

Chapter 27: White Out

"Hey Reeve, for a politician, you suck at lying." -Reno Lynley

"I'm sorry, miss, but I'm not allowed to give out that information," said the hassled young man behind the protective glass window.

Standing in front of the counter, Kiyara Maiden Shinra was struggling against the urge to stick one slim arm through the dip between the counter and window and grab the skinny boy by the scruff of his neck.

Instead, she let out a calming breath and leaned on the chipping gray counter, fighting to keep her voice friendly. "Listen, Captain," she began.

The nervous-looking kid opened his mouth to correct her on his rank, then closed it. Let her think she was a captain; she was kinda hot.

Kiyara scoffed inwardly at the faint grin on the lowly corporal's face. Flattery went a long way toward getting what you wanted. "Azrael Maiden is my brother. We fell out of touch years ago, and I've finally tracked him down. Please, Captain, just let me talk to him."

"I'm really not supposed to even confirm if he's here at the base or not..." Sitting in the tiny, stark white cubicle behind the computer screen, the young man began to crack under the steady pressure.

"It's okay; I already know he's here. He was in the boardroom yesterday, and he was told to report to barracks. Please. Just tell him that I'm here to see him."

"This is so against regulations," the bald man muttered to himself. "All right, all right. Just wait here for a minute, miss. I'll be right back."

She gave a real, genuine smile. "Thanks, Captain."

"Don't mention it," the wiry-thin officer grunted, heaving himself out of his chair and ducking out the door beside his desk.

Kiyara leaned on the counter top, glancing around disinterestedly. She stood underneath a fading sign that read 'Midgar Air Force: Information Desk,' in the center of the large gray concrete cube known as Samoset Air Base. Directly behind her, beside the information desk was the door that the corporal had disappeared into, which lead to the pilots' barracks. She was looking directly at a hallway leading to the fighter jet hangers and airstrips, and moving to the left of that, one would see the portal leading to the helicopter pads. Her final destination, however, was to her right: the corridor leading to the airship pad where the Highwind waited. If Azrael didn't hurry his slow ass up, she'd be forced to walk down that hall and onto the ship without a chance to speak with him.

As if on cue, a hand lightly tapped her on the shoulder, and she spun. The chocolate-haired pilot was standing there, and he frowned for a split second as he struggled to place her.

She was quite pretty, with stormy, slightly almond-shaped blue-gray eyes, a small mouth, and faintly defined cheekbones, all in a tanned face. Any and all of her body was shielded by the giant, puffy white coat wrapped around her, as well as the matching white pants made of the same waterproof material. On top of that, her fingers were encased in gray gloves, and tendrils of blonde hair escaped from beneath a soft, smoky hat that conformed to her head.

It only took that second of observation, though, and the craggy face was lit up by a smile that curved around the unlit cigar held between his teeth as he recognized her. "Miss Selby," Azrael Maiden said, moving his cigar into his unimpaired palm for a moment to gallantly kiss the back of her gloved hand, "you're looking lovely."

Kiyara pulled her hand back awkwardly, but he didn't seem to notice her discomfort. She froze for a moment, getting her first good look at him. He wore the Air Force's standard large black boots, olive green baggy pants, and black T-shirt, but his right arm was resting in a professional-looking blue and white sling, and what she could see of the flesh underneath had a horrible puckered black scar sliced deep into it, from his shoulder right down to his wrist. His hair shot out in all directions as though he had just been woken, but Kiyara knew from their previous meeting that it always looked like that. His face, though ... Running from the outer tip of one eyebrow, across his nose to the jawbone on the other side of his face was an angry red line, crisscrossed by smaller black stitches, that looked as though it had been drawn by a malicious child with a red marker. The woman recognized it, however, as the mark of a sword.

He noticed her stare. "Yeah, ugly bastard, ain't it? Picked it up in Rocket Town."

"You were there?" she questioned, her original train of thought forgotten.

He shrugged, then winced heavily as the movement tugged at his arm. "A lot of people were there."

One more person to add to the list of people dead and maimed because of you, Kiyara. Awesome work; just awesome! she thought bitterly to herself.

"So, uhh, remind me what you're doin' here? Not that I'm not glad to see you, but I'm jes' a little confused." The face creased again in thought. "An' what's with the cold weather get-up? I knew it was snowin' out, but I didn't realize it was that bad."

She gave a faint smile. "I'm headed to the northern continent from here."

"Ahh. That explains that."

"And what I'm doing here ... That's a little harder to explain. Look, did I ever seem somehow ... familiar to you?" she asked, heart thudding painfully against her chest.

"Funny you should mention that; first time I met you, I'd of sworn I'd seen you somewhere before."

"You were always extremely familiar to me, too, and I couldn't understand why until I had a memory about my past--which I knew nothing about. My past, that is." She was doing something she never did--struggling for the right words, and tripping up over her own tongue as she did so.

He nodded in complete understanding, leaning easily against the gray wall behind him.

The blonde woman paused suspiciously for a moment. "You look like you're not surprised I didn't have any memories."

"That's 'cause I'm not; Reno's a loudmouth and told me everything 'bout you back in Junon."

She sighed in exasperation, glad of the change to a safe topic. "I could kill him."

"Yeah, everybody always wants to kill him. Wonder why." The liquid brown eyes twinkled merrily, and Kiyara was again struck by the sense of déjà vu that they incited in her.

It was then that Tifa Lockhart blew past, dressed much the same as Kiyara. She glanced over to the pair of them quickly as she half-jogged toward the airship doorway, and gave a small wave. "Are you coming? We're leaving in a few minutes, and they're insisting that we're not waiting for anybody."

"Yeah, I'll be there in a minute, Tifa." When she turned back around, the pilot was looking at her in a slightly dubious light.

"You know Tifa Lockhart?"

"Yeah, I just met her. She's nice."

"Forget nice; that body!" He watched admiringly for a moment until the brunette woman disappeared from sight, then grinned faintly sheepishly. "Sorry."

"...No problem," Kiyara responded, slightly creeped-out. The younger woman shook her head violently and pressed onward with her original thought. "Look, anyway. I had this memory. I was five or six, and pissed off my father by accidentally knocking a huge stack of work off of his desk. He hit me, and my mother..."

With each word that she spoke, the brown eyes began to widen farther and farther, and the expressive face began to go slack in shock.

Kiyara found it difficult to continue to look him straight in the eye; she just wanted to stare at the floor, fling the rest of her words out, and bolt. She couldn't fulfill the last two options, but she did the first; she bowed her head nervously and watched her sturdy gray boots and how they rested uneasily on the concrete floor.

"...My mother came to my defense and chased him off with a sword. Then a boy named Azrael came into the room and said--"

"That father had tried to kick him, but he had dodged," came the low, shell-shocked voice. Making his late reaction almost comical, the cigar fell from Azrael's open mouth to land beside her foot.

Kiyara nodded once, still afraid to look up at his face.

"Kiyara." There was nothing for a long moment, then he took a half-step to close the distance between them. A callused hand gently tipped her chin up to look at him despite her best efforts to keep it down. He was staring at her, studying her face for clues of the little girl that she had been twenty years ago. The stare, however, wasn't angry, hard, intrusive, or anything that she had feared. Instead, it was caring and kind and friendly.

Even if it did feel a little bit incestuous. Just an eensy tad.

She stared right back, almost like a chocobo in the headlights. She was afraid; no, actually, she was terrified. All of her life that she could remember, she had wanted a family. She had found part of her past now; what she had been longing for her whole life. What if he didn't accept her? Kiyara Maiden Shinra was not someone who thrived on others' acceptance of her, but this ... It would hurt if he turned away.

The man before her did nothing of the sort.

Actually, he did nothing at all, because it was just then that a Highwind crew member darted past, apparently on her way to find the rest of the mismatched team. "Miss Maiden, you'd better get to the ship soon."

The pair completely ignored her.

Azrael only looked at Kiyara for another second or two before a huge smile burst into being on his face and he wrapped his good arm around her in a bear-hug. She immediately clung to him fiercely, not minding being crushed into his chest and his protective, big brotherly warmth.

She buried her face in his shoulder, taking in his somehow-comforting smell of cigar smoke, engine oil, and exhaust. Her

eyes began to sting--and not just because of the fumes.

Her small arms, wrapped so tightly around the back of his neck, loosened faintly, and he felt her back shake once under his hand. "Hey, whoa now, don't cry," he murmured to the top of her head.

"Ah can' hep ih," she mumbled, voice smothered by his body.

"Yeah, you can. Quit it, or I swear to Typhoon I'll start, too."

He could feel her face move into a faint smile again his shoulder. "You wuhn't cry beca' a' me."

"Who said it was because of you? You're crushin' my arm!"

His mission was accomplished when she gave a laugh and drew back immediately. "Sorry!"

"It's okay; I'm just messin' with you," he said, looking faintly amused at her gullibility.

She gave a smile. "Listen, I--"

The female Highwind mechanic sprinted by again, not even pausing as she spoke. "Miss Maiden, seriously, the Captain's raising holy hell; you really need to get on board!"

Kiyara turned back to her brother, agile mind working furiously. "Shit, I've got to go. I need ... There's so much I wanted to ask you, and t ... Ugh, gods be damned! Look, d'you have a pen on you?"

He nodded quickly, joking demeanor vanished for once as he produced a black pen from his pants pocket. "Yeah."

The blonde woman pulled her glove off with her teeth--leaving the piece of clothing dangling there--taking the writing instrument in her right hand, and his uninjured arm in her left. She quickly began to write on his skin.

"Hey," he protested, "don't you believe in paper?"

"'O time," Kiyara told the pilot, the glove garbling her speech. She finished swiftly after a few seconds of mad scribbling, and passed him the pen as she gave some last minute...babbling. "Those are some important people and their address; don't go to them unless something happens to me, but nothing should happen to me, and I should be able to introduce you to them when you get back and I think that it'd really be a good idea if y--"

"Kiyara." He cut her off gently, and nodded toward where Yuffie, Barret, Nanaki, and Rahilah were dashing by them, the sound of four feet and eight paws slapping against the ground accompanied by the distant, growing whine of a large set of engines. "Go."

The ex-research specimen stared at him for a moment, blue-gray eyes clearly distressed, then she spun and was gone, bolting after the others.

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The Highwind bucked against the tethers anchoring it to the ground, its silver, gleaming body creaking in protest as the long ropes held it down. Its multiple propellers and engines were working overtime, sending a massive roaring wall of sound out across the grassy plains beyond the fenced-in area of the base.

Despite the noise, though, the arguing man and woman standing below it still made themselves perfectly clear. "For the

last time, Elena, you are not coming!" Reeve bellowed, resembling a giant Wutaian snowman in the puffy, white clothes.

"Why the hell not?!" the blonde woman yelled in return, blue eyes flashing and hand on one pinstriped pant-clad hip.

"I told you. I need you and Rude to stay here and watch over things; I can't send my top three executives and me!"

"Reeve, you could really use our help!"

"You're right. I really could use your help. ...In Midgar!" Exasperated, the older man turned his back and began to stride purposefully toward the long rope ladder that dangled from the deck of the ship hovering twenty feet above their heads.

"Gods-be-damned!"

Her raw scream of frustration assailed his ears, and he whirled, using the violence of the move to bleed out some of his annoyance.

"Yes, Elena?" His voice was inhumanely calm.

The physical tension of the ex-Turk in the immaculate pinstriped suit drooped as she saw the obvious effort he was making to be civil. Her blue eyes met his with a softer glance, and the high-pitched voice level dropped several decibels. "I'm sorry, Reeve. I...I really hate being left behind. That's all. I don't want to have to wait here to pick up the pieces if something goes wrong. I want to be there, making pieces."

He felt a twinge of guilt at her abject misery. "I know you hate it, Elena, and I wouldn't ask you to do it if I didn't really need you to."

She sighed quietly, the sound ripped away by the rushing wind. "I know."

They stood there for a moment, both awkwardly glancing at each other as the gusting air tore around them, sending Elena's short blonde hair flying.

"Look, just..." She let out a heavy breath once again, pulling the collar of her ankle-length woolen coat up around her neck to combat the chill. "Just don't get yourself killed, okay?"

The warm brown eyes held a glint of faint amusement. "I'll try."

She spun quickly on one high heel and walked across the beaten concrete to speak to Reno, who had been patiently--an adverb that did not often apply to Reno Lynley--waiting for her to finish her little pow-wow with Reeve.

"Reeve."

The man in question turned from watching her to find Rude standing beside him, arms crossed over his broad chest.

"Yes?" questioned Reeve tiredly, again feeling the beginnings of a throbbing migraine commence at his temple. He was going to have to start remembering to pack aspirin when he traveled.

He sensed the other man's eyes flicker over him through the dark sunglasses. "No weapon?"

Reeve frowned in confusion for a moment, then the brown eyes widened. "Shit! I didn't even think of that; things have been so insane..."

The bald man's mouth quirked slightly upward at the corners. "...One of us is thinking." He reached under his leather jacket and unbuckled something, his hand reappearing after a moment clutching a mahogany and black bundle.

It took Reeve a moment to realize that the bundle was in fact a brown leather holster with the ebony glint of a handgun's grip protruding.

"I don't even want to know why you have that or how you got it through the base's security..." Reeve groaned, only half-joking.

Once again, the faintest hint of a smile ghosted across the dark-skinned face. "No, you don't," he affirmed quietly before holding out the weapon to his superior. "Use it well."

"I don't know; I don't know how to u..." He sighed. "Y'know what? You're right. Thanks, Rude." He took the unfamiliar firearm and held it gingerly at his side, watching it quizzically as though it would just explode at any second on its own.

"...Ask Reno."

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As the whine cascading throughout the base crescendoed into the familiar, full-blown roar of an airship taking off, a brown-haired man standing in the center of the Somerset Air Base looked down at his arm. As if tattooed into his flesh, the mass of black letters read: "2 Hristo Botevmin Street, 2175 Pirdrop, Bone Village. Mose, Gia, and Genevieve Dragomirov."

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The Highwind was large. It was four or five stories high, the size of a massive Junon cruise ship, and had six separate sections.

Despite all this, it was not nearly large enough for Reno Lynley.

It seemed like everywhere he went, he ran into someone that he intensely disliked. Of course, he intensely disliked five out of the nine other people onboard, so the odds were not in his favor.

Drifting through the gleaming metal cargo bay, the lanky redhead stepped over the wretched winter gear-clad body of Lady Yusina Kisaragi, who had her head buried in a brown paper bag. She was sprawled out directly in the center of the floor, completely oblivious to him and anyone else.

He momentarily contemplated "accidentally" kicking the annoying young woman, or producing a vomiting sound to start her up again, but almost immediately discarded the ideas, as both required far too much effort.

In addition to the issue of continuing to run into people that he would like to kick in the teeth, even Reeve, his only real ally, wasn't being sociable. That was understandable, given the current weird Tifa thing, but it left Reno with no one to talk to and nothing to do.

Kiyara appeared at the top of the staircase that he was approaching, pausing for a moment at the sight of him, then ducking down the steps to his right as he climbed them. Booted feet ringing against the metallic grating was the only sound for a moment or two in the cavernous belly of the ship. She frostily inched closer to the bulkhead on her left as he passed.

He grinned impishly, slowing to a near standstill on the stairs that lead to the bridge. "Why're you pissed at me now?"

"Four hours ago, you kissing me without my permission and against my will?" she asked with a touch of sarcasm, the rolling of her eyes nearly audible. "Ring any bells?"

"Oh, yeah." The smirk grew wider, and she gave him an exasperated shove that knocked him into the railing with some force. "Cheeky..." he muttered admiringly, watching her ascend the stairs and stride off as he absently rubbed his bruising arm.

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"No. Get out," was the enthusiastic greeting as Reno sauntered onto the bridge of the airship.

Cid Highwind--standing alone at the pilot's console, eyes and hands never wavering from the panel of blinking buttons and levers--spoke again as the ex-Turk ignored him and came further onto the command center. "You deaf or what, Lynley?"

"No." The redheaded man wandered around casually, peering at instruments and unmanned consoles. "Where the hell's your crew?"

"Made 'em stay in Midgar; too dangerous to drag twenty civilians along. ...Where the fuck've you been? We've been flying for 45 minutes now, and you just noticed this? Dumbass..."

Reno turned and fixed the other man with an intent frown, his profile outlined by the light streaming through the massive observation window. Far below, green fields and forests streaked past at a fast clip. "What's the matter with you, old man? You're being more of an asshole than usual." As he spoke, he ducked down the steps into the recessed crew pit, where the two panels of controls each had a very uncomfortable-looking metal chair beside it.

"None of your godsdamned business," came the snarl.

"Okay, okay. Just thought I'd pretend to care." Throwing up his hands in mock defense, Reno dropped onto a pile of white rags cushioning one of the chairs.

The rags gave a muffled yell, bucked, and punched him--quite hard, actually--in the back of the leg.

"What the hell; do I look like a punching and shoving bag or something?" Reno questioned of the air, taking his time in standing and turning around.

Cloud Strife uncurled in the seat, sitting up and shooting a baleful glare. "Not unless I look like an ass-cushion," the blond countered with more than a trace of annoyance.

Reno ignored the sour response and stared closely at the chair that Strife was sitting in, with an expression of concentration. "How did you fit curled up like that? Ha, probably because you're smaller than I remembered." The voice was matter-of-fact, and he was smiling as if he'd just realized an important, amusing fact. From the opposite console, he picked up a plastic coffee mug extolling the virtues of biochemistry, and peered inside, finding it--appropriately enough--to contain traces of a blue mold.

"Do us all a favor and shut the fuck up, Reno." The blue-eyed man tucked into a tight ball once more, closing his eyes.

His eyelids flew open again a split second later when the cheap yellow travel cup bounced off of his head. Cloud sat up fast to perch on the edge of his seat, the intensely blue--and intensely angry--eyes meeting with the other man's somber, hard green orbs.

"I'll take that kind of shit from somebody I respect, Strife," he replied, voice smooth but deadly. "Not from you." With that parting shot, Reno jogged easily up the steps of the crew pit and left the bridge.

Above, Cid poorly stifled laughter, while in the pit, Cloud forced himself to take several deep breaths and held onto the

edge of his seat, knuckles turning white with the effort of holding himself down.

It'd be a bad idea to start a fight, he told himself over and over again. It'd be a bad idea.

The rage that had been choking him slowly calmed, and Cloud curled up in the seat again.

Visions of a smiling woman with long brown hair danced through his head, preventing slumber from shutting down his brain.

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Several moments before Cloud Strife's head made contact with a coffee cup, Kiyara Maiden muttered to herself, "Idiot." She felt the aforesaid idiot's--Reno's--eyes follow her as she strode through the cargo bay and climbed down the rickety metal ladder to emerge on the outdoor deck.

The tall woman went to the rail and leaned comfortably on it, watching the world around. The sky was gray and overcast, threatening to belch snow onto the grassy fields below. The air was decidedly chilled, whipping through the blonde's hair and numbing the exposed flesh of her face. Looking ahead, she could see waves dashing themselves to frothing pieces on jagged black rocks, signifying the edge of the Northern Sea.

It was wild and cold and inhospitable, and she liked it that way. It meant that it wasn't likely that she would be interrupted, and would have plenty of time to herself to think.

There was too much going on. She had found what she had been longing for since the age of nine: a family, even if it was only in the form of a brown-haired man with a mischievous smile. A place to belong that had nothing to do with syringes or blood or screams.

And a separate issue...her own little family. She hadn't even thought of it until speaking to Azrael, but what would become of them if she died? The more she thought about it, the more obvious it seemed that she was walking into almost certain death; worse, she was walking into the waiting arms of the man that she had been running from for the past two years. The man that she had been terrified of for most of her life.

She put up a brave front; one filled with rightful rage toward the insane scientist known as Daei Hojo. But in reality...she was so afraid that it hurt. At the mere thought of him, her chest tightened up and her throat seemed to close, and it took a tremendous amount of willpower to force herself to keep breathing. On the outside, she pretended to be angry, but on the inside...she was so filled with fear that it felt like she was rotting away. She had vowed that she would rather die than fall into his hands again, and yet, look where she was going.

One gloved hand slid down her body to touch the solid holster at her right hip, as though to reassure herself that the 9-mm Beretta handgun still hung there, matched by its mate on the other side of her waist. She had never used a gun before, but she somehow felt that she would know what to do when the time came.

Despite this assurance, whenever she tried to picture herself standing before Hojo, twin handguns pointed directly at his head, and squeezing the triggers... Every time the image came into her head ... when the faint smoke cleared, she was lying in a pool of her own blood on the floor. She couldn't even imagine besting him, much less killing him; killing anyone.

He doesn't deserve the same sort of consideration as a person, she told herself. He doesn't count as one. But still, the sight--of herself coughing up blood while her eyes glazed over--lingered. Dammit, he killed... Fuck, Kiyara, you promised you wouldn't think about that.

She walked across the deck, hearing the aged metal creak faintly under her weight, and sat down on the cold iron floor, wedging herself between the outer shell of the aircraft and the railing. She drew her knees up to her chest and rested her

arms on top, letting the cold numb her body, and pretended it was numbing her brain.

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"No luck?" grunted Barret, glancing up from where his large frame was squeezed into one of the red chairs gathered around the rectangular oaken table in the command room.

Tifa sighed, draping her white puffed jacket over the back of a chair and dropping into it. She pulled the neck of her thick cable-knit navy turtleneck-sweater closer to her chin and shook her head. "Vincent's not answering his PHS. I called a bunch of Nibelheim residents, but most of them hung up when I mentioned him. The only guy who didn't said he was spotted riding out on a chocobo three days ago, and hasn't been seen since." Pulling the large hair-band from her long, chocolate tresses, she began quickly plaiting her hair into a lengthy braid. "I got the impression the townspeople were pretty pleased about that."

"He is pretty damn freaky, Teef," Barret pointed out unhelpfully as he cleaned the chambers of his gun-arm.

"Barret," she admonished as she finished tying her hair back.

Outside, Rahilah padded past, and Tifa gave her a friendly smile while wondering where Red was; the two had not been seen apart the entire voyage.

"You an' me both know he's a nut; 's not like it ain't common knowledge or nothin'," the dark-skinned man defended himself.

Tifa shook her head at him and lapsed into silent thought, head resting on her hand, which was supported by her elbow on the heavy table.

"Tifa, what's goin' on?" the former Avalanche leader asked after a moment.

She roused herself with an effort and directed a confused smile at him. "What are you talking about?"

The brown eyes stared her down for a moment, and she gave in. "Cloud being back is just...messing me up, I guess."

The big man was on his feet in an instant, all complacency vanished. "What'd that sonuvabitch do? I'll pound him into the damn ground!"

"Barret, sit down, please. He didn't do anything. I just ... Him being here means I need to sort out how I feel about him."

Looking dubious that Cloud really had done nothing wrong, Barret dropped back into his chair.

At the exact moment that he fell into the piece of furniture, a horrendous mechanical shriek rang throughout the ship, and the metal under their feet groaned in protest.

Tifa looked to Barret. "Have you really gained that much weight lately?" she blurted, praying that the engines would continue their din.

"Wh--"

The loud noise of the engines, which had been reverberating through the aircraft, coughed, then died. There was a long second of eerie silence, then the command room was plunged into darkness and everything turned upside down as the airship began to free-fall.

For a moment, the fall was straight, and the only thing that Tifa felt was her stomach rising into her throat. Then the great ship began to roll.

The brunette woman scrambled frantically for purchase, but the ship's merciless yaw tipped her chair over backwards, and she went with it. She spun at the last moment to avoid hitting the back of her head on the floor, hit the deck, and was promptly flung into the wall that was quickly becoming the floor.

"Shiiiiiiiiiii--" came the male bellow. Thud.

"You okay?!" she shouted above the sound of objects flying and hitting metal. Something crashed into her stomach, knocking the breath out of her, then something else and something else, and she realized that the sky was raining chairs. She had a sudden, horrified vision of the massive table sliding toward her to crush her against the wall, which was quashed when she remembered the large metal bolts holding it to the floor.

"Hit my godsdamn head!" Barret responded out of the darkness somewhere near her feet, this statement ended by a bout of vehement cursing.

The hellish ride was punctuated by the sounds of rushing wind, crashing objects, and distant--and close-by--human shouts, as Tifa slammed into walls, the ceiling, the deck, chairs, the table, and Barret.

"What the hell is happening?!" she roared as she hit the table--hard--and clung to its leg tightly as the ship rotated once more and she found herself hanging upside-down from it. Gravity tugged at her body, and sweat slicked her grip until she fell a good fifteen feet onto what was technically the ceiling.

The force of the collision between her back and the hard metal shuddered throughout her body with an explosion of pain, and she suddenly lost the energy to attempt to get up and fight any longer. Tifa let her limp body get thrown about the room, feeling her ears ring as her head cracked against one hard surface, then another. She began to fade peacefully into unconsciousness, away from the pain and fright and certainty that this was the end.

Mercifully, that was when the engines saw fit to whimper back into some semblance of life, and she could feel the airship struggle to right itself before it finally did so. The falling sensation in the pit of her stomach continued as the aboard ship intercom crackled, and Cid's voice bellowed out, "Better hold onto somethin'!" The lights flickered to give off dim illumination, and she absently saw Barret curled not ten feet from her, arms protectively covering his head. Even as she watched, he rolled across the floor like a giant brown and white ball to come to a stop under the table, which was still bolted in place despite the ship's gyrations.

Using every ounce of strength left in her, Tifa forced herself up to her hands and knees, and crawled agonizingly slowly toward the relative safety of the heavy wooden table. She felt her vision spiraling out of her control once again; felt her body fighting to pass out, but she doggedly pushed onward.

When she was about halfway there, Barret lunged out with surprising speed for such a large man, grabbed her arm, and slid her across the floor to collapse beside him beneath the counter.

He reacted just in time. A split second later, there was a huge, jarring crash, a sensation of flying through the air, followed by a flash of pain, and then Tifa gave in to the temptation and let herself slip into unconsciousness.

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"Nanaki, I think you should lose some weight," groaned a male voice from beneath the crumpled fiery body.

"Apologies," responded the creature in question, unsteadily climbing to his paws and moving several feet away before

sitting down heavily on his haunches.

Reeve Kazuma sat up painfully, wincing at the sensation that pierced his ribcage. The final impact had flung the 400-pound Red XIII on top of him, and he was fairly certain that several ribs had cracked, if not broken. He glanced around to find that he was draped across the stairs to the bridge in the cargo bay, the metallic grating of the steps leaving a red imprint on his cheek. The unpleasant sick-sweet scent of vomit filled the air.

"I am never getting on this hunk of flying jiangun again," said a young, shaky female voice.

Reeve turned to find Yuffie Kisaragi lying flat on her back several feet away. Her face had a decidedly white pallor to it.

"I've said it before, but this time I reeeeeeeaaaaaaally mean it," she continued, voice more than a little hysterical.

"Son of a bitch," came the barked curse from above him.

The Wutaian man tilted his head back to find Cid standing at the top of the stairs. Reeve squeezed to one side as the pilot ascended the steps past him, muttering obscenities under his breath.

"What happened?" questioned Reeve shakily.

Cid looked down at him in surprise, as if just noticing that he was there, then answered, "I don't fuckin' know! One second, everything was fine, and the next, the whole godsdamned panel blew up in my face!"

Reeve noticed the blond man's hands for the first time: they were covered in blackened, peeling flesh, as well as several large blisters. It looked as though he had suffered second-degree burns on his hands, while his face was bleeding from several deep cuts.

"I dunno how, but the engines suddenly came back online, and I barely got 'em to work enough to get us to the edge of the Northern Continent and set us down; it's just damn lucky we were close."

Nanaki succeeded in remaining standing after several tries, and spoke to the two human men. "Discussion over what happened can be saved for later, can it not? I believe right now, we should determine if anyone was hurt."

With a grunt of effort, Reeve used the handrail on the steps to pull himself to his feet and nodded to Nanaki. "You're right. Where was everybody?"

"Strife's out cold on the bridge; breathing fine an' all," offered Cid, leaning tiredly against a wall.

"Rahilah had walked down to look at the engines." Both humans shifted uncomfortably at this knowledge; the fact that the female had gone to check out the ship's engines mere moments before they failed looked quite suspicious. Nanaki, however, seemed quite oblivious to this and continued his super-humanly calm, unconcerned recital of where he believed his friends to be. "Tifa and Barret were in the command room."

"Where're Lynley and Kiyara?" questioned Cid.

"I saw her go onto the deck a while ago, but she didn't come back," offered Yuffie, who had not moved a muscle since the ship finally came to ground.

After a moment, she became aware of the three sets of eyes staring at her, and propped herself up on one elbow, asking dazedly, "What? Why're you--" It struck her then. "Ohh. Oh damn. That's not good."

Ohh shit... Despite the pain that movement brought on, Reeve was the first to the open hatch, sliding down the short ladder with one foot skidding down each vertical iron bar. He froze when--at the bottom, after his booted feet hit the floor--he came face to face with Kiyara.

"Yes, hi. Took you bloody well long enough," she grumbled at him. She was standing with her back to the metal bulkhead, and faced him through the horizontal bars of the ladder.

He gaped at her for a long moment. "What..."

"I wedged myself between the ladder and the wall when the engines cut out; I figured the tumbling was coming next and I couldn't get inside in time, to answer your question. Now will you get me the hell out of here?!" Her voice rose in her impatience, and she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, visibly calming herself. "The ladder collapsed inward on impact, and I'm stuck."

His face curved in a relieved grin. "Yeah, sure." He surveyed the scene for a moment. "Looks like the ladder was weakened by the crash, give it a shove while I pull, and let's see if we can--"

"I've got a better idea," said Cloud, leaning down through the open hatch with his famous blond spikes crushed against his head, and a massive black bruise adorning one side of his forehead. "Hold still." He pulled the Ragnarok from its sheath on his back, and brought it down in two powerful, quick slices.

Those two strategic cuts completely destroyed the welding that held the top of the ladder to the floor of the cargo bay, and the ex-Soldier gave it an easy shove to send it toppling onto the flight deck with a crash as Reeve jumped out of its way.

"Thanks," she said gratefully, stepping forward and stretching.

With the immediate shock gone, Reeve looked over the rail--and stared in surprise. As Cid had stated, they were undoubtedly on the Northern Continent. A wide panorama of nothing but pristine, undisturbed snow surrounded them. A massive trail was evidence to where the Highwind had hit the ground and slid for several hundred feet. The airship itself was listing toward its left side, where the metal beneath the ship had crumbled like paper under the force of the impact.

Kiyara obstructed his view of the land as she picked up the disengaged ladder and set it back up against the side of the ship so that its top poked into the hatch. "C'mon, Mr. Kazuma."

She clambered up the makeshift staircase nimbly, leaving him to follow more carefully and correct up to her, "Reeve."

When he emerged again in the cargo bay, Barret had appeared with a limp Tifa held gently in his arms, her coat draped over one large arm. "She took a helluva beating," said the man with a gun for a hand, setting her down, where she lay sprawled across the floor without movement. "I think she's got a concussion."

"Sure as hell feels like it," responded the brunette woman wryly, throwing a weak arm over her eyes to shield them from the dim light. She heard several pairs of feet step forward toward her, and she waved them off with her other hand. "I'm fine; just give me a minute. Find everyone else."

It was then that they all heard a scratching sound and muffled shout come from below their feet.

"That's about where the engine room is," pointed out Cid, crossing the floor and crouching down beside several faint lines in the deck. He grabbed a handle that no one else had noticed before and tugged, but nothing budged. "Something's blockin' the hatch."

"Allow me." Cloud stepped forward and slid the edge of his sword into one of the cracks signifying the edges of the hatch. He slid the blade along the crack, then did the same for the other two chinks.

Almost before he had even finished, the trapdoor began to open slowly, and a gray muzzle could be seen pushing it upward. Cid took the door and flung it the rest of the way back.

Rahilah exploded out of the hole in the floor in a gray blur, dropping on the deck several feet away and panting heavily, large pink tongue hanging. A veritable wall of heat rolled out of the room after her, causing all gathered around to step back. "Lynley's still down there," she gasped out.

A split second later, before anybody could move, the man in question streaked out of the hatch and threw himself to the deck, rolling furiously to extinguish the hungry tongue of flame licking at his chest. "Son of a bitch," he muttered to himself, finally holding still, spread-eagled on his back.

Before anything could be said, Nanaki spoke up. "We need to get off of the ship right now." All eyes turned to Nanaki, and he sighed, sensing that the humans were too shell-shocked to even think of what he had thought of. "If the engines are on fire--which they seem to be--"

"They are," confirmed Rahilah quietly.

"--it stands to reason that sooner or later, the flames will spread, and on top of that, the engines will explode."

There was a moment of dead silence as they all stared at him, then several began to move toward the exit to the deck, while others immediately protested.

"People are hurt, they need medical att--"

"Leaving the ship right now is not a good id--"

"Quiet!"

Again, there was nothing for a moment as everyone turned at the roar to look at Cid.

"Red's right; we need to get the hell outta dodge," he said, climbing to his feet and wincing as his injured hands met the deck. "I'd say we've got five minutes tops 'til the engines blow, so let's move quick."

When no one moved, astonished at his call to abandon his beloved ship, he found himself shouting again. "Let's go!"

Galvanized into action by the bellow, there was an immediate scrabble as the seven humans and two beasts scrambled for the flight deck and open air.

Cid quickly found himself to be the last one on board. He knew that time was of the essence, but he slowed at the doorway to the outside, and turned to take one final look at the ship where he had spent so much of his life.

The Highwind had survived countless battles, a nose-first dive into the Crater, riding a wave of pure Holy energy, and the shockwave given off by the explosion of Meteor ... All to be destroyed by engine failure. Now she lay in the snow like a mortally injured beast, the signs of destruction filling the cargo bay like so many wounds.

"Thanks, old girl. You did great." The pilot slapped the metal around the edge of the hatch fondly, then jumped down onto the flight deck and began to climb over the side of the ship.

He nearly succeeded in convincing himself that the stinging in his eyes was an effect of the black smoke billowing from the wreck.

* * * * *

Ten minutes later, gathered at a safe distance far away, the ten allies watched as the airship exploded in a massive orange-yellow-red-gold fireball that was seen miles away.

Cid tiredly turned away from the sight of pieces of his baby raining down on the landscape, turning gruff and irritable, as he often did while hiding "pansy-like" emotions. "Let's just heal up and go."

"What do you mean?" asked Yuffie, looking appropriately sober over the ship's demise, even if she had hated it with all her heart and soul.

"He means we've still got a goal, even if we'll have to walk there." Tifa leaned heavily on the younger Wutaian girl, head aching, but mind clear. "I think the last burst from the engines put us on the edge of the Great Glacier. If we hike due north of here, we should find the Gaia Cliffs--and the Crater."

"Am I the only one wondering why the engines just shut down on their own accord?" asked Reeve quietly, eyes glancing from person to person.

"They didn't shut down on their own." Reno spoke up for the first time since his escape from the fiery engine room, voice and mannerisms uncharacteristically somber. "Somebody manually shut off all power to the engines."

"Sabotage?" asked Cloud, leaning on the Ragnarok in the snow.

"Yeah."

Reeve glanced at Cid, who was looking at him already. He could tell that the other man was also thinking of the fact that Rahilah--whom it was universally acknowledged could not be fully trusted--had been in the engine room mere moments before the catastrophic blow-up. They nodded minutely at each other, and the president of Shinra Inc. knew that they would both keep an eye on the smoky gray female.

"Look, that can't be helped now by accusations and shit," said Cid, effectively taking charge as several suspicious eyes went to Rahilah and Yuffie opened her mouth to speak. "Let's just heal and keep movin'."

For once, there was no argument.

There was a quick flurry of activity as injuries were assessed and potions and healing materia distributed. Extraordinarily enough, despite the violence of the fall and impact, the worst injury sustained was Cid's hands, which had been burned by the backfire from the panel that he had been working on when the engines went out.

With everything finally taken care of, the ten companions began to trudge through the shin-deep snow, leaving behind only the massive conflagration that had once been the Highwind.

* * * * *

The attack came with no warning. One moment, there was nothing but a long line of tired, rattled travelers trekking through the snow. The next, a monster was among them like a bandersnatch among a herd of chocobos.

Reno, the first attacked, was also the first to react. As something large, white, furry, and extraordinarily heavy plowed into his stomach, knocking him backward with a shout--his shout--his hand instinctively found the worn leather grip of his nightstick. He pulled it from the holster at his belt and set the switch to 'on' before he had even hit the ground. As the slobbering mouth reached for him and something horrendously sharp tore through his left shoulder, he blindly jabbed the

heavy shape with the slender weapon and pressed the trigger button. The sound of high voltage rang through the air, as well as an agonized howling shriek, and the thing standing on his stomach and chest went limp. This all happened within the space of two seconds.

There was a shocked moment during which no one moved. Reno used this time to grab the massive paw and guide it away from him, pulling the long tapered claws out from where they were embedded in his shoulder. He grimaced off and on in pain, biting back a scream as he did his best to mangle no new flesh or muscle in his injured arm. As he threw the paw soaked with his blood off to one side, Kiyara and Tifa were the first to come to their senses, and the two women dragged the carcass off of him.

As Reno felt the weight threatening to crush his chest subside, he clapped his right hand tightly across his shoulder, the blood still spilling out around his fingers. Struggling painfully to a sitting position, he stared at the blackened lump of fur beside him. "What the fuck is that?"

It was large, about the height and length of Nanaki, and bulkier, with large muscles visible even beneath the thick layer of white fur. Its face resembled that of a bandersnatch, with a longer muzzle and beady black eyes. Its mouth, bared and dripping a green substance, was full of misshapen decaying yellow teeth. It was an ugly, nasty beast.

And it had ugly, nasty friends to boot.

Everything erupted in a cacophony of howls and gunfire in that instant. Dozens of white shapes sprang from the snowbanks all around, bounding at the small group.

"Shiiiiiiii--" Yuffie's low, drawn-out curse was cut off as a monster slammed into her, knocking her flat on her back. Quick as a flash, she somersaulted backward, using the momentum to put more force behind her legs as her feet caught the underside of the beast. The ninja girl gave a powerful shove/kick, and the howling creature was flung over her head to land in the snow several feet away.

Barret turned to put a spray of bullets through Yuffie's opponent's head before spinning back just in time to catch the gaping mouth coming at him. Moving with more speed and agility than many would have thought possible for such a big man, he dodged swiftly to one side and lashed out with his heavy gun-arm in the same second. The leaping monster caught the hard blow on its head, its soft skull cracking under the sudden pressure put upon it.

Directly beside him, Nanaki was facing off with another of the creatures, the pair cautiously circling each other as the albino attempted to decide whether it was safe or not to attack this strange red beast. Nanaki decided the issue for it when he flung himself upon it, the two disappearing in a deadly blur of claws, fur, and yelps.

Standing in front of where Nanaki was struggling with the monster, Kiyara aimed the gun in her right hand at that deadly blur, then lowered her arm to put a bullet through the head of the injured creature snapping at her foot. A split second later, she quickly sidestepped so that one especially hungry beast lunged right past her--and onto the sharp blade of Yuffie's shuriken.

Rahilah stood alone in the midst of the chaos, cuffing absently at anything stupid enough to come her way. "I don't understand," she murmured to herself. Then, to Nanaki: These are otapi, a creature living on the northern continent that is rarely seen by humankind. I have no doubt of this. But otapi are peaceful; they don't attack unless provoked, and we didn't prov-- She stood stock-still for a long moment, thunderstruck by a new idea.

Rahilah? questioned Nanaki, slashing one creature across the throat with his sharp claws.

Lost in her thoughts, she didn't notice the huge otapi galloping right at her--but Cloud Strife did. He entered the battle from behind, where he had sprinted to catch up with his beleaguered teammates. Its wielder still at a dead run, the massive blade swept downward.

Rahilah was awakened from her reverie by the sound of razor-sharp metal shearing through muscle, skin, and bone. The otapi's head struck the icy ground and rolled to her paws. Strife was there for a moment, face eerily calm as the black sword dripped green ichor onto one boot. He nodded briefly to her, then was gone.

Reaching out seemingly carelessly, the gray female ripped out the throat of a nearby beast. Giving a gurgled cry, it spun and crashed to the ground beside her and lay unmoving. Vomit-colored tissue and liquid streaked her sharp claws, and she examined it for a brief second before giving a scream of rage; a scream that was piercing enough to halt the battle around her for a brief second.

Across from her, Nanaki's head snapped up and away from his prey. The otapi that he had been in the process of fighting tried to use this opportunity to press the attack, but Cid quickly saved his friend's furry oblivious butt by stabbing the otapi through the neck.

"Rahilah?! Are you alright?!" the red male barked out.

"That ... that son of a bitch! Hojo altered the genetic composition of these miserable beasts to create his own sick attack dogs!" Tail twitching furiously behind her, Rahilah shook her shaggy head. "These were noble, dignified creatures. They do not deserve to be treated in such a horrible way! They aren't meant to attack humans or...or bleed green!"

"Yeah, I was thinkin' that didn't seem 100% natural," deadpanned Cid with a trace of snap to his voice. He flinched to the right as Tifa charged up and unleashed a leaping, spinning kick right beside his ear on a jumping otapi. As the monster went flying, the blond pilot sighed irritably. "I hate it when you do that, Teef."

"So what are we supposed to do?" called out Yuffie. "I mean, if they can't really help what they're doing and all." Just after her query, she threw a hand violently outward, as if flinging something, and bellowed, "Fire!" A shrieking otapi went up in a ball of yellow, orange, and red voracious flames.

"Kill them," replied Rahilah in her low, gravelly voice. "Put them out of their misery."

Cid was kicking at one monster whose attention seemed fixated on his boot and stabbing another through the side with the brilliantly colored Venus Gospel. "So what exactly are they?"

"They look like big white bandersnatches to me," offered Tifa, barely ducking a creature's leap for her head. At the same moment, another beast, already gushing green blood from several gunshot wounds, crashed into her from behind. The martial artist hissed wordlessly, somehow rolling out from under the blood-drenched creature. It easily took several running steps and placed one heavy paw on her chest, pinning her to the ground. Its face loomed over her, a throaty rumble of pleasure emanating from its mouth. This would be the first kill of the day.

Tifa spat a curse at it and slammed a fighting glove-clad fist into the side of its head. At the same time, she reached into her left boot with her other hand and, silently blessing Cid for pressing it on her, pulled out the small, ornately carved knife and drove it deep into the beast's paw. Screeching, it instinctively drew back, and she scrambled to her feet.

She could feel the angry heat burning out of its black eyes as it readied itself to attack nearby Barret. Or so she thought. The monster suddenly lunged forward--at her. It lent new meaning to the expression lightning-quick. Tifa didn't even have time to think that she wouldn't be fast enough to counter it this time; she just instinctively knew it.

She wasn't fast enough, but someone else was.

Reeve came out of nowhere, firing two quick bullets from the unfamiliar weapon clutched in his hand. Remarkably enough, he hit his target. The otapi screeched and crashed to the ground in a spray of green blood.

Shocked that he had actually struck what he aimed at, Reeve glanced up to look at Tifa, wide brown eyes meeting with

wide burgundy.

They forgot the most important rule in combat. Never take your eyes from your enemy.

Recovering impossibly fast, the enraged creature scrambled up and leaped, powerful leg muscles propelling it. Before Reeve knew what was happening, it had knocked him onto the ground and the salivating mouth was lunging for his throat. He dodged to one side as best as he could with the heavy weight of the beast sitting on his chest holding him in place. But it wasn't enough. The sharp teeth still caught one side of his neck, sank deep in, and tore it open, setting loose a spray of blood. His entire world shattered in a violent explosion of pure agony and crimson.

Almost at the same instant, an angry, wordless shout rang out and Tifa unleashed a flying kick into the side of the monster, knocking it off of Reeve. A split second later, several shots were fired directly above him and the angry otapi gave one last pain-filled screech before collapsing, dead. As Reeve convulsed helplessly, his head tilted back and he caught a glimpse of Reno standing protectively over him. The gun smoked in his employee's left hand as his right appendage still clutched his injured shoulder, only his slight drunken swaying betraying how difficult it was for him to stay on his feet through the pain he was in.

Tifa ran to Reeve, crouching down beside him. "Are you all right?" she asked quickly, pale face filled with concern.

Wincing in pain and barely biting back a scream as he did so, he slightly turned his neck to show her where blood was pouring down the opposite side of his throat. The bite was deep enough to cause the torn, glistening muscle in his throat to be visible, but shallow enough that it had missed his jugular vein by a fraction of an inch.

To her credit, the brunette woman did not lose her composure. She slid down the shredded collar of his jacket to get a better look at the injury. Then she whipped off one fighting glove and held her bare hand against the jagged perforation. He recoiled more still at the pressure against the open wound.

"I'm sorry. I know it hurts like hell, but it's for your own good. You need pressure to stop the bleeding," she told him firmly, even though he was getting to be beyond the point of comprehending, or even listening. She transferred the glove in her other hand to her teeth, and reached out with her now-free hand, held the opposite side of his head, and pressed down harder. Blood surged across her fingers to course along her hand and down her arm.

His mouth opened to groan, shout, shriek, yell ... anything. The pain skyrocketed with the involuntary attempt at speech, and no sound came out.

Tifa noticed and spoke, the glove dangling from her teeth garbling her speech. " 'Eeve, can 'oo fay fomething?" She spat out the fighting glove. "Say something."

Shaking as his face took on more and more of a deathly white pallor, he took a breath--a breath that burned and rattled all the way down his throat--and gave a Herculean effort to push it back out in the form of words. All that happened was a spike in his agony, and he began to silently cough, flecks of blood coming from his mouth to dot his hand.

He glanced up after the coughing fit subsided. His pain-filled brown eyes met with Tifa's stricken, guilty burgundy, and he quickly did his best to hide the fear and intense suffering.

Tifa Lockhart was many things, but one that she certainly wasn't was stupid. She knew that he was trying to downplay how badly he was hurt so as not to worry her. That wasn't important right now, though. What was important was making sure that he didn't die.

Normally, with a bad injury like this, she knew that you were supposed to put on a tourniquet to stop the flow of blood to the area, but if she tried that in this case, he wouldn't be able to breathe because it would cut off his air supply. So Tifa just kept pressing her hand into the wound.

"Healing materia?" asked a voice from behind her. Tifa started and glanced up, having forgotten that Reno was there.

She nodded quickly before looking back to Reeve. "Yeah; do you have any?"

"No, but I know who does... Hold on a sec." One of the increasingly fewer otapi came racing at them, but was halted when a solitary bullet from Reno's gun found its mark directly between its eyes. The distraction gone, the redhead shouted, "Hey!" and waved someone over.

Within a second, Reno was exchanging quick, quiet words with whoever it was. Tifa didn't turn around to look; she just waited and kept her hold on Reeve's neck. He shut his eyes, and Tifa was suddenly afraid that he wasn't going to open then again. She could feel his slowing pulse through his neck, and wished that she had a free hand to squeeze his hand or do something to remind him that she was there. Of course, not that he could forget that she was there while she maintained a death grip on his throat, but still.

She did the next best thing and gently kissed the top of his head. One almond-shaped eye cracked open, to her immense relief, and looked to the side at her, and he gave a weak smile before his face contracted again in suffering. He started coughing up blood again, and the sound of his breathing began to grow panicked, labored, and watery.

Tifa wanted to cry, she wanted to scream, she wanted to do anything, much like Reeve a moment before. This man was sitting there, bleeding, dying because of her. He had jumped into action and saved her from this very same fate, maybe even worse.

You don't deserve it.

I know.

Someone stepped nearer to her, and Tifa turned her head to find Kiyara bending down beside her. The blonde woman was pulling a silvery-gold bangle filled with brightly colored materia from her pocket and slipping it onto her wrist as she placed one hand gently on the back of Reeve's neck.

"Do you know how to--" Reno held his hand up, palm facing outward, and hissed something under his breath. Out of nowhere, a bolt of lightning flew from the heavens with a crackle of electricity and struck one of the last otapi, sending it collapsing into the snow. "--use materia?"

He got no response; Kiyara's head was bowed, and one green sliver of materia in the bangle on her hand began to pulsate and glow.

"Guess you do," Reno muttered.

"Cure," the husky voice murmured, and several green sparkles began to appear around where her hand met Reeve's skin. Her entire arm and part of his neck glowed emerald green for a brief second, then she was flung violently backward with a sharp intake of breath.

Astonished, Tifa cautiously lifted her blood-covered hand. There was nothing coming from the jagged gash anymore; not even a trickle of crimson liquid. Reeve's breathing sounded more normal; less like blood was leaking into his airways, and on top of that, there was more color to his face.

Tifa turned to stare incredulously at where Kiyara was lying flat on her back, the blonde gasping for breath as though she had just finished racing a marathon. "How did you do that?" asked Tifa, awed by the other woman's power. Cure just didn't have that much power in it; she and her teammates had used it often enough for her to be sure of that. She hadn't seen such a display since ... well, since Aeris Gainsborough had shown her an ability called Healing Wind three years before.

Kiyara rolled onto her stomach, holding up her pointer finger on one shaking hand to signify to Tifa to wait a second. She trembled for a moment, then vomited violently, turning the white snow into an ugly green-red-yellow color.

Red. She's throwing up blood.

Tifa was about to scoot over to the older woman, but Reno beat her to it. He was there almost immediately, ducking down beside Kiyara, green eyes darting from her wretched form to the battle, watching for potential threats. "Internal injuries?" he asked as she propped herself up on one elbow and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

She shook her head and slowly climbed to her knees, assisted by him. "Nothing hit me hard enough for that," she replied quietly, voice low and scratchy.

"How did you do that?" asked Tifa once again.

Both Kiyara and Reno turned to face her, and the blonde woman shrugged, gray-blue eyes looking none-too-pleased. "I wish I knew. I've never used materia before, but I'm guessing that's not what usually happens?"

As Tifa shook her head, Reno asked, "How did you know how to use it?" Intent emerald eyes watched her face, seemingly forgetting about the battle.

"The same reason I know how to fight, how to fire and load a gun. I don't know; I've just always known how." Her voice was odd; a sort of whisper-growl.

Reno stood again with a frown, hand returning to its job of clutching his shoulder. "Kiyara, can you talk any louder than that?"

"No," she replied, voice barely audible as she carefully sat up, then clambered to her feet. "It hurts too much to speak."

Tifa's head shot up from where she had been going through the contents of her pack for a bandage, and behind her, a wide-eyed Reeve looked as though he had been gut-punched.

Blinking, Kiyara looked at all of the eyes staring at her. "What?"

"You must've absorbed some of Reeve's problems," reasoned Reno, drawing a careful bead on an otapi threatening to attack Cloud from behind. He contemplated just letting it bite off the blond man's head for a moment, then decided that his skill with a blade was too valuable to waste. He fired, and the creature dropped dead.

"Aww shit," Kiyara muttered, speech cracking on the obscenity. She was silent for a moment, gathering her voice, then spoke again. "I think it's..." The whisper-growl was gone; instead, she sounded the same as always, and a smile curved her face. "Temporary." Drawing her twin guns from their holsters at either hip, she ducked back into where several otapi were still battling for their lives.

Tifa came up with a white cloth bandage in one hand and a bottle of a cloudy substance in the other, and without ceremony, uncapped the bottle and poured some of its contents on the gaping slash in Reeve's throat. He instinctively tried to dodge away from her, eyes widening and mouth opening in what would have been a roar of pain--if any sound had emanated.

"I know, I know, I'm sorry," she told him, quickly wrapping the bandage around his neck. "The choice is pain now and then better later, or no pain now and horribly infected and gross later."

The Wutaian man's mouth moved in some words that didn't look too pleasant, and Reno grinned. "He says that's a helluva

great choice."

Both Tifa and Reeve spun to look at him in surprise, Reeve giving a silent groan as he spun too fast on his injured neck.

"What?" the redhead asked, carefully inching his hand away from his shoulder, then removing it entirely as he saw that he was no longer bleeding. "All Turks had to be able to read lips."

Reeve mouthed something at him, and any merriment Reno was feeling died away. "He wants to know if you think he'll be able to talk again," he said to Tifa somberly.

"Tell him I don--" Tifa stopped. "What am I doing? You can hear me."

Reeve smiled in faintly bitter amusement.

"I don't know, Reeve. I'm certainly no professional. I don't know why you can't talk now, honestly," Tifa said quietly. "We should get you to a hospital as soon as we can."

Several feet away, one final burst of gunfire from Barret's gun-arm killed the last beast, and those who had been fighting finally seemed to realize that something was wrong with the trio off to one side.

"What's goin' on?" called Cid as he, Barret, Yuffie, Nanaki, Rahilah, and Cloud trudged over tiredly, all covered in minor scrapes and bruises. Kiyara followed more sedately, halting to put a bullet through the head of a monster making hideous crying, whining noises.

"Are you all right, Tifa?" asked Cloud worriedly, taking several quick steps forward to place a gentle hand on her arm as he saw the dried blood--Reeve's dried blood--caking her formerly pristine jacket's arm up to her elbow.

Reeve's eyes, so dark they almost looked black, crackled with helpless anger as Cloud touched Tifa. He opened his mouth to speak, struggled to force out a sound, and started silently coughing again, angrily mouthing, 'Son of a bitch.' Reno, watching his friend, was having issues fighting back the urge to snap Strife's insensitive head off.

"I'm fine, Cloud," she responded quietly, pulling her arm away and replacing items in her bag and clipping it closed so that she wouldn't have to meet his eyes.

"Up you go, Reeve," muttered Reno in the background, grabbing his boss under the arms and hauling him to his feet. The dark-haired man staggered, but stubbornly kept standing, face twisted in pain.

"Reeve? You okay?" Yuffie paused from strapping her shuriken across her back to ask, the first to notice his discomfort.

Eyes still closed, he shook his head faintly.

"Monster took a bite out of his throat; he can't talk," responded Reno from behind him, arms crossed over his chest.

Reeve shot a look at him suggesting he wasn't too happy with the way that he described it.

"Will he be able to speak again?" asked Nanaki quietly.

"You can talk to him, y'know," pointed out Reno, as Reeve shrugged in response to Nanaki's question. As he spoke, Reno had been experimentally rolling his shoulder and arm.

"What the hell? You was hurt bad," said the easily distracted Barret, frowning as he saw that all traces of the ex-Turk's

injury seemed to have faded.

The redheaded man shrugged. "Quick healing comes with the whole Mako package. Creepy eyes ain't the only benefit."

"And it didn't hurt that the otapi's claws had an agent that automatically cauterized your wound and lessened the bleeding," pointed out Rahilah wryly.

"Yeah, that too."

Cloud frowned none-too-friendly at the other man. "Mako eyes don't have quick-heal properties."

The casual attitude suddenly seemed more brittle. "Real ones do, Strife."

"What the hell are you implying?" asked the blond man, voice growing hard as he paused in resheathing his sword on his back.

"You were never in Soldier; that's pretty damn obvious. I shared a floor with those guys in the old Shinra Building, y'know. You're not tall enough or jacked enough for one thing, and you don't fight good enough for another. You're not bad with a sword, but those guys were un-fuckin'-stopable. Hojo never infused anyone with Mako who wasn't a 1st class Soldier; not even in his freaky-ass experiments. The shit cost too much for that."

"Then how do you have Mako in you?" asked Tifa quietly, in an effort to break the fast-growing thick tension.

"I was in Soldier before I was a Turk," the redheaded man replied shortly, eyes not inviting any comment on the fact. "I don't know what the fuck's making your eyes glow, Strife, but it ain't Mako."

"You've always known I wasn't in Soldier?" Cloud was steadfastly ignoring the comments about the substance inside of his body not being Mako.

"Yeah, everybody connected to Shinra knew it. Most of Midgar did, too. Soldiers were incorruptible; everybody knew you couldn't be one. Even the slumrats knew that you weren't some great warrior converted to the side of righteousness." The voice was a distinctive sneer now, and Cloud was beginning to look annoyed.

Fuck, Reno, fuck. Shut up. Shut up. Don't start anything. Why are you doing this? Reeve spun to face the redhead, face an angry mask of responsibility, and quickly mouthed his thoughts at Reno.

"Better just move, Reeve," cautioned Reno in a low voice, eyes flat with rage. Somewhere in his mind, he knew that Reeve was right, and he shouldn't provoke Strife. But enough was enough. He'd never liked the ex-soldier; never had the same grudging respect for him that he had had for the rest of the AVALANCHE crowd. Strife had barged right in and broken up the good thing between Reeve and Tifa, made Reno very angry on the Highwind, and now he had done it again with his insensitive shittiness. Reno wasn't quite sure what exactly he had done that had been shitty, but it had pissed him off. He was tired of tip-toeing around Strife like he was a fucking time bomb.

Reeve had seen Reno like this once or twice before, and knew that he couldn't be halted. Resigned now that violence would happen, he stepped back to stand beside Yuffie, who immediately began querying him in Wutaian, as if she thought if he couldn't speak in the tongue that he was used to, he could in Wutaian. Letting out a breath of annoyance, he smacked her across the back of the head and told her silently to shut up.

"Everyone in Midgar knew you were a blueback coward at heart," continued Reno relentlessly. "You were just a damn pawn; a puppet to be moved by Shinra and Hojo."

Reno did not know how closely he had struck home with his acidic comment on being a puppet; couldn't possibly have

known that this was what Cloud's mortal enemy, Sephiroth, had called him. Reno didn't know, but Cloud's former friends did.

There was a quick, electric silence as Cloud shook with barely contained rage; rage that he was fighting to control. His hands were balled into fists at his sides, knuckles white. He stared Reno down across the short expanse of bloody snow that separated them, eyes alight with anger.

In stark contrast, Reno was completely nonchalant as always, ignoring the insane glint in the other man's eyes. The only things that outwardly belied how furious he really felt were an almost imperceptible stiff set to his shoulders and a cold, reptilian satisfaction in his eyes.

"Oh well. At least I'm not a Jenova spawn," Reno announced casually to the air.

There were several rapid intakes of breath. Jenova spawn was one of the worst things on the Planet that you could call a person, especially Cloud, who had worried that he was a Jenova spawn for quite some time.

Cloud stared for a long moment, insanely blue eyes wild with rage. In that moment, the eight people standing around in the mess of furry bodies and gore were certain that he was going to charge at Reno.

His body relaxed after a moment, and he strode right up to Reno. The lanky executive grinned confidently, fully expecting the "ex-Soldier" to storm up, say something pissy, and storm off.

Instead, the spiky-headed man walked up and slammed his fist into the off-guard ex-Turk's face.

Strife stepped right over him, continuing in the direction of the Crater. "You asked for it, Lynley."

Nobody else moved for a moment, then Reno let his head flop backward, groaned, and touched his rapidly swelling left eye. "Son of a bitch. For such a fuckin' little guy, he's got a helluva right hook."

Tension dissipated, and the group began following Cloud, leaving Reno to get up, trail behind, and shake his head at himself in disgust for not predicting the punch.

* * * * *

Tifa trudged through the snow, face buried deep inside the high collar of her white quilted jacket, hands and feet numb despite the waterproofed warm gloves and sturdy gray boots over several pairs of thick socks. The wind tore at her eyes and the skin surrounding, chilling her ears right through the soft white hat that conformed to her head.

She was buried too deep in thought to notice any of this, though. Ever since Cloud had shown up in Reeve's office, everything had been a blur of faces and voices.

Reeve...What he had done for her... No, don't even go there.

Speaking of Cloud, he had made many attempts to engage her in conversation ever since that discussion in the office. While getting outfitted with the cold-weather gear that they all wore now, during the three-hour Highwind flight, while walking before and after the battle ... And the entire time, he had been watching out for her. He had been worried after she hit her head during the horrible airship crash, jumped to save her from the otapi before Reeve had beat him to it, and now ... Now he was standing right beside her; where the hell had he come from?

With a conscious effort, she shook herself out of her reverie and looked to him with eyes that, despite some watering from the extreme cold, were clear and lucid for the first time in a while.

"Hi," he said shyly, falling into step beside her. Spears of sunlight shone on the snow all around, cut-up by the gray clouds.

"Hi," she responded cautiously, studiously watching her boots move along the icy path plowed by Barret, Cid, and Yuffie ahead.

"Hey, you answered," he observed with a faint smile.

Her mouth quirked at the corners, and she glanced up at him, only to give a smirk of delight. The famous blond spikes had been flattened in order to allow him to wear the hat, and as a result, his hair fell out from underneath the headgear to his shoulders.

"What?" he asked self-consciously.

"Your hair," she replied simply. His teeth shone in puzzled amusement. "It's been like this since the crash. You didn't notice?"

The brunette woman shook her head wordlessly, falling silent as the brief moment of camaraderie passed.

He noticed her change in mood, and his head swung down to stare at the ground, burying his hands in his anorak pockets.

Anger began to bleed into Tifa's thoughts, rising inside her like water behind a faulty dam. He has no right to just come barging into my life, messing up everything, and expect to just be friends again! She held herself back, asking only, "Well?"

The giant sword strapped to his back swaying with every step that he took, Strife looked to her again with a frown. " 'Well' what?"

"You seem to be trying to get on my good side. Why? And while you're at it..." The matter-of-fact, neutral tone that she had been fighting to maintain dissipated, and she instead just sounded tired and anxious. "Why did you act like you did last night and ... and three years ago?"

He stopped dead in his tracks at the second question, too many emotions to keep track of flitting across his face.

She halted beside him in the middle of the path, facing him with a world of hurt and pain in the luminous burgundy eyes. There was a long, seemingly endless quiet. She waited.

A rosy-cheeked Kiyara, who had been quite a ways behind, ducked around and passed them, shooting curious glances and slowing and opening her mouth to speak. Then she just looked down, shook her head to herself, and continued onward.

This seemed to awaken Cloud, because he gave a sudden convulsive shudder and, shoulders hunched against both the wind and the accusations in her voice, began walking forward, leaving her behind. Again.

Three years before, he had walked out of her life and never returned to even try to explain himself. She was damned if it was going to happen again.

"Cloud Strife!" she admonished angrily, stepping forward quickly to clamp one strong hand over his shoulder and spin him around to face her. "You at least owe it to me to answer my question!"

"I was going to answer it while we walked, since we were falling behind," he responded mildly, surprise widening his eyes and arching his eyebrows.

"...Oh." She let her hand drop uselessly to one side. ".....Sorry." She woodenly followed beside him.

"I honestly don't know why I acted like I did," he began, voice so low that she had to strain to hear him over the sound of boots crunching on ice. "Look, Tifa, you know that I would never willingly hurt you. I'd never willingly hurt any of the others either, but you ... You're even more special than anyone else."

A faint flush not caused by the cold came to her face.

He closed his eyes—nearly tripping over his own feet as he tried to walk like that—and looked away from her for a moment, face twisted as if he were in actual physical pain. "I'd never purposely hurt you ... But I did."

"Yeah," she murmured quietly. "Yeah, you did."

"That night was the first time. I walked up to the front door, opened it, and ... I swear to the gods, Tifa, I completely lost control. It was like I was standing in a corner of the room, watching this stranger with my face and my voice try to...try to rape you." His voice was becoming more and more shaky by the moment, and it sounded as though he were struggling to restrain himself right now. "But what was worse was that ... in some part of my head, I enjoyed it."

It hurt to look at his honest, guilty face. It hurt to listen to him. She didn't want to listen.

"I didn't regain control until the next morning, after I'd hitched a ride with a freight truck to Junon and taken the ferry to Costa del Sol. I decided that if I was going to be a threat to everyone, I didn't want to be near you. Them. I couldn't face you after taking pleasure, no matter how small, in hurting you."

She nodded soundlessly, mindlessly, head reeling.

"It kept happening, too. I stayed in Costa del Sol and kept losing it, getting myself kicked out of the hotel and a couple of nice people's homes, until I just lived on the streets. I couldn't keep a job. I started drinking heavily, even when I didn't know where my next meal was coming from."

A tiny sliver of guilt began to worm its way into her heart, pricking her. She had thrown him out. She had driven him to this.

"There were month-long gaps in my memory, where I had no idea where I had been or what I'd done. I didn't dare come near you, though I wanted to more than anything on the Planet."

She wanted to put her hands over her ears and scream to block out his quiet, tortured words. But it was like a gruesome car wreck: she couldn't look away.

He let out a breath, watching the curl of white fog fly away on the cold breeze. "It wasn't until about six months ago that it stopped."

"Stopped?" she asked in a small voice.

"Completely. So that was why, when chance brought me to you, I decided to stick around. I thought I could hold myself back. Then ... I lost it again last night. After those security guys escorted me out of the building, I did some thinking. I thought all night, and I finally decided to come back into the building to talk to you. It was selfish, but I'm glad I did it now." His fevered eyes met with hers. "I know it all sounds crazy, but you've got to believe me, Tifa!"

She shook her head gently as her she slowed to a halt beside him. "What's really crazy," she said slowly, "is that I do believe you."

She turned and returned to hiking up the steep slope, brain beginning to come out of the thick stupor that it had been in.

Cloud stood in the same place for a moment of two, watching her figure climb higher and higher. Then he resolutely began to walk, keeping his distance from her. She needed time to think; even an emotional dumbass like him could see that.

High above, black clouds continued to come together, propelled by harsh winds.

* * * * *

"How's your neck?" Reno asked of Reeve, trudging side-by-side with his boss a ways behind Kiyara.

'Hurts like fuck,' lip-synced Reeve with an uncharacteristic use of profanity. Though nobody was quite sure, the general thought was that the teeth of the creature that had snapped a gouge out of Reeve's neck had scratched his larynx, leaving his voice damaged. There was no general consensus on whether or not this was temporary. He hoped so; it hurt like hell to even try to whisper. If it was permanent ... No, he didn't even want to think about it.

'Your arm?' he grated to the redhead.

"Pretty good, actually," Reno responded with a trace of teasing gloating to his voice, moving his shoulder experimentally.

Reeve scowled at him and mouthed, 'Stupid Mako healing.'

"Hey, if it'll make you feel any better, my eye still hurts," he offered, pointing to where the green orb was swollen almost shut, the area surrounding a lovely blue-black shade.

Reeve shook his head at him, the gesture clearly reading, 'That's your own damn fault', or something of the sort.

After some time walking along behind the others, Reeve couldn't keep his thoughts to himself any more, no matter how much it hurt to try to express them out loud. 'I'm wondering something,' he speculated to his companion, making sure that he was looking right at Reno and mouthing the words clearly as he did so.

Reno easily read his lips and responded. "Why the fuck we volunteered to come along on this?" he grumbled, cheeks red with cold while the rest of his face had paled even further to a translucent white.

'No, though that's a good one,' the Wutaian man replied, wincing with the pain of even pretending to say each word, while burying his hands deeper in the white coat's pockets. 'What I was wondering is...' he trailed off quietly, eyes silently tracking the two figures of Cloud and Tifa far ahead.

"Why you thought you had a chance?" suggested Reno thoughtfully.

Reeve gave a faint, pained smile, responding, 'I was actually thinking of something else, but that's pretty good, too.'

They trudged along in silence side by side for some moments, lost in their thoughts about two different women.

The dark-haired executive finally cuffed his friend on the shoulder, drawing his attention to him so that he could read what he was saying. 'I was wondering what the point was.'

Reno started when, after a moment, he realized that he was probably supposed to say something. "Uhh, the point of what?"

'Trying,' the other man whispered. Or rather, tried to whisper; still nothing came out, and the pain skyrocketed. He stopped in the middle of the trail, eyes closed for a moment as he struggled to bring himself under control.

Reno paused beside him, waiting with a concern that he would immediately hide/deny when Reeve opened his eyes.

The burning, tearing, ripping sensation in his throat faded to a dull smoldering after a moment, and the Wutaian man resumed tiredly walking again, Reno beside him. Reeve intently watched as, ahead of them, Cloud and Tifa stood inches apart on the path, neither moving.

Shaking his head to himself, Reeve looked away. 'I guess I--' The words died on his lips as he glanced to the red-headed man and discovered that he was also watching the path ahead. But the green eyes were mischievously following not Cloud and Tifa, but Kiyara, who was ducking past the ill-fated pair at the moment.

Reno turned back around after a moment to find the other man's curious gaze on him. "What?" he questioned gruffly.

'What's the deal with the two of you?'

The lank ex-Turk shrugged, doing his level best to avoid the subject. "Nothing, really."

'I somehow don't believe you.'

"She's hot an' all, an' I thought we had a thing, but she just told me she's married and now she's avoidin' me."

The brown eyes hardened almost imperceptibly. 'Define "thing." '

"Uhh, mostly consisted of us making fun of each other and her kicking my ass, though we did suck face once--wait, twice. No, three times." He could almost feel Reeve's annoyance, and the handsome scarred face frowned. "Why the hell d'you care?"

Reeve glanced away, then back so that Reno could read his lips. 'I've known her since she was a kid, that's all.'

"Hey Reeve, for a politician, you suck at lying."

'Shut up.' They slogged through the snow, neither saying anything, until Reeve finally cuffed Reno again to get his attention. 'So she's married?'

"Yeah. She said his name was Perrin, and he's living in his hometown--wherever the hell that is--right now 'cause she didn't want him to be in danger. Oh, an' she's got kids." Reno halted in the snow beside Reeve, who had stopped abruptly at that last sentence. "What the shit is wrong with you?"

Reeve's haunted brown eyes stared at him, the executive looking older than Reno had ever seen him. 'Can you keep a secret?' he asked, looking as though he were searching for something in the other man's face.

"Yeah, sure."

'I mean really keep a secret, Reno.'

"Kjata, okay, okay. I won't tell anyone whatever it is."

Apparently satisfied by that, Reeve began walking again, angling his face just enough that Reno could read his lips, but he couldn't see his expression. 'About twenty-five years ago, I was hired as President Shinra's personal assistant. I was just eighteen, and out of Wutai for the first time in my life. Midgar, honestly, scared the shit out of me. But I met a lovely, wonderful ... slightly bloodthirsty woman named Elisa. I loved her, she loved me; you know the basic story. The only problem was that she was married, with a son.'

Reno's face was eerily calm in the face of an astonishing idea. "Her last name wouldn't have happened to 've been Shinra, would it?"

The mute nodded emotionlessly.

"And now..." Reno laughed with no real humor behind the sound. "Now you're gonna tell me that you had an affair with Elisa Shinra and that Kiyara is your daughter."

Reeve hesitated for a long moment, indecision evident on his handsome features. In the distance, a bird cried out. The low murmur of voices could be heard from those ahead, as well as the crunch of boots on snow.

The Wutaian man closed his eyes, as though asking the gods to protect him, and bobbed his head in assent to Reno's question.

"Oh, no fucking way."