

CHAPTER XII: THE PIECES COME TOGETHER

Cloud felt burning pain in his left arm. He clenched his teeth. Though his arm began to tremble, he managed to keep it still enough until Kendal removed the needle.

Kendal stood there staring at him, but Cloud just lowered his head and looked at the ground. He could feel sweat dripping from his brow from the pain, as his whole arm felt as if it were being consumed by fire. He didn't want to look at Kendal. He didn't know whether he would be able to control himself.

He heard Kendal chuckle.

"That hurts a bit huh?" he commented.

Cloud gritted his teeth and said nothing.

Kendal walked over to a nearby table and put down the syringe.

"Well, a little pain never hurt anybody," he continued. "Builds character, is what I always say. Besides, the pain is the least of your worries. I'm afraid the drug we're giving you can have a number of serious side effects. Nausea, blurred vision, headaches, liver damage, loss of motor function, and possibly permanent brain damage. I could go on, but I'm sure you get the idea."

Kendal sat down, still smiling as Cloud finally looked up at him, his eyes smoldering with hatred. Cloud had seen his share of mad scientists. He still remembered what Hojo had done to him, and others. But even Hojo hadn't hurt without a reason, no matter how twisted. Even Vincent he had hurt because of Lucrecia. But even though Kendal had a purpose here as well, namely, discovering how to infuse mako, it seemed to Cloud that the man delighted in causing pain for absolutely no reason whatsoever.

"Before this is over," Cloud found himself saying, "I'm going to kill you."

Kendal's eyes shot up at this, then he tilted his head back and laughed out loud. He stood up and walked over to Cloud, looking down at him, the smirking smile still on his face.

"You've got guts, I'll say that for you," he said. "That's very dangerous. I hate people who have guts. Fortunately, they have a tendency to get themselves killed in the long run. Let me tell you something, better men than you have made that same statement."

He motioned to one of his assistants. The man came over and looked at Kendal.

"Prepare another injection for our project here," he said, looking back at Cloud.

"So soon?" the man said in surprise.

"Yes," Kendal replied. "And this time, double the dosage."

The man stood there looking at Kendal.

"Do you really think that's a good idea?" he said after a moment. "I thought we wanted him alive."

"Just do as I say!" Kendal said angrily and glared at the man.

"Yes sir!" the man said and quickly walked away.

Kendal turned and smiled evilly at Cloud once again.

"We'll see just how brave you are after this," he said. "Don't worry, I'm not about to kill you yet. I think you're strong enough to survive that dosage, barely. It should be interesting to see."

Kendal rubbed the back of his neck.

"And afterwards, I think I'll go pay a little visit to Miss Lockhart. I'm afraid I've been much too easy on her up to this point. I mean, after all, if you're going to kill me, I might as well enjoy myself a little beforehand."

He saw Cloud's knuckles go white as he clenched the arms of the chair he sat in, and for just a moment, Kendal thought he had gone too far. They had taken away Cloud's weapon, but he still had trained in the soldier program. Kendal knew he was no match for the young man even without his sword.

"Touch me and she dies," he said quickly, and cursed himself as he heard the hint of fear in his voice.

Cloud sat there for a moment longer, staring at him, poised in the chair as if to pounce, but then he sat back and looked down at the floor.

The smile immediately returned to Kendal's face.

"Very wise," he said and walked back over to the table. He looked over toward his assistant. What was taking the man so long?

The door to the lab opened, and another man stepped in. He walked rapidly over to Kendal.

Kendal looked at him expectantly without speaking.

"I followed Magnus, like you said," the man reported. "He spent most of the day in his usual duties, but about an hour ago he left the palace, being very careful he wasn't followed. I had the damnedest time keeping up with him without being spotted. He went to visit a woman."

"A woman?" Kendal said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. He hadn't known Magnus had been seeing anyone, and if he had kept it from Kendal, it must have been secret indeed. Might Magnus have a very good reason for keeping it so?

"What's her name?"

"Lenore," the man replied. "She lives on the east side, near the water. 4015 Grandview Street."

Kendal looked back at Cloud for a moment, as if deciding what to do. Then he turned to his assistant.

"Let's hold off on the next dosage," he said. "I've got a little errand to run, and I don't want to miss this."

He turned to Cloud.

"Looks like you'll be getting a little reprieve. But don't worry, I'll be back soon."

He started for the door. Whatever Magnus was up too, it seemed likely that this Lenore person would have something to do with it, or some knowledge of it. It might be advantageous to go have a little chat with her.

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"This way," Magnus said.

The forklift operator nodded and moved his machine forward slowly, a large crate balanced on the front of it. Magnus waved him forward and then pointed to the right, into a space next to a doorway and a dozen other crates. The forklift turned and moved forward until Magnus motioned for him to put it down, then the crate slowly eased to the floor.

Magnus nodded in satisfaction.

"The others go over there," he said, pointing across the room. "Just pile them next to that machinery."

The forklift driver nodded and pulled away. Magnus stood there watching him for a while, until he was sure the man was caught up in what he was doing. There were at least ten more crates to bring in. That would keep him busy. There was a huge amount of supplies being brought into the presidential palace today for the swearing in ceremony. Or the coronation, as Gram liked to think of it. Magnus shuddered at the thought. Wouldn't the people be shocked if they knew they were swearing in a man as President who was determined to plunge them into a world war.

He looked around. The forklift was on the other side of the room now, and no other workers were nearby. Magnus walked to the side of the crate he had so carefully placed. They could put the others wherever the hell they wanted. This was the only one that mattered.

He glanced around one more time. Then, satisfied that no one was paying attention to him, he stooped down and opened a small side panel on the crate. Inside was a keypad and a blank digital display. He quickly punched a sequence of numbers in on the keypad. In a moment the digital display flashed on, reading 45:00 and immediately beginning to count down. Magnus quickly closed the panel and stood up, looking around once again. No one had seemed to notice. The forklift was bringing in another crate.

"Hey," Magnus called, getting the operators attention once again. "I think we have room for that one over here."

He motioned the man to bring it over, and the forklift operator obediently placed it on the ground right next to the crate

Magnus had opened, effectively blocking the panel. Magnus took one more look around and gave a nod of satisfaction. The die was cast. Now it was up to Dr. Lee and Zack to fulfill their part in this little drama.

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"Are you making any progress?"

Dr. Lee rubbed his eyes and looked up from the microscope he had been staring into for the last ten minutes.

"I'm doing what I can," he replied with just a hint of impatience. "These kind of things take time."

"We don't have much time," Orlando replied, pacing back and forth beside Dr. Lee's desk. "The assassination attempt was a failure. Cloud is still alive. I don't know if another attempt will be possible. We've got to figure out how to use Mako infusion before Kendal does."

Dr. Lee sighed.

"I'm well aware of the need to obtain this information as quickly as possible," he replied. "As I said, I'm doing what I can. Some things are just impossible to rush."

Orlando stopped pacing and tapped his foot on the floor. He looked over at Zack, who was strapped down on a table nearby.

"Well, you better do more," he said sternly. "Whatever is necessary. I don't care what you have to do to our test subject, just get it done. You can be sure Kendal isn't treating his specimen with kid's gloves!"

For a moment the two stared at one another, then Dr. Lee shook his head.

"Perhaps if you were to leave me alone and let me do my work instead of hovering over me asking stupid questions, I would be able to provide you with answers in a timely fashion," he said sarcastically.

Orlando looked at him darkly. Then he turned away and walked toward the door. When he reached it he turned back.

"All right, I'll leave you be," he growled. "But I expect answers, and I expect them soon!"

He stalked out of the room.

Dr. Lee stood there looking after him. He gave a mock salute, but only after he was sure Orlando was gone. Then he turned around and walked over to Zack.

"What are you doing to me?" Zack questioned. He had seen the entire incident from his ringside seat, but he didn't know what to make of it. He had surmised from the conversation he had overheard between them since they had brought him here the day before that they were trying to use him to discover how to infuse mako, but other than that he seemed to know precious little about what was going on.

Dr. Lee ignored the question, as he had ignored every other question Zack had posed to him since they had taken him captive.

"Where are my friends?" he tried again.

He hadn't seen any of the others since yesterday. He didn't even know if they were still in the building.

Dr. Lee picked up a clipboard and studied it for a moment, then he walked back over to his desk and sat down. Zack lay back on the table, perplexed. He had just heard Orlando admonishing Dr. Lee for not getting results. It was obvious that whatever they were going to do, they needed to do it as quickly as possible. Yet even with Orlando clearly expecting some results, Dr. Lee had done absolutely nothing to him. No prodding, no questions, no blood samples, no poking around in orifices (for which Zack was especially grateful), no x rays, no nothing. It was as if he weren't attempting to accomplish anything.

"How long is this going to go on?" he tried again.

Dr. Lee continued to study his notes. He didn't even look up.

Zack shook his head. He obviously wasn't going to get any answers from this man. True, he hadn't been hurt, in fact, he was pretty comfortable, but he was still a captive. He had a hunch his friends needed him. How long were they planning on

keeping him here?

The phone rang, startling them both. Dr. Lee reached over immediately and picked it up. He listened for a few minutes, then nodded curtly and said, "uh huh."

He hung up the phone and then got up and walked over to Zack.

"It's begun," he said, loosening the straps that held Zack down. "Orlando told your friends that you are dead, then set them up to be captured. Some others are being held captive in the Presidential Palace. They are to be executed in two hours. One of them is Aeris Gainsborough, whom I believed you asked about when we first met. There is a car parked out front. I'll give you the keys. Take it and get to the palace as fast as you can. You don't have much time.

He finished undoing the straps. Zack just lay there looking at him, more puzzled than ever.

"You don't have much time," Dr. Lee repeated. "You and your friends must be out of the palace by ten o'clock. If not you will be killed. Do you understand?"

Zack stood up and stretched his muscles. It had been a while since he had been on his feet. He didn't know what kind of game Dr. Lee was playing, but it seemed now they might both be on the same side after all.

"Yes," Zack said. "And thanks."

"Don't thank me," Dr. Lee said. "I'm not doing it for you. I'm doing it for a friend who saved my life during the war. Your sword is in that cabinet over there."

Zack stepped over to the cabinet, opened it up, and withdrew his weapon.

"Here's the keys to the car," Dr. Lee said, shoving something into his hand. "Now hit me."

Zack looked at him.

"What?"

"Hit me," Dr. Lee repeated. "If Orlando thinks I aided you he will kill me. He has to believe you escaped on your own. Now do it."

Zack paused for just a moment. This just seemed to be getting weirder and weirder. Then his fist shot out and struck Dr. Lee in the left eye. He fell back, banging against his desk and knocking it over. All the equipment on it tumbled down on top of him.

Zack took a step forward and looked down at him.

"Are you all right?"

"Just great," he moaned. "Go on, get out of here."

Zack hesitated for a moment more, then turned and ran out the door. Dr. Lee pushed the equipment off of himself and rose unsteadily to his feet. He stumbled over to the door and looked down the hall. When he was convinced Zack had a big enough lead he turned in the other direction.

"Orlando!" he yelled. "Help, the prisoner has escaped!"

He walked slowly back toward his desk and sat down slowly. He heard shouts down the corridor, and a moment later Orlando rushed back into the room. He looked around.

"Escaped?" he cried. "How?"

"He got out of his bonds somehow," Dr. Lee said. "When I went over to him he attacked me. He'll be headed for the Presidential Palace."

Orlando looked out at the hallway, then back at Dr. Lee. His face was red with rage.

"We can't let him get away," he said. He looked back at Dr. Lee.

"I'll deal with you later," he said, then ran out and down the hallway.

Dr. Lee leaned forward and placed his head in his hands. His left eye throbbed.

"I've really got to think about finding another line of work," he muttered.

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"Are you all right?"

Cloud opened his eyes to see Wisteria standing in front of him wearing a look of concern.

"Yeah," he said slowly. His arm still burned with pain, but it wasn't nearly as bad as it had been earlier.

"C'mon," she said, extending a hand. "Let's get you out of here."

Cloud took her hand and got unsteadily to his feet. They walked out of the room, the two guards who had been following Cloud around since yesterday walked behind them at a discrete distance. Cloud still felt a little disoriented, but the pain in his arm was rapidly subsiding. He felt nauseous, and he seemed to be walking through a fog, though it did seem to be clearing up slowly.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To my room," she replied nonchalantly.

He did not respond at first, just kept walking like he hadn't heard her. But then he looked at her.

"I really don't think that's such a good idea."

Wisteria stopped and looked at him for a moment.

"What do you see in that girl?" she said petulantly. "Yes, I'll admit she's pretty, in a sort of unsophisticated way, but let's face it, she doesn't compare to me. Why would you want to settle for her when you can do so much better?"

She stepped closer to him and grabbed hold of his other hand as well.

"Besides, I offer more than just beauty," she said slowly. "I'm the daughter of the man who is about to become President. And he's not going to stop there, either. Soon he will be the most powerful man in the world. My father adores me, will do anything for me. Do you realize what kind of power I could give you?"

Cloud did not reply, just stood there looking in her eyes. Her face was only inches away now. She let go of his wrists, ran her hands up his arms until they encircled his neck, and smiled coyly. She leaned forward until her lips were right beside his ear.

"And if that's not enough incentive, there are other pleasures I can share with you as well," she whispered seductively. "Just give me chance and I'll do things to you that your little girlfriend could never imagine in her wildest dreams."

She straightened up, tilting her head and looking at him innocently. For a moment he just stood there, staring at her. Then a hint of a smile curled the corner of his lips, and he nodded slowly.

Wisteria dropped her arms, grabbed his hand, and continued down the hall, a triumphant smile on her face. She had known that eventually he would see it her way. The poor boy had never really had a chance. She knew what he wanted, she knew what they all wanted, and she knew just how to play it. It had never failed her yet.

They reached her room and stepped inside. The two guards who had been following them stopped and leaned against the wall near her doorway. One of them pulled out a cigarette.

Wisteria led Cloud into her bedroom and motioned for him to sit down. Cloud obliged, easing himself down on the foot of her bed.

"I'll be right back," she said, walking into the bathroom. She poked her head out a moment later. "Don't go away."

He did not reply, just sat there on the edge of her bed, looking around the room slowly. Her room was elegantly furnished, just like all the other rooms on this floor of the palace.

She came out a short time later wearing a short silk foam green nightgown. She slipped around behind him on the bed and rubbed his shoulders.

"How's your arm?" she questioned. "Does it feel better now? It just breaks my heart to see Kendal do that to you. I'll have to talk to my father tomorrow to see if he can do anything about it."

She ran her hands along his shoulders and then down in front of him, reaching for and slowly opening each button on his shirt.

"I'm fine now," he replied.

He raised his arms and she slipped his shirt off and threw it on the floor. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him down onto the bed, turning so she was on top. He felt her body, and then her lips, pressing against his. He slipped his arms around her, then twisted round so he was on top of her. He slowly disengaged, then stood up as his hands reached down to the button on his pants. He looked at her with a sly grin.

"Close your eyes."

She sat up and smiled at him.

"Ohh, now you're getting into it," she exclaimed. She closed her eyes. "Hurry up, I don't think I can wait very long."

"Just a sec," he said.

Wisteria had never waited for anything in her life. She couldn't help but cheat. She opened her eyes, just a sliver.

She had just enough time for her eyes to snap open completely and her jaw to drop before the fist struck her dead center between the eyes.

She tumbled over backwards and fell off the bed, landing on the floor with a thud. Cloud stepped over to look at her, poised to strike again, but it was not necessary. She was motionless, out like a light.

Cloud turned and walked swiftly into the bathroom. There was a closet inside. He walked into it and looked around. Wisteria's wardrobe lined the shelves. He looked on top to see a row of boxes. He pulled them off and looked inside each one quickly. She had to have one here somewhere...

He found what he was looking for in the fourth box. He lifted out the white floppy hat and tossed the box aside. He walked back into the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet, rummaging around until he pulled out a scissor. Then he turned and quickly gathered Wisteria's discarded clothes up off the floor. He returned to the bedroom and threw his haul down on her bed. Then he began looking through the drawers in her room. It took him a few minutes until he found what he needed, a long roll of tape. It was not exactly the best item, he would have preferred glue, but it would have to do. He threw that down on the bed as well and picked up the scissor. He bent down beside Wisteria and lifted her head. She was still out, and he hoped she stayed that way just a little longer. He rested her head in his lap, smoothing out her hair and as best he could. A few cuts with the scissor and he had what he wanted. He prayed that this would work, because he sure didn't want to be anywhere nearby when she woke up and saw what he had done.

He took the hair he had cut and lined it along the back of the hat, then taped it in place as best he could. He picked it up and put it on his head experimentally, standing and looking in the mirror above a large vanity that stood on the floor opposite the bed. The hair didn't stay very well, but it would only have to fool them for a few seconds. He put the hat down carefully and picked up her dress, eyeing it critically. It looked like it would fit, though maybe a little snug.

He couldn't believe he was doing this, but what the heck, it had worked once before.

The two guards' heads turned when they saw the door to Wisteria's room open. She stepped out, turning quickly away from them and walking rapidly down the hall. She had put on a white hat. There was no sign of Cloud.

The guards looked at each other.

"Wonder where she's off to?" the first one commented.

The second man shrugged.

"Don't know," he replied. "But she sure finished with him quick. You know Wisteria. Probably wore the poor guy out and now is on the prowl for more."

The both chuckled and turned away.

Cloud walked as quickly as he could back to his own room, praying that he wouldn't run into anyone. He knew going back to his own room was a risk, but he had to chance it. He couldn't continue walking around in these clothes, someone would be bound to notice.

He reached his room and stepped inside. A few minutes later he came out again, dressed in his own clothes. He looked around. So far, so good, but he still had to get his weapon and get Tifa out before he was discovered.

He walked quickly as he could back the way he had come. He had wandered around some when he had first arrived at the palace, and so knew at least some of the floors very well. He entered a stairway that he knew was little used and rapidly descended.

He came out and walked through a few more hallways, going slowly now, wary of running into someone. Two people did pass by in the corridor in front of him. They glanced at him and walked on. He had never seen them before.

He reached the area that held Kendal's lab. It was housed in several rooms, and the first one he went in was the one he had been in earlier when Kendal had given him the drug. He looked around quickly. It was quite possible one of Kendal's assistants would still be around, and he would have to take him out barehanded, but the room was deserted.

He walked over to a cabinet and opened it, then pulled out his sword. He swung it a few times experimentally as a smile grew on his face. Just let them try to stop him now.

He walked out of the room and down the hall once more. He stopped in front of another door, readied his sword, and flung it open.

He leapt in and looked around. The gurney that Tifa had been laying on stood in the center of the room, empty.

Cloud looked around quickly, but this room was deserted as well. He stepped back out into the hall. He had not expected this, and for the first time he felt uncertain. After what he had done he had to get Tifa and escape. He didn't think either Wisteria or Kendal would be too forgiving. What had they done with her?

He looked up suddenly. He thought he had heard someone cry out. It had been muffled, as if through a door, but he had definitely heard something.

He walked slowly down the hall, listening carefully. He stopped in front of one door. He didn't hear the woman any more, but he did hear muffled talking from within the room. He couldn't make out what they were saying, but it sounded like Kendal.

He kicked open the door and leapt inside. Kendal stood on the other side of the room, a phone in his hand. In the center of the room was a woman tied to a chair. Cloud saw immediately that it was not Tifa. It was an older woman with blonde hair. She looked up at him as he came in, and he could see a blackened bruise on her left cheek.

"Kendal!" Cloud snarled.

Kendal dropped the phone when Cloud burst into the room. A look of pure terror appeared in his eyes when he realized who it was. There was a door on the other side of the room, and he immediately bolted for it. Cloud was after him in an instant. Kendal reached out and pulled it open, then with one last desperate look behind him jumped through and slammed it shut. Cloud's sword was an instant too late and embedded itself in the door instead of Kendal. Cloud pulled it out and went to open the door, but it was locked. He turned and looked at the woman. She had twisted her head around and was looking at him.

"Don't worry about me," she cried. "You must stop him. He'll tell Gram everything."

Cloud didn't respond, but instead turned and slammed himself into the door. It collapsed and he fell into another hallway. He turned to look down the hall, and saw Kendal near the end of it. Kendal immediately turned at the sound, then took off as fast as he could down the hallway. Cloud pulled himself to his feet. He couldn't afford to fall behind. He was not going to let Kendal get away this time.

Tifa lay on the gurney in the laboratory staring up at the ceiling. She tried to slip her hand through the metal restraint holding it to the bed, as she had dozens of times in the last two days. Her hands were red and bleeding from the effort. She pulled until her hand burned in pain, but she could not get out. The restraints were just too tight.

She looked around. Kendal had been gone for quite some time. She couldn't tell how long, of course. It was hard to judge time here in this windowless room. She couldn't tell how long she had been here, but it seemed like days. She had fallen asleep twice, and had in fact just woken up a short time ago.

She knew it was just a matter of time before Kendal did something that would really hurt her. She could tell he wanted to. It was obvious every time he looked at her. Magnus had said they needed her to keep Cloud in line, but could she trust Kendal to go along with that? She didn't think so. And even if he did, there were things he could do to that wouldn't leave any scars.

She shuddered and tried not to think about that. And what about Magnus? He said friends were near. Did he mean her

friends, or did he mean that he was one? Was he going to help her? There was something about him, that hint of familiarity she had noticed, that made her want to trust him, but could he help her, even if he wanted to?

She looked back up at the ceiling, a sudden feeling of helplessness washing over her. She hated that feeling, hated it more than anything. She had kept up here courage by telling herself that she would think of something, that Kendal would slip up somehow, that she would get a chance, somewhere along the line, to get out of this. She had to keep believing that.

The door to the room opened. Tifa stiffened in spite of herself. Kendal frightened her just walking into the room.

But it was not Kendal.

Magnus stepped into the room and closed the door slowly behind him. He looked around, then hurried over to the control panel when he saw they were alone. He pressed a button, and the restraints that held her wrists opened.

"Hurry," he said, coming over to her. "I don't know how long it will be before he comes back."

He reached out his hand and helped her stand. She looked at him with a hint of suspicion. She couldn't help it. She was quickly learning that she couldn't trust anyone around here.

Magnus looked at her and seemed to understand.

"I'm a friend," he said reassuringly. "C'mon, we must go. I've still got to get Cloud before time runs out. Hurry."

She hesitated a moment more, then realized that there was no point in waiting. Even if it was a trick, it was still better than being locked on that gurney. Whatever was going to happen, she was free now, and she promised herself they were going to have a hell of a time locking her up again.

"Let's go," she said.

He turned and led her quickly out of the room. She had caught a glimpse of a guard outside sometimes when Kendal had opened the door, but there was no sign of one now.

"This way," Magnus said, leading her quickly down the corridor.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

"Down to the basement," he replied. "There's not much going on down there right now. Everyone is upstairs preparing for the swearing in ceremony. If we can get down there without being seen, you should be able to get out of here through the parking garage. Then I can come back and get Cloud."

"But I want to come with you to get Cloud," she protested.

"It's too risky," he answered quickly. "Someone would be bound to see us. No one would give a second thought to seeing me walking around, but how would I explain you? No, this is the only way."

Tifa was silent for a little while, digesting this information and coming to the conclusion that he was probably correct.

"Why are you helping us?" she asked.

"It's my fault you're all here," he answered. "I'm the one who lured Cloud here in the first place. Gram was planning on abducting someone from your continent who had been in the SOLDIER program so we could learn the secret of Mako infusion, so he could create his own soldiers and make war on the other continents. I was the one who came up with the actual plan."

They turned down another corridor. He was walking so rapidly she almost had to run to keep up. He glanced back at her.

"But I didn't expect his friends to follow," he continued. "I'm afraid I've been using Cloud all along, but I promised myself if I could save him and his friends, I would. It's the least I could..."

He stopped suddenly as two soldiers came around the corner in front of them. They all stopped, not ten feet from one another. The soldiers both looked at Tifa.

One of them frowned.

"Say, isn't she..." he said, starting to draw his weapon.

Magnus put out his arm.

"Get back Tifa," he said.

She ducked under his arm and ran forward. She leaped into the air and her leg shot out, catching the man drawing his weapon right in the chest and sending him flying backwards. He slammed against the wall and fell to the ground, his weapon spinning away uselessly. The second man swung at her, but she ducked underneath, fell to her knees, then punched right between his legs. He bent forward with a groan. She reached up, wrapped her arms around his head and flipped him over her. He smashed down hard on his back. She leapt up and looked back and forth between the two men, but neither one seemed willing to pursue the battle any further.

She looked over at Magnus, who was just standing there with his mouth open. He looked at her for a moment, then slowly smiled and shook his head.

"I guess maybe I should stay behind you," he said.

Tifa grinned.

"C'mon, let's get going," he said, and they ran past the fallen men.

He led her down two more hallways, and then slipped through a door and down three flights of steps. There came out another door at the bottom and Magnus stopped.

"Straight on down the hall," he said, pointing ahead. "Left, then left again. They'll be a small cafeteria on your right shortly after that. Take the first right after it. That will lead you out into the garage. From there, just head for daylight."

"Thanks," she said hesitantly.

He turned and opened the door to the stairs.

"Hey," she said.

He turned back to look at her. She opened her mouth, but then stopped. That feeling of familiarity struck her again, stronger than ever. She looked at his face, and her voice caught in her throat. She stared at him, not saying anything for a long time. He looked at her and a puzzled expression slowly grew on his face. She knew that look, she knew those blue eyes, and she suddenly realized exactly what it was about him that seemed so familiar. She had seen those eyes before, a thousand times.

"Morgan," she said.

She saw a hint of surprise in his eyes. He opened his mouth, and for a moment she thought he was going to deny it, but then he shut it again. He looked at her for a moment more, and she saw sadness in his eyes, but then he smiled slowly.

"Beauty, brawn, and brains," he said. "My son sure knows how to pick 'um."

Tifa blushed.

His smile quickly faded.

"I should have known better than to try to fool you. I'm afraid things didn't turn out quite the way I wished them to," he said. "I'm not going to make excuses. My ship was sunk off the coast, and I was badly hurt. Lenore found me on the shore and nursed me back to health. They were right in the middle of a war then so nobody asked too many questions, especially when they found out I could fight. Her whole family had been killed in the war, and her town was under attack. After all she did for me I had to stay and help her. I fell in love with her."

Magnus fell silent. Tifa just looked at him, at a loss for words.

Magnus shook his head.

"There's no time for this," he said firmly. "What's done is done. I don't ask for forgiveness."

He turned away. She wanted to say something to him, wanted to give him some kind of reassurance, but found she had no words.

He took a step toward the stairs once more, but then turned around again. He reached beneath his shirt and pulled a gold chain from around his neck. She could see a locket at the end of it. He extended his hand.

"Give him this," he said slowly. "And tell him I'm sorry, for everything."

Tifa slowly reached out and took the locket.

"Morgan," she said slowly, but he shook his head, then turned and walked through the door.

He ran back up the steps, taking them two at a time. Things were coming rapidly to a head. He had given himself away now, and he didn't know how much more time he had before Kendal discovered what he had done. He had to get Cloud out of here before he was stopped. Cloud didn't have to know about his little conversation with Tifa. She could tell him in her own good time, if she choose.

He reached the first floor and exited the stairwell. He walked through the main lobby and up the curving staircase. He glanced down at his watch. Not much longer now, one way or another.

He started to walk down the hall when suddenly he heard a commotion ahead of him. There were shouts and he could see people running. A couple of soldiers were coming right at him, and he felt a moment of panic as he thought he had been discovered.

But the soldiers ran right past and down the stairs. He saw another one coming down the hall, and called out as the man went by.

"What's going on?"

The soldier stopped and brought himself to attention.

"President Gram has placed the palace on alert," the man exclaimed. "Cloud Strife has escaped!"

The man turned and ran down the hall, after the others. Magnus just stared after him in shock. Could it be true? Could Cloud have escaped? For some reason it didn't seem possible. It was something that had never occurred to him, but thinking about it now, he saw no reason why it hadn't.

He looked around. He saw more soldiers running by downstairs. Surely they wouldn't be in such an uproar if it were not true.

Slowly a smile began to form on his lips. The boy was more clever than he had thought.

He turned around and started back down the stairs. There would be no way to find him now. If he had any brains at all, which he obviously did or he would never have escaped in the first place, he would get out of the palace as fast as he could. There was nothing more Magnus could do for him.

Magnus reached the bottom of the stairs and slowly crossed the lobby, heading for the main entrance. Soldiers ran by in all directions, but he ignored them. They didn't matter now. His part was over. He had done what he could to save his son, his friends, and his country.

He reached the entrance and was about to open the glass doors when a hand suddenly came down on his shoulder.

He turned to see Gram standing behind him.

"Magnus," Gram said. "I'm afraid we have a crisis on our hands. I need to discuss strategy with you. Can you come up to my office?"

Magnus looked out the door. There were soldiers running in the street outside as well. He hesitated for just a moment, but he knew there was only one answer he could give.

"Of course," he said.

Gram nodded and turned around, and they both walked quickly back through the crowded lobby.

~*~

Elena sat on a cot in the holding cell, Aeris beside her. Vincent stood leaning against the wall in one corner of the room. It was a small room, not really meant to hold three people. There were two cots in the room, attached to the wall, one above the other. Their captives didn't seem too concerned about their comfort. Actually, she supposed they were fortunate to be alive at all at this point.

She glanced at Aeris, who sat beside her looking at the floor. She was no longer crying, just sat there staring off into space. Elena didn't really care for Aeris that much, but that didn't mean she wanted to see her like this. Reeve's death had been a blow to all of them, but Aeris had been closest to him. Elena had tried to comfort her with clumsy words, but it wasn't something she was really very good at. Aeris had not responded. She had remained silent the entire time, except for once,

when she had said, barely audibly.

"It should have been me."

Elena had shut up soon after, realizing there was nothing she could say. Vincent had just stood in the corner, making no attempt at all to say anything. She hadn't really expected him to.

No one had spoken in a long time now, and Elena was beginning to get fidgety. She got up and walked over to the door of the cell. There was a small barred window in it. She had been hearing low voices coming from outside for some time now. She could see six guards sitting in a circle on the floor in the room outside. They were throwing something on the ground in between them. She realized the something was probably dice and they were involved in some kind of gambling game.

She pushed on the door, but it did not budge. It was locked tight, and too heavy to break down. Even if they could get out, it wasn't likely they could get past six guards without any weapons of their own.

She noticed that the volume of the voices outside had risen.

"Okay, Taylor," one man was saying. "If you get an even number greater than four on this throw, you get your pick."

Another man held the dice above his head and rattled them around for a moment, then cast them on the floor in front of him. For a second they all fell silent, then the man who had thrown the dice raised his fists.

"Yes!" he exclaimed.

A third man in the circle looked at the winner unhappily.

"So which one do you want?" he asked.

Taylor brought his hand to his chin in thought for a moment. He glanced over at the cell.

"The blonde," he announced.

"Really?" said the man who had looked unhappy, his face immediately brightening. "I'll take the one with the brown hair."

"Me too," said a third.

"Same here," said the fourth.

"I'm with Taylor," said the next one. "I'll take the blonde."

The last man was younger than the rest and looked at them uncertainly.

"Are you sure the Captain won't mind us doing this?" he asked.

Taylor looked at him with a frown.

"Who's going to tell him?" he questioned sharply. He waved his hand toward the cell. "They're going to be dead in an hour anyway. Do you think the Captain will care what happens to them in the meantime? Whatsamatter, you ain't never done it before?"

They all laughed at the last man's expense. He looked back at them angrily.

"Of course I have," he stated. "I'll take the brown haired one."

"All right then," Taylor said. "Let's get to it."

Elena backed away from the cell door as the guards started over. She looked at Vincent, but he gave no indication that he had overheard.

The door opened and Taylor walked in, followed by the other guards. They all had their weapons drawn and ready. Taylor stopped in front of Elena.

"Come with me," he said sternly.

Elena did not move.

The man reached out to grab her, but she was faster. Her fist shot out and struck him in the nose.

"Keep your hands off me, asshole," she cried.

The man turned away for a minute, clutching his nose. One of his compatriots laughed out loud. Taylor turned back toward

her, his face red with rage. He brought up his gun.

"Stupid bitch!" he shouted.

Elena looked at the gun and thought perhaps she had been a bit hasty.

The man's finger tightened on the trigger, but then Aeris suddenly lunged upward and pushed the his arm aside. There was a loud retort and a bullet ricocheted off the ceiling as the gun flew from his hand.

The man turned to Aeris, and now his eyes bulged out as if he were going to explode. He grabbed Aeris savagely. It was at this point that the guards made a critical error.

Vincent had remained standing in the corner, not moving a muscle during the entire confrontation. He had just stood there, watching all the guards carefully, while the rage slowly built inside him. When they had first come in two had turned their weapons on him, and had been watching him the entire time. But now they both glanced over at the girls for a moment. As soon as he saw this he let the anger wash over him, until it swept him up in an unstoppable tidal wave.

Taylor brought his arm back to strike Aeris, but paused when he saw the huge shadow growing on the wall in front of him. He turned his head, but by then it was too late. The huge claws of the beast Vincent had transformed into lashed out, and with a scream Taylor fell to the floor, blood spurting from his severed carotid artery.

The other guards took one look at the nightmarish creature Vincent had become and jammed through the door as fast as their legs could carry them. The last man out turned to slam the door behind him, but the Chaos beast's arm shot out, crashing into the door, which in turn slammed into the man behind it, tossing him into the far wall, which he struck with a sound similar to a tomato hit with a hammer.

Elena and Aeris ran out of the room. Both of them avoided looking at what was left of the man who had tried to close the door. They looked down the hall, but it was deserted.

Vincent came out of the room a moment later, his old self again. Elena walked up to him and gave him a shove.

"What took you so long?" she exclaimed. "He would have killed me if it hadn't been for Aeris!"

Vincent shrugged.

"If I'd moved any sooner they would have killed me," he replied calmly. "And I'm afraid I wouldn't have been of much use to you in that condition."

Elena looked as if she were going to say more, but Vincent cut her off.

"Can we discuss this later?"

He turned away before she could speak again. They ran rapidly down the hall. He didn't know where the guards had run off to, but he knew it wouldn't be long before they came back with reinforcements. They had to get out of here while they still had a chance.

Wisteria opened her eyes and moaned. She brought her hand up to her head and rubbed it, then blinked and looked around. A guard stood at the foot of her bed, looking at her nervously.

"What happened?" she questioned.

"Cloud hit you and escaped," the man said slowly.

"Escaped?" she said, looking at him darkly, remembering with a rush of anger just what Cloud had done to her. The little shit had tricked her!

"How did he get past the guards?" she spat out.

The man did not answer for a moment, just stood there looking at her oddly.

"He disguised himself," the man finally said slowly.

"Disguised himself?" she said. "Disguised himself how?"

The man hesitated again, seeming more nervous than ever.

"He disguised himself as you."

"As me? That's ridiculous..."

She sat up, and as she did so she happened to catch her reflection in the mirror above her vanity. She stopped and stared at it for a moment in disbelief, and for the second time that day, her jaw dropped open.

It was said later on that her shriek could be heard three blocks away.

~*~

Zack hit the gas as the car careened around the corner. The Presidential Palace lay just down the street in front of him now, but there seemed to be some kind of road block ahead. He could see soldiers in the street at the next intersection, turning traffic off to the side.

There was a short line of cars in his lane in front of the roadblock. Zack spent a split second accessing the situation, then pulled the car into the opposing lane and slammed down on the pedal even harder.

He saw the shocked look on the faces of some of the soldiers as he sped by, and those who did not have to leap out of his way turned and fired wildly after him, but none came anywhere near the mark.

The palace was almost right in front of him now, but the streets were filled with people, mostly soldiers, who seemed to be running around in a great panic but not really accomplishing anything. Some had seen his little maneuver at the roadblock, however, and fired at him as well. These shots came a little closer, he noted with discomfort, as a bullet smashed through the rear drivers side window.

He turned the car abruptly, and once more saw people leaping desperately out of his way. There was an entrance to a parking garage under the palace off to his right. The entrance itself was blocked off, but the exit was only barred by a thin wooden gate. He barreled through it, snapping the gate like a twig, but had failed to notice the slanted metal spikes on the ground under the gate designed to foil just such a maneuver as he was now attempting.

The car rocked under him as all four tires blew out. He careened across the parking garage, out of control, until he slammed to a halt not far from the rear wall.

He leapt out of the car, pulling his sword out behind him. There was a door at the back of the garage. As he ran for it he heard shouts and the crack of gunfire. He reached the door and pulled it open, nearly running into a soldier who had just been about to open it from the other side. Zack's sword drove forward, and the man fell to the ground. Zack stepped over the body and ran on. He was just beginning to realize what he had gotten himself into. He had never been to the Presidential Palace. He did not know the layout of it, and he had seen how large it was when he had been outside. He had announced his presence in no uncertain terms, so they would be looking for him. The chances of his finding Aeris and the others before he was caught, much less helping them escape, seemed tiny indeed.

So maybe he hadn't thought it through all that well. Nevertheless, he couldn't turn back now. What he lacked in knowledge he would make up for with tenacity. If they were going to take him down, he was determined to make them pay dearly.

He ran on, picking directions at random. Whenever he came to a stairway he went down. Somehow it seemed reasonable to assume that they would be keeping the prisoners on a lower floor, thought how he came up with that logic he could not say.

He ran into a large room, filled with crates and machinery, and ten soldiers standing by large double doors at the other end of it. One of them looked up at him and shouted to the others. He turned to run back the way he had come and saw more soldiers coming down the hallway from that direction.

"Shit," he muttered and bolted to the side, behind some crates just as a hail of bullets struck the wall where he had been standing. Two soldiers ran around the crates toward him, but a few slashes of his sword cut them down. The others retreated to defensive positions behind some crates of their own, pinning him down with gunfire. He looked around, and realized that, though he was safe for the moment, he could not escape from the room without exposing himself to fire. But that would not do. He could not afford to remain in one place for too long. That would allow them to gather their forces and overwhelm him. He gripped his sword tightly in his hand and moved to the edge of the crates, his eyes falling on a door across twenty yards of open space. He would have to make a run for it.

~*~

Orlando had gathered as many men with him as he could find as he left his headquarters in pursuit of Zack. They made up a convoy of four vehicles as they came to a halt near the Presidential Palace. As soon as he had reached the street in front of the building he had realized that something was very wrong. There were soldiers dashing about everywhere, seemingly in a panic. He could hear shouts and shots being fired. Such a ruckus could not possibly have been caused by just one man.

Whatever the cause, it gave Orlando sudden hope. No one was paying much attention to him and his little convoy. The soldiers seemed to be completely unorganized at the moment. Perhaps this could be turned into an opportunity not only to recapture Zack but to mount an offensive operation as well. A smile slowly grew on his face. Something had gone wrong here, and that could only be good news for the Brotherhood. Perhaps it was time to strike directly at his enemy. Perhaps this was a chance to not only retrieve Zack, but also to get Cloud as well, perhaps this might even be a chance to strike directly at Gram himself! If his enemy was in disorder, it would be foolish not to take advantage of it.

His men were gathering around him now as they got out of their vehicles. He opened the door to the van he had come in and started handing out weapons.

"We've got them on the run," he cried. "Now's our chance to strike. Get your weapons and follow me!"

~*~

Two Mysteele soldiers were walking rapidly down the street behind the Presidential Palace when one happened to glance over on the other side of the street. He stopped dead in his tracks and grabbed hold of his companion's arm.

"What the hell is that?" he exclaimed.

There was an entrance to an alleyway between two buildings across the road. In the mouth of it stood a large red animal.

The second man saw the beast as well and his eyes widened in surprise. At that moment the animal looked up, right at them, then turned and disappeared into the alley. The two men looked at each other, then without a word ran quickly across the street and followed the animal into the alley.

A few minutes later two men dressed as Mysteele soldiers stepped out of the alley. Two red beasts walked alongside them.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Reeve asked, tugging at the tight fitting collar of the soldier uniform.

Red shrugged.

"Not very imaginative, perhaps," he replied. "But it has been known to be effective."

Reeve said nothing more as they all walked toward the Presidential Palace. He felt a strong desire to run toward it as fast as he could, actually, he felt a strong desire to run away from it as fast as he could, but he gritted his teeth and forced himself to walk calmly beside the others.

There were dozens of soldiers running down the street and standing guard in front of the building. The one's in the street ignored them, but when they approached the building one man stepped toward them, looking at Red and Nipala curiously.

"What the hell are those things?" he questioned.

"Specially trained attack lions," Rude answered immediately. "It's a secret project."

The man looked at them dubiously, and seemed about to say more. But then Nipala growled low in her throat and looked at him menacingly. He stepped back.

"Okay," he said nervously. "Go ahead."

Reeve breathed a sigh of relief when they walked through the doors into the palace.

"So where do we go from here?" Rude asked.

"Not sure," Red replied. "Let's just take a look around."

"Why don't we ask someone?" Nipala suggested.

The others pondered this for a moment.

"Let's just look around a little first," Red said.

Nipala shrugged and said nothing more.

Rude led them down the hall. They came out into a wide concourse that looked like it ran the entire length of the palace. It was bustling with activity, most of them soldiers, but quite a few civilians as well.

"Looks a little too crowded for us," Rude said slowly.

Reeve nodded in agreement. They spotted a door nearby. They entered and found themselves in a stairwell.

Rude led them down. The others followed, no one arguing with his selection. They walked down two flights before they came to the bottom of the stairs. There was another door in front of them. They stepped out into a deserted hallway.

They walked along the hall for some time, looking in rooms as they went. Occasionally they saw someone else in the hallways, sometimes a soldier, sometimes not. Almost every one of them paused and stared at Red and Nipala, but no one questioned them.

They walked on for some time. After a while Nipala's tail began to twitch.

"This is senseless," she finally blurted out. "Why don't we just ask someone?"

The others just looked at her without responding. They passed another room and saw a man inside sitting at a desk studying some papers.

Nipala walked up beside Reeve.

"Ask him!" she said softly, nodding toward the man. Reeve looked in the room hesitantly, then at the others. They did not speak.

"Oh good grief!" Nipala hissed. "What is this, some kind of male thing? None of you want to ask directions?"

"Hey bub!" she called out. The man looked up.

"Where do they keep the prisoners they brought in here the other day?" she asked loudly.

"Down the hall," he said, pointing. He did not seem to think it odd at all that he was talking to a red lion like creature. "But didn't you hear? They all escaped."

Nipala looked at him in surprise.

"All of them?"

"I think so," he said, nodding.

Nipala turned and looked at the others angrily.

"See!" she exclaimed. "If we'd just asked sooner we would have saved ourselves a trip down here!"

The guys just looked at her and shrugged.

She turned back toward the man.

"What's the quickest way out of here?" she asked.

The man had turned back to his papers. Now he pointed down the hall in the same direction he had before without looking up.

"There's a stairway at the end of the corridor," he replied.

"Thank you," Nipala said.

The man waved his hand in dismissal. They continued down the corridor, this time with Nipala, shaking her head slowly, in the lead. They passed another open door and stopped suddenly, looking inside. There was a woman tied to a chair in the center of the room. She looked at them curiously, her eyes locking onto Red and Nipala. She had a large bruise on one side of her face.

"Are you Cloud's friends?" she asked.

They all looked at her in surprise.

"Yes," Red said, turning and stepping into the room. The others followed right behind. "Who are you?"

"My name is Lenore," she replied. "Cloud has escaped. Can you untie me? We've got to get out of here."

"Of course," Red said.

Reeve and Rude walked over and quickly removed her bindings. She stood up and smiled.

"Thank you," she said. "We must leave at once. Magnus has planted a bomb in the building. I'm not sure when it's set to go off. We must get out of here as fast as possible."

"A bomb?" Reeve said, feeling a tightness in his throat. "Why?"

"There's no time to explain," she said. "We've got to go!"

"But what about our friends?" Reeve said.

She shook her head.

"There's no time to look for anyone," she said.

"If they've escaped, it would seem logical that they would get out of the palace as fast as they could," Red stated.

No one disagreed.

"All right then," Rude said. "Let's blow this joint."

They all turned to look at him.

"Hmmm," he said after a moment. "Maybe I could have phrased that better. Let's get out of here!"

~*~

Vincent's head jerked up as he heard the sound of gunfire. It was coming from somewhere ahead of them. Elena came up beside him. She looked down the hallway.

"Sounds like a welcoming committee," she commented. "Should we turn back?"

Vincent stood there for a moment, listening. Then he shook his head.

"No. They're obviously not shooting at us. Which means either they're shooting at each other, or at an enemy."

"Their enemy doesn't necessarily mean our friend," she pointed out.

Vincent nodded.

"True," he replied. "But it could."

They had retrieved their weapons from the guard station. Now Vincent readied his gun and walked forward. Elenda followed behind, with Aeris bringing up the rear.

They reached the end of the hallway. A door stood open in front of them. The sound of gunfire was very close now. They edged forward, weapons ready, and took a look into the room beyond. It was a large room filled with crates and machinery. They could see seven or eight men in front of a pile of crates to their left. The men were firing over the crates across the room, but Vincent could not make out their target.

He turned toward Elena, motioning toward the men. Elena nodded.

They both stepped out into the room, guns blazing. The men by the crates, taken completely by surprise by this sudden attack from the rear, barely got off a return shot before it was over.

Vincent ran over to the crates and looked across the room. For a moment he didn't see anyone at all. Then he heard a shout from behind some crates on the far side of the room.

"Vincent!"

Aeris looked up at the sound of the voice, her heart suddenly beating faster in her chest. She ran around the crates until she could see the rest of the room.

Zack stepped out from behind the crates that had concealed him. He and Aeris saw each other at the same time, their eyes locking onto one another.

Aeris gave a little cry of relief and rushed over to him, throwing herself into his arms.

"Thank God," she exclaimed. "I thought you were dead. I thought I had lost you all."

Zack wrapped his arms around her, feeling a rush of both relief and triumph. He could hardly believe he had found her. Never in his life had it felt so good to see someone, to hold someone in his arms.

"Aeris," he said softly.

Vincent and Elena came up beside them.

"Good to see you again," Vincent said. "How did you get here?"

Zack looked at him, still holding Aeris tightly. "It's a long story. I came here to rescue you. But it looks like you don't need the help."

"Is anyone else with you?" Vincent asked.

"Not now," Zack replied. "I was with Red, Nipala and Rude earlier, but we got separated."

There was a door to another hallway nearby. Elena could hear muffled shouts coming from it.

"I think it might be better if we save the discussion for a later date," she said.

Zack reluctantly let go of Aeris. All of them could hear the voices now. Without another word Zack led them back the way he had come.

~*~

"Have a seat," Gram said, motioning to a plush leather chair by the window.

Magnus sat down slowly. He glanced out the window. He could see people running in the street below.

Gram walked over behind a counter and poured them both a drink. He came back around and handed one to Magnus, who took it without a word. Gram stood there for some time just looking at him.

"How did he get away?" Magnus asked.

Gram shrugged in dismissal.

"Some foolishness by my daughter," he replied. He did not seem overly concerned. "He can't get very far. But that's not why I brought you here."

Magnus did not reply, just looked at Gram. Just the way the man was gazing at him was making him uneasy. They had schemed for months working on getting Cloud into their hands. He was the key to Gram's entire plan. There had to be a very good reason the man was so calm. He shifted in his seat and looked at his watch.

"No, I brought you here to talk about you," Gram stated.

Magnus was even more puzzled. Already he didn't like the way this conversation was going.

"What about me?" he asked slowly.

"Where were you born, Magnus?" Gram countered.

"What?"

"Where were you born?" Gram repeated slowly.

Magnus did not reply. He could see the look in Gram's eye, the look of a vulture circling his victim. Somehow he had found out. The question now was, how much did he know?

"Why this sudden interest?"

Gram smiled.

"Did you think you could fool me forever?" he asked. "Oh, you've been very clever, I have to admit. But you made a mistake. You made Kendal suspicious. He's been having his men keep an eye on you. Kendal paid a little visit to your female friend. Lenore, I believe her name is? After some persuasion, she told him some very interesting things about you."

Magnus jumped up suddenly in anger.

"What did he do to her!" he exclaimed.

Gram took a step back and suddenly produced a gun from inside his jacket.

"Sit down," he said firmly.

Magnus looked at him, his eyes blazing, but then slowly eased himself back down in the seat. He thought furiously, a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He knew this had been a desperate venture right from the start, with little chance of success. But now after they were so close. Could it all be ruined when they were on the brink of succeeding?

"I want to know, Magnus," Gram continued. "Just what was it you had in mind? Were you waiting for me to become President and then reveal that you were born on another continent, that you have in fact been a spy for all these years? Did you think to discredit me that way? Or was it something more devious? Have you been plotting against me, maybe even helping the Brotherhood to overthrow me? I was wondering how they knew so much about us."

Magnus felt a little less uneasy at Gram's words. Obviously Lenore had not told Kendal everything. Gram still didn't know about the plot, or about the bomb. If he had we wouldn't be sitting around here discussing it, he would have gotten far away from here a long time ago. So there was still a chance. It was just possible they might still pull this off.

But what of Lenore? His hands clenched the chair thinking what Kendal might have done to her. And then he had a horrible thought. What if he had brought her here? What if she was in the building right now, Kendal's captive. He glanced down at his watch once more. There was very little time left.

Now matter how he felt about it, there was nothing he could do for Lenore now. He just had to pray that she was not here. If there was any kind of God at all, she would not be here!

"Yes, I have been working with the Brotherhood," he said. There was no point in denying it. It didn't matter now. It was all over now, one way or another. The important thing, the only thing left for him, was to keep Gram here for as long as possible. Keep him here until it was too late.

"You made it easy, you were so trusting. All this talk of making war on the other continents, on my home! Of course I was going to oppose you. I've been working with them from the very beginning. I'd do anything I could to see that you didn't take power."

Gram looked at him, just a hint of surprise on his face. Magnus didn't think he had expected to get a confession so easily. Then he slowly smiled.

"Spoken like a true patriot," he said. "I didn't think you had the courage. But I'm curious, all this time you've been with me, there must have been many times when I was vulnerable to attack from you. Why didn't you strike? You say you'd do anything to keep me from taking power, if that were true, you would be willing to give up your own life to do so. Perhaps you're not as much of a patriot as you would like to think."

"It wouldn't do any good to kill you," Magnus replied. "Not by yourself. If you were to die Ormando would be the only one left with any kind of power base, and he would surely take over the government. But he's no better than you! The both of you are ruthless, conniving, power hungry madmen with delusions of Godhood who wouldn't think twice about plunging the world into a war that could very well kill millions of people all for your own personal gain."

Magnus stared at Gram as he said this, and he saw the anger in the man's eyes. Gram's hand went white as he clutched the pistol, but Magnus didn't care anymore.

"If you were to die I have no doubt he would continue with you lunatic war plans. No, the only way to save us all would be to get rid of both of you at once. That's the only way we have any chance of restoring a rational government."

Gram raised his hand, and Magnus noticed that it shook violently. But when Gram spoke, his voice sounded calm enough.

"So you've been carrying out your own little agenda all this time," he said. "And just how did you expect to accomplish this task?"

Magnus just looked at him without speaking. Gram slowly raised the gun in his hand until it pointed directly at Magnus. He

opened his mouth, but before he could speak there was a commotion outside. They heard shouts, and a sudden blast of gunfire. Then the doors were flung open and half a dozen men, civilians all heavily armed, burst into the room. The last man was larger than the rest and carried an enormous machine gun over his shoulder.

Both Gram and Magnus stared at the newcomers for a moment.

"Orlando," they both said at once.

~*~

Cid stopped as he heard the sound of gunfire ahead.

"Looks like we're a little late for the party," he commented.

"Well, we could have been here a lot earlier if someone hadn't had to sleep so damn late," Barret muttered looking pointedly at Reno.

Reno looked at them all innocently.

"Hey, I'm recuperating," he said defensively, nodding toward his back. "I need my rest."

Barret grumbled something the others could not hear.

"Well, better late than never," Cid said. "C'mon, I been itching to get a piece of these guys for a while now. Let's get to it."

They ran down the street and turned right, toward the sound of the gunfire. They could see the Presidential Palace, the sounds of battle coming from the street in front of it. As they approached they saw both soldiers and armed civilians fighting against one another, but there seemed to be no organization to either side, at least out here in the street. With everyone running around, along with unarmed civilians dashing by, it was difficult to tell who was who.

Cid wasn't too sure about the civilians, but he knew the soldiers were their enemies. Calling for the other to follow, he charged at the nearest group of them.

The soldiers were pinned down by civilian fire from the other side of the street. They did not see Cid's group until they were almost on top of them. By then it was too late. Cid lunged in with his spear, taking one man down immediately. Then he pulled it out and slashed it across another man. Two others trained their guns on Cid, but went down in a barrage of bullets from Barret's gun. Reno's pistol and Yuffie's shuriken finished off the last two.

They paused for a moment, looking around for more foes. Mosato was with them as well, but they had told him to stay behind them, and he was intelligent enough to have listened.

Yuffie pointed suddenly.

"Hey, isn't that Cloud?"

The other looked down the road where she was pointing. They could see two people running across the road toward a narrow alley. They were pretty far away, but Cloud's spiky hair was unmistakable.

"That's him, all right," Barret said. "I wonder if he's responsible for this whole mess. I wouldn't put it past him to have started a war among these people all by himself."

Cid turned to look at them.

"Well, whatever kind of trouble he's gotten himself into, it looks like it's up to us to save his ass, as usual. C'mon."

Cloud followed Kendal as he ran through the building. He almost lost him once when he had run into a large room filled with people. But Cloud had spotted him as he shoved his way through the crowd toward a set of large glass doors that fronted the building, and had followed Kendal out into the street. Now he was slowly gaining, and Kendal looked back and redoubled his speed from sheer terror, but Cloud had a feeling he couldn't go on much farther.

Kendal ducked into a narrow alley, Cloud not far behind now. They ran down it, the gap between them narrowing with each step. Kendal seemed to have used up the last of his strength with that final burst earlier.

Kendal reached the end of the alley and disappeared around the corner. Cloud raced after him, increasing his own speed, gaining renewed strength from the fact that he was so close to his target now.

He came around the turn and stopped dead in his tracks. Kendal has stopped too. He was standing a short way down the road, with twenty soldiers behind him. He looked at Cloud, a smile curling his lips. He was still panting, and it took him a moment to catch his breath, but then he spoke.

"You fool, did you really think I would be so stupid as to not have a plan of escape?" he said, looking at Cloud evilly. "I had these men gathered here as a reserve in case of emergencies. I think this qualifies amply. Even you can't beat twenty to one odds."

The men behind Kendal raised their guns.

~*~

"Damn," Tifa muttered. She was walking down another of the seemingly endless halls that ran through the palace. She had not seen a cafeteria, or any sign of a parking garage. She was sure she should have found it by now. She must have taken a wrong turn somewhere. Much as she hated to admit it, she had to face the fact that she was lost.

She didn't know how long she had been wandering around now, but it seemed like a long time. She had passed quite a few people in her travels, but only one soldier had taken any notice of her, and she had left him sprawled unconscious on the floor.

She walked up a wide set of stairs and saw a large room in front of her. It was crowded with people. At the far end of it she could see the street beyond through large glass doors.

She hesitated a moment, looking around. The room seemed to be the main lobby of the building, and was buzzing with activity. But maybe that would be to her advantage. Maybe it would be better to hide in plain sight.

He stepped into the room, walking quickly, but not quickly enough to draw attention to herself. Or so she hoped. Most of the people seemed to be going about their business, and the only ones who seemed to be running were the soldiers. A couple ran past her nearby, but they took no notice of her.

She made her way through the crowd, walking more rapidly now. The doors were only yards away.

Suddenly a very familiar face appeared in front of her.

"You!" Wisteria cried angrily, grabbing hold of Tifa's arm. "Don't think you can get away that easy. I've got a score to settle with you and your little spiky haired twerp of a boyfriend."

Tifa jerked her arm away and looked at Wisteria. She stopped and stared for a moment.

"Speaking of hair," she said. "What have you done with yours?"

Wisteria's face turned red and she let out a little squeal of rage. She reached back and slapped Tifa across the face.

Tifa's head turned at the blow, but then she looked back at Wisteria, anger clouding her own eyes. Slowly she looked down at her fist and concentrated.

On the street outside the battle had moved away from the area, and it appeared that things had started to quiet down a little in front of the palace. But then the plate glass window beside the main entrance suddenly exploded outward as a human projectile smashed through it. Wisteria hit the ground at the edge of the sidewalk and bounced a few times like a limp rag doll before coming to a rest in the middle of the street.

Tifa stepped slowly through the shattered window and examined her handiwork. She had used final heaven many times in the past, but she didn't think it had ever made her feel so good.

A bullet whistled by her head, bringing her back to reality. There were still plenty of soldiers around, but at least she was out now. She turned and ran rapidly down the street.

"Twenty to one? That hardly seems fair."

Cloud turned around in surprise. In spite of the danger he felt a smile crossed his face as he saw Cid emerge from the alley followed by Barret, Yuffie, Reno, and a young boy.

Kendal hardly seemed phased at all.

"Twenty to one, twenty to six, I don't think it'll make much difference," he said, looking them over. "You're still outgunned." He turned back toward his troops.

"Kill them!"

The soldiers raised their guns again, but before they could fire the materia Cid, Barret, Yuffie and Reno held blazed suddenly to life.

Cloud felt a tingling sensation as regen, barrier, magic barrier and haste took effect. He heard the retort of the guns, but barrier protected them. Behind the others he saw the young boy holding up another materia, and this one glowed bright red.

"Tera Flare!" Mosato yelled.

Out in the cold depths of space a looming figure materialized. The huge triple winged dragon circled round and then stopped, hovering above a point on the surface of the planet far below. It reared back it's head, then lunged forward to emit a huge blast of incandescent light that streaked down toward the surface of the earth.

Kendal looked up as the clouds in the sky above rolled back. Suddenly he had a very bad feeling about this. He turned and took off as fast as he could down the street once again.

Cloud saw him and took off after him, just as an enormous burst of energy slammed down to the earth on top of the soldiers. Cid had to turn away and shade his eyes, and when he finally looked back, there was no sign of any of the soldiers.

Kendal looked back and saw Cloud coming up rapidly behind him. Much too rapidly. Not only was Kendal still exhausted, but Cloud was still under the influence of the haste spell Yuffie had cast.

Kendal stopped and turned, knowing that no matter how desperate he was, he could no longer outrun his opponent. Cloud was closing rapidly now, his sword poised to strike. Kendal reached down and pulled out his stun materia, his hand trembling so badly that he could barely hold on to it. There was a flash of green light, but it had no effect, for Cloud was also protected by magic barrier. Cloud's sword swung, and Kendal dove to the ground as it whistled over his head. The stun materia flew from his hand.

Cloud turned like lightening and raised his sword. Kendal pulled a knife from his belt and made one last desperate lunge, but Cloud easily sidestepped it and slashed out. Blood and the knife flew from Kendal's arm. Cloud stepped closer and raised his sword once more.

"No," Kendal cried out.

"Time for a little character building!" Cloud snarled and drove the sword downward.

~*~

Gram brought up his gun, but he was too late. There was a blast of gunfire as Ormando's men opened up. With a cry Gram fell backwards and lay still.

Ormando walked over and looked down at Gram's body, a cruel smile forming on his lips.

"Finally," he said. He looked around at the others. Magnus just stood there, looking at Ormando, hardly believing his eyes. It had worked! He had come. Dr. Lee had not let him down.

He looked out the window. There were still people running in the street below, but not nearly as many. Suddenly he spotted someone. He stared out the window and his heart skipped a beat. For a moment he thought his eyes might be playing tricks on him, but then he realized it really was Lenore he saw running rapidly away from the building.

He turned back toward Ormando, and suddenly he was no longer nervous. In fact, he had never been this calm before in his entire life.

"After all these years I've finally done it," Ormando continued. "The Brotherhood has finally triumphed. With Gram out of the way there is no one to stand in my way of taking power. All my years of hard work have finally come to fruition. It will be a simple matter now to recapture our wayward SOLDIERS and discover the secret of Mako infusion. Then we can carry on Gram's plan and conquer the other continents. I am now the ruler of Mysteele, but that is only the beginning. Soon I

will rule the entire world!"

He stopped and looked at the others, his gaze falling last on Magnus, who was just standing there shaking his head.

Magnus glanced down at his watch and saw the second hand ticking slowly toward ten o'clock.

"I don't think so."

"Zack, Aeris!"

Zack turned and saw Tifa running toward them.

"You're safe," she cried out. "I can't believe it!"

"Tifa," Aeris called.

Tifa ran up to them.

"Where is everyone else?"

Aeris was about to reply when another voice called out.

"Hey everyone, this way, quickly!"

They turned to see Red ahead of them, standing next to a woman they did not know.

"Red!" Tifa said.

They followed Red and the woman as they led them quickly away from the building. Down the block were more familiar figures.

They came together and Aeris looked at Reeve in shock.

"You're alive!" she exclaimed.

"We thought sure you were dead!" Elena blurted out.

"We thought you were dead," Red said, looking at Zack.

"And I was afraid you were all dead."

They turned at the voice and saw Cloud walk out of a nearby alley, followed by Cid, Barret, Yuffie, Reno and Mosato.

"Cloud!" Tifa yelled and ran over to him.

They all began talking at once, all except Lenore, who silently turned to look back at the Presidential Palace.

Suddenly the ground shook below them. They heard a tremendous roar, and the Presidential Palace erupted in a huge fireball that sent flame and smoke rocketing hundreds of feet into the sky. They all fell to the ground as debris plummeted back to the earth all around them. They lay on the ground and waited until the earth stopped shaking. When they looked back up again, there was nothing left of the palace but a huge pile of rubble.

They slowly got to their feet, looking in shock at the devastation the blast had caused. Lenore stared at the remains for a long time until Cloud came up beside her. There were tears running down her cheeks.

"Magnus."