at the front of the building, and he watched her enter the huge glass doors. Grinning widely, he shrugged, produced a lit cigarette out of nowhere, and sauntered after her.

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Tifa hid a yawn behind the back of her hand, leaning forward in the plush black chair to catch on her face and torso--which was covered in a white, long-sleeved shirt--the sunlight trickling through the large conference room window.

Yuffie kicked her from across the expensive wood table. She was wearing a long tight yellow-orange skirt covered in black Wutaian markings with a button-up white blouse that showed off her figure, her hair done up in an elaborate twist. Her shoes were black high heels, and Tifa had to stifle a yelp as the pointy, unyielding article of clothing met with her shin.

"You're stealing all the sun!" the girl hissed at her while the graying mayor of Kalm droned on in the background about the malfunction that his airship--designed and built by Cid and Shera Highwind's small but wealthy company--had experienced.

"Sorry," Tifa whispered in return, sitting back farther in her chair.

Yuffie eyed her warily. "Why're you giving up so easily? I usually have to fight with you to get you to even blink."

"Can't I just feel like being accommodating?" Tifa shot back.

Yuffie didn't look convinced, but just sat forward in her chair and leaned her head on her arm in a patch of sunlight.

"Are you ladies finished, then?" asked the mayor not unkindly.

Tifa winced, noticing for the first time that the diplomat had stopped speaking and everyone around the table was watching them.

"Our apologies, Mr. Bleson," said Yuffie graciously, though not looking repentant in the slightest.

The older man's eyes twinkled. "Apology accepted, though not necessary, Lady Kisaragi."

As he began to speak again, Tifa took in the room once more. It was 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. The table was filled to capacity, with thirteen unfamiliar faces among the twelve familiar. The thirteen unfamiliar were the leaders of or envoys from Kalm, Gongaga, Icicle Inn, her own newly settled hometown of Nibelheim, Bone Village, Fort Condor, and Mideel. Also interspersed were representatives of the Northern, Southern, Eastern, Western, and Middle Continent villages. On all five continents, there were groups of people that were too small to be counted separately as towns, and so they shared a representative with the other villages of the continent. These thirteen diplomats were currently sitting along with Yuffie, Bugah, Barrett, Cid, Elena, Kiyara, Rude, Reno, Rahilah, Nanaki, Tifa herself, Anisah, and Reeve.

No Cloud. Tifa wasn't sure whether she was distressed by or glad of that, but she was extremely tired, and for now, she just let her eyelids droop and felt the mayor's dull drone lull her off to sleep.

In contrast to Tifa's contentment, Reno was very disgruntled. Reeve had placed him between Red and Rahilah to prevent him from talking. He was slouched in his chair, arms crossed over his chest, and body language suggesting that he was going to kill Reeve for the seating arrangement.

"So the engineers believe that the engine malfunction was caused by the sub-transmission in the carbonatier, which is connected to the lateralus minek, and that would explain th--"

Blah blah blah blah FUCKING BLAH! "I can't take anymore!" Reno exploded, eyes flashing viciously. "When are we going to get started?!"

There were low mumbles of assent, and the mayor's face crinkled in annoyance, but he dropped into his seat with a nod to Reeve.

The Wutaian man shot Reno a look that suggested he was going to dismember him and feed his limbs to the pigeons, but the ex-Turk just shrugged at him and smirked.

Reeve sighed and subtly gave Reno the finger behind a stack of papers. The dignitaries on the opposite side of the table looked mystified as Nanaki, Rahilah, Tifa, Kiyara, and Elena--all sitting near Reno--simultaneously stifled laughter.

"Hello," Reeve said, corners of his mouth twitching as he fought to ignore the merriment taking place on the Shinra-Avalanche side of the table. "I'm sure by now you've all heard the terrible news of the death of President Nacatio of Junon, and I'm sure that Vice President--sorry, President now--Gabani would be here if she could. However, thank you all very much for getting here on such short notice."

"You don't have to go through all of the formalities. We've all been here before, Reeve," put in the graying, distinguished prime minister, Matthew Cole, in the common half-slurring, half-precise accent of all Mideelians.

Reeve gave a smile. "Thanks, Matt. Anyone disagree with cutting right to the heart of the matter?"

"Mr. Kazuma, I strongly disagree," put in Kai Anisah from his seat at the foot of the table. "These are leaders of the free world, you can't jus--"

"For the sake of the gods, shut up, Anisah." The new voice was a low tenor with a cadence that indicated that this was not the speaker's primary language.

All eyes turned to the doorway, where a young, handsome man was leaning against the frame. His short hair was the ebony color of all Costa del Sol natives, with the brown eyes and tanned complexion also normal for the people of the coastal town. He was considerably under-dressed, wearing baggy khaki pants and a crimson T-shirt over a gray long-sleeved shirt.

"Your wit and eloquence are absolutely astonishing, Rivera," Anisah replied acidly, looking extremely annoyed.

"High five on that, Rivera!" crowed Reno, reaching across the table to slap palms with the newcomer as he took a seat between Miranda Leavitt and Grace Li, the former representing the Northern Continent villages, the latter the Western Continent villages.

"Formalities are pointless. I'd personally just like to know why I got dragged out of bed by my wife's uncle at three AM, saying that there was an important meeting in Midgar that he couldn't make because of his bad back," said the nephew of Costa del Sol's mayor.

"To make a long story short," Reeve said quietly, "Daei Hojo has returned."

There was a lengthy silence, during which most jaws in the room dropped and eyes widened.

Then came the flurry of shouts, the only two from Avalanche emanating from the pair who hadn't already known this tidbit of information.

"But we wasted that sonuvabitch!" roared Barrett.

"Tifa even saw Vinnie put a bullet through his nasty-ass eyes!" Yuffie was on her feet with the screech.

Most of the executives were silent, though several of the noisier ones were making their opinions known over the general hubbub.

"Aiii, merde merde merde merde merde!" yelped Pientre Cartier, the flighty, shaky young representative of all Eastern Continent villages, in his native tongue.

"What the hell did he just say?" asked Miranda Leavitt, hazel eyes darting back and forth in the brown-skinned face.

"I believe the translation is something like: 'ohh, shit shit shit shit shit,' " replied Nanaki coolly from across the table.

"No bloody way!" bellowed Matthew Cole of Mideel, weathered face rapidly paling to the point that Reeve began to worry that the older man might have a heart attack.

"Hey Jaime, how d'you say 'fuck' in Solian?" Grace Li asked, black curls that framed the Wutaian face swaying as she turned to the man beside her.

He considered for a moment, then responded gravely, "Fuck."

"FUCK!"

Tifa woke up with a short yelp at Li's barked, terse curse.

"Funny; I think that's how you say it in Wutaian as well, and I know that's how it is said in Condorian," put in Julio Benevuto of Fort Condor drily from the opposite side of Li.

"That's how it's said in most cases, I believe," replied the eerily serene, motherly mayor of Midgar, Ophelia Slane with a small smile. "Universal language."

Amed al-Jarheni, the middle-aged balding man representing all Mid Continent villages, was muttering to himself, "Oh, this is not good. So not good. Not good not good not good not good..."

Hayden Corton looked entirely stricken with terror. He was the laughingstock of the political world; a simple farmer who had been elected to handle all diplomatic affairs of the town of Gongaga. As always, he wore a battered brown cowboy hat on his sunburned bald head, with his cheap black suit.

Sera Naomi, the tough old mayor of Nibelheim, had her head down on her arms and was hissing obscenities under her breath. She was pudgy, with shoulder-length graying brown hair, and an intelligent--if gods-awful ugly--face.

Reeve slammed his hands down on the table with a slapping thud that reverberated above the noise.

With some sheepish looks, the room silenced.

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"Everyone, I'd ask that you let the entire thing be explained. Then you can all freak out as much as you would like. Now, Bugah and Nanaki first came to me three days ago with the news that the Planet is screaming again. Would either of you care to take it?"

Nanaki glanced to Bugah, who nodded to him. "I had been hearing the Planet's screams for quite some time, but deemed it unnecessary to bring in anyone outside of Cosmo Canyon until others could hear it."

"Ho ho, we can certainly hear it now," continued Bugah, looking comical seated between Cole of Mideel and al-Jarheni of Mid Continent. Both men on either side were dressed in dapper suits with patches of immaculate graying hair, while Bugah was wearing long tan robes, and his lengthy white beard and full, long white hair were in a constant state of disarray. "Everyone in the community can, whether they are inside the observatory or not!"

"Then the Planet is in trouble?" asked Dmintrikiva Nadrova, speaking with the peculiar pattern of those from the Northern Continent, rolling her r's especially. She was the til-now silent mayor of the arctic town of Bone Village. She was tall--at least six feet--and knobbly, with hair that was sparse and entirely white with age. But deep in that lined, weathered old face were two sparkling, intelligent black eyes. Her grasp of the ordinary tongue was excellent in listening, but not so wonderful in speaking, which helped to account for her silence. Nadrova was well known for saying nothing during an entire meeting, then coming out with something astonishingly eloquent at the very end. She was a political legend.

Yes, Ms. Nadrova," replied Bugah, recognizing something of his own ancient wisdom in the woman's face. "The Planet is most certainly in trouble."

"There were six areas in particular that were found to be of a particularly evil energy. Mt. Nibel, Gongaga, Midgar, Juno Bay, Fort Condor, and the Crater. All sites of disabled Mako reactors."

There were low murmurs from those seated around the table, though no outbursts this time.

Reeve forced himself to stifle a smile as he saw Tifa crabbily rubbing her sleepy eyes, knowing that he had to appear serious; what he was saying was no laughing matter. "We sent out a team to each of the old reactor sites to check them out, as well as the Mako pipes that still run beneath the city, despite the fact that we rely completely on solar, wind, and

water power now," the dark-haired man went on.

Anisah took up the thread of the story. "None of the teams found any anomalies, but after several hours, a call came in from the Mako Protection Agency's downtown office. The team that went into the sewers to check out the Mako pipes had never returned. A second team went down, and found their ... remains."

" 'Remihns?' " asked Nadrova, face intent.

"They had been ripped to pieces. The pipes of the old Mako system were still warm from use; someone used them to move Mako through the city. We're still not certain where to, why, or who did this."

"I have an idea," Cid muttered darkly to himself.

"Your turn is coming, Cid," Reeve responded gravely. "So, on the thought that something may be going on at the Crater, I sent soldiers there to scout it out." He looked up from his hands to stare grimly at those seated around the table. "What I'm about to say can't leave this room. The general population doesn't know about it yet, and I'm of the opinion that, to avoid mass hysteria, they shouldn't until it's over and done with."

There were low murmurs of assent and they all met his eyes, giving him the impression that probably none of them would leak it to the press. Though you never knew with this group.

"The 1200 soldiers that went to the Crater were met by an opposing army that ripped them to shreds and killed them all. An army made up of creatures that Rahilah tells me are called Tanduri. Rahilah?"

The gray beat drew her front paws closer to her back paws, effectively sitting up straighter, as all eyes turned to her. "Thank you, Reeve," she said in that low, gravelly voice, faintly tipping her head to him. "I am Rahilah of Cosmo Canyon. I was captured by Daei Hojo in the year 1965 AAD. I was but a child at the time, and I have been held captive by him since then. She hesitated, then shook her shaggy head. "No, that is not entirely truthful. In AAD 1973, I willingly took part in the raid of the Gi against Cosimo. Shinra was, of course, behind the sudden rage of the Gi against the Cosmii; they fed the tribe a pack of lies. I was told that if I went along with it; lead the raid, that my family and Nanaki would not be harmed. Hojo also swore that if I did not, he would make certain that they died terrible deaths."

Rahilah sighed quietly, mustering up her courage amid the respectful silence and continuing. "I had been assured that the raid would be peaceful; merely a scare tactic to frighten the Cosmii into giving up their peaceful ideals and becoming less outspoken against Shinra. I should have known that there were no assurances when Hojo was involved... Everyone knows by now what occurred. The Gi would not listen to my command once they were inside, and slaughtered humans and non-humans alike. In the end, however, it was my people that suffered the most. All but Nanaki were killed. Most of the town was burned to the ground. Its remaining elders frightened of further reprisals, Cosmo Canyon took up a neutral stance and refused to speak out against Shinra any longer. I was not directly responsible for any deaths, but upon my return to the facilities in the Shinra Building, Hojo managed to brainwash me into thinking that I was too far gone on his side to ever return to Cosimo. I stayed with him of my own free will, terrified that I would be hunted and hated everywhere for my role in the tragedy. So you see, I was not entirely held captive..." She trailed off quietly, voice having taken on an even huskier edge than normal, and she stared glumly at the tabletop.

Hush, Rahilah. Do not weep.

Rahilah lifted her head and smiled at Nanaki, sending him a wordless sense of thanks.

"Ms. Rahilah, if you were there of your own free will, why are you not still with Hojo?" asked Anisah with a frown.

"All in good time, Mr. Anisah. I believe that we will get to that in a little while."

"I have a question, if I may, Miss Rahilah." Ranjhi Singh was a short, slightly overweight man with deep black hair, brown-

black eyes, and the tanned skin of those in the villages surrounding Mideel. He had a thick accent, signifying that this was not his native language, and a soft-spoken manner, and he spoke for the Eastern Continent villages.

"If you please, Mr. Singh." Rahilah nodded to him in deference.

"Is there anything that you know of Hojo that may be of some use here, if he has indeed risen?"

"I do not know how much use I can be of here, Mr. Singh. I actually saw Hojo very rarely. I dealt with Amaani far more often than he," she replied apologetically, tail draped beside her over the armrest of her chair.

"Amaani?" asked Naomi of Nibelheim, leaning on her wrinkled elbows on the table and peering closely at Rahilah.

"Amaani had been around for as long as any of us on the 67th floor of the Shinra Building could remember. No one is quite certain where she came from, but she calls Hojo 'Father'," Rahilah answered gravely. "She also bears a remarkable resemblance to Sephiroth: long hair the color of an aging woman's, and she carries what is either the Masamune or an incredible replica of it."

"What was she like in your dealings with her?" asked Elena, tipping herself back in her chair to look up toward the head of the table at Rahilah.

"Arrogant, cold, entirely obedient and subservient to Hojo's wishes. She has tremendous capabilities, both mental and physical, and is extremely dangerous. I suspect that she suffers from a number of psychological disorders, bipolarity in particular. She is incredibly intelligent as well; the Tanduri clones were probably her idea in the first place."

"What are Tanduri clones?" asked Naden Fissire of Icicle Inn while running a hand through short, snow-white hair.

"Nanaki and myself are the last of the Tanduri; an ancient race once charged with assisting the Cetra in protecting the Planet. Tanduri clones are just that: clones of the species. For some reason, however, these are all individuals. I am still not one hundred percent certain of how Hojo and Amaani did it, but they cloned thousands from my cells and managed to form them all with original personalities and physical qualities."

"They cloned an army?" questioned Reno with a frown, the article about the Shinra ball--written by one Avery St. Clair--lying forgotten on his lap.

"Exactly. A massive army capable of doing far more damage with tooth and claw than a human army ever could with weapons and firepower. They are all old wily veterans as well, which adds to the difficulty. Hojo has been slowly cloning them from me for decades. I suspect that they are the culprits behind the murder of your people in the sewers; the wanton destruction sounds like them."

There was silence for a moment, then Dmintrikiva Nadrova spoke, carefully watching Rahilah with a piercing gaze. "And they are besed en the Cray-tear?"

"Yes. Hojo and Amaani are based in the Crater, Ms. Nadrova."

"Then how are they feeding this gret army? There es nothing for miles!"

"Originally, thousands of years ago, the Tanduri actually fed on Mako, which was far more plentiful then. The species eventually evolved out of it, but the clones are somehow fed by it."

"Damn," said the wondering Corton of Gongaga, shaking his head to himself. "That's why the old reactor spots are active; Hojo's been rustling up some Mako to feed his army."

Rahilah caught several people rolling eyes or holding back laughter at the man's rustic accent and pattern of speech. "And fuel his Mako-powered airship," she added to his statement.

"His what?!" demanded Kalm's mayor Bleson, leaping to his feet.

"His airship," Rahilah responded calmly. She glanced at Reeve, who shook his head. "That tale is for Mr. Highwind to tell in a short time."

The slew of questions halted for a moment as the twenty-six men and women in the room soaked up this new information.

"Where exactly in the Crater do Hojo and this army stay? The Crater ain't exactly the most friendly place to live," pointed out Barrett, sitting with his arm crossed over his gun-arm.

"Long ago, there was a Shinra scientific outpost in the Crater. Frequent earthquakes caused it to be abandoned, and the explosion by Holy after the defeat of Sephiroth drove it deep beneath the surface of the Crater. That is where it lies now; a hidden underground facility." Rahilah sounded as though she was rattling things off from a textbook, and Nanaki noticed that several people were giving her odd looks.

"How long has Hojo occupied this facility?" Nanaki asked, trying to draw attention from the strange way that she was speaking.

"How long has Hojo been fuckin' alive?" countered Cid sourly.

"He was never dead," Rahilah responded.

There were low murmurs and gasps, and more than a few mumbled obscenities.

"Well, technically, I suppose that he did die, but he was so full of pure hate and evil that the Lifestream would not accept him. In this manner, he has remained in the world of the living."

There was a silence, then Yuffie spoke. "That's it? That's the entire explanation?"

Rahilah frowned in curiosity. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

"It just seems like it should be more complicated than that, y'know? That's just...too easy, almost," the girl tried to explain.

Rahilah sighed. "I know. Perhaps it is more complicated than that. I do not know. I merely know what he himself told me. Now, to continue. Just before the Shinra Building was destroyed, Hojo moved the entire operation to the Mt. Nibel reactor. To this day, I do not know how he knew to do so, but he somehow did. At the time of Meteor, more and more Tanduri soldiers were being cloned under the supervision of Amaani...and myself, because I was in charge of the Tanduri army. Hojo dubbed me the Little General." Her voice was bitter, angry, and a trifle confused, and though most people there did not fully understand Tanduri facial expressions, both Bugah and Nanaki knew that her face was creased by the same emotions.

"The Nibelheim townspeople knew better than to investigate strange comings and goings; they were all actors paid by Shinra to live there and mask the tragedy that occurred when the entire town was slaughtered by the crazed Sephiroth. Hojo left for a few days, then returned in more of a mad fury than ever before. He stepped up the cloning processes even further. I saw that Meteor had halted its threat upon the skies, but I didn't discover until much later that Hojo--and Sephiroth--had been killed during this time."

I do not comprehend, came Nanaki's familiar thought-voice. Why was Sephiroth admitted to the Lifestream and not Hojo?

Sephiroth was mad when he committed his atrocities. Hojo was perfectly lucid and knew precisely what he was doing, yet

he chose to do it just the same.

Ahh. Abahi daan, Rahilah.

She looked around Reno at Nanaki, who waved his tail slightly at her. A slow smile curved her features. Things were slowly but surely on their way to resembling the way that they had once been with Nanaki. She shook herself of the euphoria and finished her tale. "The entire operation moved to the Northern Crater soon after, via massive tanker trucks and barges. Only a few isolated projects were left behind, in the Nibelheim reactor."

One of those few isolated projects being me, of course, Kiyara mused grimly to herself.

There was silence for a moment, then Bugah asked the million-gil question. "What is it that Hojo is after?"

Rahilah let out a sigh. "That, I do not know."

"You do not know?" hissed Kalm-ite Bleson in incredulity. "You were a co-conspirator of Hojo's for years! How do you not know?!"

Rahilah ignored the blatant insult in his words and answered his question, voice taking on a faintly harder, annoyed edge. "Before the fall of Meteor, Mr. Bleson, Hojo's goal was to see his son as the ruler of the Planet. After Sephiroth died, he never again spoke of his plans. He simply gave orders and expected them to be followed. What I do know is that what he is planning involves world conquest, utilizing his army, and whatever it is cannot bode well for the Planet. The Planet is trying to warn of what he plans, and with no Cetra around to interpret, it is impossible to understand."

Down the table, Kiyara spoiled the ultra-serious moment by sneezing noisily, receiving several low choruses of "gods bless you" in response.

Rahilah watched her, yellow eyes glinting oddly. "And whatever he has in store, Miss Maiden is a large part of it."

The blonde head came up fast, startled blue-gray eyes meeting with serene amber.

"He is determined to lay his hands upon her once again, no matter the cost," Rahilah said levelly, continuing to lock gazes with Kiyara.

"What does he want with me?" Kiyara asked of her intently, voice cracking for a split second.

"I do not know, but he is desperately seeking you. All his thought is bent on you; he would never have sent Amaani after you if it were otherwise," replied Rahilah quietly.

"Uhh, pardon me, but have I missed something?" asked a puzzled General Benevuto, Condorian face crinkled.

Kiyara glanced to Reeve, who nodded gently to her.

"My name is Kiyara Maiden, and I guess I'll start from the beginning. I was captured by Hojo as well, when I was nine. Don't ask me how, or why; I can't remember."

I can, Reeve thought to himself grimly, watching her speak.

"I can't remember any of my life before the age of nine, and very little about my life afterwards either, while I was with Hojo." The name was spoken with an unbelievable amount of malice and disgust.

"I don't even remember what the hell he did to me; just flashes and bits and pieces here and there. I do remember him teaching me the violin in a very short amount of time to make sure that I was smart enough for his purposes. I also remember lots of pills and needles and machinery. Mostly, though, what comes to mind is being strapped to a table, slowly passing out, while Hojo says, ' We must do this right if she is to be a backup for Sephiroth.' "

Kiyara tucked her feet under herself gracefully, leaning her jaw on her palm as she spoke. "I can fully remember everything starting about two years ago. That was, I think, when Hojo hired a kind young lab student who began secretly taking me off of the drugs. That same student briefed me on the comings and goings of the outside world, and set me up with clothes and a map and set me free. Ever since, I've been wandering the Planet, on the run from Hojo's hired thugs. About Amaani, though, I had a bit of a run-in with her myself."

Mideelian prime minister Matthew Cole let out a slight gasp, looking as though her statement had shaken him awake. "Bloody hell. What happened?"

Reeve silently shook his head to himself in annoyed amusement; that was Cole's standard ploy that he used whenever he fell asleep in meetings. It almost always helped fill him in on what he had missed, and made it sound as though he had been listening intently.

"Well, we were..." The blonde woman trailed off, biting her lip as she looked at all of the expectant faces, and tried again. "I wa..." Dammit. "...Maybe I'd better start from the beginning. I had been travelling for two years when I found work in Costa del Sol, disguised as a man to throw my pursuers off. I ended up meeting Lynley, over there." She pointed around Tifa, Rude, Elena, and Rahilah at the man that she spoke of.

All heads turned in the direction of Reno, who was currently slouched in his chair, eyes closed. Reeve made a faint noise of exasperation, as Rahilah dug a sharp claw into the red-headed man's shoulder.

Reno let out a noisy hiss of pain and bolted upright, hand going to rub his upper arm as he glared at Rahilah. "You didn't have to do that; I was awake, just not paying attention."

"My point exactly," replied the female dryly.

"Reeve, I don't like her. Can I switch seats?" Reno appealed to Reeve, who raised his face to fix his subordinate with a stony scowl. The ex-Turk sat back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest in annoyance.

Kiyara distinctly rolled her eyes at Reno before continuing. "We beat the sh..." She froze, uncertain if the term that she had been about to use was proper for a gathering like this. "...Tar out of each other and didn't get along at all, but he ended up helping me escape from Hojo's little friends who showed up looking for me--not that I needed his help or anything. We took the ferry to Junon and stayed overnight at a hotel. We went to the airport in the morning to catch a flight, thought someone was following us, and bing-bang-boom, there was Amaani. I recognized her immediately; one of the few things that I remember clearly from my childhood is sitting and endlessly waiting in a kind of tube. There were two tubes that I could see, both directly across a metal aisle of some sort, and I would watch them all day long. Amaani was in one, Rahilah, the other."

"Miss Rahilah? What were the tubes all about, and what were you and this...Amaani doing in them if you were--in a way--co-conspirators of Hojo?" shrewdly asked the grandmotherly Midgarian mayor Ophelia Slane, speaking up for only the third time from her seat directly beside Reeve.

The amber eyes were troubled pools, staring at the tabletop, face pulled together in what Nanaki understood to be a frown. "I believe that we were being...p...punished for something. A failure of some kind..." After a moment's pause, the great head lifted to look directly at the old woman who had spoken. "I do not remember what... I had completely forgotten about the incident until Miss Maiden spoke of it. It is strange... My people have incredible powers of memory. I should remember this."

Miss Maiden also spoke of memory-altering drugs, Rahilah. Do not be too hard on yourself; there is reason to believe that you could be the victim of these.

Perhaps, Nanaki. Jerhan.

"I wouldn't be too worried about it, Miss Rahilah," said Miranda Leavitt sympathetically, slipping a small tube of lipstick back into a pocket of her black pants. "I'll bet it's not all that important to what's going on, anyway."

Rahilah bowed her head in wordless thanks to her.

"So...what happened at the airport, with Amaani?" asked the Eastern Continent representative Pientre Cartier, wide-eyed terror gone; now just wide-eyed.

"She attacked me. I fought with her and broke the syringe that she was trying to inject into my arm, but I lost the fight and was knocked out. According to Reno, she picked me up, but he grabbed me from her, and we caught our flight quickly and left her behind."

There was an expectant silence that followed what she thought to be the end of her story, and Matthew Cole prompted gently after a moment, "Perhaps you'd best tell all of it, lass."

Kiyara shrugged; she didn't see what the rest of it had to do with anything, but it was no skin off her back. "Well, okay. We flew to Rocket Town, where we were put up by the Highwinds until the repairs to the Highwind could be finished. It was there that I had a memory. I once had a family, and my name is Kiyara Maiden." Shinra. Had a powerful daddy. Oh, and my brother is the pilot--gaaaah, dammit, never got in touch with him--that flew us to Rocket Town. She wondered idly what the reaction would be if she shared what she was thinking. "Once the Highwind was all fixed up, we traveled to Midgar, where we stayed with Tifa Lockhart." Who beat the shit out of Reno. Hee.

Tifa gave a faint nod to all of the faces that were turned in her direction.

"That was when I remembered some more stuff. The violin, the whole 'backup for Sephiroth' thing, and, well, most of the memories that I have from my time with Hojo are from that short memory sequence that I had a few days ago. I don't remember much of anything that happened after that, but apparently I went crazy and grabbed a knife and tried to slit my own throat. Reno stopped me and brought me to my senses, thankfully, but I think it was some sort of defense mechanism built in by Hojo, triggered when things began to come back to me."

"What happened next?" asked Yuffie, leaning on the table in interest.

"Reno got through to Mr. Kazuma over the telephone, and Tifa, Reno, and myself came here at his request. We sat in on the board meeting and saw the tape." Then I bought new clothes--as well as a gown--got my hair and makeup done, made out with Reno on the roof of his apartment building, came to the ball, told Reno I was married, went to the hotel for the night, and here we are. Wonder what they'd say if I said that.

"Uhh, perdon, but what tape?" Jaime Rivera was watching her, a puzzled look on his handsome face.

Reeve stepped in then, leaving Kiyara to be grateful and wonder if there was a glass of water to be had for her sore throat; either she was coming down with something, or she wasn't as used to giving long explanations as she used to be.

"A young man in the army moving toward the Crater had a camera that transmitted images back here. For a few moments, there was nothing out of the ordinary. Then the Tanduri clones that Rahilah spoke of attacked the column. The man was killed, and the camera was picked up by a clone and carried to drop at a man's feet. The man lifted it and accidentally filmed his own face before crushing it. That was Hojo."

All evidence of jocularity had now vanished from the room without a trace, as ten women and fifteen men watched Reeve grimly.

"And the soldiers?" asked old Naden Fissire, removing his suit jacket as he thought to himself how hot the room was. In reality, the room was the perfect temperature; he was just a little too used to living in the sub-zero temperatures of Icicle Inn.

Reeve gave a low sigh, refusing to meet anyone's eyes for a long moment. "They're probably all dead, though I don't know for sure." Murderer. You killed them all. "I've been trying to send in planes or choppers or snowmobiles or dog sleds or anything, to bring out any wounded or bodies, but no one within a fifty-mile radius will go near the Crater. Apparently, they've all either heard or heard rumors of the awful roars and screams that carried across the Great Glacier yesterday. Add to that the fact that there are no major airbases nearby, and you've got yourself a problem. I'll have to send pilots and aid through Junon and Midgar, and that will take days to organize." And whoever is remaining will die of exposure in that time. Murderer! He shook his head vehemently, earning some odd looks from those assembled. "Cid, if you please?"

"Two days ago, Rocket Town was attacked by Amaani and her army," the blond man said grimly, jumping right into the thick of things. "Over half of the town's population was killed outright, and all but a couple of the other half are wounded."

He was eliciting stares, both from his announcement and from his dead calm, serious manner. Cid Highwind wasn't, of all things, noted for his even temper.

"Wh...Why haven't we heard of this yet?" Grace Li was looking at him in horror, face slack.

"There weren't any major news reporters or anybody in town; this was Rocket Town, for Typhoonsakes. The uninjured have been so busy helping the wounded and burying the dead that there hasn't exactly been time to schedule a fucking press conference," the pilot replied acidly, before catching himself and lowering his voice again. "The story is prob'ly coming out about now; the Highwind rolled in a little too late last night with the wounded that could be moved for the news networks to swarm on the story."

"Cid, what happened?" asked Yuffie, for once quiet, feeling the slightest twinge of fear in her heart. If Amaani could attack Rocket Town, she could very easily be slaughtering Wutaians now, as they spoke.

Damn, I wish Shera was here. I hate this public speaking shit. "A giant black airship landed--which was obviously fueled by Mako an--"

"How could you tell?" challenged Jacques Bleson, obviously trying to deny everything that he was hearing.

"I dunno, maybe from all the blue-greeny shit coming out its exhaust pipe," was his caustic response. "Anyway, Amaani, a whole bunch of strong well-trained soldiers, lotta those Tanduri clones, Rahilah, and two guys named Keller and Rawley came out of the ship. Keller was a little twerp with a stutter and a twisted leg that seemed like Amaani's second-in-command, and Rawley was a big dumb shit that was in charge of the human soldiers. Me an' Shera went to greet them, and made like we'd never seen Kiyara or Lynley before. Amaani already knew that they'd stayed with us, though, and lifted Shera into the air by her throat and started demanding to know where I'd taken them on the Highwind."

"Where did you take them on the Highwind?" Most of the room looked ready to strangle the densely stupid Cartier, and most barely restrained themselves with the thought that he was just a kid.

"Midgar, to stay with Tifa," Cid responded shortly. "Shera jes' so happened to have a smoke grenade in her pocket, and set that off. Amaani dropped her, and there was some confusion before me and the hellbitch fought a bit. Then Shera held her off for a minute with another smoke grenade." He shook his head to himself with a tiny smile. "S'funny; Amaani was scared shitless at the thought of being blinded by Shera's grenade."

"What?" asked Rahilah sharply, voice cracking like a whip.

Cid leaned around Barrett to stare at her, giving her a quizzical look.

"I had it. For a second, I had it!" she replied, sounding frustrated. "I remembered why she has that fear of blinding, and why we were punished." She was silent for a moment, looking as though she was straining, then her head drooped. "It is no use. I cannot remember."

"...Yeah... Some of her soldiers took Shera's grenade and my lance, and brought us up into the town square. Vashar Rya, a fucking traitor of a townsman, came up at that point, along with two of Amaani's soldiers. The three of 'em had my kids, and were threatening to kill them unless we told where we'd taken Kiyara and Lynley."

The only other sound in the boardroom was the softly ticking clock, as Cid's low tone grew more ragged. "We fought to get to them, and I came so close; Kat's hand touched mine, and I..." His voice failed completely, and he looked away at the royal blue carpeted floor for a moment before bringing himself back under control.

"I gave up. I said I'd tell, and that heartless bitch Amaani ordered them to be killed anyway. For the fucking hell of it. I wasn't looking. There were shots. I knew they were dead." He seemed to have forgotten that he was speaking to anyone but himself, and he gave another lengthy pause before shaking himself and glancing up at the others seated around the table. The diplomats, in various stages of shock, denial, sympathy, or regret. His friends, looking at him wide-eyed. They had never seen him so close to a breakdown before.

"They were fine," he said brusquely, in a more business-like manner. "The townsman and the two soldiers threatenin' them had been shot. Shera ran with the kids and brought them to a friend, and I gave the signal for the people to come and lend a hand. They came out of the houses and started fighting with the soldiers, an' I grabbed my lance and started fighting and lookin' for Amaani, who'd managed to disappear fast. Instead of Amaani, though, me an' the wife found Rahilah."

"What d'ya mean, 'found Rahilah'?" questioned Barrett, who had been listening silently up to this point.

"I mean a big gray Tanduri came out of nowhere and told us that she was gonna have fun killing us," responded Cid bluntly. Rahilah sheepishly slunk down in her seat as 25 pairs of eyes came to rest upon her. "We talked her out of it by convincing her that Red was alive and on our side, an' she helped us take down a bunch of soldiers, an' also called off the clones."

Did you really say that you were looking forward to killing them? Nanaki's amused thought-voice asked of Rahilah.

No, I believe what I said was that I would enjoy destroying them for my lady, she returned with the ghost of a smirk.

After the uncomfortable silence had lasted for a moment, Rahilah concluded that her attempt at humor had merely reminded Nanaki of the entire mess that they were in, and she winced and settled lower in her chair.

"There's really nothin' else after that. I ran into Rude, Elena, an' Cloud Strife; they'd been following the trail that Reno left behind, and got into Rocket Town just before the fighting started. Amaani ran after Rude's wife faked a transmission to Midgar that said that Shinra reinforcements were on the way to help. Too bad she didn't run before so many people died..." He folded his arms over his chest and looked down uneasily before glancing back up. "I'm done."

"Mr. Highvind, Rocket Tin ken depend on financial edd from Bone Village," Dmintrikiva Nadrova said warmly from her seat across the table.

"Thank you, Ms. Nadrova," Cid responded in surprise.

"Aye, from Mideel too."

"And Costa del Sol."

"Don't forget Midgar."

Before long, most of the attending delegates had pledged to aid the beleaguered citizens of Rocket Town.

"Thanks a lot," Cid replied earnestly to all of them.

There was a short silence, then Rivera of Costa del Sol looked to Reeve. "So is that it for story-telling time?"

Reeve bobbed his head. "Yes, that's about all you need to know to be informed of on the situation."

"Well, Reeve, I'm sure we all appreciate being informed an' all, but is that it? Why were we bloody well called here?" asked Matthew Cole, leaning on the tabletop.

"Well, what we thought it best to do is to send a small scouting team to the Crater. Depending on what that team's response is, we may or may not send a huge force to the Northern Continent to deal with Hojo and his army. A force that I was hoping you all will contribute to, in terms of personnel, supplies, and monetary funds." There was a silence as most bowed their heads to avoid making eye contact with him, and Reeve frowned in bewilderment. They won't help?

"What makes you so certain, Mr. Kazuma, that all of us can donate to this force?" asked Jacques Bleson skeptically.

"We can't just hand out sums of money freely, Reeve," said Grace Li gently. "I know that in my case, to give out financial aid or to reassign soldiers or supplies, I have to get permission from a committee of townspeople. That alone takes months."

"This is more than a little important, don't you think, Grace? Expedite the process!" responded Jaime Rivera, looking ready to launch into a display of that famous temper of his.

No one was prepared for what came next.

Normally cool-headed Miranda Leavitt rose from her chair, face flushing with anger. "Look, Jaime, this is easy enough for you. You're the representative of a flourishing, rich city-state. But I can't do that; my people don't have the money for me to give away! The people in my villages are poor as church mice! They can't spare a gil coin!"

"Well, boo-freaking-hoo, Leavitt! Nobody can spare the money in a time like this; everybody's struggling with the economy and all, but if we don't help, then your church mice aren't even going to be around to be poor!" snapped Rivera with more than a little bite to his words, eyes flashing.

"Stop it, Rivera," reproached Ranjhi Singh, face showing little emotion but brown-black eyes glaring fiercely. "Ms. Li and Mrs. Leavitt are absolutely right. They are caught in the same position as Mr. Cartier, Mr. al-Jarheni, and I. We are merely representatives; elected to office by the people that cannot even afford to pay our salaries. Our duty is to listen to what you have to say, then bring word back to the villagers so that they may make educated decisions. We do not have the authority to do what you are asking of us." This quiet, logical speech calmed the flaring tempers, and Leavitt and Rivera sheepishly sat back down again, he mouthing an apology to her.

Reeve nodded briskly and looked to Cole, who was seated directly to his right. "Matt?"

"We're still trying to rebuild Mideel from three years ago; we just can't spare anything. I'm sorry, Reeve; you have no idea how much I want to help you." The older man's face was grim, and he loosened his blue-striped tie around his neck as he spoke.

Seated to the right of Cole was Bugah, and Reeve's questioning eyes slid to him next.

The ancient scholar shrugged helplessly. "We are pacifists, Mr. Kazuma. Ask for anything but help financing war. The council of elders would never approve it."

Beside him was al-Jarheni, representing the Mid Continent villages, who was shaking his head even as Reeve began to ask. "I am most sorry, Mr. Kazuma, but Mr. Singh has already stated my position quite aptly. I cannot."

Reeve's confidence in his fellow diplomats began to wane as he continued to go around the table and picked up four no's to every yes.

"My people are so poor, Mr. Kazuma, that I do not think that they can spare the money needed for this venture. We have no soldiers, no supplies to help you. I am sorry." Bone Village.

"I have already spoken my piece, Mr. Kazuma. No." Southern Continent villages.

"You can count on me. Whatever you need; we've gotta kick Hojo's ass!" Wutai.

"I am in the same plight as Mr. Singh. No." Eastern Continent villages.

"I wanna help, Reeve, but Rocket Town doesn't have the money or the people to promise to you. The town's shattered; all the money we've got has gotta go to fixin' it up again." Rocket Town.

"North Corel'll help, Reeve. Dunno how much our militia'd come in handy--haven't really been trained much, but they're yours, and so's what money and supplies I can dig up." North Corel.

"My people are likely the first to be struck by Hojo when he emerges from the Crater. I can't promise you much, but whatever I can promise, it will be all we have." Icicle Inn.

"Ohh, alright, alright, you may have some supplies and money. But I will not give away Kalm's soldiers to be commanded by some Midgarian or Mideelian." Kalm.

"I'm sorry, Reeve." Northern Continent villages.

"I can't promise anything; I'm technically not the mayor or even a government official. I'll have to bring this story back to my uncle, and I really don't think he'll go for it. Sorry, Reeve." Costa del Sol.

"Nope." Western Continent villages.

"I'm with you, Mr. Kazuma. You can count on Gongaga!" Gongaga.

"I can get you a few, small well-trained special forces squads, and perhaps some rations." Fort Condor.

"There are merely fifty-two people living in my village, Mr. Kazuma. We simply don't have the resources for this." Nibelheim.

"We have been allies for a long time, Mr. Kazuma. But this...I don't know. I will have to think on it." Midgar.

That was it. There was no possible way to win this. North Corel, Wutai, Icicle Inn, Kalm, Costa del Sol, Gongaga, and Fort Condor had given positive answers. Seven out of eighteen. Out of those seven, only North Corel, Wutai, Icicle Inn, and Gongaga had pledged to go all out. North Corel had no trained soldiers to speak of. The same went for Icicle Inn and Gongaga. Wutai was the only real ally that he had gained in all of this; even Ophelia Slane, speaking for Midgar, had gone

against him.

Looking up from his mental calculations, Reeve began to speak, not even sure of what he was saying or where it was leading, letting himself speak straight from his heart. "Only 1200 people have died yet, and for the most part, they were Shinra. They were soldiers, trained to fight, and they all knew that they could die at any time. Chances are, the next 1200 who die won't have the benefit of knowing that. They'll be Condor, Cosmii, Solians, Mideelians; families sitting down to eat breakfast, children playing at recess, senior citizens watching their favorite television program. Who will it be? History teachers, computer programmers, journalists, construction workers, movie producers, students..."

Most in the room were by now watching him wide-eyed as he warmed more to his subject, voice becoming more and more bitter and heated. "We know that Hojo and Amaani are ruthless and will not hesitate in the slightest to murder, torture, and maim. If you want proof of that, stop at Rocket Town on your way back to bury your head in the sand at home. Stop and take a good look at the destruction, because that is what your city-state is going to look like if we let Hojo go unchecked."

In the stunned silence that followed, a female aide crept quietly into the boardroom and over to Reeve, whispering something into his ear. He whirled and fixed her with a stare that caused her to cautiously step back several paces. "You're sure that's true?" That's way too much of a coincidence.

She nodded timidly, short brown hair bouncing. "I'm absolutely certain, Mr. President. Their names were on the list."

He sighed quietly, turning his eyes to the tabletop while dismissing her and murmuring, "Thank you, Ms. Bartlett. That will be all." He glanced up again after a moment and held up a hand for silence, cutting off Ophelia Slane before she said a word. "Jaime, Matt, care to step into my office for a moment?"

The young Solian and older Mideelian looked to each other as if for a clue to what he wanted before Jaime shrugged. "Whatever you want to say, Mr. Kazuma, you can say it here. I don't care."

"I feel the same way. Go ahead, mate."

Reeve, feeling extreme misgivings begin to grow in his mind, shook his head. "No, I really think you ought t--"

"Reeve. It's fine," interjected Matt Cole, sitting back in his chair with his arms crossed.

"All right ... You remember me mentioning the force of Shinra soldiers that I sent to the Crater; the one was ripped apart by the Tanduri clones?"

Rivera understood what he was getting at with only this slightest hint, and his face suddenly looked inexplicably old and sad. He didn't speak, though; he simply buried his face in his hands.

"Yeah, yeah, Reeve, get on with it," heckled Cole, not understanding quite yet, waving Reeve off.

"...Jaime, your sister-in-law was a part of that force, and Matt, your son was, too."

No one spoke a word besides Rivera, murmuring to himself in rapid-fire Solian, voice muffled by his hands.

"I'm sorry," Reeve added as gently as he could, gingerly patting a frozen Cole on the shoulder.

Down the table, Rivera raised his head, eyes shining faintly with an intense hatred. "That carnicero is going to die for this." He was silent for a moment, calming himself. "Costa del Sol will definitely help you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to call my wife." He rose from the table and quickly strode out of the room.

"Not me boyo," said Cole, shaking his head firmly to himself. "He's a damn good soldier; one of your best. I know he's not dead." He looked up to Reeve. "Mideel's with you one hundred fucking percent, Kazuma. Can't just leave him and the rest of your soldiers to rot there, now can we?" Despite his brave words, his voice faltered and he slowly climbed to his feet, looking ready to bolt for the door.

"Matt, I--"

Cole held up a hand. "No, not a word. Keep goin' with the meeting; that's the best course o' action." He ducked out the door and along the hall.

There was a quick silence, then Ophelia Slane spoke quietly. "What I was going to say, when you had just finished speaking, Reeve, was that you're absolutely right. No one will be safe from the long arm of Daei Hojo. Midgar will stand with you against the tide."

The other soft, low voices followed, and in the end, there were only three who did not agree to give aid in some way, shape, or form.

"Cosmo Canyon cannot take part in a war, no matter how vile and evil the foe. We train scholars, not soldiers. I am sorry," said Bugah, the old face unreadable in its emotion.

Cid looked like he was just itching to join those who had promised to join the coalition, but shook his head. "Can't. We jes' don't have the money."

"The same problem goes for the Southern Continent villages. I cannot," added Ranjhi Singh stoically.

With the exception of the three, the diplomats promised soldiers and supplies that were to be delivered to the staging ground on an icy field south of the Crater. Listening and trying to coordinate the effort, Reeve couldn't help but wonder if it would be enough, and in time.

The aging, raspy voice of Dmintrikiva Nadrova drew Reeve out of his short reverie. "What ov thess scouting tihm, Mr. Kazuma?" asked the aging woman quietly, whose accent seemed to have grown thicker as the meeting went on. "Who vill be on it?"

"Scouting t ... Oh, the scouting team. I've had a suggestion, although I don't know how much I like it. However, I'll put it forward and see what you think. Barrett, Cid, Yuffie, Tifa, and Nanaki, what do you say? Is it too much to ask of you guys after what you did three years ago?" There was a silence as Reeve's brown eyes searched the five faces in question, though he merely smiled fleetingly at Tifa, who had made the suggestion herself.

"What exactly would we have to do?" asked Yuffie cautiously, surprising Tifa, who had expected the girl to jump into the thick of things.

Anisah spoke up for the first time in a while, posture ramrod straight as always. "Find opportune places to land troops, discover entry points into the Crater and this facility that Hojo is holed up inside of, try to get a feel for the security of a place, how many Tanduri clones and soldiers he has ... Things like that."

"And if you get opportunities, carry out guerilla warfare against his armies, or kill Hojo himself," finished Reeve from the opposite end of the table.

"Would it jes' be the five of us?" replied Cid, looking doubtful.

"If you can get a hold of Vincent— "

"That's not possible," Tifa interrupted.

"That whack job don't come outta his basement for nothin'," added Barrett grimly.

"...Okay, so it would be you five, plus m—"

"Me," called out Kiyara, causing several eyebrows to rise.

"You?" questioned Kai Anisah, graying eyebrows pulling together in a frown. "Pardon me, Miss Maiden, but wouldn't you just get in the way if there were to be a fight?"

"I'm pretty handy with my fists, Mr. Anisah," responded Kiyara, refusing to lose her temper at the insulting older man.

Reno winced inwardly at the statement, considering all of the times that she had punched him in the last two weeks. I'll say.

"Though I prefer guns," she continued coolly, eyes levelly meeting with Anisah's. This man may have professed to be friendly, but he knew the secret of her real last name, and so she had to be careful around him. Besides, she still didn't trust him as far as she could throw him.

Anisah gave up on his protest to her going, glowering at the worn tabletop.

"What makes you want to go?" asked Reeve quietly, praying to all of the gods that he could find some way to keep her from joining whoever went.

"The man tortured me and messed with my head for nearly fifteen years. I want to see his head on a fucking pike," she hissed in a low, throaty growl, eyes glaring with a deadly intensity.

There was an audible scraping noise as several people around her either slid back or to one side in their seats, away from her.

The Wutaian man sighed, not feeling up to an argument with the blonde woman, who he was willing to bet would kick his ass in a debate anyway. He'd figure out a way to keep her out of danger later. "Alright, Miss Maiden, you're good to go. And, speaking of who's going, I am, too."

Tifa stared at him, as did most men and women sitting around the large, rectangular table. This was more than a little unexpected.

"Uhh, Reeve, no offense, but won't you get in the way?" asked Yuffie hesitantly, voicing the thought on several other minds.

"I used to box. Hell, I was the featherweight champion of the Western Continent three years running."

Most people immediately wondered how long ago that had been.

"I can take care of myself. Besides, you'll probably be in need of someone who's good with computers and security."

"Yes, true, but Mr. Kazuma, you can send a special forces computer expert along for that. You needn't put yourself in jeopardy," protested Ophelia Slane, frowning faintly.

"I think it's about time I do put myself in danger's path, Ophelia. I'm tired of sitting high and dry behind my desk, watching

young men and women die. I've got to do something," he replied, eyes flashing with vehemence.

"Are you sure this whole thing is such a good idea, Reeve? I mean, Mr. Wallace is the mayor of North Corel, Mr. Highwind is the mayor of Rocket Town, you're the president of Shinra Incorporated, Miss Maiden carries valuable information about Hojo, Lady Kisaragi is the empress of Wutai, and Nanaki is an Elder of Cosmo Canyon. If something went wrong..." Grace Li trailed off meaningfully, absently twisting a strand of black curly hair around one short finger.

"Look, Grace, I already said, I don't like this idea. I don't like asking them to do this. I'm putting it out there because it's one of several possibilities, and I don't want to overlook anything.

"I'm in," Yuffie announced grimly in the stillness that followed. "If somebody else fails at the scouting thing and Hojo isn't killed, it won't matter if I'm the leader of Wutai or a homeless old woman. I'll die or be enslaved either way."

"Well said," Tifa murmured, with a smile, to her across the table, before saying louder, "I'm going, too."

"I as well," rumbled the bass voice of Nanaki as he broke off his silent conversation that he had been carrying on with Rahilah. "And if I may suggest it, Rahilah would be a great asset in the Crater."

"Absolutely not!" affirmed Anisah, while several people gave less noisy protests, and Reeve eyed the pair skeptically.

"You do know what you're asking of me, don't you? We're still not certain whether or not you can be trusted, Rahilah, no matter how much we need you as an ally," said Reeve tiredly, massaging his temples as though to hold back the massive migraine that he could feel building.

"She can be trusted. I will vouch for her," Nanaki insisted forcefully, his one yellow eye boring into Reeve.

Tifa frowned, watching him curiously. There was no possible way that he could vouch for the female sitting calmly beside him; he had told Tifa as much the day before. He had felt that he himself couldn't trust her.

The gray female spoke, seeing that Reeve was still unconvinced. "I would never betray Nanaki, nor any of the people on this mission. Hojo has done me great harm; I as well wish him dead, and the best chance of achieving that is if I go along with the scouting team. I have lived in the facilities at the Crater for the past three years. I can be your guide; I know the security, the layout, where to go and not to go, passwords, hidden pitfalls, everything. I can help; you must let me help. We are running short on time, Mr. Kazuma. I can help save some."

There was a lengthy pause, during which the diplomats whispered and murmured to each other. Reeve made good use of the silence, weighing one hand against the other. On one side, Rahilah's assistance would indeed be invaluable. On the other, all would be lost if she so much as breathed in the general direction of Hojo. He wrestled with the issue for several moments before finally coming to a decision, raising his eyes from the tabletop.

"We need her help too badly to refuse. Rahilah, you're coming, but you will be under close scrutiny."

There were some scattered groans, but she bared her teeth in a smile and bowed her head to him. "You will not regret it, Mr. Kazuma."

He held her gaze for a moment, somehow feeling that he was going to regret this. "I hope not, Rahilah. Alright, so, myself, Miss Maiden, and Rahilah will be going no matter what."

"What about me and Tifa?" asked Yuffie, sounding faintly affronted.

"We've got two possible groups, Lady Kisaragi, one of which will end up going with the three of us. On one hand, a trained special forces team--which I'm hoping someone else will offer to donate because Shinra doesn't have that kind of a

military.”

Julio Benevuto of Fort Condor raised a hand halfway, silently signaling that he would provide the specially trained force.

Reeve nodded to him. “Thanks, Signor. On one hand, a trained special forces team, kindly donated by Signor Benevuto and Fort Condor. On the other, if they all agree, Avalanche. Those are the two choices. Thoughts, anyone?”

Barrett’s good arm slammed down on the table with a meaty thud. “That ol’ bastard needs to die, and I wanna be there to see it!”

“You’re in, Old Man?” Yuffie called cheekily down the table to him, voice incredulous.

“Stuff it, Brat,” he growled good-naturedly.

Three seats down, Cid was doing his damndest to drown out the quarreling pair. Normally, he would have joined right in with the bickering fun, ganging up against Yuffie and eventually ending up arguing fiercely with Barrett. Not right now, though. Right now, the two were annoying the hell out of him as the volume of their squabbling increased. He couldn’t think, and thinking was what he really needed to do. He’d been given a choice; a choice that he wouldn’t have even thought of as a choice three years ago. Three years ago, he would have jumped right into battle with the others, complaining grumpily all the way while enjoying himself immensely. But now ... now there were people depending on him. Shera, his kids, the town. Correction, what was left of the town. They needed him more than ever, now. He couldn’t just go off gallivanting anymore. If he died... No, he didn’t even want to go there. But then there was Hojo. His friends. He couldn’t desert them. And hell, if they didn’t beat Hojo, there wouldn’t even be any Shera and kids and town to return to.

"Shut up, Barret, Yuffie," the blond pilot growled at the two, who both silenced at the icy glare that he was shooting them. He contemplated for another moment, then slowly shook his head. "Shera's gonna kill me for this," he muttered to himself.

Reeve had sharp ears. "Does that mean...?"

Cid sighed heavily. "Yeah. I'm in, an' so's the Highwind, if you wanna use her. An' as much as I hate to say it, we could be way more effective than any fancy-ass special forces team. We're prob'ly stronger than them, an' we've faced Hojo before, and kicked his ass, too."

"I'd say he's right, Reeve," noted Ophelia Slane of Midgar, the tired old blue eyes blinking as she fought back a yawn of exhaustion.

The dark-haired CEO pondered for a moment, then bobbed his head. "So be it. Cid, Yuffie, Barret, Tifa, Nanaki, Rahilah, Miss Maiden, and myself. Did I miss anyone?"

"Yeah. Me." Heads turned to look at Reno, who had spoken without even sitting up from his slouched position, and without opening his eyes.

"You?" questioned Elena doubtfully.

"Me 'n Hojo ain't exactly best buddies, 'Lena." The red-headed man cracked an eyelid and pointed to the emerald green orb now showing. "Unless you forgot, I've got Mako eyes because of that jackass. 'Sides, waiting here for them to come back would suck." Both calculating, intelligent eyes opened to catch Reeve, watching him steadily. "You know it'd be good to have a Turk along."

"Ex-Turk," corrected Elena tensely, nibbling at her short fingernails.

"Ex-Turk," agreed Reno with a shrug. "Whaddya say, Reeve?"

Gods, why does everyone look at me to make every single freaking decision?! Outwardly, the other man showed none of his inner annoyance and nodded. "Fine. It will be Cid, Yuffie, Barret, Tifa, Nanaki, Rahilah, Miss Maiden, Reno, and myself. Any objections?"

There were no objections.

"Good. If you're going on the scouting party, head down to the storage room on the fifth floor. I'll have people there to fit you out with cold weather gear and anything else that you might need. After that, we can get a shuttle to the air force base and catch the Highwind there. Meeting adjourned."

There was a mass scraping of chairs and voices as the occupants rose and milled about in the expansive conference room.

Yuffie sat on her feet and rested her forearms on the table, leaning on them in order to grow closer to Tifa, lowering her voice slightly with an even bigger smile. "Now what's this about an incriminating tabloid picture? People were talking about it before the meeting started."

Tifa blushed ever-so-faintly. "The Daily Mirror got a shot of--"

"Her and Reeve making out," cut in Grace Li from behind Yuffie, wrapping a flaming red scarf around her neck with a smirk. "We were not making out!" hissed Tifa in protest, flush growing more pronounced by the second.

Li just laughed and pulled her black pea coat tighter around her body as she disappeared out the door.

Yuffie's smirk was huge as she leaned even more heavily on the table, face closer than before. "So?"

"What do you mean, 'so'?"

"Who, what, when, where, how, why?!" the girl exclaimed, waving her arms expressively and coming dangerously close to smacking Tifa in the nose.

"That's none of your business!" Tifa replied severely,

The dark-haired lady of Wutai began to slink back into her chair, eyebrows pulled together in an injured frown.

Sighing, the brunette woman beckoned to her to return, and Yuffie leaped like a Jack-in-a-box to take up her prior position, grinning once again.

"To answer your questions: Reeve. Kiss. Last night. On the dance floor. Okay, fine, making out. And why? Because he's kind, funny, sincere, handsome, considerate..." she trailed off dreamily.

Yuffie was watching her absent smile, face crinkling in astonished delight. "You did not!"

Tifa leaned her face on her hand, attempting to shield her burning cheeks. "Did not what?" she asked in her best innocent manner.

The dark eyes sparkled as she giggled with glee. "You did!"

"Pipe down!" Tifa hissed, glancing around quickly to see if anyone was showing an untoward interest in their conversation, then half-heartedly swatting at the ninja's head.

Yuffie ducked with a graceful ease. "So? What happened?!"

The older woman shot her an outraged look. "Yuffie!"

"Eww, Tifa, I'm not asking for a play-by-play or anything. Gawds! Just the general gist of it!"

Tifa hesitated for a long moment, inwardly weighing her privacy against the desire to tell all. "Weeeell.....Okay!" She curled her legs beneath herself in the chair and leaned in closer to Yuffie, mischievous smile now mirroring that of her young compatriot.

"Well, after...the whole Cloud thing last night, I felt really sick and the bathroom was closed, so Reeve took me up to his apartment," she murmured into the aristocrat's dainty tanned ear, eyes self-consciously flitting from one side to another.

"Ooooh," whistled Yuffie with a grin.

"To puke in his toilet. That's definitely worthy of an 'ooh', Yuffie," Tifa replied wryly, shaking her head slightly at the adolescent's antics.

"Then what'd you do in his apartment?"

"Yuffie!" she reprimanded, smacking her, none-too-gently this time.

"Ow! Hey, here I am trying to be concerned with my friend's life, and you're hitting me?! That's just not right!" Yuffie squealed irately, rubbing her injured shoulder. "I'll just go away an--"

"All right, all right! We talked a little, I threw up a lot, established that I was too sick to withstand a cab ride home, he went back to the banquet, and I passed out on his couch."

Yuffie raised an eyebrow. "And?"

"Aand ... he came back, got me ice for my hand--"

"Your hand?"

"Remember this?" Tifa held out her arm, rolling her shirt sleeve back to reveal the five black and purple dots--finger marks--surrounding her wrist.

Yuffie's merry, happy-go-lucky face dissolved astonishingly quickly into a dark glare. "When I get my hands on Cloud, I'm going to wring his scrawny little neck and cut off his b--"

Tifa quickly cut the bloodthirsty girl off. "Reeve took my hand to give me the ice pack, and ... gods, this sounds stupid now, and I can't even describe it, but ... something passed between us, Yuffie. It was like ... I don't even know. As a result of ... whatever it was, he leaned in to kiss me. I wanted to, but I ... I guess I was a little afraid that it would lead to me liking him even more than I already did. So I argued with him; tried to convince him that he shouldn't be interested in me. He shot me down, and I gave up and kissed him. I hate to be cliché, but from there, one thing lead to another, and that was that."

Yuffie gave a noisy giggle and flung her arms around Tifa's neck in an excited hug while other conversations stopped dead as everyone stared outright. The Wutaian girl lowered her voice considerably, but her teeth and eyes still shone. "Tifa, I'm so happy for you!"

Tifa disentangled herself from the pair of long arms and shot Yuffie a look that suggested she thought that the other

woman had finally gone crazy. "Come again?"

"You haven't had a relationship in forever; not even a one night stand!"

"You don't know that for sure!" the martial arts expert challenged indignantly.

"Well, have you?"

"...No."

"See? That's my point! This is good for you; really good for you! You can't always hide from men. And Reeve's really nice; I bet you guys will..." Yuffie's speech steadily slowed before grinding to a halt, and she frowned. "Why are you looking at me like that? You guys are gonna try a real relationship...aren't you?"

Tifa said nothing, watching her hands twist into knots where they rested on the brown tabletop.

"... ..Aren't you?"

Tifa glanced up at her and snapped, "I don't know, Yuffie!" At the girl's hurt look, her voice softened. "It's a bad time for both of us. Cloud's shown up again, and hell, he's confusing enough by himself. Reeve just broke up with Elena. I know there's something else that he's not talking about; I can feel it. Hojo's alive... It's not a good time. Maybe we'll hook up again sometime later."

Yuffie regarded her seriously, all trace of mirth and youth vanished from her face and eyes. Even her posture as she sat up straighter in the chair was more sophisticated and adult. "Cloud isn't exactly the guy you want to be in a relationship with after he tried to rape you, plus his little escapade last night." She held up an imperious hand to forestall Tifa from saying a word as the brunette opened her mouth to disagree. "Don't you dare defend him, Tifa. Let me finish. As for Elena, Reeve's a big boy. I'm sure that if he were that worked up about her, he wouldn't have gone within miles of you. Don't be stupid. You're making up random, pointless reasons to keep you away from him, and you don't even really know him yet. You've got to give people a chance before you push them away, Tifa."

Tifa looked like a deer in the headlights as she stared silently at her solemn friend before letting her eyes drop to the table, idly following a crack in the woodwork with one finger.

"You give good advice, Lady Kisaragi," came the by-now familiar male voice.

Tifa closed her eyes and winced. You've got to be kidding me. Sure enough, when she turned, there was Reeve standing to her right, an amused smile playing at his lips.

Behind her, even Yuffie had the grace to blush slightly and look abashed.

"You two managed to hit on the exact issue that I wanted to talk to you about. Tifa?" He gestured toward the adjoining door to his office.

Tifa hesitated for a long moment, unsure of what to do or say, but a glare from Yuffie told her that if she didn't talk to Reeve, she would be annoyed and harassed within an inch of her life. Standing, she demurely kept her head down and padded quietly through the door.

Reeve, right at her heels, paused before entering. He turned, walking backward while still calling out orders. "Anyone who's not in the scouting party, I don't know what to tell you. You could always return home, go back to your hotel, take a nap, whatever. You're also welcome to take the shuttle to the base and listen in on our radio traffic." Dignitaries, employees, and former members of the rebel group Avalanche began to rise and file out the door, chattering the whole time. "We'll

meet you downstairs in a minute." As he ducked into the office, he neatly snagged the tabloid from Reno's hands and shut the door.

Reno stared down at his empty hands in annoyance. "Dammit again!"

* * * * *

The door closed behind Reeve with a soft click, and Tifa glanced up from where she was perched uneasily in a black leather chair in front of his desk. There was an uncomfortable silence for a moment as they just stared at each other.

Reeve finally spoke, taking a seat on the edge of his desk in front of Tifa. "Yuffie certainly has grown wiser since I first met her."

Tifa was very interested in her hands twisting in her lap. "Yeah, she has."

"She was right about everything, you know."

She continued to pick at the chipping blue nail polish splashed across her fingernails, not looking up or responding.

"Tifa?" He frowned in worry. "Is something wrong?"

She shook her head minutely, a few stray strands of chocolate brown hair framing her face waving with the movement. "No." She paused, then shook her head at herself and looked up at him. "Yes."

He waited a moment, curiosity obvious in the brown eyes, then asked, "Well, what is it?"

"I'm a little...confused, I guess. A little unsure of what to do. I need some time to think."

"Does this have something to do with what Yuffie said? What she said about you not giving me a chance?" Reeve probed gently.

"I don't know, Reeve! If I knew, I wouldn't be unsure!" she snapped before staring at her toes and muttering, "Sorry."

He nodded, wordlessly accepting her apology. "You may be unsure, but I'm not. I haven't known you for very long, but I'm sure that you're the most intriguing, incredible woman that I've met in my life."

She looked up quickly before asking shyly, "Really?"

He smiled at her; not his usual perfect, blinding, forced, fake diplomatic smile, but a real smile, full of mirth and cheer and sweetness. "Yeah. Tifa, don't push me away. I really like you, and unless I've completely misread you, you don't think I'm all bad. Give me a chance." His brown eyes were watching her intently, fondly.

Tifa felt something flip-flop in her chest, and the corners of her mouth quirked involuntarily. Maybe he was right. Maybe she had been shoving him to one side. Maybe it was time to let Cloud go. "Well, I g--"

The office door that opened to the hallway flew open and slammed into the ivory-painted wall with a loud crash. Reeve looked up quickly in annoyance, looking ready to quickly dismiss whoever it was so that Tifa could finish what she had been about to say. "Wh -- What the hell are you doing here?"

Tifa turned in her seat with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Cloud Strife stood in the doorway, wearing jeans and a white T-shirt that showed off his bulging arm muscles, the great sword Ragnarok strapped to his back. "Hello Reeve, Tifa." His voice was quiet and sounded just like it always had before that horrible night three years before. "Sorry about the door; didn't mean to do that." He sounded quite sincere and was wincing while looking at the dent that the door had carved in the wall.

"How did you get past security?" Reeve's face was set, eyes cold and hard. Quite different from the gentle, kind look of a moment before.

"I came in through the back entrance to the kitchens and took the service elevator up here," he responded, looking uncomfortable and more than a little sheepish standing in the doorway.

"Nobody found it odd that there was a man with glowing Mako eyes carrying a five-foot sword wandering the building?" persisted Reeve sourly. Though neither Cloud nor Tifa could see it, his hand was hovering over the button behind his desk that would cause a swarm of security personnel to alight on the office. If Cloud so much as made a move toward the Ragnarok, he would be in a world of hurt.

"I'm thought of as the savior of the free world," replied Cloud with no real arrogance behind the words. "The kitchen workers didn't know that I had been banned from the building. They were glad to let me pass through in exchange for posing for some pictures. I didn't run into any security people, and here I am."

"What do you want, Cloud?" came a soft, world-weary voice. Both men looked to Tifa, startled, having forgotten that she was there. She was still turned backward in her chair, watching Cloud with a mixture of nostalgia and misery spread across her face for all to see.

His aquamarine eyes were beacons of truth; beacons of light and color and depth that were reminding her of why she used to get lost in his eyes. "All I want is another crack at Amaani. If she really is who she says she is, she deserves death. I can't allow anyone with the name of Hojo to harm innocents. Not after what the original Hojo put me through." He looked from Tifa to Reeve, eyes pleading with them. "Please."

"How do you know we could even give you the chance to fight Amaani if we wanted to?" asked Reeve skeptically, hand moving fractionally from the panic button.

"I've been talking to your employees; put all the pieces together. I know about Hojo. I know you're going to the Crater to kill him and Amaani. I want to come."

"No w-- Wait." Reeve halted, eyes going to the ceiling as if for guidance, leaning on his desk once again. "It's really not my decision to make. Tifa, he's done you the most harm. What do you think?"

The woman was already out of her seat, making her way to where Cloud stood, moving as though she were in a dream. She stood before him, faintly swaying, and cupped his face in one strong, callused hand, peering intently into his face. He didn't move a millimeter, staring back into her burgundy eyes.

In the depths of those luminous azure orbs, Tifa found what she was looking for, and stepped back from him with a slight shake. "You mean what you're saying." She had seen the light of truth there, but what she had seen that had shaken her more was love. He was completely, hopelessly in love with her. She wasn't quite certain of how she could tell, but she just knew.

One hand, covered by a leather finger-less glove, came up to gently, fondly run across her cheek. She froze, hands clenched at her sides and face slack. Behind the pair, Reeve took one step forward, then halted, silently seething. Cloud seemed to realize only then what he was doing, and quickly snatched back his hand. "Yeah, Teef, I do mean it."

In the background, the Wutaian man gave a light cough, bringing Tifa back to reality, and reminding her that he was there.

"Oh." She turned to face him, a faintly guilty look coloring her countenance. "Reeve, I think that ... well, I think he should come. He means it; all he wants is to kill Amaani. He's really good with a sword . . . He could really help us!"

"You don't need to convince me, Tifa. I said that the choice is yours, and I meant it. He can come," replied Reeve, voice cold as his hard, angry eyes met with Cloud's. "But if he makes so much as one wrong move, I'm throwing him over the side of the Highwind." He broke off eye contact with the former mercenary, storming out the door.

"Tifa, thank you s--" Cloud began effusively, taking the step closer to her.

Oy, stupid, don't let him touch you.

Tifa slid away, looking at him in disbelief that, after harming her physically twice, he would think that she would allow him to come near her. "I may have spoken up for you, Cloud, but that doesn't mean I trust you." She shook her head, eyes not much friendlier than Reeve's had been. "Not by a long shot."

Cloud sighed quietly as he watched her walk out the door. "Gotta long way to go with making friends, Strife."

Midgar - Mayor Ophelia Slane

Gongaga - Representative Hayden Corton

Junon - Not present

Costa del Sol - Representative Jaime Rivera

Mideel - Prime Minister Matthew Cole

Cosmo Canyon - Elder Bugah and Elder Nanaki

Shinra - President Reeve Kazuma and Vice-President Kai Anisah

Kalm - Mayor Jacques Bleson

Rocket Town - (unofficial) Mayor Cid Highwind

North Corel - Mayor Barret Wallace (whose name I consistently spelled wrong, with two t's, in this chapter)

Wutai - Lady Yuffie Kisaragi

Fort Condor - General Julio Benevuto

Nibelheim - Mayor Sera Naomi

Bone Village - Mayor Dmintrikivna Nadrov

Icicle Inn - Mayor Naden Fissire

Mid continent villages - Representative Amed al-Jerhani

Southern continent villages - Representative Ranjhi Singh

Eastern continent villages - Representative Pientre Cartier

Western continent villages - Representative Grace Li

Northern continent villages - Representative Miranda Leavitt