

The Thief of Hell
By Princess Artemis

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There was above such a blue sky as he never remembered seeing before. Deep, startling azure unblemished and clear. The brightness hurt him so he shut his eyes and covered them with his hands. Short grass crinkled with the movement and tickled his cheek. A breeze gently bent the grass, ruffling his hair and bringing with it the scent of wildflowers. He thought vaguely about getting up, but the soft turf and the whisper of leaves in the wind invited him to stay. The warm rays of the spring sun blanketed him, teasing the cool wind and grass. He felt now a part of the earth and the wind, part of some distant eternity. Forever would come and go over him; he had been here for as long as he could remember and he would never leave. It never occurred to him to wonder why he was lying out in the grass, far from town, on the rolling foothills below the Silver Mountains. For a moment, a memory pricked him, of some other place, darkness glaring green, the stench of Mako mixed with blood. He felt suddenly very cold, but he was too comfortable, too weak, to do anything about it. Too tired now to hold his gloved hands over his eyes, he let them fall away slowly, to rest on the cool earth. He opened his eyes just a slit and looked back up at the blueness above through dark lashes. It was so bright, too bright; the sky hurt him still, causing his own blue eyes to water. He didn't know that the turquoise of his eyes now robbed the canopy above him of its glory, that from now on, others would feel the same brightness of the blue sky when they looked on him. All he knew now was the consuming weakness that held him tenderly in its hands and the darkness that dulled his mind. Again, he closed his eyes, blocking the pain in the sky. He didn't even know his name. He didn't react when he heard one sound that should have been as familiar to him as his own breath, for he did not recognize it as the sound of the Highwind's propellers cutting through the wind. It was so dim and far away, like a faltering vision he had long ago, clouded by the darkness of spent memory. So far away. The voices all melted together with the beating of the props and it seemed almost a non-event when he felt himself lifted up, one that flowed into and merged with the hands of the earth and the soft flowing wind. Now this movement was eternity until it merged again into a silent darkness that covered all there ever was. Cid Highwind was aware of nothing but that warm, quiet darkness for a long time.

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"Djin-Fe, are you sure this will work?" the tall man asked. His thin body was covered in a long white coat with buttons up the left side. He had no hair, but that was by choice.

"Yeah, Sri-Danat, I'm positive. It worked on Ni'esla didn't it? What could go wrong? I followed your directions exactly," Djin-Fe answered with a brash confidence, blowing off the question as if it were of no consequence. He had a quiet voice and a thin face partly hidden by a shock of unruly black hair. Ni'esla shrugged, her incredibly long, almost colorless hair flying out in so many directions and taking up so much space that it was slightly larger than she was. But that was the hallmark of a wind elemental.

"Then it should be fine. Let us wait, and watch. If it does not work, we will have lost nothing," Ni'esla intoned in her whispering voice. Her thin lips parted slightly, exposing the tips of translucent, needle-like teeth. "We will just try again, with a more suitable subject." She walked lightly back into the cave in the Nibel Mountains, her gossamer dress floating behind her.

Djin-Fe and Sri-Danat followed after the wind elemental. What a stroke of luck they had when they found this cave; if their little experiment worked, the delicate balance of power that ruled the Planet and the elements would be irrevocably altered. The kingdom of the air would again be the kingdom of the world.

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Slowly, so slowly, the gentle darkness began to give way to a dim awareness that he existed apart from the dark. He opened his eyes slightly; any more seemed far beyond his grasp. The sky wasn't blazing bright as it had been before; it now appeared dark and a rather rich brown. It didn't hurt his eyes, anyway. A sweet scent, that of chamomile and not the wildflowers he half expected, finally elicited a spark of familiarity. It took him several more minutes to climb far enough out of the dense fog that he could place where he was. It wasn't a dark sky he saw, but rather his own ceiling.

This realization shocked Cid just a little farther back into reality. Last time he checked, he had been wandering home from the Shanghai-Tei after visiting with a friend. The soft breeze and the warm sun tickled his thoughts, causing him to wonder why those sensations were so strong in his mind. The quiet black blanketed him for a moment then again gave way to reality. He was lying in his foldout easy chair in the front room. He made an effort to sit up, but he found himself too weak. Turning his head proved beyond his limits as well. He sighed a little; even that was an exertion. This was unfamiliar territory; he had never suffered from such a profound weakness. Even so, he felt content and peaceful in a way, as though he were just at that edge of sleep where all was right with the world.

A moment later he heard soft footfalls, causing the palest ghost of a smile to tug at his lips. That sound he knew very well, indeed; he recognized the sound of Shera's movements immediately. He knew that she was worried, however. He knew that as well as he knew his name; he supposed it was that subtle perception that people acquired about another they had lived with for a long time, the very same talent that let every five year old in the known universe sense and avoid an irritated parent by listening to the way they coughed across a crowded department store.

Cid listened as Shera sat on the couch next to him. He wished he could just look at her, but so deep was his malaise that even glancing around was almost too difficult. He hoped that wouldn't last very long. It might get damn irritating after a while. He didn't feel quite strong enough to be irritated now.

Shera sipped her tea in worried silence. Cid tried to speak after a long moment, but he was only able to make the faintest of sounds, not even a whisper. Shera turned her head toward him; she heard the difference in his breathing and knew he had come around. Setting her tea aside, she leaned over to look at his face. She set one hand over his short blond hair and stroked it very softly while she watched him. He had a long face and a straight nose; most of the time it was extremely expressive, as evidenced by the equal number of smile lines and scowl marks on his light skin. Right now, he wore no expression except perhaps a faint drawn look, one of extreme illness. His turquoise eyes were barely open, but she could see the glare of Mako easily enough through his black eyelashes. She wasn't surprised; Cid had been unconscious for five days straight since she and Vincent had found him on that hill, and the kind doctor from Mideel had already come and looked him over. She knew he had a bad case of Mako poisoning; hardly the worst the Planet had ever known, but still pretty bad. "Hey," she said quietly, brushing back a few light brown hairs that were perpetually in her face.

Cid looked toward her very slowly and tried to take a breath to say something, but he could do no more than minimal breathing. A very faint change in his expression caused Shera to smile slightly; she could just tell he was frustrated and cursing in there. "Do you want me to say it for you?" she asked. A ghost of a smile played on his face as he closed his eyes. Not long after, he was asleep; this time a natural one. Shera sighed and stood, hoping he wouldn't be so sick for long.

She picked up her teacup and walked into the kitchen where Vincent Valentine and Cloud Strife were sitting. Cloud wore a navy SOLDIER uniform minus a shoulder guard, and his wild spiked blond hair framed his young face. No one knew for certain if he styled his hair like that or if it just grew that way. His large black sword, the Ragnarok, was perched against the kitchen counter. (The kitchen had taken seven years of Cid's slower-than-molasses carpentry to finish. A rocket scientist he was, but not a carpenter; and he complained about how long she took to do things...?) Vincent was in his usual black attire, complete with tall, pointed boots and a dark red cape. A headband of the same color kept his long black hair partly out of his face and hooded his blood red eyes while a tall, buckled collar on the cape obscured his long, sallow features and thin lips. They sat in wooden chairs around the small table; Cloud had his booted feet propped up on the table while Vincent had his arms crossed in front of him, the brushed brass of his artificial arm glinting. Shera shot Cloud a look and he promptly removed his feet from the table. He looked up at Shera and raised his eyebrows, silently asking if anything had changed.

"Yeah, he came around for a bit, then went to sleep," she answered, "He's really weak, and his eyes are still glowing."

Cloud nodded and said, "That's good; at least he's back in the land of the living." He motioned to his own Mako eyes and added, "That's probably permanent."

"Did you find anything today?" Shera asked. When Cid had turned up missing, she and Vincent used the Highwind to search the land near Rocket Town. They had found him four days later near the foot of the Silver Mountains, close to where they joined the twisted and dark Nibel mountain range. When Cloud had come by a few hours later, he and Vincent had combed the area, trying to find out where Cid had been and where he could have been exposed to enough Mako to poison him. The old Nibel Reactor had been an obvious starting place, but they found nothing; even the pods where Hojo had

made monsters were empty. After that they had used Vincent's heightened senses to follow a scent trail, but after a while, the Mako smell became too weak and they were forced to give up. (Vincent had, of course, shot Cloud a baleful glare after he made some crack about him turning into a bloodhound.) They had gone out searching for answers every day since.

"Naw, nothing new today. I think we're just going to have to wait for Cid to tell us," Cloud responded with a shrug. There was no telling what could have happened.

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Sri-Danat sat in his borrowed lab twiddling his thumbs. His booted feet sat on the top of a large desk covered with stacks of paper and a few test tube racks. All of the last six months had been spent studying some mad scientist's research and decoding his frantic notes. It was all very interesting, to be sure, but it had taken a long time to finally work out what this Hojo had only begun thinking about. And it had been difficult for other reasons; Sri-Danat, despite being raised in an atmosphere of hate and mad desires for control, had developed something of a compassion for the 'weak ones' his mother had said they would some day rule. This Hojo, whom had originally used this hidden lab deep in Mount Nibel, had shared none of those tender feelings. Sri-Danat was appalled at the wanton lack of respect and even disdain that madman had demonstrated in his research. It took a great deal of work to sift through and separate necessary processes from ones that could be redeveloped into less invasive techniques and then to completely throw out things that seemed to serve no purpose other than satisfying Hojo's sadism. Hojo was one sick puppy, that was for sure. He never even took the time to find out if his experiments would work before he started inflicting them on humans, not even sparing his own son. But Sri-Danat, Ni'esla, and Djin-Fe, Sri's older siblings, had found all this research and discovered within it a means to re-create their mother's dream of a 'kingdom of the air'.

It was a simple idea, and as it turned out it had an elegant solution, one that Hojo had completely missed. Hojo had postulated that it would be possible to make elementals out of humans by saturating them in near-frozen Mako for long periods of time. All he had ended up producing were twisted and horrific monsters of every sort. Apparently, Hojo was satisfied with that, because he never pursued the idea to its logical conclusion. Djin-Fe had found the volume of notes dedicated to that process and given them to Sri-Danat to figure out. Sri discovered that the notes were hardly complete, and it took months of reading to track down the rest, but in the end, he had the entire experiment laid out before him. It took very little time to see why it had not worked and alter it so it would. The alterations were thus: liquefy several materia containing the desired element, liquefy an equal number of mastered Elemental materia, and add both to some heated Mako. Make a small number of incisions into the skin of the subject so the Mako mixture would soak in faster—this eliminated the danger of poisoning—and set the subject into the mixture for about twelve hours. These modifications to Hojo's original experiment worked beautifully. All that was left was an approximate three-week wait for the subjects to change. Sri-Danat had produced several small elemental creatures, including fire mice, wind fish, three varieties of water trees, and even earth birds. These were perfect elementals; the only odd thing about it was the dramatic change in the wind fish—they became absolutely viscous little animals, despite the fact that they were produced from friendly guppies.

As Sri-Danat's experiment was a rousing success, Ni'esla and Djin-Fe had concluded that a human experiment was in order. Djin-Fe had declared that a kingdom of the air needed wind elementals to govern it, and his siblings had agreed. Ni'esla volunteered to be the first scientifically produced wind elemental, and the process had worked beautifully. Sri-Danat was not present for the actual experiment; he just couldn't stomach making the necessary handful of incisions on his sister, so Djin-Fe had performed it for him and videotaped it so Sri could see how it went. She had suffered no ill effects except for perhaps the slight mean streak she had developed. Sri-Danat had been ecstatic to see his own experiment work so well. It brought to his dreams new visions of creating even better elementals—powerful ones created from the chimeras of the world. His vision of creating human chimeras and then making them into wind elementals was intoxicating. So back to Hojo's notes he went, searching for ways to alter the genetic make-up of various creatures.

He found what he was looking for rather quickly; a simple virus would work. It had taken Sri-Danat a rather long time to produce the proper virus, but eventually he did. His first genetic experiments were on creatures that were chimeras from birth: he simply extracted their DNA, removed everything that did not pertain to the animal he wished to make, and then infected the chimera with the virus. Using a normal infant chimera, one that was a third goat, lion, and snake, respectively, Sri-Danat had produced a perfectly normal snake by editing out the goat and lion genes, injecting the custom virus into its bloodstream, and using some normal Mako. He still had that snake in a glass tank in his room. It was, in every respect, a normal, garden-variety python. When he performed both the virus and elemental processes on another baby chimera, he had produced an elemental snake. Later, he took the chimera's genetics and introduced them into a baby snake; after a

few failures and some alterations, he had produced a perfect new chimera.

It had all worked so well; Sri-Danat could hardly wait to perform both experiments on a human. In his excitement he had temporarily forgotten his scruples; the process was as non-invasive as possible, and Ni'esla had made it through entirely uninjured. Why should it be different for anyone else? To begin with, he wanted to use a human who was a chimera from birth, just to be sure the virus process would work using non-foreign genetic material. The process that introduced total foreign genetic material was much harder; Sri-Danat certainly didn't want the blood of a failed experiment on his hands. He had thought it would be very difficult to find a human chimera; it was extremely uncommon for a human to have children with another species, partly because suitably intelligent mates were hard to come by, but mostly because it was just plain weird. But somehow Djin-Fe had found one, and quickly too. Again, Djin-Fe had performed the actual experiment. Now all they had to do was wait.

Hence Sri-Danat's twiddling of his thumbs. He was excited to find out how it all would turn out; he was even tempted to look the subject up and see how he was faring. Three weeks seemed like such a long time. But, alas, there was nothing better for him to do but sit in this dark lab and wait—if the experiment was a success, the new wind dragon would very likely come to him.

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The next morning, Cid woke up relieved that he could at least move a little. Not damn much, but a little. He lifted his head slightly and looked into the kitchen. Shera, Cloud, and Vincent were milling around, making breakfast. Apparently, he had house guests. Laying his head back, he briefly wondered if Cloud was going to forget for the umpteenth time and scramble Setzer's eggs again. He did every single time, and every single time he got all grossed out by the black yolks her eggs had. Setzer was a black Chocobo; it came with the territory. A startled 'eww!' confirmed it; Cloud forgot again. He heard Shera laugh at him; it was getting to be a regular joke—ironically, Cloud was the only person in the house who really cared if his eggs were the right color. Vincent asked tonelessly, "Why don't you let someone else make the eggs from now on?"

"Because one of these days I'm gonna remember, all right?!" the blond swordsman shouted. Cid smiled faintly; he was certain that despite all his emotional distance, Vincent had a wickedly dry sense of humor. At least, he was known to needle people in the most sarcastic way from time to time. Vincent was one of his best friends; he wasn't sure why, but they just clicked. He guessed it was because he let Vincent be his distant self without any judgment or expectation.

After a moment, the smell of the cooking Chocobo eggs filled the house. For a brief instant, Cid thought it smelled down right tasty, until his weak body decided that just that little hint of eggs was enough to necessitate it making it quite clear that food was most unwelcome. His stomach felt it was important to reiterate that point by trying to expel its contents. He squeezed his eyes shut, tears leaking out as he gagged and coughed on the acid, which was all he had in his gut. He turned over a little, trying to spit out the burning acid with little success. Muttering a few choice oaths when he could, he suffered through several minutes of the dry heaves. At some point, he knew Shera had come over; he was as relieved as was possible at the time that she kept her distance. She knew that he needed some space when he was in pain like this; it just made it harder when someone was too close. After a while it subsided, but it left him hurting. It had taken most of the little strength he had gained from his sleep.

Shera lifted his head and set a small glass of water mixed with soda to his lips. Cid took a tentative sip; it tasted like hell but it calmed the burning in his throat, so he took a longer drink. After he was finished, Shera set his head back and dipped a rag into the soda water. She used it to mop up the little bit of acid left. Cloud and Vincent were standing near by. Cloud's face was a nasty color, green and pasty white at the same time; even his spiky blond hair looked slightly ill. Cid thought it was a bit ironic that Cloud was such an accomplished fighter with the weak stomach he had. Everything made him queasy. He would not be a bit surprised if he had all ready tossed his cookies over this.

"Well, welcome back. I'd ask you how you feel, but I've got a pretty clear idea...besides, it's obvious how you feel about my cooking!" Cloud said with a weak grin.

Cid looked sideways at the younger man, without moving anything more than he had to. After a moment he found the strength to speak, albeit very quietly. "Yeah...Looks like you...feel the same way," he whispered, smiling faintly as well. It was very clear to all three that Cid was extremely sick; they knew it before, but seeing him awake and yet still so motionless made it all the more real. After his nausea had passed, he hadn't so much as twitched a finger. That in itself would be a

sure sign of illness in anyone; in one as naturally expressive and animated as Cid, it was extremely disconcerting and alarming.

Cloud blushed slightly. The Captain knew as well as he did about his constant struggle with Setzer's stupid eggs. "I'll take that to mean you aren't feeling that bad," he responded kindly. He examined the glow in Cid's blue eyes; he never got used to seeing that glow, even though he saw it in himself every time he looked in a mirror. It represented events best not remembered in his past as well as his own weakness; every time he saw his own blue eyes it reminded him of things he had spent a long time trying to forget. He wondered what that glare would represent to Cid. The three stood in silence for a long moment.

"Can you tell us what happened?" Vincent asked quietly, breaking the silence as he sat across from his friend, folding his scarlet cape beneath him. Cloud took a seat on the couch next to Shera, who in turn was nearest to Cid.

He tried to think back, to recall the last thing he saw before he had found himself at home. There was no point of reference for him to move back, however; everything was in such a dense fog and consuming blackness that whatever he might have remembered may have been a dream. As that process wasn't working, Cid decided to think forward from something he knew had happened, which was his hanging out with a friend he hadn't seen since the before the end of the war. They had spent several hours catching up over lunch at the Shanghai-Tei; Cid was amazed at what had happened with his friend in the eleven years since he had last seen him. The guy was married, had something like four kids, and made a decent living as a fisherman of all things; it all made Cid feel like he had been standing still for all that time, doing nothing but waste his life on broken dreams. Sure, he had started going somewhere; for two years he had continued work with Shin-Ra R&D on the space program and the Highwind, but for the remaining eight he had basically rotted in a rusted out tin-can of a rocket and lived in a town that was never supposed to be anything more than temporary housing for mechanics. Of course, last year had been better, what with going off and saving the Planet and all, but that didn't prevent him from looking back and regretting the waste he had made of those ten years before. Anyway, he decided, he would just start over; so what if he was ten years late on living his life? He couldn't let that stop him for another ten years. After that, he took his leave of his friend, seeing as how both had work to do.

Cid had then walked out of the local tavern and lit up a cigarette as he wandered off toward his house to pick up a weapon then left toward the fields around Rocket Town. For a while, he had been working as an exterminator of sorts, killing nearby monsters; it was better money than one would expect—for some reason he could not at all fathom, monsters carried gil, and the people who hired him paid him as well. It kept food on the table and work going on the Highwind's repairs, anyway. And it left plenty of time to play with his Tiny Bronco, too. All in all, it wasn't a bad way of making a temporary living.

It was right about then that things became a little fuzzy. Someone whispering, the wind was blowing hard all of a sudden, and then memory failed, being drowned out by blinding panic and fear. Nothing remained but slippery visions he couldn't grasp, the cloying smell of green Mako and red blood, hinting at something worse but evading his every attempt to pin it down. Wildflowers and blood, soft wind, hot Mako, and a sky bluer than anything he had ever seen.

After several minutes of thought, Cid finally answered, "I don't know...I left the...Shanghai-Tei...after that, I don't know." He paused for a moment, then added, "There was something...something in my eyes...blood, and flowers..."

Shera said, "You were at the Shanghai-Tei almost ten days ago. We found you four days later, in a field full of wildflowers and grass. Physically, you were fine, except for the Mako poisoning. You don't remember anything before that?"

"Ten days...", Cid whispered. What had he done for ten days that he couldn't remember? Something that got him damn sick, that's what. "No, I don't," he answered finally.

"That's understandable, I mean, Mako isn't real good for making the memory sharp," Cloud added with a wry smile. It had taken some work to get his own head screwed back on straight, anyway. "I hate to think it, but someone must have poisoned you on purpose; there isn't anywhere even close to here that has enough exposed Lifestream to fall in. There's just that Mako fountain on Mount Nibel, but that couldn't hurt anyone."

An uncomfortable silence followed. The idea that Cid had been poisoned intentionally was always a possibility, but it became increasingly more so as more and more searches proved fruitless and leads turned up false. The worst part was the

fact that Mako was only ever used by humans for experimentation and energy. It was commonly held that no one used it at all now; this whole incident had therefore opened up some frightening possibilities. If someone had just wanted to poison Cid, there were far easier and less dangerous ways to do it.

After a while, the three heard a quick rapping at the front door. Shera got up to see who was there. She opened the door and was greeted by James Anderson, the doctor from Mideel; he was wearing a blue dress shirt and carrying the fabled doctor's little black bag. He had a pleasant look, tiny round glasses and a small, gray mustache. "May I come in?" he asked in his kind voice.

"Of course," Shera nodded, backing out of the way.

James came in, sniffed the air, and said, "Mmm! Chocobo eggs! Did I interrupt your breakfast?"

"Oh, no, not really. We were distracted, so we never finished," Shera said with a shrug. She had forgotten all about it. Now that she thought about it, she was pretty hungry.

Cloud winced. "I hope I turned the eggs off...not that burning them would make them any uglier..."

"I turned them off," Vincent said matter-of-factly. Cloud gave a little sheepish grin after standing up. Then he walked into the kitchen, holding a hand over his suddenly growling stomach, as the doctor walked into the front room.

"Do you want anything?" Shera asked the doctor as she returned to the batter she had half-prepared.

"Oh, no thank you. I think I'll just come in here and visit with Mr. Highwind for a minute," James answered as he sat in the spot Shera had been occupying on the couch. He set the bag down at his feet and turned to face Cid.

"Hey, Vinny? Aren't you going to come eat? I made delicious black eggs for you," Cloud asked tauntingly from the kitchen. The dark man turned to get up, but caught sight of Cid's rather panicked expression. Apparently, the pilot didn't relish the idea of being left alone with a doctor. Vincent didn't quite understand; after all, all of them had met this particular doctor before, and he was certainly one of the best and most compassionate medical practitioners in the world. He supposed it must be an irrational fear, or an ego thing; he knew very few men who would willingly visit a doctor, erroneously believing this somehow lowered their 'macho' quotient. But he would pass on breakfast if his friend was that uncomfortable with the doctor's presence, so he stayed seated. Cid was one of the very few people the mysterious man considered a friend.

"Well, it's good to see you, Mr. Highwind," Dr. Anderson said.

Cid looked toward the doctor after finding, much to his relief, that someone had decided not to abandon him. He just didn't like doctors all that much; even proven ones like James here made him nervous. It was silly, he knew, but still true. "Cid..." he said, almost silent. He wasn't about to sit here and listen to some damn doctor call him 'mister'...that aside from the fact that it wasn't the proper way to address a Captain!

"Cid, then. How are you feeling?" the doctor asked. He knew the answer already; Cid was unnaturally still and had hardly even moved his mouth to speak. He lay on the chair completely limp.

"Like #\$\$%," Cid responded with a slight smile. He had far past the point of illness where one feels absolutely miserable and finds it necessary to make sure everyone else knows it. He was extremely sick, so he didn't have the energy to be irritated about it and thus lose his sense of humor. It was either let it go or get upset about it at this point, and he didn't really feel well enough to getting upset.

The doctor smiled in return. "I would have worried if you said anything else. You've been out for five days; you must be hungry." When Cid visibly blanched, sickened by the very thought of eating, the doctor sat back and adjusted his glasses in thought. "I'll take that as a 'hell no,' then. Well, we can't leave you to starve. Malpractice suits, you know, that sort of thing."

Cid decided that he liked this doctor better than most; usually doctors took everything so seriously and couldn't help a dead man feel relaxed. This one seemed different; anyway, he didn't feel quite as nervous as he had before. "Suppose not..."

what can you do...?" he wondered.

"Well," the doctor replied as he unzipped his black bag, "the only thing I can say is to start an IV. There's the blue bag special, there's cream of drip with a side of clear stuff, and then there's the house special. What'll you have?"

The sick pilot made a sort of wheezing sound that was the closest he could come to laughing at the moment. He was feeling pretty good about this whole doctor thing until he saw Dr. Anderson pull the IV needle out of his bag. The doctor noticed this caused Cid to go white and break out into a cold sweat.

Cid wasn't the squeamish type, and he usually wasn't afraid of little things like needles, but for some reason today the sight of the sharp point made his heart stop. He was suddenly very cold. When the doctor picked up his limp hand, he felt what could only be described as absolute terror. He tried to jerk his hand away, but he couldn't. He was breathing very fast and shallow in mind-numbing panic.

Vincent saw Cid's unusual reaction and walked over next to his chair. He leaned down over his terrified friend and asked very quietly, "What is it?"

Cid closed his eyes. He said something, just under his breath, so quietly even Vincent's sharp ears could barely make it out, "...please no...no more...please stop...." A tear trickled down his face as he continued to plead in near silence.

The dark man's emotions were, as always, deeply buried and even deeper denied, but the sound of his friend's voice and the words he spoke twisted his gut. Somewhere inside his fortress where he dare not let it loose for fear of what it would do, he remembered the sort of event that could tear sanity apart like that, what could in memory come with such force as to encompass one's whole reality, if only for a little while. Something had hurt Cid far worse than the pilot had strength enough to comprehend. In a twisted sympathy, the Galian beast that drew power from the same sort of incoherent pain roared within, and it took a mighty effort on Vincent's part to prevent it from taking over and venting his anger. Vincent glanced over at the doctor and held up his one gloved hand, motioning to him to set the needle down, at least for the moment.

The doctor complied and said, "This is most unusual."

Vincent nodded slightly and asked, "Is this necessary?"

The doctor nodded with a quick movement and added, "He's much too sick to eat anything. We need to calm him down; forcing the issue wouldn't do anyone any good. I would give him a sedative, but that has a needle, too."

Vincent turned his red eyes away in thought. He could find no reason to give that would cut through Cid's terror and convince him of what was obviously both harmless and necessary. Neither could he think of anything that would relax him; surely comforting others was not his strong suit. He turned his head to face the kitchen, causing his long, raven dark hair to spill over his shoulder. "Shera," he called out in his carefully controlled voice, "would you come here?"

"Sure," Shera answered as she set the last pancake on the stack. She turned and walked into the front room. "What is it?"

"Something has terrified Cid to the point where he is experiencing it again. The doctor needs to start an IV, but the needle triggered this flashback," Vincent explained coolly. "He needs to calm down."

Shera moved to stand over Vincent and looked down at her companion. She bit her lip and shuddered when she saw him; it made her ill to see him that distressed. She touched Vincent's shoulder and he moved out of the way so she could take his place. Leaning over, she shook Cid's shoulder and said softly, "James isn't going to do anything to hurt you, Cid. I can see it will be hard for you, but you have to let him do what he needs to do."

He glanced up at her for a moment, then closed his eyes again. "...please, no..., " he whispered in desperation, trembling.

Shera looked over at the doctor, then stood up and walked over next to him. She knelt down next to him and asked quietly, "Will you show me how to do it?" When the doctor gave her a questioning glance, she explained, "I think he'll let me."

"Are you sure?" James asked.

Shera nodded slowly; she was certain Cid would hate every second of it, but she knew he would trust her even if he would trust no one else. Doctor Anderson shrugged then proceeded to explain very carefully how to insert the needle and how to remove it from the IV when it was in place. When she thought she had it, she took the thin needle and said to Cid, "I'm going to do it, okay?"

Cid looked over at her again; his dread was so clearly expressed in his glowing blue eyes that Shera had to force back a sudden rush of tears. But such was his trust in her that he would allow her to do something that evoked in him abject terror, because the knowledge, no, the truth that he could trust her was deeper than his deepest fears. That trust was the fruit of a deep and permanent innocence, a gift given by the true Venus Gospel. He closed his eyes again and moved his head down in the faintest of nods. If possible, however, his face paled even more. He was still desperately afraid.

Shera sighed; she could think of at least a thousand other things that she would rather be doing right now other than this. She picked up Cid's hand and pricked a vein with the needle, trying very hard to ignore the tears and the fright this caused him. He cried out weakly when she threaded the IV into his vein, but he didn't react when she undid the needle the way James had shown her. "I'm done," she said shakily, but Cid was lost in whatever horrible memories had scared him in the first place and tears were streaming down his face. A few tears of her own escaped in sympathy and dull horror at whatever had caused Cid such pain. She moved back and let the doctor finish setting up the IV.

Cid calmed visibly after the doctor was finished. Shera looked over at James and he held up a small syringe, which he had emptied into the IV tube. It was apparently a sedative. She was thankful for it; she didn't exactly like the idea, but she would much rather see Cid drugged up at the moment than gripped with terror. She stood still for a moment, watching her Captain, until Vincent silently motioned to her with his clawed hand, indicating that he wanted her to follow him out of the room. She did so, looking back over her shoulder at Cid, who was now thoroughly out of it, as she walked after him.

Vincent sat at the table after Shera took her seat and said tersely, a note of anger coloring his voice, "It is plain that Cid has been tortured. Thus we may safely assume he was poisoned intentionally as well." Shera put her hand over her mouth, shocked. Things like that were not supposed to happen here; Rocket Town was just a small community where everyone knew everyone else...there had never been such depravity here. Her Captain wasn't supposed to get so sick, he wasn't supposed to be hurt like that. She hugged herself with one arm, trying with all her might not to think about what terrible things might have happened to scare Cid so much.

Cloud shot Vincent a surprised look, a fork-full of the pancake he was eating suspended in mid-flight. "Tortured...? How do you know? That's a serious conclusion to come to." He trusted the ex-Turk's judgment, of course; he had been trained to pick up and interpret such signs after all, but the idea of it stretched belief. Cloud was not unfamiliar with such cruelty; he had spent far too long in the company of Hojo not to...but he could hardly imagine why anyone would do such a thing to Cid. He felt the beginnings of a dull rage build in him—who ever had done this would not go without a reckoning. Cloud set the fork down. So much for enjoying breakfast.

Vincent looked at Cloud, his blood red eyes flashing. "His reactions," he stated evenly.

He narrowed his eyes, the fire of his anger fanned by Vincent's simple explanation. "I'm going to find out who did this. They will not get away with it," Cloud growled through clenched teeth. He had seen enough such anguish in his own life; no one else should have to experience it. He stood slowly and stalked to where his Ragnarok leaned against the sink. Quickly taking the massive sword in hand, light reflecting darkly along its ebony blade, the young warrior swung it into the scabbard on his back and turned to face Vincent. "Come on. We have some slime to hunt."

The dark man stood as well, carefully controlled as always. It was difficult to see, but both Cloud and Shera had known Vincent long enough to sense the contained fury radiating off him. Silently, he reached for his rifle, the Death Penalty, which fed on the bloodshed and death its user caused. It was a grim weapon, perfectly suited for Vincent.

Shera looked at the two fighters, her shock giving way to an instinctive anger that no one would seek to face. She wanted to go with them, to strike back in rage at the one responsible, but by far more she wanted to stay in her house, right next to her long-time companion, to protect him as a she-bear does her cubs. She turned away from them in silence, holding on

to that anger, using it to ward off the grief she felt creeping up on her.

Vincent and Cloud walked out the door and stood for a moment outside Cid's house. They had decided in silence and of one accord to go to Nibelheim, the source of all nightmares. They had both met up with Hojo, their devil, in Nibelheim, and both knew instinctively that it was that devil's ghost that now haunted Cid. They would destroy that ghost with passion born from their own pain. The two strode toward the Nibel Mountains.

* * *

Ni'esla stood outside, arms outstretched and a cruel grin twisting her delicate features. The wind was coming, coming to drive out all before it and claim the world. She could feel it whipping about her, tugging at her fine hair and dress, giving her power. She was the wind; the wind given form and a spirit...spirit indeed...the very word meant the wind. The wind with a mind, containing a living force, the wind made alive. She took some of the air in her hand, twisting it about, giving it force. The wind picked up speed, growing ever faster as the wind elemental directed her fierce hate into it.

Once, Ni'esla had been human, the sister of Djin-Fe and Sri-Danat. She was the eldest, the first-born daughter of a woman who was hate incarnate. Ni'esla grimaced at the memory of her. Her mother had hated the world, who knows why, and had instilled that hate into her children. We will rule them some day, she had said, we will found the new kingdom of the air, to recall the glory of the first. Mother had known something that only now was Ni'esla beginning to appreciate. That fool Sri, that weak fool, had no idea. He had developed the process that made Ni'esla what she was now...made her into the wind. Sri would never have started if he had known what she knew. She hadn't known when she volunteered, when she let Djin-Fe perform that experiment. It was such an easy process, hardly any pain involved, but it had twisted her into a being of very evil. Air was corrupt, that 'spirit' element, and it corrupted. The wind in and of itself was not evil, merely broken, as were all things under the moon, upon this Planet. But it was corrupt nonetheless. Only a spirit of evil could wear the pure air as its clothes; somehow, the wind was more akin to the spirit, allowing pure spirit to have form...but the fallen and broken air would only clothe the unholy. Becoming a wind elemental had purged anything true out of Ni'esla. She was broken twice over, once by birth into a broken world and twice by the air. If Sri-Danat had known, if he had done his homework, none of this would have happened. He was too soft to allow, knowingly, anyone to become a demon by his hobby. But stupid Sri was too caught up in the 'wonders of science' to stop and think about what he was doing. He was responsible for the creation of demons and he didn't even know it. Little demon guppies, oh, that made her laugh, evil guppies! And his science had destroyed all the good in his own sister.

That didn't bother Ni'esla; she would just use Sri to make more wind elementals. She would be their queen, fulfill her destiny that her vengeful mother had given her. She would be their queen, the queen over all the weak ones of the Planet, the queen of the Planet itself. She grinned wide, her dagger-like teeth exposed. The wind was gathering, readying itself to form a new elemental even as she stood there on the mountain. She was the first of all the kingdom of the air.

Her grin turned quickly to a snarl. She tried not to think about it, but she knew deep down that in becoming the queen of that kingdom, she had abandon all hope. It was not a misery of despair, not as humans understood it...the loss of hope was not profound in her, but total. She was not confused. She knew what she was doing. She was Misery. She had become Despair. It was a taste of Hell. The blackness that blighted her as she accepted the conditions forced on her by her new existence was total, without even the tiniest glimmer of light. She knew something of evil now. Human despair rarely consumes others...but she would consume them all. If she were to be in Hell, she would bring the universe with her. She would be the queen of Hell.

The hole in her heart would not be sated. There would be no end to her hunger. And she knew it.

The wind howled her fury.

* * *

Two days after Cloud and Vincent had left for Nibelheim, Cid awoke, unspeakably relieved that he could actually get his ^*& out of that damn recliner and move around a little. He stretched with the thoroughness of a cat; 'sleeping' for a little over a week in a recliner made for some interesting cramps. He was very slow about trying to remove them; he still felt sick and lightheaded and he didn't really want to faint right then and there.

After a few moments of basking in the glory of what was standing upright, Cid ran a hand through his blond hair and quickly decided he needed a shower really, really bad. I must look like hell, he thought to himself, worse than I feel at least. He slowly wandered through his room into the bathroom and turned the hot water on, letting it heat up as he removed the flannel night clothes he had worn for he didn't want to know how long. He didn't want to think real hard about the logistics involved, so he just left it at that. Some things were better left alone and unknown. He glanced at himself in the mirror, not quite sure as to what he should expect, but what he saw really wasn't all that bad.... Well, okay, so he did look like death warmed over, but it could have been worse. It could have been better, too. His eyes were glowing; he blinked a moment, trying to block out a little of that glare in his eyes. The sky's stinging blue...he shook his head, trying to dislodge some haunting memory he couldn't quite grasp. Other than that, he didn't look half as scruffy as he expected; apparently his stubble had decided not to grow at all. He ran a hand over his chin, wondering why he didn't have the beginnings of a beard yet. What the hell's that...? he thought after catching sight of the IV taped to the back of his hand. Pulling his hand down, he examined it closely, poking the plastic tube thingy that was taped on his arm. When did that get there? He had a vague recollection of the doctor pulling something like that out of his black bag, but anything after that was just fog and dull panic. He shrugged a little and decided to put off thinking about it until after he was clean and dressed. So, in pursuit of that goal, he stepped into the shower and proceeded to wash himself and scrub what felt like two years' worth of ick out of his hair. Damn natural resource...

Several minutes later, Cid shut off the water and looked at his hands again. \$^%#, I'm fallin' apart! There was a ton of hair tangled up in his fingers. This little bout with Mako poisoning had left him in pretty bad shape. He gathered it up into one hand and grimaced at it. He couldn't shake the disgusting feeling that he had a drain-clog all wadded up in his hand. So what if he knew it had to have come off his head just now, it was still gross. He took the wad of blond hair and dropped it into the trash, flicking the last few strands that clung to his wet hands. He grabbed a towel and dried off, a little wary of drying his hair for fear of dislodging more of it.

He wandered back into his room and slowly put on his regular get up. Before he got his jacket on, he slumped heavily onto his bed, feeling a little dizzy and his vision swimming. Too much standin' for a while, he supposed as he lay back on the comforter. Well, his bed felt a damn sight more comfortable than the recliner anyway. After several minutes, he sat up, trying to fight off a sudden drowsiness. Slept too much already...how long had he slept? He rubbed his head, having trouble thinking.

how did you find...don't worry about that, i just did, ok?

Voices...Cid shook his head, sure he must be on the edge of sleep...didn't feel like it though...

so what're we gonna do...you wanna do it different...?oh, yes, i think we will...it's taking him forever!you worry too much, probably just shocked...i mean, think about it...it's gotta be a shock

The sounds were so faint, but so real, heard with a strange clarity although they were only memories. Is that what it is? Cid thought, could those voices be memories?

look like hell.yeah, wonder why...such an idiot, you are such a fool.i wonder if everything's gonna be ok, i mean... ..be fine, sure, it'll be fine. don't worry, you'll be fine

He knew there was something he couldn't recall, some reason he had Mako poisoning, and he wondered if this was part of it; too bad those remembered words didn't mean anything to him. The room had begun taking on a very uncomfortable tilt, making him nauseous. He closed his eyes and leaned heavily into his bare hands, resting his elbows on his knees. He wanted to lie down, but he didn't trust himself to do it without either falling or throwing up, so he sat very still and tried to ignore the dizziness spinning through his head.

sky's awful bright it is the wind preparing itself...well, off you go, you know your way home, doncha?not taking it well. what a lovely day...I don't think I've ever seen a sky so blue.

After a few more minutes of vertigo, the nausea began to subside. Just to be sure, Cid sat a little longer, not wanting to agitate an already weak stomach. The sky was blue and bright...why did that keep coming back to him? Very slowly he stood and took a tentative step. He didn't feel dizzy anymore, so he guessed it was okay. He walked out into the front room then into the kitchen and sat down.

After several minutes of just sitting and trying to make sense of the words he remembered, Cid heard Shera's footsteps on the stairs to the porch on the front of the house. Again, he knew just by listening to her movements how she felt. She was tired, worn out, but somehow he knew it wasn't for lack of sleep. He felt bad for her; he wished she wouldn't worry about him so much, but he supposed he would be right there with her if the situation were reversed. He smiled slightly; his worryin' and Shera's worryin' were two different animals, that was for sure. The door opened and Shera stepped in, then quickly closed it. He felt a breeze come through the kitchen just as the door closed. He looked over at Shera; judging by her appearance, the wind was rough out there. Her longish brown hair was in an advanced state of disarray, even more hair than usual hanging in her face and escaping her ponytail, and one lapel on her white coat stood on end, flipped up by the wind. She was carrying a few bags of groceries and her purse, which had made its way down her arm and hung by her feet. She kicked it a few times as she walked into the kitchen with the bags; they looked heavy, but she wasn't bothered by the weight. Shera was a bit taller than Cid was and the form of her body was in proportion to her height; she was a lot stronger than one would expect from the somewhat timid way she carried herself. He winced at the memory of the first time he had realized how strong she was; he'd had a black eye for a week due to her forcefully demonstrating how pissed she was that day. She was a big girl, and he owed his life to that fact; when tank number eight had failed, he would have been Meteor fodder if she hadn't been there to help lift it off his leg.

After Shera set the bags down, she went over and gave Cid a hug then sat down in the chair next to him. She looked him over; he looked pretty bad. He had lost too much weight and he was still very pale; there were dark circles under his glowing blue eyes and he looked weak. She could tell he was still extremely sick, but it was equally obvious that he felt much better than he had for the last several days. Ever since Doctor Anderson had set up the IV, Cid had been asleep. She noticed he had lost some hair, too. "It's about time you got up, Captain. I was getting tired of dusting off the cobwebs," she said with a smile.

"Very funny. I see how it is; I'm surprised ya didn't put me in the garage. Don't be expectin' nuthin' outta me when you get sick!" Cid replied, his face stern but his voice laughing. "Speakin' of cobwebs, is that what you decided ta do ta yer hair? Put those cobwebs in it? Or did Cait Sith sleep in it?"

Shera gave him a glare of mock-menace, her brown eyes flashing with mirth. "Look who's talking, baldy-locks," she said, "What did you do, get frustrated when you couldn't find the remote? Or did you run out of tea again?"

Cid rolled his eyes theatrically, grinning wide. He enjoyed such playful sparring, especially with Shera. He loved her so much, more than he could say and more than he could ever show in a lifetime. It had taken him too damn long to pull his head out of his *^# and realize it, though, and they both had hurt because of it. But that was water under the bridge; if for ten years he had mistreated Shera, it was certainly a profound loss, but he could not let that injured past stop him from loving her now. He wondered sometimes what it would have been like if he had been less prideful and more honest with himself for all of those years.... He knew he could not love her any more then or in the future as he did now, but he also knew that it wasn't a matter of more or less so much as it was a matter of maturity. It had been approximately seven months since the Venus Gospel had forced him to face the emotions and thoughts of his heart, seven months since he had finally realized how he truly felt, seven months since his spear had shown him the truth. Today his love was no less and no more, but it was immeasurably richer, like a pattern that never leaves a set boundary but as time goes on becomes increasingly complex and unimaginably beautiful. What would it be in ten years? Thirty? He longed for it.

Shera noticed a change in Cid's demeanor so she asked, "Penny for your thoughts?"

Cid looked down at the table, still smiling. After a moment he looked up at Shera and said, "I was just thinking about how much I love you. And how I can hardly wait to know what it's like to love you in thirty years." Leaning over closer, he touched her hair and kissed her softly.

After they parted, Shera smiled and stroked his hair above those flight goggles he always wore. She wasn't too alarmed when some of it fell out; it was to be expected, even if it wasn't very pleasant. "This was worth the wait, Cid," she answered quietly, "If the last ten years were necessary just so I could love you like this, then I would do it all over again." It was a precious gift the spirit in Cid's spear had given her, the ability to truly love and forgive him, to be able to call ten years of such pain and strife good. But she truly would not want anything changed; that was a gift worth dying for.

Shera's smile grew mischievous. "Thirty years...is that how long I have to wait before you marry me?"

The pilot snickered and turned away for a moment. He looked back at Shera sidelong and said, "No, I won't make ya wait that long. I know if I do, you ain't gonna be here when I finally get my lazy *^& around ta askin', an' I don't want that...or else you'll knock my head off fer takin' too damn long." After a moment's thought, his expression turned serious. "You really wanna marry me?"

Shera nodded. "Yeah, of course I do." A few minutes of silence followed, with the two just enjoying each other's company for a while. This was such a beautiful thing, to sit, silent and content, without all the discomfort and uneasiness one would expect after speaking of marriage, to be still like this.

Shera got up and started putting the groceries away. "Are you feeling up to eating something? I'm going to fix myself a sandwich; do you want one?"

Cid thought about it for a second, rubbing the back of his hand where the IV was. That thing...it gave him the creeps. He did feel a little hungry, though. "Yeah, I guess I can try. First though, I'm goin' outside and havin' a smoke." He stood slowly, holding his head to ward off a slight dizziness, then walked outside, grabbing his pack of cigarettes on the way. He lit up and took a deep drag off the cigarette. He sighed contentedly and blew the smoke out his mouth, gazing absently at the horizon. The wind was a little rough, but not as bad as it was when Shera came in.

The neighbor's orange tabby cat wandered up to the white picket fence and hopped up on a post. It set its wide-eyed gaze on Cid and flicked its ears back. Cid watched the cat for a moment, unknowingly returning the unblinking feral stare with one of his own. He did feel a little hungry. The cat reared up and exposed its sharp canines, hissing and bristling its tail. I can't do this... The cat was scared; it sensed something dangerous, and Cid saw in its dark blue eyes a silent wish it had never come this way.

Without thinking, the pilot launched himself toward the cat, easily reaching the post where it had stood in one jump. Normally, he was extremely agile, but today there was a grace in him that only those made for the hunt possessed. Wild blue electricity formed around his right hand, spitting animal fury. The feline bolted, darting toward a nearby oak. It never made it to the tree. With fluid grace and surprising speed, Cid cleared the fence and caught the frightened cat in one leap. The dragon energy crackling about his fist killed it instantly. This isn't right...

Quickly, Cid carried the cat around to the Tiny Bronco and sat down under one of the wings with his back to the fuselage, in a relatively protected spot. He felt an instinctive need for privacy as he began very carefully tearing strips of flesh off the deceased animal and eating them. This isn't right...

He finished quickly, and there was nothing recognizable left except the blood on his hands and bits of gore and fur on the ground. He wasted nothing, not even the marrow. What in the hell am I doing?! And as the feline he had just consumed might have on a more fortunate day, he began licking his hands clean in a very methodical and precise way.

He heard Shera open the door and call for him. "I'm over here," he said calmly as he stretched his arms and shifted a little to get more comfortable. It was only right to take a little nap after eating such a tasty meal. He wished that nagging feeling that something was wrong would go away.

Shera walked over to the Tiny Bronco and leaned over to peer under its wing. She saw Cid resting there, content as could be, hands stained red and mouth bloodied, crimson liquid dripping on his white scarf and a few tufts of wiry orange hair stuck to his chin and clothes. For a brief second, her face was impassive; the level of shock she felt was impossible to express. Then her jaw dropped and she covered her mouth with one hand, holding on to the metal wing with the other. Cid narrowed his eyes in confusion; why was she so surprised? Dammit, this isn't right! It was perfectly natural for a predatory creature such as himself to kill.

Predatory creature? Cid turned his head away, his blue eyes searching the empty air. When had he ever been a predator? It was so natural! Squinting his eyes shut and holding his head at a sudden and deep pain that twisted through his gut, he let loose a long, low wail, an inhuman sound. Since when did he kill and eat his neighbor's pets? A gust of wind buffeted the small airplane, causing it to shudder slightly. But it was so natural, so right! I know this isn't right!

Shera was at a total loss. She didn't want to begin to think about what that slick of gore and bits of bone on the dirt had

once been. Something was very wrong with Cid. After what felt like an eternity of standing and gaping, she found her voice and squeaked, "Wh-what happened?! Cid, what happened?!"

What is wrong with me? With a mighty mental effort, Cid took hold of the still and silent words, grabbing tightly to that deep light that whispered the truth, for somehow he knew that no matter how natural and easy it seemed to be a predator, it wasn't that way at all. He found himself possessing of a whole new set of powerful, strange, and yet very comfortable instincts; he now knew that those predatory instincts had driven him to kill the tabby cat. It was second nature, as if he had always been a hunter. It confused him, and it was difficult to hold on to the truth, so difficult that it even caused him physical pain. He was fighting his nature, red in tooth and claw; but why was it his nature now when it never had been before? It hadn't been, had it? He looked up into Shera's face, seeing her shock, wondering why it took so long to feel it himself. "I-I killed Devon's cat...", he finally said, his voice small and quiet.

Shera shook her head; the evidence was plain to see, but the concept was nearly impossible to grasp. Cid had more than killed the cat. "But...but why? I don't understand...." She looked back at his bloody hands, her eyes widening. "Captain, look at your hands...!" she exclaimed in incredulity.

Cid pulled his hands away from his temples and examined them. His own eyes widened at what he saw. He had no fingernails; instead, the tip of each finger, right after the last joint, curved and tapered into a hard, ebony claw, a cross between a cat's and a bird's. He flexed his fingers; they felt strange now, almost unnatural. He tried to get rid of the strange feeling by clenching and unclenching his fists, but as he did, his grasp on the truth began to slip. The more comfortable he became with those curving fingertips, the harder it was to remember that he wasn't an animal, that he wasn't a predator. That I'm not a dragon...I know it isn't true! It scared him. As he tightened his grip on what was truly human in him, his hands tensed painfully. "Damn, this is bad," he whispered to himself. He looked back up at Shera, trying to ignore the increasing pain in his hands. She hadn't recovered from her shock much at all. Cid stumbled to his feet, whatever graced he normally had deserting him.

Shera tentatively took his arm and walked with him back into the house. They both went into the bathroom. While Shera got a towel and wet it at the sink, Cid looked at himself in the mirror. The first thing he saw was the blood on his mouth and chin. It was strange how little it seemed to bother him; it disgusted him deeply, but in less deep ways it seemed as normal as getting peanut butter on one's fingers. He sighed and shook his head, worried because the sight didn't affect him the way it should. He could only wish it would turn his stomach, make him sick; then he would be able to get rid of the poor cat...he didn't want to know that his continued nourishment cost the life of his neighbor's favorite pet. He shed a tear, resigning himself for the moment to his lack of emotion.

Shera twisted the towel to remove the excess water then started wiping the gore from Cid's face. As she cleaned his chin, she caught a glance at his teeth. Stopping for a moment, she took a longer look; she shook her head at what she saw because she was too numb already to feel any more shock. They were pointed and serrated much like a shark's tooth, but thin and narrow. She sighed and continued cleaning, wondering in silence who could have done such a thing to her Captain.

But as the shock wore off, denial and disgust set in. As hard as she tried to ignore it, all she could think about was seeing the ruined remains of a defenseless cat smeared across Cid's face and hands. It began to get harder and harder to look at him and remember that he wasn't a monster, that he was still the Cid Highwind she loved. As she began wiping the blood from his hands, she turned to look up at him, an unwelcome sensation settling in her stomach. He was still staring at himself in the mirror, his expression devoid of remorse or any other emotion. Maybe the poisoning and this new change had affected his spirit...maybe he was no longer the one she knew...

She dropped the cloth and ran out of the room, unwilling to spend another moment in his presence.

Cid turned to see her go; when he caught a split-second view of her expression, he hung his head and cried.

* * *

Djin-Fe wandered around a small hillside, doing nothing in particular. He had never been a patient man; waiting for that stupid experiment to work was no exception. Not that he expected much; Ni'esla had nearly killed that Highwind dragoon whatever, and he didn't think he would recover. It would be nice if he did; then Ni'esla's little kingdom could get on to a

nice start. He didn't care; he didn't care about much of anything. Hadn't for a long, long time. Ni'esla was vengeful, Sri-Danat was deluded, but he, Djin-Fe, was above all that. He cared not at all for the people his mother hated and not one bit for the 'kingdom of the air' she thought was the remedy for whatever it was they had done to wrong her. Why should he? It only made everything complicated.

It was much easier this way.

He had no ties but the blood of his family, but even that tie he maintained only because it made life easier. He lived with them and they all supported each other: if he was lonely, there was someone to talk to, and if he was bored, he had people to hang with. It was enough.

He'd help them, of course...Ni'esla wanted her kingdom and Sri wanted to play science, so he helped them out. It meant nothing; Sri-Danat's worries that 'everything will go wrong' and Ni'esla's cruel nature were just something he played along with. None of it mattered to him.

He could care less if Sri-Danat ruined lives in his blindness.

It didn't matter to him if Ni'esla tried to feed her hate with the agony of others. It didn't bother him much. He didn't care if that Highwind left so sick he didn't even know his name. What was it to him if his sister had hurt him so badly it almost killed him? What did it matter?

If his late mother wanted to oppress the world...so be it.

None of it affected Djin-Fe. In fact, it would be easier that way. All the world at his feet and nothing to tie him down. If Sri's new experiment worked, it would be the beginning of Ni'esla's dreams...and those dreams would make everything smooth and effortless for him.

That's all he cared about, after all.

* * *

"I hate this place," Cloud muttered for the umpteenth time. Vincent understood fully his sentiments, but silently wished he would keep them to himself. Vincent hated this place as well; it was the library beneath the Shinra mansion. The glass tube that held Cloud as Hojo performed his experiments, the table where Vincent's body had been mutilated; these were perpetual reminders of the nightmares that began here and plagued them both still. Every time Cloud vented his anger, it pricked Vincent's studied indifference, his carefully constructed walls that he erected to protect himself. The taller man just wanted to search the books without interference from all the bad memories this place evoked. He just wanted to concentrate.

Cloud glared around the room, wanting so bad to take his sword and destroy the whole place, to give his rage at what had happened here free reign, but he knew that would be a waste of time. The empty tubes and scientific apparatus mocked him now; how much more would they grin and leer, teeth made of broken glass, if he destroyed them? Now they laughed at him, whispering, you can't escape, you can't... If he shattered the glass, swinging the Ragnarok with all his might, they would only laugh the more. See? You can't escape...you can't break us enough, you can't grind us fine enough...why don't you try? Scatter us, crush us, destroy us...but you still can't escape... Cloud turned away from them in disgust. He knew it was his mind playing tricks; breaking those things wouldn't unmake the past. He stomped over to a bookshelf, trying to swallow his anger and the frustration at his inability to escape it. "I hate this place," he hissed under his breath. He grabbed a book off the shelf, dusting off the cover quickly and roughly turning the pages. It was one of Professor Gast's journals. Just a place to record notes about various things. He was glad he hadn't picked up one of Hojo's, and he wished there were none to find. Sephiroth had once asked why Gast had to die...for once in his life, Cloud had to agree with his late arch-foe. Gast would never have done what Hojo did.

They had been here nearly a day and a half, searching through the stacks of books scattered in every direction, trying to find any reference to a lab nearby that had access to Mako. It was an obvious jump to figure that whomever had poisoned Cid had done it nearby using a made-made hidden source of Mako. Mako usually had to be processed from the Planet's natural Spirit energy; it was exceedingly rare to find a source of natural Mako—only in three places was it known to come

to the surface, and two, Mideel and the Northern Crater, were too far away, and the third, the Mako fountain in the Nibel Mountains, was too small. The most likely option left was a hidden Shinra lab. But so far, they had found nothing hinting at the existence of any hidden structures. They had both given up hope hours ago; the only reason they still looked was for their vengeance and the sake of their friend.

Vincent carefully set down one book and picked up another. This one turned out to be a notebook of Hojo's. Vincent grimaced slightly; the prospect of reading any more of Hojo's twisted thoughts made him sick. He opened the book anyway, looking at the scrawled handwriting in extreme distaste. It detailed in Hojo's arrogant and neurotic way how he had discovered the process of mutating humans by exposing them to near-frozen Mako for long periods. He seemed to have delighted in his discovery, not caring at all about the people he destroyed. Vincent was disgusted by what he read; there were detailed descriptions of the different mutations and how long was necessary to achieve them, photographs of the subjects, and a number of write-ups of how the experiments proceeded. However, there was also a small map to find the laboratory in which some of these experiments had been conducted. Apparently, it was some distance down the mountainside; it was near the reactor but far from all the intertwining caves that lead to it. He found himself as much upset by the discovery as he was relieved by it. Now they could find out what had happened to Cid almost two weeks ago... but it also drove out any glimmer of hope that it was all just an accident. It meant that someone had poisoned and tortured Cid, most likely in an attempt to repeat one of Hojo's sick experiments. Vincent closed his eyes and allowed for a moment the Galian beast to growl deep in his throat. That purple and red monstrosity, with its black horns and yellow claws, was a result of Hojo's experiments. Vincent was no longer human because of it; the Galian beast knew that in a slight, animal way, and both were enraged to learn that their friend might share the same fate. Cid had enough of his own bad luck; he didn't need to be drawn into the hell Hojo had made.

"You find anything yet?" Cloud asked as he set Gast's book down. Vincent nodded slightly and pointed one golden claw at the page with the map. He said nothing, but his eyes betrayed his thoughts; the blood red irises flickered with pent up anger while his eyes pinched with despair. Cloud took a few steps and looked over Vincent's cape enshrouded shoulder. The path to the lab looked easy enough; it was a bit of a hike down the mountain, but nothing truly difficult. "Well," he said, fingering the hilt of his dark Ragnarok, "I guess we go for a little hike."

Several hours later, Vincent and Cloud made their way down the last few feet of mountainside before the entrance to the hidden lab. A few pebbles skittered down as the two hopped down to the narrow path below them. They looked around for the entrance and when they saw it a few yards to the right, they started off quickly in that direction. Shortly they reached the door, which was painted to blend in with the surrounding rock; from a distance it might be difficult to see, but from close quarters, it was quite obvious. Nevertheless, it was well hidden; few people would think to look on this side of the mountain for such a structure. All the rest were built much closer to the main paths and caves. Cloud glanced at Vincent then tried the door handle. It was unlocked.

Cautiously, the two stepped into the darkened room and looked around. They were in a short hallway with two doors on each side and one at the end. The door at the end was much larger and appeared to open automatically. Vincent walked over to the large door and looked through a small window while Cloud examined one of the side doors. Vincent turned and motioned to Cloud, so he left the door he had been looking at and walked to his side. Vincent pointed at the window and Cloud stood on his tiptoes to look through it. It appeared to be what they were looking for, so the swordsman found the controls for the door and opened it. With a slight hiss the large door opened and a few dim lights came up. Cloud shook his head, wondering what it was with Shin-Ra that they always had to make everything so dark. There was never enough light. Cloud followed Vincent as he entered the large room.

The darker man wrinkled his nose at the smell in the room. The odor was faint, but one side effect of Vincent's altered form was that all his senses were much more acute than an ordinary person's was, so he had no trouble detecting it. He turned to glance at Cloud, his red eyes flashing. He smelled blood and Mako.

"We have the right place, huh," Cloud whispered. Vincent nodded then went to look around the room. Cloud went in the opposite direction, toward a desk stacked with small monitors, machines, and screens. Every sort of wire and tube ran from the small pieces of equipment. Cloud scratched his head then shrugged. He decided not to bother trying to figure out what in the world all the machines did. Instead, he examined some of the things on other tables nearby. There was a fish tank with one guppy swimming frantically back and forth amongst the stripped remains of several other little fish. Every once in a while it would leap out of the water and float around in an extremely disconcerting way, like it was possessed or something. Another tank contained a little wheel, some charred remains of what were probably wood chips, and a rather

large mouse whose fur glowed with tiny red embers. A thin stream of smoke curled up from its small nostrils as it slept.

Vincent stepped over to a large steel container that had a cover complete with latches along the sides and a few monitors on the top. There was one for pressure, temperature, and a counter. The steel contraption was eight feet long by four feet wide by four feet tall. All along one side, he saw several drip marks, all a dry and a dull crimson; he could smell that it was old blood. On the floor, there was a trail of large drops and bloody shoe-prints leading to the steel container from a larger red area; it appeared to be several small puddles of the same dried blood. He turned from the sight, trying very hard to maintain his composure; soon he would have to let the Galian beast out, otherwise it might take another, more dangerous internal monster to vent his rage. After several seconds, he succeeded in subduing the beast. He then turned back to the steel contraption and examined the latches; all were undone, so he carefully lifted the cover and set it aside. The inside of the container reeked of Mako; he could still see some of the green liquid puddling around the edges of it. The walls were smooth; once the cover was in place there was no way for anything to get in or out. A valve and red tube marked 'Mako' stood near the container, as was a thin vacuum tube, apparently there to drain the used Mako. Vincent looked back toward where the large red mark was; there was nothing there other than the dried blood.

Cloud knelt down to get a better look at the strange rodent. It seemed to sense his presence for it opened its eyes; they glowed as if they were tiny globes of liquid fire. It stood up on its hind legs and pawed at the glass while fire began licking up its glowing fur. A few wood chips began smoldering. Cloud straightened and turned to what looked like a computer screen. There were several small discs scattered around, each carefully labeled with descriptive titles. He picked one up, reading the label. Experimental trial documentation #5: fire elemental—subject: mouse. Procedure and outcome. He looked back at the glowing mouse, then inserted the disc in a slot to the side of the monitor. The monitor clicked on, glowing to life. He sat down at the computer and watched as a tall bald man explained in very precise detail how the experiment would go and what he hoped to achieve. "Hey, Vincent, come look at this," Cloud called to his companion. Vincent came over and leaned his good hand on the table over Cloud's shoulder while resting his claw on the back of his chair. They watched as the tall man on the screen sedated the mouse then made a handful of tiny cuts on its body. He was extremely precise and careful about it, making sure he did no more than was necessary. After that, he set it in a small tub of green liquid, which he explained was melted Elemental and Fire materia mixed with Mako. After a few minutes of watching a sleeping mouse in Mako, Cloud advanced the recording until the bald man showed up again. A counter in the corner of the screen indicated that approximately twelve hours had passed. The man donned thick gloves and removed the mouse, placing it in a tank with all the proper accouterments any rodent would need to live a satisfying life. The small incisions the man had made were all healed and after a short bout of coughing up Mako, the mouse quickly got up and began drinking some water from a water bottle. It seemed fine. The recording sped up, the counter indicating the passage of around twenty-one days, then slowed again. Over the course of the segment, the mouse gradually became larger and fierier—it had become a full-fledged fire elemental. The only thing different about the mouse's behavior was it avoided the water bottle like the plague and it seemed somewhat concerned when it accidentally charred its nesting material. The recording ended with the bald man declaring the experiment a success.

"Huh," Cloud said as he removed the disc, "That didn't look like one of Hojo's experiments...."

"No...That man seemed to take great pains to spare his subject any undue suffering," Vincent replied. "It was an elegant experiment; I doubt Hojo would have been capable of it. He was not a brilliant man by any means. What do the other discs say?"

"Hmmm," Cloud muttered as he shuffled through the discs. "Looks like there's a few on other elemental experiments... here's one on some virus thing...Heh, there's even one on The creative misuse of Bunsen burners: How to make S'mores in the lab. Ah, here's one: Experimental trial documentation #19: Wind elemental—subject: human. Procedure and outcome." He held it up for Vincent's inspection. Vincent took it carefully in his brass claw and placed it in the slot. Shortly the video came up. It showed two people, a woman with short black hair and a man who apparently didn't take great care of his appearance. The bald man wasn't there. The unkempt man explained the purpose of the experiment and why he was performing it; some man, Cloud figured the bald one, named Sri-Danat had bowed out, as he felt uncomfortable actually doing the work. The man proceeded to sedate the woman and, much as had occurred with the mouse, made no more than ten cuts on her, although he wasn't nearly as careful as the bald man had been. He then took her to the large steel container, which was filled with glowing green Mako, and after setting her in it, replaced the cover and sealed it. First, he explained that the fluid was Choco/Mog and Elemental materia mixed in with Mako, then how he was setting the dials to heat up the fluid. Cloud advanced the recording again another twelve hours. The man came back and undid the cover, releasing the woman. She climbed out on her own; she didn't appear to be sick or anything. The counter suddenly read

twenty-one days later, and the woman was again shown. She looked much the same, but also radically different. Her now colorless hair had grown out to her heels and seemed to float about in fine wisps, while her skin had also paled. Her face was the same, but her expression was darker, colder. Then the recording stopped.

"She was a wind elemental? How weird...," Cloud responded. He looked through the discs again. "Altering chimeras...," he read aloud, "More elemental stuff...hmmm, something about recorded notes...."

Vincent tapped his claw on the plastic backing of the chair. "Are there any others with human subjects? I wonder if they did the same thing to Cid and he just reacted badly? They are strange experiments, but not as extreme as I expected."

"He would have reacted pretty damn bad. That lady didn't look like she got sick at all," Cloud replied as he looked through a few more discs. He picked one up and read the title to Vincent. "Experimental trial documentation #23: viral genetic manipulation and wind elemental—subject: human/dragon chimera. Procedure. Huh, I guess that's the one we want."

Vincent looked a question at the swordsman. "Since when is Cid a chimera?"

"Oh, since forever I guess...some crackpot told us he was a descendant of the Dragoons and Bahamut. I didn't believe it for a while, but I guess it's true; aren't Dragoons the ones that could jump all hither and yon? Cid never told you that?" Cloud answered matter-of-factly.

"No. I suppose, however, it would explain why he uses pole-arms instead of guns like any other ex-military in their right mind would," Vincent responded coolly. "Put in the disc," he added after a short pause, pointing his claw toward the slot. Cloud nodded and removed the first disc then inserted the new one.

Just as recording began to load, Vincent turned toward the door, sensing another's presence. Someone stepped through the open door. The newcomer would have said something, but Vincent skewered him with a glance and so the bald man quickly shut his mouth. The man quickly shut the automatic door, having decided that trying to leave would perhaps not be his best course of action, judging by the glare that Vincent continued to give him. "Who are you?" he asked quietly, anxiety evident in his voice.

"Come here," Vincent commanded, his tone declaring he would harbor no defiance. The bald man obeyed, slowly walking over to the desk that the two strangers occupied. "Tell me, what is your name?" the dark man asked tonelessly.

The bald man fidgeted nervously. "Um, Sri-Danat," he answered, tugging at a button on his tunic. He glanced over at the monitor and asked, "Why are you watching that? I haven't had a chance to see it yet."

"Well," Cloud added darkly, "You can watch it with us." He got up and directed Sri-Danat into the chair. Sri-Danat glanced nervously up at the blond man as he sat, not quite sure he liked the glare in his eyes or the way he fingered the hilt of his large sword. All three turned to the screen.

Sri-Danat pointed at the screen and said, "That's my brother, Djin-Fe," indicating the man with the unkempt hair. "Huh," he muttered in surprise when he saw the woman wind elemental, "I didn't know Ni'esla was there. She wasn't supposed to be...."

"Who is Ni'esla?" Cloud asked harshly.

"Oh, uh, my sister. Djin-Fe was supposed to do this alone," Sri-Danat explained. On the recording, Djin-Fe again explained what he was going to do, this time adding the process involved in the viral genetic manipulation. It sounded rather simple: just a few injections of a specially produced virus and the incisions for the elemental process. "Who are you two, anyway?"

Cloud narrowed his eyes at the man. Something about his nervous manner and the recordings of his experiments didn't add up with the evidence concerning Cid. "You didn't actually do the experiment on Cid, did you?"

"Um, no...Cid was his name? Are you friends of his?" Sri-Danat asked, turning from the monitor to face Cloud. Vincent watched the recording in silence. On the screen, Ni'esla and Djin-Fe discussed something in hushed tones.

"You didn't even know his name?" Cloud shouted. Then he narrowed his eyes, anger burning within them. "You don't know what happened to him, do you?" he snapped.

Sri-Danat shrunk back and said, "I-I assumed, uh, that it was the same thing as with Ni'esla...but he took it badly...he looked sick when he left. I figured it was just him."

"Let's see what it was in truth," Vincent intoned. Sri-Danat glanced up at him then looked back at the screen. A stunned silence descended on the three. What they saw was nothing like the other recordings; the processes were the same, but carried far past the realm of what was necessary, surpassing any rational justification, and then going much farther. Cloud slowly reached a finger out to advance the recording; it was too long, too much to watch. At the end of four day's worth of recording, one documenting the insane and brutal twisting of a relatively benign experiment and three recording Mako exposure, Cloud pressed a button to resume regular playback. The recording ended after Djin-Fe opened the steel container instead of after another three-week wait. Sri-Danat began to weep, promptly leaning over and throwing up.

Cloud was speechless. Chaos spread its wings and destroyed the recording equipment as its hellish rage engulfed the room in flames.

* * *

The weather had turned; it was very unusual for Rocket Town. It was windy during the spring, usually; a nice, cool wind that carried rain clouds as often as not. The spring showers were gentle as could be. Today, however, the unusually forceful wind was far too dry. In other parts of the world, it might be known as a Santa Ana. It was a fast, dry, and strangely silent wind. Ni'esla began walking down the mountainside toward Rocket Town. She remembered the weather when she became an air elemental—it was identical. It had blown like this the last few days before she had changed completely; perhaps her alterations to Sri's experiment had indeed sped things up. When she reached a part of the terrain that she could not cross normally, she gathered the air about her and floated over. She wanted to see how the subject was doing and help him along. Nothing would stand in her way, especially not a strong will. She had no idea if that man had a strong will or not, but she had taken great care to break it or at least damage it as much as possible, just to be sure. The wind would harbor no resistance; she had and would make the ground as slippery as possible for the developing elemental.

It took her a little while to reach the Rocket Town. When she did, she wandered around the town, examining the place. It wasn't much to look at; but that was of no consequence. She stood and examined the direction the wind traveled, then followed it to the nascent wind dragon's residence. Ni'esla stepped lightly to the door; she could feel him somewhere nearby. That sickening light she felt in him, the one that seeped its claws into every crack, pulling and tearing...she hated it. She had made the empty darkness her home; the stinging, burning light tried to destroy it. She hissed, trying to ignore the ugly things that hateful, vengeful brightness revealed. But she felt it had dimmed and was still growing dimmer. Her darkness would swallow it up. She knocked heavily on the door, then stepped away, waiting for an answer.

Inside his house, the Captain slept fitfully, disturbed by dreams of violence and murder, still fighting to maintain his grasp on his humanity. He tossed and turned, his muscles tensed; the instincts and the nature of his changing form rebelled against his attempts to deny it the supremacy by twisting him. It felt just like the day after every time he'd overexerted himself; he was sore all over. The only relief was to give in to the dragon he was becoming; every time he had in his sleep the soreness subsided a little but the dreams became terrible nightmares of ravening bloodlust. An inch or two here, a little there; in his sleep he slowly lost his ground to the dragon...eventually the nightmares returned to dreams. They didn't bother him anymore, and he slept a little easier.

A little while after he began sleeping better, Shera stepped quietly into his room to check on him. It was hard to sleep when the person next door was moaning and groaning all night, so she was tired. And worried. She padded over to his side, trying not to think too hard about what she saw. Thick, peeling gray scales had formed on him over that night, and she saw the beginnings of a little black horn in one of the bald spots on his head.

Suddenly, his eyes flew open and he pinned her with an intense and frightening stare. She took a step back, horrified at the expression on her companion's face.

It took a few seconds for Cid to realize what was going on and regain the ground he had lost as he slept. It was a difficult,

almost schizophrenic experience; his mind and his body were totally at odds. He winced as the battle caused his arms to curl up to his chest and his fingers to tense. With effort, he got up and shuffled to his closet to get a robe. He wished he had a hooded cloak; it was clear that all Shera wanted to do was run away from him. She tried to hide it, but he could see the revulsion in her eyes. It hurt to see...but he could hardly blame her.

"You want something for breakfast...? Um, uh...sorry...," Shera muttered. She looked at her feet and beat a hasty retreat. She hated thinking it about him, but as she asked, all she could imagine was another pet dying in his clawed hands. She wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt. She left his room and went into the kitchen, disgusted with herself. Leaning on the kitchen counter and hanging her head, she tried to take hold of what she knew was true, the same way Cid had. It eluded her for the moment.

A moment later, Shera heard a strong, quick knock on the front door. She straightened her robe and walked over to the door. She opened it and was taken slightly aback at what she saw. It was a short woman, one with a dark presence and an icy stare. The woman drew her lips from her needle-like teeth in an expression of surprised distaste, then quickly smoothed her features. She was beautiful, in a haunting and discomforting way.

Before Shera could say anything, the woman asked, "Is the Dragoon here? I wish to speak to him." A shiver went down Shera's back; something about the woman set off every alarm and red flag she had.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Shera answered warily. It was a half-truth; she knew the pale woman wanted to see Cid, but he wasn't really a Dragoon, now was he?

The visitor bared her teeth. "Tell him Ni'esla is in town to see him," she said slowly, biting off each word. "This is a gift," she continued as she produced a long, pointed instrument and handed it to Shera. The engineer took it and examined it in her palm. It was a hollow needle; little bits of dried blood flaked off the steel and onto her hand. Shera looked up in shock. The connection presented itself immediately; this was the needle that had caused Cid's fear...which meant Ni'esla was involved in his poisoning. Shera scowled and slammed the door in Ni'esla's face, her heart pounding in her chest. She was livid...and she was horrified. She dropped the bloody needle, letting it fall to the ground.

She backed away a step, then spun around when she heard Cid gasp behind her. He leaned against the wall in the front room; the same look of helpless terror she had seen in him before marred his suddenly pale face. He held his hands up, as if to ward off some ghost, as he slid down the wall to a sitting position. Shera went over to him, forgetting for the moment her own fear, but he didn't see her. One tear made its way down his cheek as he watched something that wasn't there. For the moment, he was lost.

As soon as Cid heard Ni'esla's voice, saw that damned needle, the darkness of memory blinded him—what he had forgotten came over him and it was as if he were experiencing it anew. With a flash of incoherent panic, he tried to hold on to the here and now—there was a reason to forget—but it was too late; the elusive and vague events of the last two weeks would be now known. Vertigo pulled him down and the black claimed him.

...The door of the Shanghai-Tei swung shut, closing quietly behind him. He placed a cigarette in his mouth and lit it, guarding the flame from the wind. After a drag on the cigarette, he looked back at the inn for a moment. His friend, the man who had been in the Shinra Air Force with him so long ago, had accomplished so much with his life. A wife, a whole damn nest-full of rugrats, a satisfying job...it was difficult for him to admit to himself that he envied the man. He had, from time to time over the years wished for a family of his own, but he had wasted every second of his life after the damn Shinra 26 fell back to the earth; wasted every ounce of his strength hating and blaming himself. As he turned toward his house, he thought about those things; yeah, he blamed himself, but he had always been so weak, such a poor excuse for a man, that he couldn't face it so he took it all out on Shera...who for some reason of her own was willing to take it. He wondered briefly what might have happened if Shera had had the backbone to dump it all back on him, where it belonged, and forced him to take it. Would it have ruined him or saved him? He thought it would have ruined him; there was nothing she could do to force him to look at it with open eyes. He didn't know...but it didn't really matter now. That strange spear of his, the life of the Venus Gospel, had taken the initiative. When he thought about it, he realized that it could be no other way. If he had the strength to face the mountain of carefully constructed delusions he had foisted on himself on his own then he would have done it long ago. But it didn't work that way; there was a reason he had shifted the blame, a reason he taken all his anger out on someone else. He didn't want to face it, so he would not and could not without help. Something else, something that started in the deepest places, was the only thing that could help. Fortresses had to be broken from

the inside, and he was grateful to the one who broke it.

Now he looked back at what was and knew there was nothing he could do to change it. Which was fine by him; it was such a bloody mess it would take a thousand years to sort it all out. Life was now, today; he had to live now or never. He remembered the pictures his friend had shown him of his mess of kids. A family someday...well, there were still many 'somedays' to come, now that he could see them clearly. When he reached the gate on his picket fence, he was smiling a little. For some reason, the thought of his own brood of Highwinds brought him a great joy. He wondered what Shera would think of that; someday he was gonna marry her—there wasn't another soul on the whole damn Planet that would put up with one big Highwind and a bunch of little Highwinds runnin' all around. He loved her about as much as he could love anything; for reasons quite unknown and mysterious to him, she'd stayed with him and become a friend closer than a sister. He shook his head, still grinning; he was going to have to stop daydreaming if he was going to go dispatch of more of those monsters and expect to be paid for it.

He opened the gate and stepped into his over-grown backyard, then to the door of the garage, which he entered. He walked over to the corner where he kept his pole-arms and looked through them. He wasn't exactly going out to beat the %^#@ outta Jenova-SYNTHESIS, so he didn't need to take one of his stronger weapons. The Dragoon Lance would be more than adequate. After taking a Slash-All and placing it in one of the materia slots on his bracelet, he went back outside and started off for the fields around Rocket Town, carrying his lance on his shoulder. After a few minutes walk, he was outside the town and standing among the trees and grass that characterized the landscape. He flicked some ash off the end of his cigarette just as a strong wind came up from behind him, causing him to stumble. There was a darkness and a voice carrying in the wind, so he turned around to look for the source of it. Standing behind him was a woman with the biggest damn hair he'd ever seen. Her feet barely touched the ground and her dress floated in a way reminiscent of cloth in water. Her pale hair was much the same. Cid opened his mouth to say something, but as soon as he did, he felt his breath snatched out of him. It felt just like he had the wind knocked out of him. He dropped his lance and gasped for air, but for some reason, there was none to be had. It only took a few seconds for him to fall to the ground unconscious.

Some indeterminate amount of time later, he stirred. He felt woozy, as if he had been drugged. After a few seconds of lying there clearing his head, he tried to look around to see where he was. It didn't do him any good; he was blindfolded. That was certainly a cause for concern. After that intensely annoying discovery, he tried to figure out his situation as best he could. He was lying on a cold floor, probably cement, on his stomach. He silently breathed several choice curses when he realized his hands and his feet were tightly bound. Well, hell, I'm in a %^&*\$#^ of trouble, ain't I? Now what?

Cid lay there muttering and cursing his luck to himself for easily a half-hour; he hadn't even bothered trying to sit up. It was hardly the most comfortable place he'd ever been and his hands and feet were going numb. It was fortunate he had his gloves on; whoever had bound him sure tied him up tight enough. He knew he would have been bleeding by now if his hands had been bare. His ankles weren't so fortunate; whatever it was that bound him was hard plastic, and it had cut through his old, worn-out socks and into his skin. Whoever did this could have tied his feet over his pant legs, which came right down to the top of his shoes and were buckled half-way down his calf so they fit exactly, but they insisted on making it as tight as possible.

Finally, he heard two people enter the room, talking normally. One, a man with an average sounding voice asked, "How did you find one so fast? I thought it would take forever."

A second man with a much quieter and almost whispering voice answered, "Don't worry about that, I just did, OK?"

"Find one what?!" Cid shouted, angry. It didn't seem to him that it would matter one way or the other how he acted; he was helpless to escape at the moment and they could do whatever it was they wanted to do without any hassle from him.

"Oh!" the first man exclaimed, "I guess that means you're awake."

"Find a human chimera," the second man added. "There aren't many of you around, you know."

"Ah, &\$#!" Cid swore. He couldn't say they had made a mistake; it wasn't that long ago that he had found out he was a descendent of Bahamut, the bloody King of Monsters. The proof of it was in his jumping and his Dragon limit, although he could wield a mop, too, and he didn't think that made him some descendent of any damn janitors of yore. Anyway, it seemed to be getting him in a mess of trouble as of late. Thirty-two years and only now did anyone seem to care; he'd

spent a lifetime thinking he was as normal as the next John Q. Public and now some ^&*^\$%^'s decide to kidnap him over it. It pissed him off in the extreme. "What the hell is it to you?"

"We just want to try something. A little experiment," the man with the soft voice answered.

The man's quiet voice had a note of menace in it. A shiver ran down Cid's spine and a chill gripped him. Human experimentation was the province of the Shinra freaks—Shinra was gone, but that didn't mean the same fate had met the freaks. He swallowed hard and asked, "You don't have anything to do with Hojo, do you?" His friend Vincent had said little about him, but he knew enough to fear that name.

The first man cleared his throat and answered tersely, "The hypothesis was Hojo's, but I've altered the actual experiment. It's quite painless and quick. But to answer your question: no, we have nothing to do with Hojo."

The second man added, "I'm actually gonna do the work; my brother is very sensitive that way. We did the same sort of experiment on my sister, and it didn't adversely affect her. Don't worry about it; you'll be fine."

Cid felt the two men pick him up and quickly set him on what felt like a stretcher. After they began moving, he asked, "If yer all so sensitive about this stuff, why're ya doin' it at all? I don't remember you askin' me how I felt about it!" His words were strong, but his voice was shaking. A deep sense of dread crept up on him; he had no wish to learn the nightmares Vincent and Cloud knew.

"You'll be fine; like I said, we did the same to Ni'esla, my sister. You'll be sedated. We wouldn't hurt our own blood." The first man's voice betrayed a prick of conscience, but not enough, apparently, to stop this. Cid heard the first man stride away as a large door hissed shut. Something smelled familiar in the room, but he couldn't place it. Shortly he felt himself stop moving. The most sickening sense of evil twisted through his gut and made his skin crawl. It was just like being in the same room as someone whose hate and malice was so intense one could feel it.

Another voice, one like the voice he heard in the wind, said, "Come, let us begin." Footsteps came near and suddenly the blindfold was removed, allowing Cid to get a glimpse of his surroundings. The room was dark, except for a strange green glow and a bright light, which he guessed was somewhere overhead. The woman knelt down and looked him in the face. She smiled thinly; it surprised Cid to see the dagger-like points of her translucent teeth. It was not a comforting sight; the evil he felt in his bones found its source in her.

"Do not resist us; if you do, I will take your breath from you and keep it forever. I have taken it before and I can do it again," she said with a quiet menace. It was by far more frightening than anything he had ever heard; it was the voice of one who truly has no qualms with murder, one who has, in fact, knowingly chosen her path. Cid made no answer; what could he say to such a one? Apparently, she was satisfied, so she took a small scalpel from a table near by and cut the plastic tie from his wrists. Cid winced when the circulation to his hands was restored; they began throbbing rather painfully.

"Have we decided to do anything differently, Ni'e?" the man asked. He took one of Cid's arms, and with help from his sister, carried him a short distance to what looked like an operating table. The touch of that evil woman nearly made him sick, but she let go quickly and with her own expression of disgust as soon as the two laid him on the table. Cid watched the man without expression. He was rather thin and small, with pale skin and dark eyes. And he didn't look like he ever brushed his hair. "What do you think?" he asked, looking down at Cid as he started taking his leather glove off. He returned the gaze, still expressionless; only his blue eyes revealed his dread. He was afraid of what they were going to do, but it was an expectant fear that didn't reach his face. "Heh, I guess you don't need to answer that," he added with a mirthless smile as he tossed the glove in a corner and started on the blue jacket.

Cid allowed it in silence; he knew that the woman would kill him without a second thought. For a moment he wondered which would be worse, to live at the mercy of Ni'esla or to die right now. It was a sobering thought, but he knew there was nothing they could do that could take from him those things that truly mattered. If he lived through this, and he thought that was likely, he would just go on as he had. His immediate future would be his distant past someday, no matter how dark it looked now; that outlook helped him deal with his fear. When the two had removed his shirt, they put one of those gowns with the little blue polka dots on him then used some velcro straps to hold his arms down to two extensions on the table made for that purpose. He'd never been in an OR, so he didn't know if it was normal to restrain patients...but he had been to enough doctors to form an opinion on the gown. He smiled slightly in spite of his growing terror and cracked

nervously, "I always hated these damn backless dresses." He needed to see some humor in this situation, if only to keep the dread at bay.

The man snickered. "Keep that attitude; I think it'll help you survive in the long run. It's a good outlook." A few moments later Ni'esla cut the plastic binding Cid's feet and proceeded to remove his shoes. "Huh," the man said, "looks like I pulled it a little tight. Sorry about that." It didn't take the two long to finish undressing him and restrain his legs. Ni'esla took a cloth of some sort and laid it over Cid.

The man walked over to a monitor and flipped a few switches. Then he returned to the side of the table and directed his voice to some point on the wall. "This is the official documentation of experimental trial number 23: viral genetic manipulation and wind elemental—subject: human/dragon chimera. Sri-Danat will not be performing this experiment; in his stead, I, Djin-Fe, and our sister Ni'esla will. Some alteration to Sri-Danat's original procedure has been made in an effort to speed up the process. It is the hypothesis of Ni'esla and I that a massive introduction of the virus created by Sri-Danat will prevent the subject's immune system from fighting it. In effect, we believe overwhelming the subject's immune system will allow the genetic manipulation to occur faster. We also believe a longer stay in the Mako mixture will allow the genetic alterations a safer environment and thus speed up the process. The mixture has been—"

Cid interrupted Djin-Fe's monologue by shouting, "What the hell are you talking about?! What're ya gonna do to me?!" He struggled against the cloth restraints, the fear temporarily overriding any rational thought; for fear wanted to save him but didn't know it might just get him killed in the process. Ni'esla glanced down and raised a finger; her cold eyes and the slight breeze across Cid's face reminded him of her threat. With that reminder of the greater immediate danger, Cid ceased his struggling and tried to hold himself very still. After what Djin-Fe had said, he knew that all of that other man's assurances were wasted. And Ni'esla's cruelty was so evident just by his being in her sickening presence that Cid was certain this would be a most unpleasant experience.

Djin-Fe brushed some of his black hair back as he glanced down at Cid. He looked back toward the unseen recorder and continued his explanation. "As I was saying, the mixture has been prepared as the outline of the experiment proscribes: three mastered Elemental materia and three Choco/Mog materia have been melted down and mixed with processed Mako. This mixture will soak into the subject and remake him as a wind elemental. To increase the speed of this process we will make several more incisions so that the mixture soaks in faster. Well," he said, turning to a table and picking up an IV needle, "shall we?" As Djin-Fe was preparing to put the needle in Cid's arm, Ni'esla raised her hand and shook her head.

"What?" Djin-Fe asked, confused. "We're not gonna put him under?"

"No...I want to be sure this experiment is a success. To that end I will do everything in my power to stop any resistance to the wind," Ni'esla explained quietly.

"So, what're we gonna do? You wanna do it different?" the unkempt man asked, still unsure of what his sister had planned. Cid was damn certain he at least didn't like the sound of it.

"Oh, yes, I think we will. You see, the wind requires something in order to bear one's spirit. I want this one to be unable to resist that requirement. The more pain we inflict on his soul, the harder it will be to find the strength to fight the wind. Or to even want to. I doubt anyone could fight it, but I want to be sure," the pale woman added.

Djin-Fe gave her a sidelong glance and shrugged. "OK, we'll do it your way," he said after a moment. He looked down at Cid and added, "Sorry. I guess in the interest of science, my dear sister has decided to make things difficult for you. I suppose, since she is what you will be, she has an insight we lack."

Cid shook his head a little, anxiety having been replaced by a dull certainty that that evil woman was going to hurt him badly. In her voice was the utter darkness, a consuming blackness that wanted nothing but to share its misery with the world. In his soul he now knew her to be a demon, or at least a person so wholly given over to the dark that it made little difference. He knew that Ni'esla was more interested in satisfying her sadism than she was in the results of any experiment. He saw the same knowledge in Djin-Fe's expression; it was a sort of mild disgust at his sister's behavior mingled with a willingness to let it slide. "Djin-Fe," Cid asked, his voice almost a whisper, "why are you going to let her do this?"

The dark-haired man grimaced a little, apparently feeling uncomfortable. Then he blew the question off and said, "I don't

care what she does. Don't worry, you'll live. You just won't enjoy it." Djinn-Fe turned back to face the invisible recorder and explained, "There has been another slight change in plans. We're gonna start right off with the introduction of the virus, beginning with an injection into the bloodstream, then through forced respiration...and after that, we'll begin the massive infection by injecting small amounts of the virus in every separate structure until Ni'esla's satisfied this poor man's been hurt as much as possible." The last was said with a pointed glance at Ni'esla. Neither Cid nor Djinn-Fe missed the fact that the comment didn't faze her one bit. Djinn-Fe shook his head. "And Sri thinks it's just a mean streak."

Djinn-Fe handed Ni'esla a needle and stepped away for a moment. She took it and stabbed it into a vein in Cid's arm. He jerked a little and sucked in a quick gasp; she was being none too gentle with it. Whatever was in the syringe was cold. There was something in it that caused Cid's head to swim almost immediately. For a few minutes, he blinked his eyes trying to focus his blurry vision, too out of it to realize it was a hopeless task. He was dimly aware of something gagging him.

Not long after the fog in his head lifted; he heard the man say in an almost reassuring tone, "Don't fight it; just let it breathe for you. The quicker you go with it, the easier it'll be on you." For a second, the pilot wasn't sure what he meant. When he tried to inhale, though, he found he couldn't. He panicked and struggled for a few minutes with what he shortly realized was a tube stuffed down his throat that was doing the breathing for him. He tried to relax, as much as was possible, given the circumstance, and listen for the soft whisper of the machine. It took a little work, but eventually he was able to keep his breathing in time with the machine's. Once he did, Djinn-Fe diddled with the controls on the machine, letting some stuff into the air that felt hazy and made Cid want to cough. It must have been the stupid virus they had been yammering about.

After a few more minutes of preparation, the woman took the same needle she had used before and began systematically injecting tiny amounts of fluid into Cid's body. She started at his head and stabbed the large needle into every different bone in his face, then every muscle. The first time he jerked his head involuntarily at the pain, but this only served to make it worse. After that he tried to stay very still as she twisted and pushed the tip of the needle into him. She was intentionally rough; it was clear she wanted to make this as hard and as painful as possible. Eventually, as every time Ni'esla hurt him with that needle became more intolerable than the last, as tears began streaking down his face and his cries of pain and later screams were choked off by that machine, Cid sank back into some dim place in his mind and started to drown in it. He slowly became aware of nothing with surprising intensity. He heard their voices, but didn't understand them. He still felt the pain, but he couldn't comprehend it. His vision was equally meaningless. For some time, he stayed under the surface of the strange depths of that place.

Suddenly, he had to leave that shadowy state; he felt like he really was drowning. He tried to sit up, but when he was unable to, he remembered that his arms were strapped down. His head hurt and he felt like he needed more air, but he couldn't get any more. Djinn-Fe looked down at him with black eyes and commented, "Shoulda stayed where ever it was you went. Ni'e's still got a ways to go."

Ni'esla hissed a little at her brother; it was a cruel sound. Cid glanced in her direction just in time to see her terrible grin and watch her stick the needle in the palm of his hand. He squeezed his eyes shut tight and tried to scream when the needle scraped against a bone then was jerked out, leaving a long tear on his hand. But somehow the feel of her cold hand on his, keeping it still, was a worse torment than anything she had done with that needle. It was a spiritual revulsion at the evil that he felt in Ni'esla and it was by far the more maddening.

Several minutes later, Cid fell again into a shadowy state when he could no longer stand the pain Ni'esla was inflicting on him. Time seemed not to pass there, under the dark, but it was not somewhere he could stay long. It too was difficult, in its own way, and perhaps more dangerous. For many hours he passed in and out of the shadows, driven to and fro from one to another when the other place became too painful to stay. The stints in the dark grew shorter with each trip, as did the time he could endure Ni'esla's needle.

The shadows passed away slowly this time, for he had not been among them long when he came back. Cid found himself alone, the disgusting presence gone for the moment, and she had taken the needle with her. Alone... He cried silently, knowing it wouldn't last long. He had no way of knowing how long he'd been here; it seemed to have been a strange forever, sleeping in shadows and waking in darkness, with nothing to see but the demon and her steel needle. And her brother, who just sat there running his mouth and twiddling his thumbs, occasionally taking the hypodermic and letting Ni'esla rest for a bit, while he stabbed it and twisted it into Cid's flesh. How long had he been here?

Approximately ten minutes later, the door hissed open and Djin-Fe walked up to the operating table. He ran a hand through the shock of black hair he never seemed to brush and pursed his lips in thought. "If I let you up for a little bit, would you promise not to try to escape?" he asked in his whispery voice. Cid looked away; a few slow tears trickled down his face. Even if he could make such a promise, he wouldn't; how could he promise to stay in this place? How could he let them continue torturing him if they let him loose? He closed his eyes and shook his head, a barely perceptible movement. "Hmmm," the man responded, "at least you're honest about it.... Does your word mean that much to you that you wouldn't lie to me and take this opportunity to escape?"

The pilot nodded slightly; it seemed strange to him sometimes, but his word did mean that much to him. Even given to such cruel people he would not break his word. However, he didn't think he could escape even if given the opportunity. He was still in a lot of pain; he wasn't sure how far he could go and he had no idea where he was. Maybe he was just succumbing to hopelessness; perhaps he should have taken the chance. No, it wasn't that...he knew he would live through this, and he didn't want to take the chance of being killed. If he were going to die here, he should have tried something earlier and saved himself a lot of suffering. He wanted to see Shera again...and he couldn't give up on the life he had been given.

Djin-Fe shook his head. "That's not it, is it. You're a strange breed, Highwind. What do you have that's worth living through this for?" He paused for a long moment, his expression troubled. "Ah, well. I doubt it's worth as much as you think, but whatever floats yer boat, I guess," he added, having apparently gotten over his spate of conscience.

Not long after, Ni'esla entered the room. Cid instinctively turned his head away from that evil creature and began trembling uncontrollably. In his soul, he feared her, but in his body, he was plain terrified. He didn't want to see her and her cold eyes and cruel smile. The twisted sense of evil returned, crawling up his spine and chilling him like some slimy, cold, godforsaken thing; he tried to pull away from her, but he was helpless to escape...still helpless. How long could he stay in her horrifying presence and still retain his sanity? The cold, decaying fingers of her unclean spirit encircled his heart and constricted, covering whatever they could with their deathly gray miasma. It was driving him mad.

She chuckled lightly, seemingly amused at Cid's reaction. She laughed harder when she saw him twist his face in disgust at the sound of her voice. "Look to me," she commanded. Cid hesitated, but then complied, not wishing her to force the issue. She held up something that vaguely resembled a short, wide comb. The top had a handle that went over the back of the hand so it could be held in the palm, while the bottom had a small row of short razors arranged like tiny teeth. Cid tensed and looked away from her; he knew it wouldn't be long before he found out what that was for. "For the purpose of the next phase of this experiment, we need to make a few incisions," she explained, then set the blades on his temple. With a quick swipe, the comb-like instrument left a trail of long, parallel cuts to bleed on his face. The wind elemental hissed in unexpected anger and continued to viciously rake the comb over Cid's body. Blood trickled in his eyes and he heard it dripping on the ground. Very quickly he went into shock from the assault and sudden and great blood-loss.

Faintly, as if from a great distance, he heard someone shout, "That's enough, Ni'e! You're gonna kill him!" There was a scuffle for a second, then the same man said, "That was too much...c'mon, let's finish this...." Cid recovered slightly and blinked the blood out of his eyes, while Djin-Fe carefully pulled the tube out of his throat. It took a few seconds and a near faint before he was able to breathe normally, albeit shallowly. Djin-Fe quickly undid the cloth straps and picked up Cid as carefully as he could; still, he cried out softly, too weak now for anything else. "Lift the lid, Ni'e," he commanded. He heard the faint sound of something shifting, then the strange familiar smell got stronger. Mako...

Djin-Fe slowly lowered Cid into a large metal container. Cid caught a glimpse of the man's clothes; they appeared to be soaked with blood. The man's expression was one of distaste. "I think you might have killed him, Ni'e," he said as finished setting Cid in the container, which he closed quickly after. The Mako was hot, but it almost immediately clouded his mind to the point where he didn't notice it. It barely registered when he inhaled a lung-full of the hot liquid. Something whispered...

In a daze, he remembered Tifa (...tifa...?) had said she heard voices accusing her in the Lifestream... No voices...no words... no broken minds to put together...but there were accusers, a hundred thousand questions, insane gibbering blaming him for every crime committed from the time Bahamut walked upon the ground. My existence was a crime...his mother should have killed him before he was born. They should have killed her for her crimes. They all should have destroyed that terrible dragon before he could have such misbegotten freaks, before he could pollute their blood. (...he was my father...?) Why else would they mention him...sideshow freak. They should kill me for my crimes.

Cid tried to speak, to answer the accusers, but no words would come out. Soon the accusers' questions became too jumbled to understand, mixing with his memories and bleeding into his thoughts until he could no longer separate them. Time slowed until every breath he took of that hot Mako lasted for years. Slowly, incredibly slowly, the Mako and materia ate into his mind, dissolving it and poisoning it. He ceased to be aware of much of anything except the dull sense of time crawling by ponderously and the microscopically increasing sickness invading his bones....

"...It's taking him forever! What's wrong with him?" Cid looked up, trying to see the source of the voice, but he couldn't really see anything. His vision was so jumbled it made him sick to even think about. He coughed hard, expelling the most god-awful colored liquid...if he never saw that green again he would die a happy man. He shook his head and rubbed his face, trying to make sense of the six centuries he remembered of nothing else but that green hell. All that ended up doing was making him throw up on the chair he was leaning on.

"You worry too much, probably just shocked. I mean, think about it, it's gotta be a shock. We just infected him with a virus that's gonna wreak havoc on him and then dumped him in Mako. It's understandable!" a familiar voice answered.

For what might have been the first or fiftieth time, the pilot looked back at his shirt, which he was supposed to be putting on. He picked it up then dropped it again, falling forward and landing on his side in a near faint. "But Ni'esla didn't come out like this! It's taken him two hours to put his pants on! I don't even want to know how long it's going to take for him to tie his shoes!" the first voice exclaimed.

That name, Ni'esla...Cid covered his mouth, barely containing the scream that tried to escape his lips. He closed his eyes and began crying, assailed by panic and the memory of her terrible presence. He cringed, remembering the sensation of that needle scraping bone in his hand. The tear was gone, along with all the lacerations and other injuries, but the memory was still powerful and fresh in his mind.

"Sri, you worry too much! Maybe he's allergic to Mako? You ever thought of that?" Cid finally recognized the voice as belonging to Djin-Fe.

"Well...," Sri-Danat muttered. Cid heard the two walking away from the door. At least, he thought that was what he heard. His mind was working extremely slowly, so he had a hard time processing what he sensed. He had almost entirely given up on his sight; there was just too much to sort through. Everything was being drowned in green; every minute that passed made it worse. After several minutes of lying on the tile floor, he remembered again that he was supposed to be getting dressed, so he picked up his shirt again and managed to slip it over his head and one arm before falling to the ground, vomiting and semi-conscious. He was certain he had never felt so damn sick in his entire life. The next time he remembered he was trying to get dressed, which was about ten minutes later, he decided not to get up and risk fainting again. That worked a little better, and over the next hour he managed to finish the job with only a minimum of trouble, but it exhausted him. Lying very still and trying to ignore the green shadows that were slowly consuming what he had left of his mind, he fell asleep.

"Hey, get up. Time to go," Djin-Fe called as he shook Cid's shoulder, trying to rouse him. The sickly green had become a warm, comfortable black. He opened his eyes a slit and looked up at the dark haired man. He wanted to say something, but as soon as the desire came, it was swallowed up in the darkness clouding his mind. "You look like hell," Djin-Fe muttered as he grabbed the sick pilot's arm and pulled him to his feet. After a few minutes fighting dizziness and nausea, he was able to stand on his own, barely.

"Yeah, wonder why? He really shouldn't be this sick," Sri-Danat asked no one in particular. Then he faced Cid and wondered, "I never caught your name."

Djin-Fe touched Cid's elbow, directing him to walk with them. He shuffled along between the two brothers, for the moment unsure where he was or how he got there. Several seconds went by while he tried to remember his name. He had one, or at least he thought he did, but whatever it was, it was lost to him now. "Don't know," he murmured.

Sri-Danat just wrinkled his brow. Shortly the three reached a small stable with several mountain Chocobos lodged inside. Ni'esla was standing outside waiting for them. Sri-Danat went in to get three Chocobos while the rest stayed outside. Cid leaned against the wooden wall of the stables and slid down until he was sitting with his head against the wall and lolling

to one side. "I wish you would have told me when you finished, Djin," Sri-Danat called from inside the stables.

"Hey, you were out buying materia. I didn't want to bother you. Besides, he's been sleeping for three days; it's not like you could have done anything," Djin-Fe answered.

"Yeah...I just wish I could have done something. I feel bad that he reacted so badly."

Ni'esla muttered under her breath, "Sri, you are such an idiot, such a fool." Cid grimaced at the sound of her voice and began shivering, but he had no idea why. He wasn't sure he had ever met her before, but the gut-level terror he felt must have been caused by something.

"Ni'e, be quiet," Djin-Fe admonished.

Cid heard the other man shuffling things around and carrying tack to the birds. "How are we going to do this? He can't ride by himself," Sri-Danat asked loudly from inside the tack shed.

"Uh, I'll take him," Djin-Fe answered, after looking toward his sister and getting an emphatic no. "We're gonna have to go slow, though. I don't want him puking his guts out on my bird," he added, brushing some black hair out of his eyes. A few moments later, he continued, "Let's get this show on the road. We only have a few hours of daylight left and I'm gonna be back here by nightfall."

Sri-Danat came out of the shed, riding one and leading two other Chocobos out. He then handed the reins to Ni'esla and Djin-Fe. The two men picked up Cid and set him on Djin-Fe's green mount while Ni'esla climbed into the saddle of her bird. Djin-Fe jumped up and sat on the saddle behind Cid, wrapping one arm around his waist and pulling him back so that he was leaning on his chest. The pilot was limp as a rag doll. After looking at Cid for a second, Sri shook his head and said, "I wonder if everything's gonna be OK, I mean, he looks terrible."

"He'll be fine, sure, it'll be fine," Djin-Fe answered, an edge in his voice. He whispered in Cid's ear, "Don't worry, you'll be fine." Unexpectedly, his voice was tinged with regret. "Now let's get going." The three Chocobos slowly descended the Nibel mountainside and headed south toward the Silver Mountains. Djin-Fe rode his Chocobo gently, but it helped little. Cid still got sick several times; although the Chocobo was spared, the man's coat sleeve was not. He just grumbled about it, apparently not as irritated as others might have been. About an hour out of the Nibel Mountains and a half riding on the foothills west of the Silver mountain range, the three riders halted their Chocobos. It was late afternoon.

"Sky's awful bright," Sri-Danat commented.

"It is the wind preparing itself," Ni'esla said, her tone dark.

Through half closed eyes, Cid gazed up at the cobalt expanse above him. It was bright, and exceptionally beautiful. It looked to be the same color as it was at the height of day. It was a welcome sight to look up at the unbroken sky; it was all the same, no confusing mess to sort through or images tilting drunkenly to make him sick. A little gust of wind ruffled his hair and he nearly cried in relief to feel the air again. He loved the open air, the sky, the wind. He didn't remember the nightmare he was leaving, only that it was over.

Djin-Fe turned his head and looked at the pilot leaning against him. He muttered an uneasy curse under his breath, then said in a loud, contemptuous tone, "Well, off you go; you know your way home, doncha?" He unceremoniously dumped his ill passenger onto the grass below. Cid landed on his back and groaned, turning on to his side and curling up slightly.

"Djin, what did you do that for? He's not taking it well as it is!" Sri-Danat cried in disapproval.

"What do you care, Sri?" Djin-Fe shouted back. "I don't remember you asking him how he felt about it!"

The other man jerked back in shock. "It's for science!" Sri-Danat countered after a brief pause. Djin-Fe just hollered in frustration and kicked his Chocobo, setting off toward home. Sri-Danat followed angrily.

Ni'esla looked up toward the sky for a moment and smiled. "What a lovely day...I don't think I've ever seen a sky so blue."

With that, she set off as well, leaving Cid alone in a field of short grass and spring wildflowers. Dusk fell, then night; Cid never moved from that spot. Night gave way to morning; in its turn it also gave place to a midday graced with a starling azure unblemished by any cloud, one so bright Cid had to cover his eyes.

These memories faded slowly, their edges tattering like thin clouds in a stiff breeze, returning him once again to the front room of his house. His heart was pounding and his breath ragged; soon, the terror he felt reluctantly released its grip. Cid held up his clawed and scaly hands, looking at them as if for the first time. The claws were dark as ebony and sharper than before, and light played on the grayish plates as it might on brushed steel. In another time, on another's hands, they would have been beautiful.

This was an experiment, then.

Could he fight it?

Ni'esla thought not.

But she had thought it necessary to hurt him in order to drive any fight out of him. So again: could he fight it? He didn't know, but he would, if for no other reason than he liked who he was in truth and thought that truth was worth fighting to keep. It didn't matter if it was a hopeless cause. He refused to forfeit his soul to end his pain. Cid hugged his arms to his chest and hung his head, knowing there was no way for this to end well. His life could not and would not ever be the same.

* * *

Vincent flung open the door to the makeshift stables on the mountainside. The stiff wind caught it, throwing it to the wall and making a loud crack. Cloud shoved Sri-Danat into the stable and strode in after him. With a dark stare, Cloud growled, "Get them saddled up, and quick."

Sri-Danat went into the tack shed immediately. He was still green around the gills after seeing the recording of his last experiment. He could hardly fathom what Ni'esla and Djin-Fe had done. He felt like a complete fool for not seeing his sister's evil before. He had spent too long with his head in books to realize his sister was a sadist. And how had Djin-Fe allowed it? How could he? He even helped her! If they had just followed his instructions, none of this would have happened. Next time, he would just do it himself. That way, he wouldn't have any blood on his hands.

While they waited, Vincent crossed his arms and stared out at the horizon. After a moment of silence, he asked tonelessly, "Can you reverse it?"

After some shifting and muttering, Sri-Danat answered, "No. I won't. I can't do what they did, and that's what would have to happen."

"You mean to tell me, you would refuse to do something to repair the damage you've done?" Cloud replied, incredulous.

"I haven't done anything wrong! It was Djin-Fe and Ni'esla!" Sri shouted back as he saddled up the three Chocobos.

"I can't believe him!" Cloud muttered to Vincent. "How can he sit there and say he did nothing?" He reached up and fingered the hilt of his sword, fidgeting and trying to resist the urge to take the bald scientist's head off. The man apparently thought it was all good as long as no one got physically hurt, never mind the results. Wind dragon...Cloud shook his head; he couldn't imagine what that would be like, to see Cid altered like that.

Vincent said nothing. He had been around enough scientists to develop a healthy distaste for their ilk. It was a common fallacy among them that their work was greater than the people it hurt; many, in fact, gave no heed to the ramifications. If they could be brought to see it, most would be shocked...but others still wouldn't care, like Hojo. He narrowed his red eyes at the name. Would his friend now share in his agony, the torment of trying to keep internal monsters under tight control so they wouldn't take over? Is that what it would be for him? Most people had their 'demons', the skeletons in their closet, the little internal monsters that harassed their souls, but Vincent's demons were very real; the hidden lab was left in flames because of them. Would the same be now said for Cid?

The two warriors turned toward a sudden sound coming from a short distance up the mountain path. A few rocks fell as another person scabbled down the steep slope. He wore a dark leather jacket and blue jeans; his black hair fell in his face, partly blocking his dark eyes. He had a young look and the same type of face as Cloud. He took a few more steps then stopped short when he saw Vincent and Cloud staring darkly at him.

"Djin-Fe, I presume," the blond swordsman hissed.

"Yeah...Cloud Strife, is that it?" Djin-Fe answered slowly as he took a few wary steps toward them.

It was Cloud's turn to be surprised. "How did you know my name?"

"I must confess, I've been spying on you all ever since I was in the Shanghai-Tei and that Seir creep showed up. So, how is Cid doing?"

Cloud bared his teeth and backhanded Djin-Fe, knocking him to the ground. He scrambled up and rubbed his jaw while a trail of blood trickled down his chin. There were a few teeth loose, but nothing missing. He shook the stars from his eyes and ventured, "Not good, I take it...."

"We saw the recording," Vincent stated emotionlessly. Only his eyes flashed with the anger he felt.

Djin-Fe looked at the dark man, but could not maintain eye contact for more than a second. Sri-Danat led the Chocobos out at that moment. When he saw his brother, he shouted, "How could you! How could you do something like that?"

Djin-Fe glared at Sri-Danat, almost in disbelief. "You can stand there and accuse me when it was you who thought the whole thing up in the first place?!"

Cloud turned a dark stare on the two brothers. "I can blame you both. I think you should come with us too, Djin-Fe."

"Huh? Where are you going?" the man asked.

"Back to Rocket Town. Maybe we can convince you to reverse what you've done on the way," Cloud replied.

Djin-Fe thought for a moment, realizing that whatever these two men had planned, it would not be in his best interests to resist. He nodded slightly and backed down a bit, his face expressing resignation. After a short pause, he asked sincerely, "Really, how is he doing?" He wasn't sure why he wanted to know, but he hadn't been able to ignore what he thought was a slight concern.

"He is not well," Vincent answered. "When we last saw him two days ago, he was unable to get up or do more than whisper. He had spent several days previous unconscious."

"Why do you care?" Cloud growled, "You were the one who put him in that condition."

"I don't care," Djin-Fe snapped hastily. "Why should I?"

"Let's go now," Vincent stated, "We can 'discuss' this on the way. The trip will take a few hours." He jumped up and floated slowly onto his borrowed mount, his cape flicking up behind him. The Chocobo seemed uncomfortable with its new rider, but didn't complain much. It was an easy-going Chocobo; it had already been spooked by the wind and Vincent was surprised it didn't get more anxious as it was. Cloud nodded and climbed up on the second Chocobo, leaving the third for Sri-Danat and Djin-Fe to share. The two warring brothers looked at each other in contempt, but both knew Djin-Fe was the better rider, so Djin-Fe climbed up front with the reins and Sri-Danat sat behind him. As they set off for Rocket Town, Djin-Fe considered his actions. Whatever else he should have considered, it was stupid of him not to take Cid's powerful friends into account at least. Cid himself was a dangerous man; but he had wanted that and it was no trouble to deal with it...but these two, he should have thought of what havoc they could ruin on his sibling's dreams.

Maybe he had, in the back of his mind...maybe he had.

* * *

The four travelers arrived in Rocket Town a few hours after Ni'esla left Cid's house. Vincent led the group to the white picket fence surrounding the Captain's back yard. When they arrived, Cloud dismounted his green Chocobo and lashed the reins to one of the fence posts. Vincent, Djin-Fe, and Sri-Danat did the same. Vincent spied Shera standing in her backyard so he led the other three around to the gate and then to Shera. She turned to look at Vincent, her expression one of shock bordering on out-right denial. It was not a momentary shock, either; it was one that suggested something unbelievable in its magnitude had occurred. He wondered what had happened in the two days they had been gone.

"What happened?" the dark man asked.

Shera didn't answer for a moment. It was clear she didn't want to say anything. "He's asleep," she finally muttered. Vincent decided to leave it at that. There was no use prying.

"We found out what happened to Cid," Cloud stated. "We brought these two with us to see if there was something we could do to stop it. See, what happened—"

Shera interrupted him before he could finish. "I know what happened," she said in a shaky voice. She turned to look back at her house. "He...he's...he told me." Looking over at the two strangers, she asked Vincent, "Who are these?"

"Their names are Djin-Fe and Sri-Danat," he answered in his emotionless voice.

Shera's eyes narrowed and her face hardened. "Why did you do this?" she spat at the two.

Sri-Danat shuffled his feet in the tall grass. Every reason he had suddenly disintegrated and blew away like the smoke-screens they were. In Shera's piercing gaze he saw the pain his experiments had caused and could not deny it. He could not deny it...but neither would he admit it. In one instant all his justifications were declared as shams, but he stubbornly clung to them, unwilling to admit he had been wrong. It was for a good cause, it was to further knowledge, it was for his mother, it was for his sister and brother, it wasn't his fault...it was not his fault. He looked up into Shera's dark eyes and declared as much. "I did nothing. It was him," he said, pointing an accusing finger at his brother.

Djin-Fe gaped in shock at his brother. He looked back at Shera, then quickly flicked his eyes down, unable to meet her intense gaze. He couldn't look at anyone, really. Ever since Cloud and Vincent had discovered their actions, he had been plagued by thoughts of what he had and had not done. His own careful delusions had begun to crumble as well. It had not been a 'slight concern' as he previously thought. He shook his head, unable to give the woman an answer.

"Now that we're here, we have to decide what we can do. Can this whole process be reversed?" Cloud asked Djin-Fe. He knew the bald one was the scientist, but he had quickly acquired a healthy distaste for the man. He refused to even look at him; besides, he had asked him already and knew his answer. Djin-Fe had committed the greater crime, but he seemed to at least feel some remorse.

Sri-Danat answered quickly. "I can't. I couldn't even perform the normal experiment; how could I stomach repeating what my siblings did?"

Vincent leveled his blood red gaze at the scientist. "You would do nothing to set right this atrocity? You are responsible for destroying a man's humanity and you will do nothing?" He remembered not long ago Sri-Danat had said much the same thing, but it still surprised him.

"We haven't seen the results. How do you know he has lost anything?" Sri-Danat countered.

Vincent looked to Shera to answer. It was true, they had not seen Cid; but he knew from the expression on her face that all was not well. Shera looked at the ground, unable to respond. She could hardly come to grips with Cid's transformation; how could she even begin to explain?

Djin-Fe sneered in disgust at his brother. Then he turned to Vincent and said, "I don't think it would work anyway. Maybe we could reverse the genetic alteration, turn him human again, but we would have to repeat the whole thing...." He paused

and swallowed hard, shifting his gaze from one person to another. He didn't care what happened to anyone but himself... so why was he feeling so uncomfortable? "I...I couldn't do it...It was hard enough the first time...he almost died...I don't think he would make it through a second time. Besides, even if it did work, there's nothing we could do about the elemental process." Djinn-Fe brushed some of his black hair out of his eyes and said to Sri-Danat, "It changed Ni'esla, Sri. It's not a mean streak...."

"What do you mean?" Shera asked, still hostile.

Djinn-Fe explained. "Something about it, about the air elemental process twisted her. She turned evil. It didn't happen with the other elements...I remember hearing that when evil spirits take on form, they can only use the air. Maybe that has something to do with it...."

Before anything else could be said, Shera heard someone trying her front door. She rushed into the house, leaving the four others. Shera knew it was the wind elemental calling.

Some time after that woman slammed the door in her face and minutes after Vincent and the others had arrived, Ni'esla wandered back to the subject's home. The wind was becoming furious now, blowing new green leaves everywhere and tearing branches down. Most of the residents of the small town had taken refuge in their houses; it was fortunate for them that all their electricity was carried by underground cables. Ni'esla could feel the wind on the verge of finishing its work; the materia absorbed by the subject was summoning it and soon he would be made of naught but air as she was. She stepped up to the door and tried the knob; there was no point in asking to be let in. The door was locked; this did not surprise her. She took a step back, focusing the airs into her fists. When she let go, they hit the door with enough force to break it. Without a sound, it cracked down the middle but still stood. The elemental had not allowed the sound to carry through her air. Once more, Ni'esla gathered the wind and released it; this time, the door shivered in half. One half fell into the front room while the other hung on broken hinges. She pushed it away and stepped into the nascent elemental's house. She came face to face with a very angry Shera, who had a rifle cocked and leveled at Ni'esla's head.

"Get the hell out of my house," Shera growled through clenched teeth. Her finger held the trigger a hair's breadth from firing.

Ni'esla sneered and edged further into the house, ignoring everyone but Shera. She stopped when Shera pulled her finger back just a little more. "Ah, what fury animals display when their mates are threatened," she hissed, her voice dripping with venom. "Even the timid mouse will bear her teeth."

Shera just narrowed her eyes. Yes, she was angry; she felt such hatred and rage as she had never experienced before. But it did not cloud her judgment; in fact, it left her mind focused and clear. She gazed down the length of the barrel, checking her aim.

Ni'esla raised her hands, readying the wind, intending to rob the 'mouse' of her breath. As soon as she did, however, Shera fired. The wind elemental howled in pain as the bullet tore through her. She stumbled and fell, breathing hard and glaring murder, holding one thin hand over her chest. Shera's aim was true.

But it would take more than a bullet to kill Ni'esla. She slowly found her footing and stood on shaky legs, stooped over from the pain. She shifted her gaze from Shera to Cid, who had just come into the room. He looked startled and half-asleep at the same time.

Shera looked over at him then instinctively turned away, still unable to really look at him. She lowered her rifle, struck by a sudden weariness. It hurt her to see Cid this way.

Cid noticed but said nothing. With hooded eyes, the pilot turned to look at Ni'esla. Just looking at her made his skin crawl, riled his dragon instincts; he wanted so badly to dig his claws into her skin, to tear her, to make her bleed, to revenge himself upon her. He turned his glowing eyes away from her in an effort to quiet the desires of the beast he was becoming.

Ni'esla smiled cruelly. She watched him battle, his own form betraying him and weakening him. "What is the point? You cannot hope to win this fight...," Ni'esla whispered, glancing sidelong at him. She suddenly lunged at Shera, catching her by surprise and tearing the air from around her. The air returned with a reverberating boom, knocking her down.

Cid's tenuous control snapped. He shrieked and jumped at the demon, dark claws extended and sharp teeth bared. He could not stand the thought of that evil creature hurting his love; he would not allow it. Any protective instinct that had been roused in Shera paled in comparison to the true dragon rage that now drove Cid. For himself he could not face Ni'esla, but there was nothing he would not do for Shera. His blue-white dragon fire blazed bright around his fist.

The wind elemental's eyes flew wide, startled, as Cid fell on her and knocked her down. She had expected to provoke him; what she had not realized was with what power he would retaliate. Ni'esla screamed as Cid bit deep into her shoulder and mauled her. His draconian roots traced not to common, rude wyrms but to the unquestioned King of them all. The dragon he was becoming was no less than a son of Bahamut, a prince among monsters; he held more power than Ni'esla realized. His dragon spirit burned her.

Shera stood and shook her head, clearing it from the little black and white pinpricks that Ni'esla's attack had caused. When she saw what was happening, however, she sucked in a breath and dropped her rifle in horror. She backed up a few steps, then bolted down the hall and into the backyard. Ni'esla saw her go and started laughing in spite of her pain. Her dark laughter cut through Cid's animal rage and struck fear into his heart. He jumped far back, landing on all fours on his kitchen table, claws clattering against the hardwood, leaving the wind elemental alone for now. What was he doing? He couldn't think. The dragon in him darkened his mind; he was losing himself in it.

Ni'esla gingerly picked herself up, watching the pilot all the while. It wouldn't be long. Provoking him had helped speed things along, that much was clear. His dark, twisted horns had grown several inches in only a few minutes; all it took was letting go. She smiled at him; she could feel his loathsome light grow cold and the blackness begin to engulf him. "Just give in...there is nothing you can do. You are a wind dragon now; nothing can change that," Ni'esla stated slowly. "Do you know what it means to be an element of the air?"

The wind demanded an answer of him. Cid blinked a few times, desperately trying to regain his equilibrium. What did it mean to be an elemental? He already knew it would have to give himself up if he wanted any peace in his warring body, but that battle was fought against the dragon. What did the air want?

And Sri thinks it's just a mean streak.

You see, the wind requires something in order to bear one's spirit.

"What does it mean, what does it require?" Cid asked, his voice shaking. He had managed to find some little peace for the moment, a little piece of the man he was. He looked down at his hands, wincing as they began to tense again.

Ni'esla took a few slow steps toward Cid, stopping when she stood in front of him. She set her long hand on his scaly cheek, smiling in satisfaction when he cringed and closed his eyes. He didn't pull away; it was as though he could not move. He was helpless again, waiting in horrible anticipation for when she would hurt him again. Ni'esla's smile widened and her expression hardened. She felt a profound and deeply wicked pleasure in seeing his helplessness and knowing she had not only caused it but that she could do to him anything she wanted because of it. That hideous thing he had, the filler and destroyer of dark emptiness, the light she had felt when she first came into his presence several days ago was now grown very dim. Before, just the very existence of something that could banish the dark and satisfy the deep hungers of one's soul had disgusted her, knowing she could never have it. That he had it, that anyone could escape her Hell, enraged her. It was that more than anything else which had driven her to torture him. Now, though, it was almost of no consequence. The darkness was crowding out the light in him and soon it would blot it out all together. He could not live and still have any good in him; the air would drive it out. He would not escape; her kingdom was off to a promising start.

Ni'esla dropped her hand and said, "I think you know. You know what I am." With that she left the house, grinning cruelly as she walked. As an utterly corrupt prince among dragons he would be a power to be reckoned with.

Several minutes later, Cid slowly slipped off the table, balancing precariously on legs that didn't want to obey him. He did know what she was. She was evil, without any light. He guessed that was what the air required. The dragon only wanted control; it could care less the condition of his soul, although if he gave up that fight he would lose himself. But the air demanded more than just a surrender; it required an active acceptance. No one could be as evil as Ni'esla unless they had consciously made a choice to abandon all hope. What would happen if he refused to give up his hope? Once, he thought

he might have done it, not knowing the truth that was deeper than belief, not knowing that there really was a such thing as hope as the Venus Gospel had given it. But he knew it now...he could no more deny it than he could deny that the sky was blue. He knew there was truth, that there was a Promised Land, that there was more in life than what was immediately obvious. He had tasted it. There were no words to express how deeply he knew it.

He felt it would take an incredible effort to deny what he knew to be true. Was it worth it to live?

Suddenly his choice became very clear. Live in abject and hopeless misery or die in peace. Living death. Again he was presented with a choice between life and death, but this time it was given by Ni'esla and not the Venus Gospel. This time he would have to chose death.

He was dead anyway.

* * *

Vincent turned away from the two brothers, unable to put up with them much longer. After Shera went into the house, they had begun arguing with each other. The longer they argued, the deeper Sri-Danat dug his heels in. He refused to believe he was wrong. Djin-Fe refused to accept all the blame; but at least he knew he had done something terrible. He clenched and unclenched his fists, resisting the urge to strike them both. How could they bicker like this? How could they not appreciate the hell they put his friend through? Did they not realize what it was like to be changed into a monster, to have to constantly fight the inner beasts that threatened to break forth at any moment?

No, of course they didn't. They may have lost "the milk of human kindness", but they were still human. Vincent wished more than anything to be alone in his knowledge. They didn't know...but Cid knew. Those two stupid, squabbling, selfish brothers had inflicted on his closest friend a knowledge of things too horrible to know, that no one deserved to know.

Despite all his anger at the situation, in the deep places Vincent was almost glad, in a grim manner, that someone else might share his misery...someone would understand. He tried to ignore the feeling; how could he possibly want anyone, much less Cid, to know what it was like to have one's humanity ripped from them, to be made a monster? His red eyes narrowed, angry at himself now for entertaining such a thought. Another sin to heap on the rest.

What a worthless, wretched beast he was. He hadn't even gone in to see him.

Suddenly, a shot rang out. Djin-Fe and Sri-Danat instantly stopped arguing. All four turned to the back door, hesitating for a moment. Vincent held up his hand, indicating to Cloud that he should stay with the two brothers. Cloud nodded while Vincent started striding quickly up to the back door. He began moving faster when he heard the howl of an angry dragon. He had come up with enough dragons in the Nibel Mountains to know what they sounded like. Just as he reached the door, Shera stumbled out and bumped into him, her expression one of mixed horror and disgust. She looked up at Vincent and whispered with almost no voice, "What is he?" She quickly stepped away and stood with her back to the group, ignoring them entirely.

Vincent watched her for a second, wondering if anyone had ever looked at him that way when his back was turned. Shera was a kind woman and an understanding one, but even she could not ignore the gut-level revulsion at seeing someone become a monster. Even without seeing Cid, he knew just from the look in Shera's eyes that that was exactly what had happened. He didn't know if Cid would be like him, with an appearance of humanity most of the time, or if he would be permanently changed. But he knew that Cid was not human inside this house; it was his voice he heard shrieking in fury. The dark man turned his head back toward the door. A sudden loathing assailed him; he didn't want to see what had happened. He clenched his teeth in self-disgust; he knew he felt the same trepidation others felt about him when he lost control and became a monster. How dare he feel like this? How dare he ignore his friend, turn his back, just because he knew he was a monster? How dare he?!

But that was exactly what he did. Vincent backed away a few steps and closed the door. He let his arm fall limp at his side while he stared at the door. His features were flat as always, giving no hint to the turmoil he felt inside. How dare he.

After several minutes of awkward silence, Cloud saw an apparition pass by the fence. To him it looked like a ghost anyway. It was that wind elemental he had seen in the recording. He quickly began to give chase. The others saw him then followed

as well; even Sri-Danat and Djin-Fe. They both wanted to see their sister and have words with her. Ni'esla saw them and began moving at a dead run; all her injuries had healed over quickly.

Shera stood silent, not even turning to see them go.

* * *

It only took a few minutes for Vincent and Cloud to catch up with Ni'esla. When she realized she could not out run them, she turned to face them. They were of no consequence to her; she was not in the least bit threatened. She could always fly away if she needed to.

Djin-Fe ran up behind them; he could not run quite as fast as the two trained warriors. He stood, breathing hard for a moment. Sri-Danat came up a moment later, panting and gasping for air. He glared murder at his sister. She just grinned in triumph.

"Why do you chase me down? It won't accomplish anything," she sneered.

"How could you!!" Sri-Danat shouted, "How could you hurt someone like that?"

Ni'esla shook her head, her long hair whipping in the wind. "You are such a fool. You do not even know what it is you have done. Let me explain, dear, stupid Sri. You have perfected a scientific process that takes humans and makes them into demons."

Sri-Danat's eyes widened in disbelief. "Wh, what do you mean...?" he asked, his voice shaking.

Ni'esla glared at him. "You destroyed all that was ever good in me." Then she smiled and continued, "I do not care, of course. How better to make and rule my demon kingdom than to be one myself? The wind cannot clothe anything good or holy. It is no fault of the air; that is just the way it is. Do you see now, my foolish Sri?"

Sri-Danat was at a loss for words. Could it be true? Could he be responsible for making possible a kingdom of demons? Is that what the kingdom of the air was? "I don't believe it. That couldn't be true. Did mother know that?"

The wind elemental paused for a moment, then said, "I think she did. She was always full of hate. Now I know how to make elementals myself; it is indeed an ingenious process, and I thank you for showing it to me."

There was something strange in her tone, a note of finality that none of the four quite understood until it was too late. Ni'esla threw back her hands, commanding the air to leave Sri-Danat's immediate vicinity. Then she dropped her arms. The wind fell back into the vacuum she had created with the noise of thunder and enough force to crush and kill Sri-Danat. The scientist died with a look of utter shock on his broken face.

The remaining three took a step back from the murdering elemental. Djin-Fe said nothing; for some reason he was not surprised that his sister would kill his brother. She knew no remorse. Cloud felt a sickening sense of evil come of her like rays from a blackened and sickly sun. He almost pitied Djin-Fe...it could have been that he allowed Ni'esla to do what she did because he was afraid to stop her.

"Do you feel the wind? It is finished. There is now a wind dragon in our midst, and he is powerful." She smiled wickedly, then rose into the air and flew away as fast as the violent wind would take her.

Vincent stood motionless, without expression. There was nothing they could do. Somehow he knew she was right; he could feel it in the wind...what ever its work, it was finished now. He turned back toward the center of town and began walking slowly, almost aimlessly.

Cloud shrugged and followed. He wasn't sure why Vincent looked so, well, sad...they didn't know if Ni'esla was right; how could they trust her judgment? Even if she was, there still might be a way to reverse whatever it was she had done. Djin-Fe looked just as depressed, but he supposed that was understandable. All three headed back to the Captain's house in a mode of defeat.

* * *

The wind was blowing, but it blew in silence. The fierce wind had turned strange; it had become one that silenced the birds and held them to the earth. No birds would fly in it. It was a dry wind and an eerie one—Shera had never felt one like it before. All around she heard with a strange clarity the rustling of the leaves and grass, but no howling wind, and no birds. She was standing in her backyard, nearly knee-deep in overgrown grass. Her white coat flew out behind her in the quiet wind, as did her brown hair. She stared off into the distance, focusing on nothing. Crossing her arms over her chest, she tried to stave off the loneliness she felt creeping up on her. She heard Cid come out and close the door slowly behind him. She wasn't alone yet, but she felt like she was. Without turning to face him, she addressed her long time companion. "You're not human anymore, are you." It was not a question.

"No," he answered, in the same voice he always had, but the deep schism forming in him was undeniable. He wasn't human, wasn't anything now.

After a long moment of silence, Shera added sadly, "I can't look at you, Cid...I'm sorry...."

For a second, he didn't respond, but he understood. He could barely stand to see himself; he couldn't imagine what it must be like for her. "It's okay...just, just stay with me for a while, talk to me..."

Shera nodded, looking down at her crossed arms. The air was cool, but not too cold; it almost felt feverish, in a way. What strange air...but she understood why, even if she couldn't accept it. When Ni'esla, that wind elemental, had come to Rocket Town, when Cid had remembered the awful things she had done, it had become clear what was happening. Even as she stood there, Cid was becoming more and more an air elemental; Sri-Danat, Djinn-Fe, and Ni'esla had cruelly induced a process in his body that as every human cell was infected and died, it was replaced by those of an ancestral dragon, one of Bahamut's kind. And the wind filled the new cells. Even as he stood there, he was losing himself.

The wind had grown hostile the farther along Cid was in becoming a wind elemental. No one could reverse it because there was no one who was willing to commit the atrocities required. It was an act of calculated brutality that had set this process in motion and it would take the same to stop it; but there was no guarantee it would work even if they tried. Sri-Danat wouldn't do it; he couldn't stomach it. Djinn-Fe refused; he thought it wouldn't work, and although he had helped perform the experiment the first time, he would not repeat it.

"I can't live like this...what they did...it didn't work," Cid whispered.

Shera blinked her surprise. "You don't mean that do you?"

"I wish there were another way," Cid said quietly. "I...I wish I could live longer for you..."

Shera choked back a sob, squeezing her eyes shut. He did mean it. He wasn't going to lose himself; he was going to die. "You still...still...", she cried, but she couldn't finish her words. He was leaving her...she almost felt as though he were gone already.

"No," Cid replied, "I can't...I'm exhausted. I know I'm going to die today...please, please look at me Shera."

She shook her head and sobbed, "I can't! I can't..." She hated that she couldn't bear to look at him.

The wind whipped past her, tearing at her hair and her clothes, utterly silent. The eerie feeling was getting worse. Shera instinctively knew he was right; he didn't have long. She turned, finally, to face him, to look for a little while on the one she loved.

How he had remained standing was a mystery. What had been done to him was horribly flawed; they had tried to make him into a dragon but hadn't known it could be fought. His skin had become scaly, but in everything else, his humanity warred with the dragon in him. In order to stave off the transformation, he had to take hold of the one bit of uncorrupted truth in his soul; his rapidly corrupting form retaliated by tensing his muscles and twisting his limbs until they were now almost useless. Most of his hair had fallen out and his face had been deformed somewhat, but not enough to erase his

expression or destroy his appearance. He lowered his blue eyes and turned his face when he saw Shera's horrified expression.

She stepped over to him quickly, stroking his face and what was left of his hair. "I'm so sorry...so sorry...", she whispered through her tears.

Cid closed his eyes and smiled faintly, exposing one or two sharp, crooked teeth. He tried to return her gentle touch, but his arms and his hands refused to obey. His fight was over; the lot was cast, and for a little while he was himself again. He was so glad the disgust he had seen in Shera's eyes was gone.

Shera saw how hard it was for him to stand on his crippled legs, so she carefully helped him to lie down in the long grass. She lay on her side next to him, still stroking his cheek and brushing away a few tears he had shed. He was so cold, and the wind was blowing so hard.

"It taunts me, the wind...I could give in to it, and I would live...", Cid whispered.

"What do you mean?" Shera asked as she took one of his gloved hands in hers. She held it tightly, but he couldn't return the grasp. How could Cid have a choice in this?

Looking up at the sky, Cid paused for a moment. He then explained quietly, "I'm going to die...because I won't give up the gift I've been given...." He closed his glowing blue eyes, pondering this strange choice. "It saved me, made life worth living...you know what I'm talking about...but I could turn away from it, let go of it, then I could live in what I'm becoming..."

Shera did know what it was he spoke of. It was that gift of the Venus Gospel, the stillness inside that had broken down every wall and granted imperishable security, the foundation which gave back her innocence and allowed her to love. If he let go of it, if he turned his back on what he knew was true, then his unholy soul could live in his unholy body. Previously she had known it was worth living for; now she realized it was also worth dying for. So now, Cid would have to die for it. He was dead without it anyway.

She knew now that he would die in peace. As hard as it was, she knew neither of them could be happy any other way. She knew she would rather he die uncompromised than live forever damned. She took off Cid's leather gloves and kissed his twisted, clawed hands, then entwined her fingers with his. "Stay with me...", she whispered through her tears, knowing it could not be.

"Come with me...", he replied weakly. This also could not be.

Shera sniffled and told him, "You are a good man, Cid." For a brief second, she saw an image of Cid standing in the grass, completely still, watching the horizon, with the Venus Gospel held like a staff in his hand. It quickly vanished. Tears streamed down her face as she choked out, "Don't ever forget...don't ever forget me...I love you..."

Cid looked over at her, unable to speak. He was too weak now to do more than look at her. Not long after he turned his gaze to the horizon, clouded by grass, but he could still see the sky and the first few stars. His eyes unfocused and he closed them half way. Then he died.

Shera stood and looked toward those few stars, flickering strangely bright on the horizon. She remembered falling away from those same stars, falling back to the Planet, and what he had said as they fell. 'Could it be meant for us...? Is it even real?' he had asked, heedless of the tears streaming down his face. 'I don't know,' she had answered...but she knew now. It was very real. She had just now held him as he died for it. She wiped her face, brushing away her tears. 'Come with me...' to our Promised Land. "Oh, God...", she whispered, falling to her knees and covering her mouth with one hand. He wasn't coming back.

The wind blew on in silence.

* * *

Vincent wandered back to the Captain's house, almost shuffling his feet. There was no dragon here; he knew it. No hope;

there never was. Without looking, just by listening to his footsteps, he knew Cloud thought there was a chance. No chance, no hope. His friend, his only friend, was dead. Of that he had no doubt. There were no miracles in this world. If Cid was not a dragon then he was dead. There was no dragon here.

Cloud looked at the ex-Turk, watched his barely perceptible foot-dragging. He didn't know the dark man as well as Cid had, or even Shera, but he had been around him long enough to see that he was deeply troubled. He walked up along side Vincent and asked, "What's wrong? We don't know if that woman is right." The only response he got was a dim, desolate look in Vincent's dull eyes. The rest of his pale face was as blank as always.

Cloud shrugged and fell back a step or two. Djin-Fe looked toward the blond swordsman with an expression as lost as Vincent's. His whole world had just tumbled down around him, leaving him bereft and extremely confused. No one was forcing the dark-haired man to go with them anymore; Vincent had pretty much given up and Cloud really didn't know what to do with him. The late Sri-Danat was the scientist; this man couldn't be expected to figure out how to reverse a process he didn't create in the first place.

But Djin-Fe continued with them, partly because he was in shock over his brother's death, but mostly because he didn't know what else to do. He had finally realized his mistake in thinking he cared for nothing; he really and truly cared deeper than even Sri-Danat had for the welfare of others. He didn't remember why he had ever begun pretending he didn't, but it really didn't matter. Trying to protect himself, perhaps, but all it ended up doing was forcing him to hurt himself and others with his actions and indifference, over and over again. His last and by far his worst act of indifference, his worst sin of omission, was to allow Ni'esla to hurt Cid the way she had. He had nothing now but to follow these two and see what happened next. He had never felt so empty in his entire life.

"Cloud...can I ask you something?" Djin-Fe ventured.

Cloud gave him a dirty look. After a moment his face softened, remembering the passing thought he had when after Ni'esla murdered Sri-Danat. "Go ahead," he answered softly.

Djin-Fe cleared his throat and asked tentatively, "Um, do you think...do you think that Shera could ever forgive me?"

Cloud watched the man's face as they walked. "I think it would be easier for her if you could do something to help Cid." He shrugged again. "She's a kind lady. She forgives easier than most. Why do you ask? Sudden fit of conscience?" Cloud wasn't willing to just let it slide, no matter whether he had been cowed by his demonic sister or not. He had seen the recording; Djin-Fe had used that needle in his hand as well.

Djin-Fe flinched, but didn't respond. They continued walking; shortly they arrived at Cid's house. They turned toward the back yard where they saw Shera standing with her back toward them.

"The weather is strange," Cloud commented as they walked through the gate. Dry, cold, and otherworldly. The wind easily picked up Vincent's crimson cape and his black hair, causing it to flick and swirl behind him. If the dry and silent air had been strange before, it was not so now; today the wind was bitter cold and it whispered in a soft, slight voice that was unearthly. He walked up behind Shera and stood facing her back. She looked back, nodding slowly, dry tears streaking her cheek, then returned her gaze to the east. Several bright stars flickered on the horizon even though it was still early afternoon.

Cloud was about to say something when he suddenly stopped and looked in the grass near Shera's feet. He sighed heavily and visibly drooped. He had thought perhaps Ni'esla was wrong...and she was, but not in the way he had hoped. There in the grass lay Cid's pale form, clad in dragon scales and held motionless by death. He blinked and took a step back, motioning to Vincent.

The dark man looked down at his friend, not surprised in the least to see him there yet still deeply affected. Vincent turned and watched the same stars that Shera stared at for a little while. He and Cid had managed to forge an unexpected friendship, one he shared with no one else. And he had turned his back on that friend...another sin. He could do nothing to help him.

Djin-Fe followed Cloud's gaze. When he saw the end result of his actions, the deformed corpse of a man who would still be

here if Djin had not found him, he turned his back and sat heavily in the grass, a sudden rush of tears trailing down his face. No one could forgive him for this.

While the others stood behind her, Shera gazed up at the deep blue sky, silently wishing for the last few days to vanish. She wanted so much to hear Cid's voice, shouting some curse, at the Tiny Bronco, at the old rocket, even at her. But she knew he wouldn't. She knew she would never hear his voice again, never see his face, whether scowling in anger or grinning wide. He laughed every bit as much as he had hollered; he had enjoyed life as much as he had cried. He'd been so expressive, so confident...she knew who the hell he was—he was Cid, that's who the hell he was. But that hadn't been enough.

Shera shook her head. That wasn't right; it had been entirely enough. He had not died in weakness, lacking anything. No... he had faced death down, called its bluff...she knew he had won, although he lay lifeless now. Death could not scare Cid into living.