

# FFVII Too Much In The Sun by Glass Shard

## Part Ten: BEAUTY, TERROR, AND CLOSING THE DOOR



The Turk paced the streets. They were lined with hell's fires but the destruction, as haughty as it attempted to make itself, was not interesting. To hell with the fires of hell, they didn't belong here. He didn't care for whatever dark dark power thought it could take over the world this time. Let it come, let it steal it all, a billion lives, he didn't care. He had more pressing matters. And a new mark to kill. There it was, ten feet tall, black and grinning and coming at him at a full charge.

Chaos.

Let it come. To hell with demons, to hell with the past.

The Turk raised his gun.

That other mark, the one from before, that flitting figure of white. He could feel it watching, see that pleading face in the farthest corner of his peripheral vision. The hurt of the years had made the face into something he feared.

"Vincent. . ."

He turned around at the sound of his name, forgetting the charging demon, that scrap of night coming to take his head off simply because the Turk was too human, too decent, too damned bloody naive. Not the Turk though, that other man that'd always been there behind it. That Vincent Valentine man with the cheesy last name that demeaned his own love, that mocked him; named after a saint who'd loved too much. He had loved too much, loved with a desperate, impossible intensity. The Turk had killed, had stolen, had gotten his love killed and stolen and locked in a box, the tab for a lifetime of unthinking murders.

Chaos was charging.

Chaos. His new box after he'd abandoned the other. After he'd abandoned his velvet-lined sanctuary. After he'd abandoned and burned that shack in the snow.

Fuck Chaos.

"Vincent. . ."

The other mark, the white one that he always blew away and let die in his arms. Where was Hojo, wasn't this his cue

to come in and say something, pick his emotions apart grind them beneath his patent leather shoes?

Oh yeah, that was right. He'd already killed Hojo.

Shut the book on the past. The letter had demanded he shut the door on the past.

That demon was charging. Black, roaring, bloody claws and fangs and horns. Before the Turk could do anything, those claws were boring through his stomach and coming out the other side in showers of red and gore. So he raised his gun and shoved it in the demon's black head.

Its red eyes. Turned up to look at him as the Turk's twitching finger moved over the trigger. His own red eyes. Not the brown ones of the Turk who'd been locked in the box, but the sorrowful red eyes of the man that'd come out thirty years later. But the demon was the Turk, right? Hadn't Hojo made the Turk into the monster? Shouldn't those eyes be brown and murderous?

Not sad and red and weeping.

Fuck it.

He pulled the trigger and the demon flew back without a head.

Maybe it all needed to die.

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The light was screaming.

A piercing sound that thundered and whispered and moaned all at once and it pounded her brain and the rocks raining from above threatened to press her into the ground and Tifa pushed her back against the oozing, freezing, slime-inundated stone wall as though to burst through its solidity and come out the other side to somewhere else. Somewhere there was no Jenova and there was no death. But there wasn't such a place. Tifa knew all she had to work with was the Planet she'd been born on. Anything she wanted it to be for herself or those she loved, she had to force upon it with her own two hands.

Her heart roaring in her chest, she flinched with each immense slab of rock that plummeted from the ceiling as Jenova's light-enshrouded form ascended upwards in a blaze of divine power, boring through the layers of the Northern Crater, seeking the surface.

"Cloud!!"

She couldn't see him in the light, or see that thing that held him captive. The glow blinded her and she looked away, pressing further back against the wall as more of the Crater clattered and shattered all about, filling her ears with thunder and the screech of grinding rock. She added her own voice to the cacophony, glad to hear her shout, as hoarse as it was. At least it was making noise in the name of something that mattered. Not blind destruction. Just blind frigging love.

Vincent snapped awake with a cry on his lips that never came. He lay there, half-buried in rubble and stared upwards at Death's ascent, confused at first, then completely enraged. So enraged, he was literally seeing red and he had to give half a bitter chuckle at that one. In a flurry of movements that surprised him, he thought he'd still be weak and injured by Hojo's lying chemicals, he was suddenly on his feet, shedding rocks off the lower half of his body as though they were nothing at all. The noise was deafening and he darted his eyes around for Tifa, fearful of the dangerous and deadly plummeting of stones and ceiling from above. The whole god damned world was falling down around his ears, the rocks were like pieces of the sky raining down, that light pouring from above, it bathed it all and washed it all away, leaving only the white glaring blankness of perfect illumination. A vacuum. That's what it'd all be soon. There'd be no stopping it. It was inevitable now.

But impossible odds had never stopped them before.

Dodging the pieces of fallen sky, Vincent leapt catlike from one patch of clear cave floor to the next, feeling physically better, probably mentally better too, than he had in years. With a sudden start, he realized something was wrong. A few observations confirmed it.

The world before his eyes came to his brain filtered in red.

He was ten feet tall.

He had wings.

And as hard as he tried, all he could get to come out of his mouth were growls.

He was Chaos.

But he was still Vincent.

Professor Hojo had truly had a flair for the dramatic.

"You evil bastard!!" a voice screamed at his back and Vincent whipped around, almost tripping, the unconscious instincts that had kept him as agile as he ever was a human, fading away as his brain realized how utterly screwed up his body now was. He didn't know how to move with wings and horns and four extra feet of height. He almost fell flat on his face.

"Are you here to finish me off? Are you? I don't care, there's nothing more you can do to me. . . nothing matters anymore, does it?!"

Tifa's voice was a furious sob that ripped from her throat with sharper claws than he could ever hope to possess. Pulling himself together, he slowly turned to face her, blinking rapidly, swallowing hard, wincing as pieces of the Crater slammed into him. Tifa stood pressed against the cave's rear-most wall, his rifle poised in her shaking hands, aiming for his heart.

"I'm sorry, Vincent!" she sobbed, "I couldn't protect Cloud and I couldn't help you! Jenova's won! She's won and it's all over! Because of him!" The rifle barrel dropped a bit as she broke down, sobbing into the folds of her over-sized sweatshirt. "Maybe if I'd been more. . . more understanding or something, or-- or just doing something different-- he might never have gone up to the sixty-eighth floor by himself, maybe he would have called me to help him. . . ! Oh, god, it isn't fair. . . I thought we could stop him before it got this far, before it ended on such a sour fucking note--! But no, everything's against us, everything!"

Everything was against them. But everything always had been. Jenova and Sephiroth and Shinra, all of it. Even the Planet was dubious and not to be trusted, an ally that you could never turn your back on, who only helped on a whim. It had always been that way with them. A lone small group up against the worst things in the world.

"Vincent--! What do I do? What? Please, tell me. . . what do you do when someone you love is dead and it hurts so bad you can't breathe or think or bear to live another minute?"

Her broken sobs struck at him and Vincent stepped forward, clenching and unclenching his fists in rage and helplessness. That light from above was getting further away. The fact whispered foulness in the back of his mind. Frowning, he took another cautious step towards his friend, but Tifa's head shot up and the rifle renewed its deadly aim, the muzzle shoved nearly into his chest. The woman behind it glared at the demon before her with hatred snapping through the tears, ignoring the chips of rock slicing into her face and bare arms from the debris flying around. Not even noticing the thunder of rocks anymore. What the hell did it matter anyway?

"Vincent. . . "she breathed, a throaty whisper, "No one blames you for any of what this monster does." With a small panicked sound, she let the rifle fall out her hands and then straightened, standing erect and tall and shivering. Frowning, tear after tear falling from her bright eyes, she stuck two fingers into the collar of her sweatshirt and pulled it away from her throat, arcing her head back to reveal pale flesh there in the harsh light of the freezing cavern. Tifa trembled with the cold and then with fear, shutting her eyes and clenching her fists. "Do it, Chaos, you animal. I know you're going to anyway, that's all you can do so get it over with. Just do it. . . "

She stared at the blackness behind her eyelids and wept bitterly, waiting. She'd never get to be there when Cloud awoke from this nightmare. She'd never get to hold CJ or Ifalna again. Nothing. But maybe some day. Maybe in that mess of green where they always said you went after you died. Maybe there she'd find her family and her love again. Maybe. Maybe. She clung to that one word.

Vincent didn't know what else to do as she stood there, looking fragile and so small and sad in the horrible light, with the world going all to hell around her. So, denied his own voice, he swept her up in his arms and held her close, engulfing the back of her small brown head with one massive claw as he pressed the side of her face into his chest. She was shocked at first, but then was content to break down all over him, crying until there was nothing left but hiccups.

"That little boy. . . "she choked, "That boy, Jeek, he said all the little vicious monsters would die. He meant Cloud, he meant you. . . but none of you are monsters. How can Jenova say that? We have to keep it from happening, right? We can stop it. We'll save him, we'll save all of us yet. . . "

He nodded his head as Tifa strained to convince herself of her own words. She was right, they'd stop Jenova. If they had drop Mt. Nibel on her head, they'd stop her. As the Northern Crater showered down around the both of them, as the world began its long descent into oblivion, Vincent let Tifa cry the words into his shoulder, her tears wet on his skin. They would have been a bizarre sight to anyone happening upon them. A despairing woman wrapped in the understanding arms of a winged black devil. But Tifa didn't even consider it. She was just glad someone was there. And Vincent was glad he

could be there for her, to let her know that they would stop Jenova and free themselves from her control. He couldn't say the words, but he told her firmly. They'd halt her advance. They had to.

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He'd seen her again. Her face burned in his mind like a soft after image and Cloud grabbed for it amidst the swirls of dark and unconsciousness. Tifa. . . she'd been there, an end had been there and then flown out from under his fingertips. What had stolen it away this time? Hadn't it been Jenova?

She'd been there. . . the memory of her touch, the touch of someone who loved him, tickled and stabbed him at the same time. But he didn't deserve love, people he loved got hurt. Better for Tifa that she was snatched away before he could kill her.

But still. . . he cried to think she'd been there, in his hands. And then snatched away.

He wanted her back. He wanted some love back.

But it was too late. Oblivion was here, grabbing at his mind and everything that made any sense began to fall away. He'd gotten what he'd wanted. He'd brought Jenova back, he'd killed them all. So why couldn't he rest, let the darkness come and say to hell with all the struggles? He wanted to forget it and let the torture end, it was eating away at his mind, the long, long days of grief and questions and destruction.

Time for the murderer's name to be jotted amidst the list of his own casualties, right?

But no, he couldn't. Something burned beyond his reach and he wanted to grab for it. Was that Tifa? Or was it something else? Hadn't he destroyed or allowed to be destroyed any semblance of anything worth living for, or protecting? Maybe not. Because something was still out there. The dark veil of Jenova's power couldn't hide it from him anymore. His human heart sensed it, something he wanted, something he'd been missing, something whose absence had been the cause of his insanity.

Just the thought that maybe he'd been wrong sent bullets into his brain, so he shoved it away. If he'd been wrong. . . that meant he was a murderer. If he'd been wrong, that meant he was evil. No, no, no, no, he wouldn't even think about it. He hadn't been wrong, he'd seen them fall. . . he remembered it so clearly. They fell away from him, screaming, and the Planet had watched it happen with apathetic eyes.

He remembered it so clearly.

Didn't he?

Yes. Yes, he did.

So let it end. Cloud welcomed it, even as darkness stole over his mind.

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Reeve walked with his head craned back, watching the sky exploding above him in detached interest. The frozen Northern air beat down through his jacket and jabbed him in the chest, wrapping chilly fingers around his neck as though to strangle him. He pulled the flaps of his coat closer and jogged a bit to keep up with Sephiroth, who was making his way over the strewn stones and broken boulders littering the lip of the Northern Crater nimbly. The Shinra President glanced once behind him to make sure Nanaki, Cid, and Berk weren't lagging, then surveyed their surroundings, the bleakness of them not helping the unease sitting heavy in his heart. He just wished the damn day would end, the whole damned week actually. Then he realized it was a Monday and kicked the ground really hard with his scuffed-beyond-repair loafers, the wind blowing his dark, mussed hair into his vision.

Hmph. It unnerved Reeve to realize that he couldn't quite get the looming, imposing abyss of the Crater laying just ahead totally out of his vision without closing his eyes. His feet moved forward, seemingly on a kamikaze mission to throw their owner into the depths of that bloody black hole. Like gunshots in the air, different footsteps sounded off suddenly, Cid's soft boots crunching gravel as he ran forward to catch him. Reeve didn't look up as his friend began walking in step with him.

"Damn quiet, dontcha think?" Cid asked lowly, nudging him in the shoulder.

"Better quiet than some of the shit we've been hearing, eh? Explosions, screams and the like."

"I dunno," he answered skeptically, treading beside his friend with light steps, using Venus Gospel as a walking staff, "Almost prefer those, then ya know just what's going on. . . but hearing nothing but our footsteps, this blasted wind whistling over the Crater, and your heart beatin' a mile a minute. . . just makes me jittery. If Jenova's here, Chaos and all them jerks, shouldn't they be making their presence known?"

Reeve laughed a bit to himself, dark eyes darting up to glance towards Sephiroth about thirty feet ahead. "Be grateful for the peace while it's here, Cid. We're heading down to all that crap right now, you'll get your fill of noise."

"Hey, I wasn't complaining. . . quiet's fine with me. S'making that Berk kid back there shake in his shoes though. All this lightening dancing around and then the sky. . ." Cid shot two worried blue eyes back towards his airship, half a grin playing over his lips to see it hovering so majestically there in the heavens, a massing of silver like a piece of jewelry, an earring hanging from the clouds. The sky behind it was still that horrible blood color like old wet clay, and it bled flakes of freezing white that fell in Cid's face and made him swear. It was a strange sight but he was getting used to crap like that.

Eyeing the snow, he lapsed into a contemplative silence and Reeve watched his friend's boots kicking up dirt as they both made their way towards the Crater. He absently wondered what was coming. They were about to plunge right into that hole ahead of them on the heels of a sword-wielding dead maniac to fight the greatest evil the Planet had ever known, then try to lure that unspeakable evil out into the open so they could blast it with a weapon that had been designed to blow up dragons, not. . . er, blow up whatever the heck Jenova was. . . it was a lame, crazy plan but it was their only hope.

Ugh, he decided he had to stop thinking about it, the simple facts of the situation were giving him a migraine.

His cellphone rang out of the blue and Reeve jumped a foot in the air.

"Dammit, Reeve!" Cid hollered, flinching, the sudden sound sending his heart roaring in his ears and his fist tightening around his pike's shaft, "Doesn't that thing have a vibrate mode? Stupid phone 'bout gave me a heart attack!"

"Gimme a break, I always miss the vibrate thing, don't like t'use it," Reeve sniffed, almost laughing. He unfolded his phone and stuck it to his ear, taking his tie off with his other hand and stuffing it away in his pocket, sick of the thing smacking him in the chin. "Reeve here."

"President, sir, Dragon Weapon's ready and in position."

He thought Marlene sounded inappropriately cheery. He turned back to the Highwind and saw the gleam of silver from behind a massing of upright granite slabs situated below it, concealed in the airship's shadow. Marlene waved to him in the distance, perched on the weapon's control panel and giving a victory sign.

"Good job," he said absently, waving back, "Alright now, from what Nanaki's told me, that weapon has a range of only a thousand feet since it's been manipulated and the projectiles weighed down, but that shouldn't be a problem, you're no more'n a thousand feet from the Crater no matter which side the little bitch decides to pop out of. Um. . . gotta ask you this, and don't take it as pessimism on my part but uh, Marlene, as a scientist, do you really think. . . this'll work?"

"As a scientist, not a chance in hell," Marlene replied cheerily, "But so what, sir? Any better ideas?"

"She's spunky, that kid," Cid remarked, lighting a cigarette. Reeve frowned, noticing how frigging near they were to the Crater now. His hands were going cold and it was from more than just the weather.

"Keep your eyes open, m'dear," he told her absently, eyes pasted on their destination, "Far as I know, we're going underground to lure Jenova into the open so you can fire. Do not wait on word from me to do so. God only knows if any of us'll make it back to the top to tell ya. So fire when you see her, bang, boom, to the moon. You just do your stuff, okay? No matter what you see going on."

"Yes, sir. Umm. . . one thing though. If this doesn't work, I just want to say right now that it won't be my fault. Oh! Elder Bugah says it won't be his fault either. Just er, so ya know and we don't get blamed."

"You're not helping me feel very confident about this, Marlene," Reeve sighed. He rubbed at his tired eyes with a cold thumb and forefinger, "But let's do this right and not give yer dad anything to bitch about when he comes back, eh? Heh. Good luck, Miss Wallace."

"Yeah, we need it. Good luck, sir."

Reeve slammed the phone shut and dropped it in his pocket, looking around to his friends. "It's up to us now, gents," he said with forced cheer, "The Weapon's ready and Marlene and Bugah are on stand-by."

"They know what they're doin', right?" Cid asked suspiciously, zipping his flight jacket to keep it from slapping at his sides. Nanaki glared up at him, claws unsheathed and digging into the dirt to keep him anchored against the beating winds threatening to pick him right up from the ground.

"Of course," he snapped to the pilot, a growl rolling off his tongue, "The question is, do we know what we're doing?"

"Let's friggin hope so, eh?" Cid smiled easily, puffing away and looking forward, "Captain Planet there seems pretty confident. Well, confident enough for. . . for. . . now what the hell is he doin'?"

Grimacing impatiently, he stared off towards their dubious silver-haired guide, decidedly irritated. Reeve and the others followed his gaze, the air filling with the rumbling thunder of the electrical storm raging above them in the reddened sky. Sephiroth had stopped at the very edge of the Crater, balanced precariously on a cliff overlooking the abyss, his cloak and hair streaming behind him like pennants, his narrowed green gaze focused into the void of space before him. He seemed threatening and ambiguous looming against the dying sky and Reeve feared to approach him, or even attempt another question.

"What is it?" he finally asked, stepping forward and gulping. Sephiroth either ignored his question or didn't hear it, half-shutting his eyes and listening intently to something that had snagged his attention with invisible teeth. Watching his comrades, Berk strained his own hearing but nothing came to his ears save wind and thunder. He stuck one hand in his pocket and swung his sword idly in the other, slicing the air to ribbons.

"I don't hear anythin'. Maybe he just got some sand up his nose," Berk suggested and the others shot him looks, "Nah, I mean, with the wind and all, that's all I been doing, the inside of my head feels like a beach."

"Don't try to help," Reeve commanded wearily, patting clueless Berk on his shoulder. Steeling his courage and desiring answers, the Shinra President paced slowly towards Sephiroth, eyes darting up to watch the crackles of lightening running curling white fingers over the heavens, ears picking up on the distant thunder's threats.

"There's no time. . ."

Sephiroth spoke before Reeve could even get another question out. He snapped about suddenly, features pale. "Do you hear it? No, I don't suppose you can. But it's already started and the song is wretched. . . The Planet, it knows Jenova moves again. She's awake, alive. . . writhing. . ."

"Cut the melodrama," Cid mumbled, "What're you talking about?"

Sephiroth glared at him and said evenly, "That bloody, blackening sky is a beginning. Your friend has achieved his aims."

"So are we too late?!" Reeve demanded over the roar of the quickening winds, swallowing down his fear and looking around, wary of an attack, searching for something to tell him for certain that they were all royally screwed. He stumbled back a step, the gale fierce and hitting him with the force of a swinging fist. Angry, he stuck a trembling hand up to block the assault of flying snow, ice, and sand. "Sephiroth!!" he hollered, "What are you saying? What do we do? Are we still going down there?!"

Reeve didn't get an answer and ground his molars together in fury as Sephiroth wordlessly knelt and bowed his head, both hands spread wide and laid on the frozen ground delicately. He could feel it. Personified by the storm, the Planet's rage swirled about him but he was a calm island amidst the blasts, it could do nothing to distract him from his thoughts. He could hear the evil's approach. Redemption, condemnation, heaven or hell, it was all about to rain down upon him and the rest of the world. Sephiroth feared it, he honestly did. He could feel that power rumbling towards him like a plowing bull. Green eyes sad and tired, he looked towards Reeve and the others, staring at them a moment, features garishly lit by the stray strands of violet lightening. He only had one thing to say.

"She's coming."

"What d'ya mean?!"

Berk fell backwards, darting his eyes to the right and left so fast it gave him a headache, fingers wrapped around the hilt of his blade, alternately loosening and tightening in anxiety and eagerness. But there was nothing to see, nothing to hear. Just the thunder, the rage of the elements, the desolate field of stone with the depthless Crater plummeting to hell only a few feet off.

"I don't see anything. . ."

"Shut up," Reeve hissed, jerking a forefinger to his lips. He could hear it; a barely audible rumbling. Actually, after a moment, he realized he didn't hear it so much as feel it in the heels of his feet. The earth was shaking. Something far below was struggling to be free, pushing dirt and stone from its path as though digging upwards from a grave, fingers scrabbling to feel the sun above. Thunder crackled on the heels of violent lightening, causing Reeve to gasp and cringe, looking to Cid and the rest to see if they felt the vibrations too.

"What the fuck is that. . . ?" the pilot whispered, pacing backwards in a circle, "What is it?! What's coming?"

Berk hefted his sword, fighting down panic as the earth began to really buck, shifting beneath his feet with impossible force. He looked up towards the sky for reassurance but found none there; only that reddish-black mess of death. The winds bit into his cheeks until he thought they'd tear his skin off and the air was too cold to breathe, every attempt at a

breath had him gasping and coughing up blood. He doubled over, falling to his knees as the earth knocked him down, hacking into a clenched fist. Cid darted towards him and offered a shoulder that was soon useless as he too lost his balance and sprawled in the dirt besides the others.

"Leave it up to Jenova to make a helluva entrance," he muttered.

Reeve looked to Sephiroth, demanding his attention, sick of it all. "Is this an earthquake?" he hollered, scrabbling to get to his feet, "Answer me, god dammit!" The summoned General drew Masamune in one swift movement, glaring at the man and amazingly keeping his balance. Reeve's breath caught in his throat at seeing the fiery fury in his expression, but he didn't have long to ponder it. With little warning, there came a series of immense cracks like the very foundations of the world splitting apart and the twenty foot stretch of frozen tundra separating the group of four from the glaring swordsman suddenly burst apart in jagged chunks of ice and rock, exploding outwards; vicious shrapnel of hardened ground striking at them mercilessly. Cid and Berk flew backwards, Nanaki and Reeve landing atop them in a heap, fighting off flying rock in desperation, the entire world turning upside down and doing sadistic cartwheels, earth shifting and exploding and beating them as it split apart. Berk landed, coughing, plowing up a stretch of snow with one arm raised above his forehead to fend off the plummeting chunks of debris from the sky. The sky. . . when Berk opened his eyes, fighting for air, he saw past the sharpened stone and rock and saw the sky again. And it was black. Not the black of night or the black of a storm, but the black of nothingness. It sucked at his dark eyes, made it impossible to look away.

Was that Jenova? he wondered absently, lungs on fire, Was it their enemy doing that to the blameless skies?

A blinding glow of white grabbed his attention and Berk renewed his hold on his weapon, taking a shallow breath and flipping over onto his stomach, a twinge in his shoulder letting him know it hadn't been a consequence-free landing. He saw Cid and the others out of the corner of his eye, the pilot leaning up on two elbows, rubbing snow out of his hair. His features were dyed white by some harsh illumination and Berk turned his face up to see what it was; what Cid and the others were looking upon; what had burst from the earth in that violent but glorious explosion of ice.

But before he could make it out, Cid smacked a hand over his eyes.

"What the hell?! "Berk protested, scrabbling at the pilot's fingers, "Get yer hand offa me, Mr. Highwind!"

"Kid like you shouldn't be seein' this. . . "he muttered, staring forward, the pilot's rough voice a whisper carried away by the fierce winds. Berk growled a curse and pried his hand off anyway, flinging it back to him petulantly. What was it? Was it Jenova standing there? Was she some slimy monster with five heads, a lotta arms, dripping ooze and nasty things? Didn't this guy know that Berk didn't let that stuff phase him? Ha. . .

He crawled forward on his elbows, ignoring Reeve and Nanaki's protesting whispers from behind as they struggled to free themselves of the debris they were half-buried beneath. Cid moved with him at his left side, the both of them shoving rolling rocks from their path as the wild winds plastered them to the ground. Berk pulled himself up, leaning hard on a huge slab of stone jutting up to bar his way. As Cid cursed him for not listening, he peered forward and finally got a good look at the thing that had made such a grand entrance.

"Oh. . . "he breathed, cluing in, "Er. . . oh. Okay then."

Jenova had blasted what was almost a second Crater in the stretch of barren field before Berk's eyes; a hole prickled with upright shards of broken stone and ice at its edges, flurries of snow settling so delicately on the debris. But the Planet's beauty was nothing. Berk didn't even pay attention to the pristine white flakes. Silent and solemn, Jenova herself hovered in the center of the new Crater, her body embedded in a nest of writhing white light; flickering, tangible strands of energy that licked about her bare flesh and sizzled in the air, lighting their mistress and the new surroundings harshly, blasting away all shadows and bleaching the world to a colorless white.

"Fuck me, but she's beautiful. . . "Berk breathed, straightening, an arm wrapping around his throbbing chest, gazing and gazing at Jenova's final form. Cid yanked him down again, cuffing him upside the head, but then the pilot shot his wide eyes back to their enemy, unable to look away.

She was breathtakingly beautiful; beautiful in a way that wasn't natural, so unnatural as a matter of fact, that her perfection made her almost ugly. Nearly seven feet tall, she hung suspended above the black void of the abyss she'd sprang from, ebony hair billowing softly past her feet, a velvety backdrop for the pale skin of the rest of her body to stand against. Gentle yellow eyes blinked slowly, almost lazily, taking in the black and blasted lip of the Crater, at ease and unconcerned with the fact that she was unclothed and seemingly vulnerable to the freezing Northern air. She moved languidly, as though stretching from a long sleep and Berk ogled her body, dark eyes running up and down her legs and across her breasts.

"Stop that!" Cid commanded lowly, smacking him again, "Don't let the li'l vixen see ya looking at her like that. Don't give the bitch the pleasure!"

"B- but. . . " Berk blinked hard, remembering to breathe, "But she is friggin' gorgeous, ain't she? It just isn't me that thinks so, right? Tell me ya think so too or I'm gonna be convinced I'm crazy!"

Cid tore his eyes away and glanced down at the wedding band on his right hand.

"I plead the fifth, "he murmured.

"Man, I wish I had a camera. . . "

"Reeve!" Cid hissed, smacking Berk yet again and jerking around, "Don't you think you should call Marlene and tell her to get her ass in gear! Blow this bitch away before she goes ballistic!"

Reeve stared forward at his friend blankly for a moment, then shook his head, eyes squinted against the blinding bright illumination dripping from Jenova, and whipped out his cellphone like a gun from a holster. Before he could even switch it on though, it flew from his hand as Nanaki snapped at him, almost taking off a few fingers. Reeve muttered a protest and a question but Nanaki only gestured back to Jenova, his one eye lowered and sad.

"Look, "he whispered.

Reeve and the others turned away from him and back towards that wavering light surrounding the. . . the monster? Should they call her a monster? the Shinra President wondered. Whatever. He peered into the blinding white, squinting to see past the curlings of power, wondering what the wicked stuff would do if he happened to touch it. With no small amount of difficulty, he forced his gaze to move past the top of Jenova's head, thinking he saw something strange there, some form obscured by the light, wrapped in the glow as though bound with it, imprisoned by intangible tentacles. There was a face there, washed out, pale and agonized, Reeve could make it out beyond the glow; a familiar faint face that made him want to break down. Cid spoke before he could.

"That's Cloud up there, "he muttered, "She's got Cloud. Poor kid."

Reeve scrambled for his fallen cell phone and slapped it to his lips.

"Sir!" Marlene answered after two rings, voice panicked, "What is it?! Thirty seconds, give us thirty seconds!!"

"No! Don't fire! Cloud's up there, you can't hit her without hurting Cloud!"

"Cloud? Cloud?! President Reeve, sir, what do Elder Bugah and I do??"

He lowered the phone from his mouth, staring blankly ahead at Jenova's stoic figure, her gentle lie of a smile, death swirling over her features. She stared back with yellow eyes, mocking him. He could see the laughs there, the dare, the challenge. She was going to kill them all. But she was going to hurt them first and laugh at their agony.

"Tell Marlene to fire."

"What?!"

Reeve snapped about to Nanaki, shocked at the words, but the creature wouldn't meet his eye. "I said tell her to fire. This is the choice. And. . . I think it's an obvious one."

"No!" Berk clenched his fists, swiveling towards him with a snarl. His eyes darted to his companions for back-up. "No! We can't and we won't. If we can't save one guy what the hell's the point of all this, huh? There has to be another way!"

"But there isn't, "Nanaki insisted passionately, shaking his furry head as his mane slapped in the wind, "Is there?"

"I won't fire this weapon at Uncle Cloud, "Marlene stated calmly from over the phone. Reeve frowned at the words, torn and terrified. He swallowed hard, looking towards his friend's barely visible form hidden away from them all, hidden away as he'd been all week, separated from those people he belonged with by demons they couldn't fight.

"No, Marlene, "he answered, "No, you won't. Fuck this. Cid!"

"What?"

"Suggestions?"

The pilot thought for a moment, sitting there in the dirt and drilling Venus Gospel into the ground distractedly.

"Nope."

He sighed at the word, glaring through whipping blonde bangs towards Cloud as the others were silent and fearful behind him. The winds were picking up, blasting dirt and snow into their eyes but Jenova was seemingly above the Planet's pathetic rage. The gale couldn't touch her, it only caused the shining black strands of her hair to separate and shimmer with the light of the crackling electrical storm, pushing some of the concealing power away from Cloud's pale face. Cid saw that he was held above and behind the monster, unconscious and bleeding a bit from some wound in his chest. The pilot immediately had the urge to dash out there and tear his friend free, save him from the harpy who had him trapped, bat that power away and make him whole again. His fist closed around Venus Gospel's shaft and he fought back the desire, slamming the ground with his other hand in his frustration.

"Release that man."

Sephiroth's order was curt and unyielding. All eyes snapped towards him as he emerged from the darkness, Masamune extending from his left hand like a single beam of light. He narrowed his gaze at Jenova, the wind's fury tearing at his cloak the only noise filling the air.

Jenova's phantom smile widened as the familiar form of the human stepped into her line of vision. She half-shut her eyes lazily, stretching her limbs, and Berk wished she'd put some clothes on, he was having a hard time concentrating.

"Sephiroth. . ."

Sephiroth noticeably stiffened upon hearing his name spoken so carelessly by that creature before them. It occurred to Nanaki how bizarre it must be for him to be facing this evil now after it had played such a prominent part in ruining his life. Forgetting the situation for just a moment, he peered into the man's face, not sure what he was looking for. Whatever it was, all he found was anger.

"Release him," he repeated, stepping forward. The rest of the group immediately stepped back.

Jenova laughed long and loud, golden strains of mirth that meandered to their ears, unbroken by the wind. "Sephiroth," she laughed, her voice echoing in the air, "How long it's been, my love. Mothers aren't supposed to admit it, but I feel inclined to let you know you probably were my favourite son. It was too bad that you were killed. Unworthy, is all, after everything was said and done. But not like this man. Not like Cloud Strife."

On cat feet, she approached Sephiroth, a train of white energy trailing at her heels, and took a deep drag off of the freezing wind. She felt more awake now, more prepared. It was time to begin.

"I see your wide eyes," she remarked conversationally, walking through the air, swinging her hips, flashing a wide, friendly smile at the group watching her, "I'm beautiful, am I not? Despite what you think of me, I am the one who was wronged, I am the gorgeous, righteous element in this war. Not this, this. . . rock. This Planet. . . it is as pathetic, as ugly, as worthless as you, my dear Sephiroth. Fitting that it chose you to represent it. Ha, what will you do to stop me, regent of the Planet? You haven't any power. I could kill those people behind you with a snap of my fingers and what would you do? Stand there with your sword as I tear them apart. You should have stayed in your hell, you sniveling wretch. It was safer there. Or were you thirsty to destroy more, to watch more killed? Is that why you've come? Are you truly fighting to save your world, or are you fighting to feed that blood lust you always had? I remember you, Sephiroth. I sculpted you, I know exactly what you are."

Her words sent shivers through him, he'd spent a lifetime assaulted by those very same ideas she spouted now. But not anymore.

"Release him and leave or I'll be forced to obliterate you," he answered simply. Reeve and Nanaki exchanged glances behind his back, the both of them hiding behind boulders.

"Maybe he's trying to intimidate her," Reeve suggested hopefully.

Nanaki shook his head. "Maybe he's suicidal," he growled.

"But he's already dead."

"Well then, maybe he's just crazy."

"Nail. Head. You hit it."

"You know how unfair my imprisonment was. . . "Jenova whispered lowly to Sephiroth, her tone changing from a mocking laugh to indignant anger, "And your fighting me makes you nothing more than another human attempting to perpetuate an imbalance that can only end in destruction. Why do you fight? Let me perform my function!"

"Your function is nothing more than to kill us all. Humans have no choice but to fight in the name of Life," Sephiroth stated simply, "Whether it's right or not. And so I say again, release Cloud and move on. Or I will fight."

Jenova roared in rage at the words, dark black brows lowering over eyes that glinted like amber. But then she wiped the anger away and laughed hideously, her power flaring up red as blood and vibrating outwards in waves, immediately melting the rocks about her form; breaking them apart and turning them to red molten stone that drained away, bubbling up and spitting steam into the freezing air. The ground cracked beneath her and more magma oozed upwards from the fissure, sizzling as it hit the chill, choking the air in smoke and pinkish steam. Sephiroth stepped backwards, grimacing, wondering just what was coming but knowing what he had to do. He gave a shout and leapt towards the woman-shaped beast, sword poised and angled to cut her in half but with a raucous shout of unbridled joy, Jenova leapt away, moving in a mess of white light and crackling energy, her hair snapping in the wind like a glistening black cloak. Sephiroth jerked about in time to be knocked backwards painfully, Masamune flying from his hand. He pushed himself up quickly and saw Jenova darting away, stark white against the blackened sky.

"What the hell was that. . ?" Berk pulled himself to his feet in a few quick movements, not even having seen what had knocked him down, it'd moved so fast. Gripping his weapon, he ran a few steps after Jenova's retreating form but almost immediately froze, terrified, suddenly seeing her intentions.

Sephiroth saw them too and marveled at the evil, amazed by it even as he was disgusted. Darting forward, brushing dirt from his clothes, he distractedly hoped that the Planet had known what it was doing when it had decided to allow him to defend it.

"She's heading for the Highwind!" Berk hollered in a panic to whoever was listening, "The kids are on there, Marlene's underneath!!"

Pumping his arms, he threw himself wholeheartedly after the monster, squinting his eyes as he ran straight after the white glow surrounding her. But she was too quick, moving with unimaginable speed that at the same time was completely effortless to her. What the hell was she? Berk demanded, And did they have any chance of doing anything to her? He asked himself the questions fearfully as he ran, nearly getting knocked to the ground as Cid and Reeve pushed past him.

"What the hell's she gonna do?" Cid asked, half a sob in the back of his voice. He darted ahead of his friends, Venus Gospel poised to strike anything that dared hurt his baby, be it Death Incarnate or what the hell ever.

Jenova was already at the airship's base, standing in its massive shadow. Her divinely illuminated form bathed the ship in white and she gazed upon it lovingly, mischievously, playfully. Only a few hundred feet away, cowering behind a few convenient slabs of stone, Marlene, Bugah, CJ and Ifalna looked on as the monster surveyed the airship's magnificent bulk. Well, Marlene and Bugah looked on anyways, both of them were covering the kids eyes, Marlene having decided CJ was too young for such a graphic lesson in female anatomy.

"Brace yourselves," Bugah muttered, pressing against the cold stone, pulling his shoulders up around his ears as Ifalna whimpered and CJ grabbed at Marlene's hands around his eyes, insisting she let him see his dad and the stupid lady that had him hostage.

With barely a flicker of will, barely a second of conscious thought, Jenova blasted the Highwind from the sky. With an amazing noise, it plummeted downwards in flames and plumes of black smoke, bleeding sparks, crashing to the earth with an explosion that sent a curtain of heat radiating outwards and into the horrified faces of everyone watching.

Reeve froze in his tracks, mouth agape.

"CJ!"

"Ifalna!" Berk hollered, feeling sick.

"My airship!!!" Cid fell forward on his knees, mouth opening and closing, blinking in disbelief. He collapsed onto his stomach, clawing the dirt, tears coming to his eyes. Those new flames danced before him, changing the stark white-lit surroundings to a deep bloody red. It couldn't be. . . and Jenova was just hovering there like some mighty goddess, some fucking deity too strong for any of them to touch. . . he shot to his feet, intent on running forward and drop kicking the silly bitch to the moon, but Reeve held him back with a strong, friendly hand on his shoulder.

"No!! The kids, my ship, Reeve, I'm gonna fuckin' kill her!!"

"The kids're okay, they're over there with Marlene and Bugah, I see 'em!! Cid, don't attack her, it's suicide! Remember Chaos?"

"Fuck Chaos and fuck Jenova!! That was the last straw!!"

Reeve, Nanaki, and Berk all jumped their friend, pinning his arms down as the Highwind's remains settled, bright fires scorching the steel and random explosions thundering through the air. The heat was intense, they could feel it from where they crouched in the dirt, and Reeve watched it burning with a sick feeling in his stomach, eyes darting to the nearby boulders as CJ and Ifalna jumped up and down, impressed by the explosion and waving to him cheerily, Marlene trying to grab at CJ. He squirmed away from her, eyes pasted on Jenova as she laughed like a little girl at play. His feature's sobered markedly once he saw his dad.

"I don't care if she kills me, I'm gonna make her pay!! No one disrespects me like that, no one!!" Cid struggled to be free, smacking Berk in the chin and sending him reeling back. The young Turk stood, rubbing his jaw, and glanced to the skies, wondering what was coming next. Once he saw it, he thought for sure he was going to throw up all over the place.

"P-president? President Reeve, sir?" he stuttered, the cruel winds lashing him with a renewed vehemence, "Sir. . . look. Aw, sonnuvabitch, tell me that ain't who I think it is. . ."

Reeve turned about, still trying to control Cid, noticing Dragon Weapon's silver bulk peeking out from the nearby rocks, Marlene now perched atop it at the control panel again and Bugah hiding at its base besides the kids. He breathed a quick sigh of relief, glanced quickly to Jenova who now seemed content to just watch the fires she'd created as she planned

what to destroy next, then Reeve turned about to see what had Berk looking so suddenly pale. He found himself sharing his sentiments.

"This is the last thing we need," he mumbled, unconsciously loosening his grip on Cid and jumping to his feet, "This is like the fifth frigging finger on a knuckle sandwich. . . why, tell me why Chaos feels the need to show up now? Why? Why do the gods hate me, what did I ever do to 'em?"

"I dunno. . ." Berk whispered, a hand shooting up to rub against his sore chest. He took a step backwards, watching the demon's approach, muttering curses and tightening his grip on his sword. Every inch of his being felt like running as far and as fast from it as he could, but he knew Marlene was watching. He couldn't look like a gibbering coward in front of Marlene, he'd rather die if it came down to it. So he shook off Reeve's hand and stepped towards the creature, jaw set in determination.

Chaos soared from the Crater in an arc of black, wings slicing through the warring winds effortlessly and carrying him from the inky darkness of the abyss like an ascending devil. Against the dead black of the skies above, all Berk could see as the demon dove was the red of its two eyes and then the shimmer of the lightening glowing from its glistening pebbled skin. As he drew closer, the fires from the burning airship outlined him in orange.

Vincent landed gracefully, wings folding at his back, and Tifa tightened her grip around his neck, eyes wide in fear. He put a claw out to help her to the ground and she let go hesitantly, sticking close to him when only an hour before she'd been fighting him for dear life. They both stood at the edge of Jenova's abyss, taking in the surroundings soberly, and Tifa gave a gasp upon seeing the Highwind in flames and Jenova's silent form silhouetted black against the fire.

What was all this? She stepped forward just bit, a fist to her mouth, her knees ready to buckle.

"Vincent, we have to stop it," she said determinedly. Shaking all over, still unnerved by the things she'd witnessed underground, Tifa looked about for her friends and for a moment, upon seeing the burning airship, feared the worst. But she breathed easier once she caught sight of Reeve and the others nearby, a relief that only lasted for a second as Cid suddenly rocketed forward out of nowhere, Venus Gospel raised to the heavens, and had her jumping backwards.

"Cid! What're you doing?!"

He brushed past her with an enraged roar and leapt at Vincent, bringing his pike down in a vicious sweep that struck him in the throat and knocked him over.

"I'll take it out on your hide, you ugly fucker!!!" he hollered, voice cracking mid-sentence, "I'll cut you into horse meat and feed you t'my chocobo, you ain't good enough t'burn!!!"

"Cid! Stop it! You don't understand!!" Tifa ran forward but Vincent shoved her back, Cid flailing his weapon in a mad rage. There was something growling in Vincent's head, a fire burning in his chest, and he had a hard time not taking one of his claws and swiping Cid's head off. The urge to fight and kill was nearly unbearable and he couldn't understand where it was coming from. Narrowing crimson eyes, wings spreading vicious at his back, he grabbed at Cid's jacket and flung him hard to the ground, battling the desire to finish him off with a swift swipe to his jugular.

Was that Chaos' desire? Was it his own? He didn't know and he didn't care to find out, not if he could avoid it. This new twist of fate was unsettling despite its intrigue and he didn't fully understand it. Full circle perhaps. Perhaps Hojo's intention had been to show him he could be whole if he wanted to. He could be what he'd been and what he'd become and make something new of it. Or maybe Hojo had just been fucking insane and delirious as he'd laid dying on the floor of his broken laboratory and penned that letter. Vincent just wasn't too sure how deeply he should bother looking into it all, or how seriously he should consider the words of a madman to be. He was just so tired of struggling to find an identity, struggling to live a life that he was convinced had ended a long time ago. But at least he wouldn't let himself hide anymore. Whatever the world did to him, he face it head on.

"Cid!" Tifa raced to her fallen friend even as he was struggling to stand and charge again, the beginnings of a smouldering vendetta raging in his eyes, "No, no, something's happened and that's not Chaos, it's really Vincent! Please, get a hold of yourself!"

"What're you talkin' about, dammit?" Cid leaned on his pike, face contorted in a scowl, inching forward slowly to lunge again, "Did you see what happened to my airship?! Did you see?! I ain't playing anymore, I'll see that ugly bastard dead and that ugly bitch in pieces if I hafta sell my soul t'do it! Chaos!!!"

He raised his weapon again and flew forward, the honed blade sweeping from Vincent's skin and then sliding from Cid's hand into the ground. Vincent again grabbed at his friend, rougher than he meant to, claws cutting into his shoulder. He stoically held him at arms length, unable to keep from grinning as Cid kicked and swore at the air, red-faced and panting. In all patience, he held him there for a moment until the pilot finally began to wonder why Chaos wasn't just tearing him to pieces. His scowl drained away slowly and he quit struggling, dangling from Vincent's claws, arms lifeless at

his sides, the freezing winds beating at him with a mocking fury. Looking him in the eye as though to ask if he was quite finished, Vincent gently set Cid down on the ground and took a step backwards as he straightened his collar, bent over to retrieve Venus Gospel, and swiped a few trembling fingers through his hair, flicking it back from his face composedly. After a moment or two, he stuck one hand in his pocket, tapped his foot in impatience, and asked casually, "Yo, Vince, what's up? Feelin' better?"

With cautious footsteps, Reeve, Berk, and Nanaki approached and Tifa quickly explained the new circumstances as Cid eyed Vincent skeptically, tapping his pike against the side of his boot. Flames roared nearby and he clenched his teeth against the sound, focusing his thoughts elsewhere.

"Are you all right, Tifa?" Reeve insisted, sweeping his friend up in a relieved embrace half-way through her lecture. She laughed weakly and gave him a reassuring pat, shoving him away.

"No, "she answered, "But I'm not the one to worry about. How about you guys? I'm sorry I left you back there, I panicked, I suppose, ran off and worried you all and didn't even manage to do any frigging good to anybody."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, we're all about useless, "Reeve assured her, cheered just a bit by her return, "But at least Vincent's back with us, thank God. Chaos is one less thing to worry about and I'm sure Berk's glad to hear it, now if we can only-- "

"Alright! "Cid cut in quickly, shutting his teammate's prattle up with a single sweep of his arm, "We got off to a bad fuckin' start, so let's try this again. We have to get Cloud away from Jenova. Anyone see where Sephy got off to?"

Tifa's breath caught in her throat and the sound of the name but she kept quiet. Reeve eyed her sympathetically and grabbed a hold of her arm.

"C'mon, "he commanded, "I'll take you to the kids, we don't have any business being out here, we're about as useless as toes."

"No, Reeve! I'm not going anywhere unless it's with Cloud, "Tifa insisted, flinging off his arm, "Where is Jenova?"

"That's an excellent question. . . "Nanaki muttered, glancing towards the Highwind's wreckage and grimly noticing the demon had disappeared, "Let's keep our guards up, I have a feeling she won't move off until she's sure we're dead."

"We don't want her to move off though, "Berk insisted, looking to the right and left, cold sweat dribbling down his back and sticking his shirt to his skin. He put himself into a loose attack stance, katana wavering before his face, ready to slice anything that threatened he or his friends. "We have to keep that thing here, we have to take it out. Where'd she go?"

The group was quiet, looking about, that very question on everyone's mind.

There is something familiar about this scene. . .

The disembodied voice came at them like a weapon, rolls of thunder punctuating the beginning and end. Reeve pulled his damp collar from his neck, eyeing the blackness of the dead sky, the flames from the Highwind making the world look covered in blood.

Something familiar. . . but this time, it will be you that die. I shall kill you all first, the "heroes". . . yes. Then I take care of the rest of your race. A Meteor this time? No, no, nothing so quick, you've all lost your chance to end it so easily. Slow and tortuous, as my long imprisonment was, I'll give your race time to ponder its sins before I send you all to hell. A famine, a flood. . . forty days of fire, something excruciating. . . it's a difficult decision but I hardly mind that. . .

The Crater was darkening, the sun gone, hidden behind the void that was the sky. A bitter storm spewed snow at them, wind so fierce it made their cheeks raw and bloody.

"Jenova!!" Tifa cried into the blackness, Reeve's hand on her shoulder, "This ends now! Give us back Cloud!"

Vincent's eyesight was far better than the rest. He turned his blazing red eyes to the darkness, thinking he saw some movement, some distant glow. He was right. With unimaginable speed, a brilliantly illuminated female figure shot at them, arms blazing with a pulsating power, leaving a trail of energy and light behind her. A beautiful sight almost, the way she melted from the dark, but her intentions were deadly and focused on the group of six.

Berk lashed out with sword that was too slow and too ineffectual, the blade passing through Jenova's form harmlessly. The young Turk darted away to avoid the bursts of raw power drenching the monster as she passed among them, enjoying herself immensely and in no hurry to end her play so soon. He fell back, the very rocks beneath his feet crumbling beneath the intensity of their enemy's glory.

"We are like ants fighting God, "Tifa murmured, cringing from the monster, grabbing unconsciously at the cuff of Reeve's jacket as he pushed her back.

"What?" he panicked, "What?!"

"Reeve, where are my kids?"

He knocked his friend to the ground and they both rolled away as the very air sizzled about their bodies. "With Marlene and Bugah!" he answered above the roaring of the wind, "They're fine!"

Berk gave Reeve a glance, skipping over the crumbling ground, dodging the puddles of molten rock, and sliced at Jenova again, a graceful sweep of silver that would've beheaded a normal adversary but it passed through Jenova as though she were air.

"That's fair as shit!" he protested, darting to the side, "Fight fair, lady!"

"Ha!" Cid laughed, dark brows lowered over snapping eyes, "Bitch baddies like her don't fight fair, they just take every advantage they can get and stab ya in the back at every turn. Ain't that right, ya ugly little whore? You wanna blast another airship? Eh? C'mon, Red, let's give her a haircut, I'd love to hang her up by that black mane of hers. . ."

Nanaki shrugged, knowing Cid was too far gone over a mountain of rage to even bother reasoning with. Jenova's words did nothing but fan that fire.

"Why do you fight so desperately to free your friend? Cloud Strife was going to kill you all. He has killed you all. He didn't give a second thought to the fact that destroying the Planet meant all of you would die along with it. He didn't care, he didn't mind. Everything was immaterial in his lust for revenge. Don't you hate him for that? Don't you enjoy watching him wrapped and choking in the very power he helped bring about?!" Jenova laughed heartily, the harsh sounds breaking apart like glass in the air and she laughed even harder as Berk, Cid, and Nanaki charged her, their weapons as useless as paper fans against her divinity. But when Vincent attacked, she noticed.

Her laughter cut off sharply as he landed in a crouch, grinning, the strain of fighting off that blood lust easing up as he allowed himself to lash out. Jenova smiled faintly, one thin hand going up to smear away a line of purple blood from her brow.

"You're not Chaos. . ." she remarked casually, "Where is Chaos, Vincent?"

I told you before. He's dead.

"Hm. Not entirely true. But true enough, I see. How unfortunate. Why don't you join him, you miserable worm?" With a sudden scream of rage that nearly deafened him, Jenova struck out, sending Vincent flying back, body slamming painfully against the unforgiving side of an upturned boulder. He slid down sickeningly, sure that he'd felt his spine snap. He struggled to stand, blinking hard, the dark world going darker, but with a snap of realization, he suddenly swiveled one red eye about, the glimmer of silver in the distance grabbing his attention. Sephiroth approached slowly, his mouth a grim, determined frown. He stood in front of Vincent, shielding him from Jenova's gaze and planted himself there, Masamune drawn and quivering in his hand. Jenova seemed almost surprised to see him again, she'd thought he'd surely fled after confronting the old monster again, the sight of the thing that had controlled him years ago too much for his tortured psyche to bear. But here he was again, just as she remembered him. Her Sephiroth. Her murderer. That lone human she'd placed on a pedestal and entwined in lies and false promises, telling him he deserved to be a God and laughing as he'd believed it, desperate to believe, desperate to be anything but an inhuman, unloved experiment, a mass of motherless flesh with nothing to call his own save his skill and the meaningless number one tattooed on his hand. She'd been willing to be his family, if only for long enough to get what she wanted from him. He'd played into her hands so effortlessly. Perhaps that was why Jenova thought of him as her favourite.

Sephiroth swung Masamune in a Z-shape before him, the blade singing through the air and then dancing to its own song. He pointed to Cloud with it and his voice rang out, assured.

"His only crime is his humanity," he said quietly, "And if that is such a crime, kill us all. And start with me. I fight you in the name of all of us. I fight you in the name of Life."

With a roar of rage, Sephiroth leapt forward onto a massing of broken stone, his agile feet finding the best holds with almost supernatural precision. Masamune swung around his head, the silver of the blade playing in the silver of its master's snapping hair as he lashed out. Jenova took a swipe across the shoulder before she got a hold of herself enough to swing back, moving through the empty air with a push of her arms, hair swirling about her head like a school of hissing black snakes. Light dripped from her and sizzled into the ground as she rose, eyeing Sephiroth in cold anger as he stood perched on the highest boulder of the formation he'd leapt upon, sword at his side, green eyes snapping pleasurably with the conflict, with this chance to fight the thing that had ruined him and perverted his life.

Vincent pushed himself painfully to his feet, something within roaring for him to join this battle. He looked around and saw the others cowering nearby, watching Sephiroth and Jenova struggling with awe and fear in their eyes.

"How can he fight her?" Reeve asked no one in particular. He knelt in the dirt, an arm around Tifa, brushing snow out of his eyes.

"She's one side o' coin, he's the other," Cid explained easily, "Or at least, ole Seph there is fighting for the other.

Captain Planet had better watch himself, she isn't playing around."

"The General seems to be watching himself just fine," Berk commented with a whistle, wincing as Sephiroth took a jab in the sternum and doubled over for a second gasping for air. Jenova took advantage of her successful attack to beat him savagely with a burst of energy in the back of his head, but he shook it off, leaping away to regain his composure, then immediately charging again, Masamune moving like a ray of moonlight through the air.

"I wonder if Marlene would sell me his summon materia. . . "Cid wondered with half a grin.

"I doubt it, she probably-- hey!! Now what the hell is he doing?! Vincent!!" Reeve lost his balance and fell backwards, taking Tifa with him as Vincent suddenly appeared before them all, diving on Jenova savagely and tearing at her shoulders with two vicious claws and a swipe of horns. He maneuvered gracefully in the air, swiping the edge of a wing into her back and she screamed in something like pain, whipping about and blasting him to the ground. White exploded in his eyes as he hit the rocks, getting fouled up and tangled in his own wings.

Ungrateful. . . attacking me with the very power I've granted you. Insolent and ungrateful and treacherous. Why did Hojo grow so human at the end? More weakness, more pathetic righteousness; a final act to ease his suffering heart after a lifetime of torturing his own kind. Do you see why you all need to die? You hurt yourselves, it isn't me. You're all animals who should be disposed of for your own good. I am not evil, I am necessary, I am the one who will end all the suffering in the world. And you know it. And still you fight. . .

Jenova descended towards him, her feet almost touching the ground, but not entirely, too repugnant of that earth to ever needlessly come in contact with it. Vincent looked up at her through half-closed eyes as she formed a sudden blade-like projection of power in her right hand and jabbed him through the shoulder with it. He cried out in pain, then gasped and grit his teeth as she twisted her sword through his wound, laughing softly. "If you cannot. . . will not be what I want," she whispered, the air crackling with her power, "Then I do not need you anymore, Vincent."

Her blade came free in a spray of red and she reared the arm back again, this time aiming for his heart. Vincent watched her desperately, red eyes narrowed, looking for opportunity. He found it, glancing just past her shoulder and through the power emanating from her body, making out the gleam of pure silver behind her. Snarling, he kicked outwards, slamming two powerful legs into her soft stomach and sending her flying backwards, straight into an extended, seven foot blade. Masamune slid cleanly through her stomach and she stared at it impassively, her own sword sizzling away to a few dying sparks.

"Vincent!"

Leaping to his feet, shaking off the hole in his shoulder though it kept him from using his right arm, Vincent looked for the source of the shout and saw Tifa in the distance, form lit by Jenova's light and the still-burning fires of the Highwind. She didn't have to say a word he knew exactly why she'd called him.

Jenova drifted forward, her body sliding soundlessly off of Sephiroth's sword. She darted away, twisting around to face him, the gash in her abdomen immediately healing, leaving nothing but a purplish scar, barely visible. She raised her right hand and wagged a finger in her attacker's stoic face, as though rebuking him as nothing more than a naughty child. Sephiroth darted a roving green eye past her blinding form as she quickly worked a ball of black energy into a solid, lethal spike, rearing back to take his head off with it. He smiled at what he saw there.

With a determined roar, Vincent darted forward, held aloft by spread, black wings, then dove soundlessly into the massing of curling energy surrounding Jenova's upper half. The white light was thick and tangible, caustic and burning to the touch as Vincent discovered when he plunged his claws into it, searching for Cloud. Snarling and struggling, he felt his friend's shoulders buried in the vile light, skin cold and clammy, covered in a thick sweat that made him hard to get a hold of. Jenova whipped about, a snarl of rage and disbelief curling her thick red lips up into a grimace as she lashed out with both arms, anger making her clumsy.

"Get your hands off of him!!" she screamed, "He's mine!"

Sephiroth took advantage of Jenova's carelessness and impaled her again through the back, stabbing for her heart though the wound did nothing but cause her anger to rise, her scream to mount in pitch and fury. Vincent snarled as she raked his face and neck with her dark power, the light he was half engulfed in burning like liquid fires across his skin. He pulled with all the strength he could gather, his claws wrapped around Cloud's waist now, as though struggling to free him from quicksand. He was going to free him! This was going to end!

Something was cutting into him. A sharp burning pain in his sides, a contrast to the duller burning fire everywhere else. As much as it hurt, this pain was real and he clung to it, white exploding in front of his eyes in flashes of brilliance. But then Cloud gave a gasp as a devil's dark face replaced the white, two bright crimson eyes searching out his own and begging him to crawl free.

Wasn't this where he belonged? Cloud was tired of struggling; he'd freed Jenova, she could deal with it now, he wasn't going anywhere.

"Lemme alone. . ." he mumbled, eyes slipping shut, too tired to struggle but honestly meaning his words. Why wouldn't it all go away? Why wouldn't it all leave him alone?

Sephiroth leapt into the air and brought Masamune down into his adversary's bare shoulder, the air whistling around the blade and fresh purple blood exploding from the wound.

"You think you can harm me? Me?" She whipped about and threw herself on the General, knocking him to the ground as Vincent wrapped his arms around Cloud and the both of them flew backwards, coming free from the monster's power in a splash of blood and white light. Sephiroth watched their escape, glaring past Jenova's flailing arms and the sizzle of her fury, then gave a labored grunt and rolled from under the monster, pushing himself to his feet.

"You see?" he panted, "You cannot win. You're stronger than the Planet, stronger than me, but you're outnumbered. Fight until the end only to fall again. You'll fall, time after time after time."

"I'll tear you apart, Sephiroth, you blasphemous, babbling traitor!"

"Reeve!!"

The Shinra President looked up from watching the battle, tearing his eyes away as Jenova screamed and blasted their ally with the intensity of her power, the atmosphere crackling as her energy poured through it in waves of alternating silver and violet light. As it blasted upwards, any sky that hadn't already turned black did so, the reds, the blues, the colors burning away as Reeve looked on, sweat pouring off his brow. Cid shook him violently and bellowed, "Call Marlene! They've freed Cloud! Time to take this piece of shit out for good!"

"Marlene. . .?"

"Yeah, the girlie with the missile launcher, remember?"

"Mr. President, sir, hurry!"

Berk ground his teeth in anxiety, afraid the heavens would come crashing down. The air was so suddenly hot and crackling, full of steam as the snow continued to fall and was immediately blasted to nothing. He had a feeling that something was coming, something big. They had to act before it got there. He swiped at the cruel air as Reeve dialed with trembling fingers, his eyes glued to the battle before him. Life versus Death. He'd never thought such a conflict could be so gripping.

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Burning. He was falling and burning, like a star plummeting from heaven.

Winds rushed past his face, icy cold, killing the pain and numbing his flesh and darkness came again. So easy to just go to sleep. Exhaustion tickled the backs of his eyelids and through the whirlwind of sensations, the fluttering of his eyelashes against his cheeks stood out.

Cloud hit the cold ground with a jolt, his chin slamming into the rocks and plowing up a mouthful of dirt and ice. He lay there breathing hard, eyes shut and face pressed into the earth, entire body shivering with the chill of the wind.

Where was he?

He could've opened his eyes and looked but he was too exhausted. He was probably somewhere wretched anyway, gone off now to another rock-littered island, full of decay, full of prickling things that longed to sink their claws into his throat. Probably. Cloud lay there and pulled his limbs to his body, folding his knees to his face, trying to sleep. Muffled noises raged from far off and he listened to the sounds absently. Fighting. He heard screams and cries and he sighed deeply at the song, a long breath of the cold Northern air. What was that, he wondered weakly, What was battling? A war raging so near, powers struggling to be greater than the other. . . why were they bothering? Why did anyone have to fight? He couldn't understand it. There were so many beautiful things in the world, enough for everyone, yet people fought. Cloud curled in tighter on himself, pressing his closed eyes into his hands, tucking his elbows into the little cubbyhole of warmth between his stomach and pulled-up legs as the winds blew cold over his body.

There was something soft, ticklish, and cold hitting his bare shoulders. Delicate flakes that struck him softly, like angel's chilly kisses. The water ran down his arms and back and Cloud smiled softly to himself, thinking of other times in the snow. Winter in Midgar was always fun; snowmen in the front yard and pegging CJ with snowballs. Trying to burn the house down with mammoth fires in the hearth and then laughing as Tifa got paranoid and scolded him and then threw another

log on when his back was turned.

He took a deep breath and slowly lowered his cold hands from his face, letting the breeze in to run across his cheeks and brow, dry the sweat and tears snaking down. Opening his eyes softly, he watched the snow meandering down from the void of black sky. The flakes swirled and eddied, dancing little fairies that formed patterns of white, putting on a show just for him. He lay his head back against the hard gray ground, silent spectator to the free performance.

Why had it come down to something so horrible? He didn't even remember deciding to follow the commands and chase his vengeance to that cave. He'd just felt there were no other options, and hadn't cared enough to search for any. Rage was a dangerous, dangerous thing. Cloud thought he'd learned that lesson a long time ago, but a new teacher had arisen to give an example to accompany the fact. Rage was dangerous, and rage was lethal in his hands, he'd proven that to himself these past few days. Jenova and Hojo had given him tools and he'd used them to destroy, take back a little of the life stolen from him so unfairly. And he had. Cloud realized he'd achieved his aims, he destroyed so much. Whether Jenova succeeded in her freedom or not, he'd obliterated Midgar, that steamy, divided city to the south. He remembered it now, so so clearly, the fog had lifted from his memory and he recalled his every action with startling clarity. It had just hurt so bad.

He couldn't even cry anymore. But he didn't particularly feel the need. The anguish had burnt itself out in his heart and Cloud only felt unspeakably cold and frozen. He turned slowly onto his back, settling his arms at his side, and stared upwards at the falling snow against the mantle of black. It seemed as though every star in a night sky were floating down to alight on his skin, comfort their poor fallen comrade. The comforts were cold but so was his gratefulness for their efforts. Not cold from a lack of emotion, but cold from too much emotion; cold because the fire of his heart had burnt out. He was too exhausted to harness that rage anymore. But the rage was gone anyway. He didn't know where it was, but it had fled and all Cloud could do was accept what he'd done, what had happened, and let the facts of the matter echo softly in his mind as he lay, gazing up, unblinking, at the falling snow. He put a hand up to catch a flake, as though to catch one of his own drifting thoughts, melt it, crush it to nothing.

But he found he couldn't do it. The fleck of virgin white lay cold against his skin, slowly dissolving, and Cloud found he couldn't harm it. He couldn't harm it any more than he could forget what he'd done. He wouldn't retreat into comfortable forgetfulness as he had in the past. No. . . he neither deserved it, nor was capable of it anyways. Not this time. He'd grown up. He wasn't a beaten down sixteen year old who couldn't handle trauma or pain so he became someone else. No. He was, as often as it hurt him to admit it, no one else but Cloud Strife. He'd keep his name, it was his, no matter how tarnished, blood-stained, or mocking it was. He was Cloud Strife and he'd destroyed a city, resurrected an evil that would destroy his race, and he'd hurt a lot of people. He'd done it all because he'd been unable to control loosened elements in his mind and body, been unable to fight back against warring powers, against mako and Jenova, Life and Death's grapples for control. . . he'd been coerced in a lot of ways. But to hide amidst that coercion was the same as hiding behind the identity of a Soldier named Zack.

No, Cloud had done what he'd done for revenge's sake, because he'd passionately believed that the lives of his children had been worth so much that they couldn't be allowed to die by themselves, or that the indifferent eyes of the Planet who'd watched them fall and done nothing, done nothing even though Cloud had given his soul in the past for it, even though those two children had never done a single thing to it but be born upon its surface, should be allowed to go on. They'd fallen and the Planet had watched them fall. And Cloud could swear he remembered the sound of it laughing in his ears, a silent mirth reserved solely for the man it betrayed.

And that was why he'd turned to Jenova.

"Are you sure?"

The voice was so soft, a whisper amidst the falling snow. Cloud recognized it as that accusing little boy and he sighed quietly, blinking softly, turning his head against the cutting rocks and raising a weary hand to sweep blonde from his eyes. Jeek stood there casually, catching snowflakes on his tongue. He closed his mouth suddenly and smiled down at Cloud, repeating his question.

"Are you sure, Mister? It's a selfish reason, I think."

Cloud smiled weakly, looking at the little boy through half-lowered lashes. "You're right," he murmured sadly, "But there's nothing for it now."

Jeek watched as the man slowly pushed himself to a standing position, pulling his knees up under his chin and wrapping cold arms around his legs. He sat there for a moment, staring off at the sweeping wall of rock before him, cliffs reaching up hundreds of feet and disappearing into gloom. The noises of war echoed behind him, accompanied by the harsh red glow of something burning. Firelight flickered off the gray of the rock. What was burning? Nibelheim? Midgar? Icicle Inn? He could remember it all so clearly as he sat there, Jeek eyeing him; a string of fires, some his, some not.

Destruction and death. Besides his family, his life had been nothing but destruction and death. Training to do both more efficiently all his life. Going to Shinra to build better weapons, fight in the name of something else, after fighting in the name of Planet was no longer needed. He wanted his family back, destruction and death were cold and empty. It had been Tifa and his children that had kept his heart full for thirteen years. He wanted his love back.

"But they're dead."

"I know. I'm not delusional. I just miss them, is all."

"Don't you want to fight for them anymore?"

Jeek looked to the man in wide-eyed curiosity, wondering where his spunk had gone. Something to do with that gash in his chest no doubt. But something else too, because. . .

"Coercion is an excuse," Cloud explained, pushing himself to his feet, but refusing to turn and face that battle raging behind. The snow against the firelight was gorgeous and filled his deprived eyes with a beauty they'd been missing for weeks. He could've stood and gazed upon that snowfall for hours. Too bad the snow was so cold, that it couldn't love him back. Only one thing could do that. And Jenova had taken her away.

"I'm tired of fighting, I want this struggle to be over. It's cold here. I only wish I could go home, find a place to lay down and go to sleep."

"Your friends are here."

"Are they?"

Cloud looked at the ground, swaying a bit on unsteady feet. "They here to kill me?"

"Probably."

"Hmph. 'Bout time."

He crossed arms over his bare chest, eyeing the healed wound snaking down his torso. Jenova had taken her cells back, he remembered it now. Was that why the events of the past week echoed so clearly in his mind? Was that why he couldn't feel her presence anymore, or hear that coaxing, sweet voice echoing in his mind? It made sense, he supposed. But the mako was still there, he could feel the power inside his heart, humming and buzzing in his brain. He rubbed a cold, weary hand over his nose and mouth, distractedly thinking he needed a shave, when he noticed the absence of something else.

"The J's gone. . . "he murmured, "The scar. . . kid, is it gone?"

Jeek peered up in disinterest, his real attention on the battle raging in the distance. He shrugged.

"Looks like it. A shame, it was pretty cool looking."

Jeek smiled with his words, a chilled wicked grin that pulled the corners of his mouth up almost to his glinting black eyes as Cloud ran both hands over his face, laughing in unhinged disbelief.

"What in the hell. . . ? "he whispered, feeling dirty, grimy flesh covered in three days worth of stubble, but whole and perfect flesh nonetheless. That mocking scar had healed, the mark of that monster. That morning in the alley where Sephiroth had appeared to prove to him, to show him once and for all that he couldn't fight Jenova or Hojo or their intentions for him, to "brand" him and leave him with a reminder he could never forget or wash away. . . the memory of that morning made him cringe. He'd nearly killed Barret, he'd stormed from his home and left Tifa to deal with everything by herself. That had been the start of so much of this madness. Jenova's mark, Jenova's intrusion into his life. . .

"But it was the Planet that watched 'em fall, Mr. Cloud," Jeek insisted, staring at the man's back as the man stared at the ground, trembling with the thoughts raining on his mind, "Right? It's the Planet and the people who turned on ya, who made you have to be a murderer just to get justice, right? You can't trust yer own head right now, you know that. Yer a freakin' nutball, you can't trust yer own judgment."

"Shut up!" Cloud growled, watching the firelight on the walls, watching the snow, hungry for something pure and beautiful. He didn't want to turn and face what was making those fires, face what was screaming, what was yelling, face the blasts of power or the clashing of a sword against stone. But the J was gone. . . why was it gone? Had he been nothing but a possession? No! His pain and his agony had been real!! Those days of death had been real and he'd acted on his own. He'd face up to them, the thought that perhaps his children had been killed to get to him hurt too much to contemplate, it was worse, a thousand times worse than what he was convinced was the truth, that they'd died in an accident that the Planet had allowed.

"You can't trust yer own reason," Jeek needled in his tiny, little boy mumble, "That Jenova stuff is gone but now the mako's yellin' at ya! It'll use ya too, if that's what Jenova was doing! You said you were tired of fighting, you gonna go back to fighting for Life?! You gonna be a pawn again?!"

"I wasn't a pawn!" Cloud yelled, grabbing at his head and squeezing his eyes shut, "I was hurting the world because I wanted to! Because it hurt me! Jenova was just something I wanted to use to help me!!" But what about the scar? What about that mark? What about her insistent voice always there, always pushing him on?! "No!! I wasn't a pawn! It was cowardly fucking revenge and nothing noble but it was honest if nothing else! It was my own, my own actions because I wanted to!! It couldn't have been anything else! God no! NO! The vengeance was for CJ and Ifalna, not for Jenova!! Never for her!!"

"Keep the vengeance goin', "Jeek said calmly, stepping forward, white snowflakes in his black hair, "Don't quit now when yer so near to bein' done. Don't let yer kids've died for nothin'."

"Shut up! Shut up, ya little bastard! Who are you?!" Cloud flung his arms away, breathing hard, sweat glistening on his forehead and matting his hair to his head. That fire on the wall, it flickered higher, red and imperial, beckoning him to turn and see what caused it, what was fighting, what was dying there on the lip of the Northern Crater. It wanted him to forget the peace and beauty of the snow and be immersed in more pain and ugliness, more suffering, more torture. He whipped around to Jeek and stared the little boy down, his bright green mako eyes begging to be left alone. "Something's gonna pay, you're right, "he whispered, "I won't be anyone's pawn. The Planet's or Jenova's. Neither will Tifa or anyone else. We're humans, we don't take sides. We fight for life out of necessity but we don't serve this Planet, we won't be its little lapdogs because it doesn't care for us. I can't fight the Planet and tell it that, it wouldn't have ears to hear it anyway, but Jenova. . . Death. . . it played a part in all of this. . . I'll tell her that my actions weren't done to satisfy her desires. I'll tell her right now. I fight for people, for the ones I love and care about. Elements, counters, and every other sick, fuckin', magical nuance in this world are our enemies. They interfere. But no more. Not any more. . . "

Cloud whipped about, taking a deep, steadying breath to clear his head, then screwed his courage into a hard knot and finally gazed upon the battle at his back, at the flames licking to the sky as the Highwind burned, at his friends, his enemies, the blasted barren grotesqueness of the Northern Crater. Friends and enemies. . . he saw the people there and couldn't tell them apart, faces blended, blurred, and made no sense. He saw Sephiroth there, a vision from his nightmares. . . he saw Jenova, saw that demon he'd battled back in Icicle Inn. He saw Reeve and Berk, Cid and Nanaki, friendly faces that brought tears to his eyes. . . and then he saw Tifa, and guilt tore him to pieces. He didn't deserve her, she shouldn't be touched by such tainted hands. By God, he had to find absolution.

Jeek snapped at his heels, darting sharp words and accusations into his ears as Cloud made his way forward, eyes narrowed against the bloody raging inferno, but none of it could slow his advance into the fray. He was ready for it to end, just sad to leave the drifting snow behind, the beauty, the perfection of a white that should never have to melt away, or be caught in the feverish hands of evil such as he. Something else to avenge? Sure. He'd fight for beauty. It should never have to be defiled by the wretchedness of humanity and the warring elements.

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"Now ya see, Mr. President, sir? that's why Sephiroth kicks ass!"

Berk clutched at the edge of a slab of rock, scrabbling at his own sword with one eager hand as he watched Masamune weaving through the air impossibly fast, scattering purple blood like rain over the surrounding stone. The master warrior skipped effortlessly from rock to rock, fighting in the uneven terrain without the slightest indication that it was a hassle, keeping up with Jenova despite her numerous advantages and the fact that she fought in the air, twirling her lithe form in her own energy as though it were as easy as breathing. She dodged most of Sephiroth's thrusts with unnatural ease, countering with bursts of power that nearly always hit their mark. The general's summon-form was bleeding badly but he kept up his speed, something in his eyes betraying his desires. Berk knew he was fighting in the name of the Planet, but something there, some twitch at the corner of his mouth as Jenova mocked him unfeelingly, told the Turk that he had other reasons behind his remorseless assault. Honor, a revenge of his own, something. Berk wasn't sure but whatever it was was damned effective. Jenova was hurt too, oozing deeply purple blood from deep wounds that didn't last long. With so many of her cells returned, she was hard to hurt, possessing an unrivaled ability to heal herself that her adversaries had a hard time dealing with.

"We may not need Dragon Weapon after all, "Berk said cheerily and Cid glared at him, "Look at that. Our Planet's coming through, Sephiroth can take her down no problem. Ant fightin' God my ass. Ha!"

"We're using that weapon if I have to go fire it myself, "Cid snapped, taking a few eager steps towards the battle before Nanaki leapt at him and pushed him back, "I didn't go all the way to Wutai and deal with Yuffie'n Elena for nothin'. We're going to use Dragon Weapon for something whether we weaken that monster with it, or use it t'grill up some hot dogs for lunch. Reeve, what's Marlene's friggin' hold up on firing, is she waiting for Christmas?"

"I can't get a clear shot, asshole!! I'm a scientist, not frigging Roy Rogers!!"

"Ooh, harsh. . ."

Reeve moved his phone from his ear, wincing, about to tell Cid her answer but the pilot held up a hand and shook his head. He'd heard her.

"I wanna go out there. . ." he growled, fingers wrapped tight around Venus Gospel's shaft, "She ain't gonna get away with burning my ship. Bitch don't look that tough, lemme at her. . ."

"Sephiroth's protected by the Planet, "Nanaki muttered irritably, "And Vincent is er, well, he's Chaos, I don't feel the need to say more. You go out there, Cid, and you'll lose your head. This is no battle for we mere mortals to go sticking our noses in."

"Why doesn't she just ignore him and us and go about her destruction?" Tifa wondered faintly, features strained with self-control as she watched the scene playing out before her eyes. She wasn't entirely believing any of it was really happening and that helped just a bit in keeping her from breaking down completely.

"I'm not sure, "Reeve answered softly, "I don't suppose she can if the Planet's warrior hasn't been defeated yet. Or maybe she's just enjoying herself too much, or maybe this is part of her grand revenge. . . I dunno. Probably a bit of all three."

"I'd like to tear her to pieces, "Tifa whispered, clenching her fists, her dark eyes shooting hatred towards the creature as she screamed. Reeve patted his friend comfortingly.

"Me too. We'd all like to, Tifa. But none of us ever seem to get what we want."

A gut-wrenching roar shattered the air and the group darted about in time to see Chaos plunge a wickedly pointed sabre through Jenova's collarbone, the point coming out her back at a sickening angle. Vincent grinned to himself in satisfaction, twisting the blade as he pulled it out, reveling in that monster's screams of agony and indignation. What was wrong with him? Why did this feel so good? Gods, it was disgusting and he hated himself for it but at the same time, he couldn't stop. He'd never been a sadist, even as a murdering, cold-hearted Turk, he'd never enjoyed to inflict pain. This primal joy bubbling inside at the feel and sight and smell of blood was Chaos', he recognized it immediately. But it wasn't a hindrance strangely enough, it was more like a tool, an advantage, Hojo had known what he was doing. It was too late for him to ever feel grateful or even begin to respect that insane professor who'd ruined his and so many peoples' lives but he was starting to understand him a bit more. As cliché as it was to say, there certainly had been a method to his madness.

As Jenova pulled free from Chaos' sword, she stumbled backwards in the air, blood dripping down her pale body, over her stomach and down her legs before the gash could heal. Sephiroth leapt forward and gave her another one, a vicious swipe across the back of her neck, almost taking her head off. As it was, he cut off her huge massing of billowing black hair and it fell to the ground, writhing like snakes, wriggling about like living things. Vincent swooped low and cast a quick spell, setting the ebony strands on fire.

The smoke it made was disgusting, putrid and black and both Sephiroth and Vincent had to step away from it, giving Jenova a quick moment to regain herself, whip around and immediately blast the both of them. The air solidified into white curls of energy, electrical hands grabbing for both of their lungs and threatening to squeeze the very life from their hearts. Vincent fell forward gasping, fighting for breath but Sephiroth didn't let the evil magic phase him. He shook it off, breathing deep, then gripped Masamune in both gloved hands and charged, anticipating Jenova's attempts to dart from his path, and swinging around, slashing her across the abdomen. The Planet's Counter fell backwards and purple blood pooled on the ground.

"Do you yield?!" Sephiroth roared through pants, his blade quivering at his side.

"Yield?!" the woman-shaped monster screamed, her voice a laugh and a snarl, a self-righteous twirl of disbelief, "I'll not yield till you all are reduced to piles of bones and blood that I'll burn in my own fires! I've not come this far to be stopped right on the verge of my destruction. Stopped by you, my own puppet, and that demon there, my own creation. Do you think I'm weak, Sephiroth? I have not begun to show you my power! It's been amusing to watch you struggle, to see the hope building up in those cowering insects, to watch the lot of you believing you'll get to go home, you'll get to be safe, be warm, be free. . . There is not a tomorrow to look forward to, I will devour all days, all nights, the very sun and moon this Planet rely upon. Then this rock shall rot and all you miserable, piteous fools with die. Give me my turn! My own stolen two thousand years, Planet! Yes, give me my two thousand years to make up for what you took from me, and I'll consider us settled. A fair deal, Sephiroth?"

Sephiroth didn't take the time to consider it. He gave a battle cry and struck out, Masamune flashing silver, then dulling over purple.

"Chieko!!" Jenova bellowed, fighting back with renewed energy, "Chieko, you're needed! You're needed, come to

me!!"

"Aw man, don't call that thing. . . "Berk mumbled to himself, peering at the raging battle from behind the biggest boulder he could find. He'd had to move a good bit away from the rest to get the best view, but he didn't care, it was obvious that Jenova wasn't interested in him, she had her hands full with Marlene's summon and that Valentine guy. He dearly wished he could go out there and help but he was fully aware of how stupid that would be, whether it would impress Marlene or not. Aw, hell, he'd probably impressed her enough for a lifetime after saving her ass twice. Not that it was particularly difficult to let a demon run its horns through ya, but still, he was sure she'd gotten the point of what a bad ass he was. She was a damned smart girl after all.

The thoughts flew from his mind as the air pulsated faster, Jenova drawing energy into her form and flailing out with it. Berk saw that Chaos seemed down for the count, he was sprawled and bleeding at the base of a few rocks, and Sephiroth didn't look so hot himself though he wasn't allowing his injuries to hinder his attacks. Berk flinched as Jenova cut into him again, laughing as he cried out, bearing down on him like a swooping bird of prey. The Turk swallowed hard, itching to dart out there, but he restrained himself, looking about the battlefield for some opportunity to lend a hand; a rock or something he could push on the monster, like they did in movies.

Sweeping the barren rocky field before him, squinting past the smoke, steam and glaring tangibility of Jenova's light, Berk saw something that made him pause.

Cloud.

He was leaning against a wall of stone, his hands in his pockets, his mussed hair in his eyes as he took in the scene before him stoically. Sephiroth and Chaos fighting Jenova. He blinked slowly, trying to make sense of it, grinning intermittently at his own thoughts, and Berk found he couldn't tear his eyes away from him. What was he going to do? Berk wanted to see him join their ranks again, see him fight for what was just and be able to cheer him on. He was his boss and he respected him, aspired to be just like him, seeing him acting so wrong the past couple of days had torn his faith apart. But if Cloud only came around now. . . if he'd only help to correct his mistakes. . . Berk thought maybe he could respect him again.

"Cloud!!"

Berk snapped around and saw that Tifa'd caught sight of him too but Reeve wouldn't let her leave the safety of their hiding place. After a moment, she decided her friend was right. Heart fluttering with a desperate hope, she watched Cloud out there, form obscured by flying dust and steam, and tears came to her eyes, blurring him further. He seemed a spectre, not wholly formed, and Tifa thought she felt him teetering on the brink of some abyss. What would he do? She hoped he'd realize the truth, but then she was suddenly terrified of what would happen when he did.

"What's he going to do?" Reeve whispered, arm wrapped around Tifa's shoulders as they both gazed off towards him. She noticed that little boy at his back, babbling things in his ear and tried to dart out there and shove the kid off him but Reeve wouldn't allow it.

"Mr. Strife!!"

Tifa jerked about and saw Berk running from his cover, waving his katana towards his boss in greeting. "Where's yer sword?"

Cloud looked up and frowned, Berk halting a good bit away from him cautiously. He really looked like shit, as sane as a screw, his eyes blinking back so much uncertainty and confusion it was painful to watch. But that J had healed, that grasping scar and Berk wondered what was going through his head with Jenova's influence gone.

"I don't know, kid," Cloud finally answered, shaking his head slowly, at a loss. Berk ran a hand through his hair, pulling bangs from his face and cursing the winds. He tossed his sword to Cloud who looked surprise but caught it deftly, taking a step backwards and pressing against the rocks, his face contorted with the things raging in his mind. Berk saluted his boss cheerily, bowing low in respect, then skipped back behind the rocks, battle noises raging in his ears. A battle. . . another one. For a few solemn moments, Cloud stood and gazed down at Berk's short sword, looking at his reflection in the blade. It wasn't the reflection he usually saw in Ultima Weapon, but this wasn't Ultima Weapon, was it? And he was hardly the man who usually wielded that sword.

"Yeah, you're evil now," Jeek snapped from behind him, his voice full of spite, "Why don't you stick that sword through your throat, ya murderer? It's startin' t'hit ya now, ain't it? How stupid you were and mean and evil. Dead kids or not, you hurt people. Jerk. Murderin' jerk!"

"Leave me alone. . . "Cloud whispered, knuckles popping sharp as he tightened his grip around the sword's hilt. He looked up as Jeek spat insults and saw Jenova there in the distance, her face a twisted, glaring mask of blood and fury. He hadn't been her murderer. He hadn't, he wouldn't believe it, but he had to fight her. He had to fight her now, because. . .

because. . . maybe because the Planet was screaming for him to help, maybe because he saw Tifa crouching in the distance and the sudden thought of anything happening to her drove him insane when before, it hadn't even occurred to him. Maybe he was beginning to realize what a manipulated asshole he'd been. Maybe he now knew how truly and thoroughly he'd damned himself. Maybe. . . maybe if he fought he could shut his conscience up, shut up that babbling bastard child snapping his own thoughts and rebukes at his back. Maybe if he went out there, Sephiroth, Chaos, and Jenova would kill him and he wouldn't have to think about any of it anymore. Maybe. . . maybe.

Cloud gave a desperate cry as he stretched his legs in a blinding run towards the fight, sword raised above his head and tears in his eyes. Time to end it once and for all.

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"Chieko!! Come to me!!"

Pressure everywhere, innumerable crushing points of pressure.

And then a searing line of pain in her shoulder, warm red soaking her fur.

"Chieko!!"

Chieko's brown mako eyes snapped open in a panic, straining to focus, seeing nothing but dark. Where was she? In a rush of disjointed, cruel memories, events flooded back to her. She'd taken that red-eyed man down here and they'd found Jenova. Mother. . . a chance to be needed and find a place in the world. She'd been so happy, so so eager to please her and earn her love. So desirous to fight in the name of her father and make sure he hadn't died in vain. She was going to prove her worth, and it was going to be wonderful.

What had happened?

Betrayal.

Again.

A final act of treason.

Jenova had taken her power back and left Chieko alone, bleeding, here at the bottom of the Northern Crater. And she'd been so horrible, so twisted and ugly, not like she'd always imagined her mother would look. No, she'd been a creature of nightmares, a demon she feared, sharp claws, those conscienceless yellow eyes that defied the love she dyed her voice with. Lies. . . it had all been lies, that sweet and lilting invitation had only been to use her, to steal from her. Chieko meant nothing to Jenova.

"You knew. . . "Chieko whispered, shedding the jagged rocks crushing her body and struggling to stand on four legs, "Hojo. . . you knew all along that she could have no loyalty or love and you never told me. You let me go on believing. . . but I love you for that. Why'd you have to die?" Chieko sobbed bitterly into her own furry red shoulder, a gaping hole eating at her heart and threatening to choke her. She did choke, choking on tears that left her gasping for air.

Was it too late now? Couldn't mother love her yet? There had to be some capacity for emotion in that being, Chieko insisted upon it. She'd followed her out here, all the way to the end of the earth, seeking her out of pure devotion and desire. Jenova had just needed more power, Chieko could understand that, it was a sacrifice she would've made gratefully if only asked. And she'd give more, she'd give Jenova her life if that was what it would take to gain her respect and her love. There was nothing else for her, father was dead, the world was coming to a close, all she wanted now was for someone to miss her when she went. Jenova would mourn her, Chieko would make her. She'd fight for her, she'd die for her, and Jenova would be grateful.

"Chieko!!"

That voice was so beautiful, how could something so beautiful be evil or cruel? It wasn't. Jenova was just and right and Chieko believed it whole-heartedly, she'd been conditioned to believe it, her mother's beliefs had been her creed all of her life. Time to fight for that creed.

Chieko shook off the pain of injuries sprinkled over her massive body, the sting of the wound Jenova'd inflicted with her own claw, and spread her wings into the emptiness of the perfectly black air. It was cold and breezy, made her shiver through her fur, but she ignored it all, desperate for action. Roaring a cry of despondent grief into the world, she soared upwards on broken wings and made for the pinprick of white light far above, sure that her own joy was waiting just beyond.

"Elder Bugah!!" Marlene wailed, both hands wrapped around Dragon Weapon's trembling controls, "I'm getting nauseous. . !"

Bugah scuttled up to the Dragon Weapon's base, jumping back as the monstrosity spewed green sparks and snapped at him like a rabid dog. He gulped, smearing sweat off his wrinkled brow, and half-heartedly kicked the thing like he might a misbehaving television set.

"It's going to backfire if we don't launch that missile soon!" Bugah shouted above the roar of circuitry and the snap of crackling mako covering the machine in pulsating green, "Can't you get a clear shot?!"

"I can't aim for beans, you know that!" Marlene retorted, swearing as the crackles of power burnt at her fingers, "I couldn't hit Chaos before with Reno's shotgun and he was ten feet in front of me and hurting dad! Marlene Wallace cannot shoot! I'll build you a gun but I can't shoot it for you! So sue me!" Marlene bent her head down and swiped a trickling bead of sweat off her cheek and into the shoulder of her sweater, then shivered as a blast of icy air assaulted her. She was close enough to hit Jenova, Dragon Weapon was equipped with sensors that would aim for her, but with Chaos and Sephiroth leaping about her form like a couple of insects, she didn't dare fire without hurting one of them. "Are you sure I can't just fire anyways?" she asked the old man, "Sephiroth's already dead after all. Are you sure Chaos isn't still our enemy?!"

"Have you been watching this battle with closed eyes, girl?" Bugah snapped, turning down a few of Dragon Weapon's pressure valves, wrapping his hand up in his robe to keep from getting burnt. The Weapon's reactions to their tinkering were infinitely more violent than he'd imagined they'd be. It was being affected by something else. Something out of their control. "You cannot hurt our comrades! You sure you can't get a clean aim at that monster?"

Marlene put her eye to the sights, swearing blue fire, glad that the kids couldn't hear her stream of curses over the noise of the machine. She usually wasn't so foul-mouthed, but she guessed extreme situations called for extreme language. "Yes!" she spat after only a second, "If Berk were here he could hit her no problem. Why in the hell didn't he come with me?!"

"Cause ya didn't ask him!" CJ piped up, looking away from the battle briefly, "Ya were too cocky and thought ya could do it yerself, Marlene! S'what ya get!"

"You're not helping. . . "she mumbled.

"You're not either, "CJ griped, jumping to his feet and pulling one of Ifalna's pigtails to get her to stand too. "Look!" he shouted suddenly, "It's dad!"

"What?"

"It's my dad! Look, he's gonna help 'em! All right! Eef, Eef! Look!" CJ jumped up and down and started scrabbling up the face of the rock he was hidden behind in excitement, grinning ear to ear. "Beat up on that naked lady, dad!" he shouted, "Give her hell!"

"CJ, get down!" Ifalna insisted, pulling at her brother's t-shirt with balled little fists.

"Yeah, get down!" Marlene ordered, wrestling with her Weapon's controls. She shot an eye towards Elder Bugah who saw her point and ran over to grab CJ up in his arms and keep him from running out into the middle of the hazardous battle.

"No! I want 'im to see me and know I'm okay!" CJ hollered, smacking Bugah in the chin as he struggled to worm out of his grasp, "Let go of me or I'll sock you, Mr. Bugah, I ain't kidding!" Ifalna grabbed at one of CJ's legs with both hands, pulling and squinching her face up with her efforts.

"Let go of my brother!" she demanded, "He can't help he's so dumb!"

Bugah gave a grunt as the little girl thwacked him a good one in the stomach, then pushed her down and hollered, "Behave yourself, young lady! Sit yourself down and hush up or I'll tell your mother!"

That did it. Ifalna relinquished her hold on CJ's leg and plopped back down at the base of the rocks, twirling her hair in between two fingers. Bugah quickly gave her brother a similar lecture and he stopped kicking, falling onto the cold ground when the old man finally dropped him. Scowling murderously, he wiped an arm across his eyes and stood, brushing dirt from his clothes, shooting evil glances to Elder Bugah.

"Geez, if looks could kill, "Marlene mumbled, turning from the scene and looking back through Dragon Weapon's scope, "I see your dad, CJ!" she hollered, and he looked up at her, frowning, "I wish I knew what was going on in that head of his. Elder Bugah, why's he doing this? Trying to kill us all one minute and now. . . oh my god, he almost took Jenova's head off!"

Marlene fell back a bit, got zapped by a random spark of the power licking over Dragon Weapon's frame, and darted back up, the deep rumbling and violent shaking of the thing doing a number on her stomach. Bugah peered up at her then out towards the battle, features grim in the flickering green light. The blaze of the still raging fires from the Highwind's wreckage dyed his right side in red and the mix of colors playing over his body was unsettling to the eye.

"He's confused and reacting like any man would, I'd imagine," Bugah whispered, "Gods above, I could cry for him. No man should have to discover what he has. No man should have to suffer like this. Marlene. . . please, can't you kill her? Can't you get her in your sights and keep her from hurting him more?"

The young woman frowned, blowing aggravating auburn strands from her eyes as she balled her concentration up and squinted through the scope, agile fingers running over the firing mechanisms, itching to launch, but her own reasoning keeping them at bay. If there was only some way to tell them, only some way to isolate Jenova and get the others away. . .

"The minute I get a clear shot, Elder," she breathed, "Here's the PHS, call Reeve and tell them to evacuate back to here, judging from the power this thing is building up, when I fire it's going to be huge. Tell them to haul ass away from there on the double, they should have already, Berk should have made them. Cid should've too. Stupid macho men don't know when it's wise to run."

CJ glanced her way for a moment, still scowling, sick of standing by idly as the real action all went down just before his eyes. Snow blew in his hair, the heat off of Dragon Weapon immediately melting it so that his blonde locks were plastered to his scalp, soaked and aggravating. He pulled his jacket tighter around him as the raging gale still assaulting the plains turned to assault him, taking advantage of the trickling water running down his shirt and freezing the bejeezus out of him. He wanted to go home, he wanted them to be finished with all of this. He looked out at the battle, gave a gasp as Jenova lashed at the three now fighting against her cruel tyranny, and got to his feet, pressing his shoulder against the rocks as far as he dared to see as best as he could.

"Hey. . ." he breathed softly, moving a bit further from the concealing space he, the others, and Dragon Weapon were secreted away in, "Hey, who's that kid out there?"

He turned to Bugah and Marlene for an answer but they were too busy trying to control that big ole missile launcher to pay him any attention. He whipped his gaze back around, watching that little black-haired kid through sharply narrowed violet eyes. What was he doing to his dad? He was yelling at him, he couldn't hear what he was saying, but he was making his dad sad, CJ could see it, sense it, feel it. "Hey. . ." he whispered again, tugging on Ifalna's sleeve and gesturing towards Jeek, "Look at that jerk, Eef, you know him?"

"No."

"Yeah, me neither. I don't like the looks of him though. I don't like 'em at all."

CJ began running his left hand over his gloved right one, stroking the leather with a wicked grin on his face. He glanced quickly to Bugah and Marlene, the both of them beating Dragon Weapon down as best they could, asking each other and themselves why the machine wasn't listening, why it was building so much more power than the meager eight materias' worth they'd been able to give it, why it seemed to roar like a vengeful animal every time Marlene attempted to lower the power output. It was rattling and shaking so badly she feared it would burst apart.

"I don't give it long!" she cried, on the verge of panic as the air around them crackled in rage, as the mako in their weapon screamed to be released even as more built up. Bugah shook his head, desperately trying to tame the circuitry.

"Keep your eyes on the battle, Marlene! Keep looking for an opening and don't hold back, I'll call President Reeve!"

Marlene only heard his words distantly, her eyes turned down to the ground, features pale and mouth hanging open, dread playing over the back of her throat with cold fingers. Bugah turned her way and frowned.

"What's wrong?" he demanded, the PHS opened and poised in his frail hand. Marlene shook her head and blinked slowly.

"Where did the kids go?"

~\*~

Dammit. . . Chaos or not, Jenova had him beat.

Vincent opened his eyes. Or tried to anyways. He could feel blood running from a gash in his head, burn marks, scorch marks, gushing places in his torso where he'd been impaled. It was nice to just lay on the rocks with his eyes closed and let himself heal a bit. But he had to be careful, unconsciousness crouched not far off, threatening to jump him like a mugger in the park if he turned his back. He shuddered as a wave of fiery pain tore at him, a gift from Jenova, beating upon him while

he was down. Rather dishonorable of her but then why bother with such a thought? He knew what they were fighting, she had no reason to respect them as opponents, they were all meaningless to her. Hardly worth her effort.

You know it's true. . . you know how evil your race is, you declared yourself a misanthropist long ago. You live away from them, you hate them, you fear them and you scare them. Even living as a demon for days couldn't manage to make you recant your beliefs. Shake off your false emotions and fight beside me again, Chaos. Help me kill your oppressors. I won't judge you.

Ha. . . not bloody likely, Jenova. You're worse than any human I've ever known. And that's not true what you say. They're not all bad, they just become those things I hate. For a while. . . for a while humans can be the most perfect creatures in the world. S'go take a walk.

Vincent gasped a deep breath and forced his eyes open, taking in the fighting though a haze of red. Sephiroth darted around before him and Vincent distractedly realized he was protecting him from Jenova's assaults. Masamune seemed everywhere, cutting and rending, fighting to end it, a relentless barrage as their enemy screamed. There was another figure there too though, a bare-chested man holding a short katana, almost more of a wakizashi, that shimmered in Jenova's own glow. Vincent thought he was dreaming, that he'd hit his head too hard and this was some sort of feverish vision. Was it really him?

The new figure stepped forward and Vincent could see Sephiroth halt his attacks to watch him, wary.

"What's going on?" Cloud asked in a quiet voice.

"She has used you. . . "Sephiroth answered simply, as Jenova turned around to eye the both of them, grinning in sickened pleasure. She'd thought Cloud had been killed as he and Vincent had been thrown backwards. Apparently not. Good.

"Has she?" he asked softly. He stared at her for a moment, then slowly nodded his head, his mouth a trembling line as he fought for self control. "I thought as much. You though. . . you. . . Seph-sephiroth. . . why're you here? Come back to finish what you started in that alley? Your mark left me. Will you give me another? Or do you just want me dead?"

"That was not me that day. But I recommend you stop asking questions, "Sephiroth answered coldly, "And start following your instincts. There will be time for revelations and regret later. Wallow in them now and you'll quickly find yourself dead."

"Too late. . . "

Jenova flew at Cloud with a screech and tore an arm through his chest, sending him sailing through the air and to the ground, blood splattering in a crimson shower. The attack caused Vincent to leap to his feet and fly forward in defense of his friend, too glad to see him coming to his senses now to lose him again. He darted about in the steamy, snowy air and let Chaos' instincts take control.

"You see? It's all comin' together now. . . "

Cloud grunted in pain and lay there in the cold as Sephiroth and Vincent battled their enemy. He reached out for his fallen sword, trying to ignore that little boy mumble in his ear. Jeek squatted at his side, babbling horrible truths. Cloud thought he'd scream if they didn't stop soon.

"Did you think you could kill your conscience like ya killed everythin' else?" the boy snapped, face turned down in a frown as tears rolled over his dark cheeks, "If you did hurt it, it's better now because there's an ache in your heart different than what's been there. Jenova hid it away from you where you couldn't find it but now it's burning more than any real wound you've gotten. You're a murderer, Mr. Cloud, and you're damned for it. You're worse'n Sephiroth, worse'n Hojo, worse'n anyone and selfish, selfish, selfish!! There's only one thing you can do now and have it even start t'make up for yer crimes!"

"What?!" Cloud snapped, a hand to the rapidly healing gash across his chest. He pushed himself to his feet, sword clutched in his hand so hard his knuckles split, "Ya wanna tell me? Tell me what it is and I'll do it!"

"So ya know you were wrong. . . "Jeek breathed slyly, "Ya admit it. . . don't you think anymore that yer kids were worth all that you did?"

"They were worth more. . . "Cloud gasped, fighting back tears, "But it wasn't my place to take it. I don't know what possessed me to do all those things, but I know they were wrong. There's nothing I can do to fix 'em."

"No, I said there was one thing. . . "Jeek corrected, drawing himself up haughtily. He narrowed his little black eyes as Cloud hung on his words, desperate to repent. Jeek spoke slowly, "You can kill yerself and keep ya from taking anymore."

End himself. . . he'd kept wishing someone else would do the deed, make him halt the actions he couldn't halt himself, but maybe all along, the power to free his soul and stop his own agony had lain within his own grasp. He looked to Jeek,

every blink of his eyes making a cold tear roll down his cheek. The little boy nodded soberly to confirm his questions. But Cloud wasn't convinced. With a cry of rage and despair, he whipped about and joined the fight against that monster, weaving Berk's sword in and out of the lithe, long, white shape twisting through the air. He didn't deserve it. Not yet. Not just yet. He had to know the truth first. And he had to say goodbye to Tifa. It was a selfish thing that a man as wretched as he had no right to, but he couldn't deny his heart. He had to tell her it was okay. He couldn't leave her guilty or thinking that any of what had happened had been her fault. He had to make sure she knew how blameless she was for it all before he died. She deserved it after losing so much. He'd give it to her.

Jeek watched the desperate intensity in Cloud as he fought with his head bowed, looking up through half-closed, disappointed eyes. He leaned back, stuck one hand in his pocket and a pinky finger in his mouth, chewing on his fingernail thoughtfully, wondering why Cloud had to be so damn stubborn.

"Yo!"

The cry came from a few feet off but Jeek ignored it, black eyes on the fighting as it moved slowly away, Jenova's cries sweeping like banshee song through the wind.

"Yo, retard! You deaf?"

CJ stepped from the shadow of a looming, precariously balanced tower of rolling rocks, Ifalna clutching at the hem of his t-shirt, one long bunch of blonde sticking out of the corner of her mouth as she anxiously chewed on the end of a pigtail. CJ looked to Jeek, the black-haired kid not even acknowledging him with a glance.

"What were you saying to my dad?" he demanded, stalking forward with crossed arms and an inch-thick scowl on his face, "What were you saying to him, eh? Hey! Try gettin' yer finger outta yer mouth and answering me, jerk-off!"

Jeek looked up finally, a flicker of moving light as his black eyes refocused. A small smile played over his lips.

"You gotta be CJ, "he said, "Yer dead, kid."

CJ's jaw almost dropped at that one. In a one swift movement, he ripped Ifalna's hand off his shirt, set her down at the base of the nearby stone wall, and ran forward, shaking his fist in Jeek's apathetic face. "I'll shove my foot so far up yer butt it comes out yer nose!!"he hollered, "Ya jerk, ya gotta lotta nerve sayin' something so lame!"

Jeek remained calm, crossing his arms and looking the new kid over from head to toe, sizing him up. "Why you bein' so jumpy?" he asked, stopping his evaluation at CJ's eyes, staring at him creepily, "I haven't done nothin' to you. You're the one that got thrown outta building and started all this mess. It's you and Ifalna's fault my dad is a mental case."

"Your dad?!" CJ hollered, brandishing a clenched fist in Jeek's face, "You're jus' askin' for it, pinky-finger-jerk-o'-the-year! Say that again, I dare ya!"

"You died and left him alone and hurt with Hojo and killed Vincent too. So I called dibs on him and he's mine now. Go crawl back in the ground and stay buried."

"Are you nuts??!! I'm right here, Eef too and we ain't dead, we're ready to smash you into the ground! You ain't nothin' but some ugly kid buggin' my dad, MY dad, hear me? Yer gonna leave him alone or I'm gonna make ya! Wanna go at it? Eh? I've faced Ash, the meanest jerk at my school and I broke his nose! You ain't half the size of him, I'll take ya out with my eyes closed!"

CJ didn't even wait for an answer. With a feral snarl he jumped the kid and started wailing on him. A jab to his jaw and another one to the side of his head, knocking Jeek back and CJ kneed him in the gut as he followed him to the ground, Ifalna cheering him on. Ha, ha! He was getting his revenge! No one messed with the Strifes and lived to tell the tale! 'Specially not some li'l punk with such a big freakin' mouth!!

"CJ!!"

Tifa saw her son's little blonde head bobbing about out there and rocketed forward, her heart in her throat. Reeve got over the shock of seeing the kids so close to a decisive battle to save the Planet with a little yelp and then leapt after her, tackling her by the waist and they both crashed to the ground, getting dirt in their mouths.

"Shit! Tifa, no! You go out there and Jenova will tear you to pieces! We can't deal with her, she's too powerful!"

"Fuck powerful!! My kids are out there! Get your hands off of me!! Please! No, please, Reeve, please let me go!!"

"I'll go!"

Berk jumped forward, fists up and ready to fight. He leapt over the rocks and started running across the rocky span of ground separating them from the battle but Reeve's roar halted him in his tracks.

"Mr. Berk!! You'll stay here and not go dashing out like a fool! You're a god damned Turk, you know better than to act without orders!"

"But, sir-- !"

"Don't disagree with me, "Reeve commanded, pulling himself and Tifa up from the ground. He was going to rebuke Berk further, but his cellphone started ringing again and he gestured for someone to answer it, his strong arms wrapped about Tifa as she shouted her children's names and cursed him as a coward.

"Good morning, this is AVALANCE, your call is important to us, please wait while we contact a member of our staff to assist you. . . beep. . . click. . . Hullo, this is Cid Highwind, how may I be of service?"

"You daffy pilot, stop larking about!!! Give me the President!!!"

"Reeve's busy. Talk to me, Bugah, what's cookin'?"

"You must evacuate the area, get away from that fighting, we're going to be forced to fire very shortly and anyone too near Jenova is going to be decimated."

"I'll pass that along. Thanks."

Cid dropped the phone back in Reeve's jacket pocket and the Shinra President looked at him expectantly, Tifa struggling and crying in his arms. "Well?"

"Bugah says we need to split or we're toast. Let's make a break for the Highwind, we can take shelter behind the. . . "Cid cleared his throat and scowled before finishing, "The wreckage. . . the Weapon's docked at the base, we should be safe enough if we're behind the blast."

"Marlene's going to have to fire?" Nanaki asked, looking up, tail flickering yellow shadows into his miraculously composed face, "How can she if our people are still out there and hindering her sights?"

"I dunno, "Cid answered, "But I think they gave good advice, you see that green shit shooting out of yonder boulders? That would be mako. From Dragon Weapon. You hear that rumbling? That would be circuits crackling. From Dragon Weapon. We don't get outta range soon and we'll be piles of soot on the ground in front of, er, Dragon Weapon."

"But what about CJ and Ifalna? What about them?" Nanaki asked, getting to his feet. Cid shook his head slowly, wishing he could give a favourable answer. With things coming so close to the wire though, they couldn't be picky and they couldn't take chances.

"Please lemme go out there, Mr. President, sir! Please!"

"No, "Reeve snapped, picking Tifa up off her feet and beginning to move away toward the Highwind's crackling remains, "Too many people are going to die today, not you too, Berk, I won't allow it. But don't worry. . . " His sad dark eyes went distant as he looked back towards the fighting, saw CJ bloodying Jeek, saw their own warriors doing their best to slow Jenova's aims. "I think they'll be all right. The Planet saved them once, I don't think it'll fail them or us this time."

"The Planet can kiss my ass, "Cid spat, jogging ahead and doing his best to ignore Tifa's frantic pleas. Her entire family was out there. "It can kiss my ass and take its shit to someone who cares. I'm through with it."

No one answered him as the small group began to quickly move off, six pairs of shoes and four paws stepping over the blasted remains of the lip of the Northern Crater, heading towards the glowing pyre of the Highwind smouldering in the near distance. They all had their faces turned back to watch their friends, their minds occupied with cursing that single entity, that single intruding force that was causing all the grief, pain and suffering they'd had to watch the past few days. Lightning still fingered across the blackened sky but the snow had ceased to fall and the air was full of nothing but power and battle cries, the sounds of war and desperate human struggles for freedom, sounds that had echoed for ages but had never been so intense as they were then. The ultimate battle was raging, despite the strange and almost humble appearance of it. Forces had been made tangible again, just as Shinra had always loved to do. They'd turned Life into mako, Death into Jenova, and harnessed both as they would. Now the elements had changed shape again but the manipulation was still the same. Death was that screaming, white woman in the sky; Life were those humans fighting her.

Magic and swords and claws were the weapons of choice and each slash or blast was another strike towards a balance. A balance in favor of Life or Death. The chance for the two to meet on common ground had failed when the Cetra had selfishly shifted the odds. They'd grown greedy, wanting a Planet that ruled supreme, uncountered; and the humans were paying for that greed now.

Vincent wondered briefly how wrong or how right this battle was. If the Planet had cheated so long ago, Jenova's wrath was somewhat justified. Her purpose was terrible but it was necessary, wasn't it? She brought random destruction when in her normal state, when not influenced by dark desires or lustful vengeance. The destruction kept the Planet in check, and kept the number of humans on her surface from multiplying to outrageous numbers and destroying themselves and the world they occupied. Wars, famine, Shinra's control, all of the things that had plagued them for two thousand years. . . Vincent suddenly wondered if those had come about because of the lack of a counter. If people truly were the Planet, then Jenova was their opposite, their necessary counter-weight. And they'd done away with her. For two thousand

years.

Technically, they needed her.

But in his heart, Vincent knew there was no way in hell they could let her stay, necessary or not.

Cloud fought with a fury unleashed, raining blow upon blow on Jenova with a sword that had absorbed some of the mako drenching his blood. The blade glowed as Ultima Weapon did and the monster screamed under the blows.

"Why?!" he demanded, his voice breaking from exhaustion and madness, "Why did you do this to me?! What'd I ever do t'deserve it? Any of us?!"

Sephiroth swooped in, fighting hard but knowing how futile it all truly was. They needed the Planet's strength. Where was that blasted Weapon? Masamune's blade was obscured and dulled by their enemy's dark blood but for every wound the three managed to inflict, Jenova healed faster than they could strike again. She couldn't die, or really be hurt. All they could do was battle until she finally worked up the strength to finish them all for good. She was an entire element, almost wholly reconstructed, while the three fighting her were nothing more than three separate pieces, though altered, of her counter-element. In mathematical terms, the odds were pretty obvious and rather disheartening. Sephiroth was representing their Planet and borrowing much of its strength but there was only so much to give. Every time she hurt him, she was hurting their world. Cloud and Vincent's help was limited, they simply hadn't the resources to be of much help. The only reason Vincent could fight something so strong at all was with Hojo's manipulations with his genetics and then Jenova's own cells. Cloud fought with the ill-begotten gifts of materia in his blood and they kept him alive and gave him a weapon, but he was only human. He couldn't be what the world needed now anymore than Sephiroth could. They truly needed their Planet's aid.

"How d'you like that?" CJ yelled triumphantly, darting off Jeek with a bloody nose and black eyes. He chuckled as the black-haired kid rolled around on the ground, rubbing his face and spitting out teeth. "Strike one up for CJ Strife!! Ya wanna tell me somethin' else about my dad, retard? C'mon, say somethin', I wanna hit ya again! Don't mess with me, man, I'm from Midgar!"

Jeek laughed sweetly, sitting up and clutching his ribs, staring at CJ through two swollen eyes. "You're tough, "he admitted, "Guess that's why Mr. Cloud thought so much of ya."

"Darn straight!" CJ snapped, darting his fists in his hips and standing there cocky. The cold breeze dried the sweat under his eyes and he grinned huge, loving it. He gave Jeek a final disgusted glance, then turned and winked at Ifalna who wasn't even looking at him. "What's up?" he asked, wondering where all her adulation was. He'd just won a fight for her and mom and dad, she should be unloading compliments and clapping her hands, not gazing off all pale like a bed sheet.

Ifalna pointed and CJ turned around. Oh, yeah. The naked Jenova lady. Hmph.

Cloud landed in the dirt and twisted his foot wrong, falling backwards and cursing his clumsiness. He winced as Sephiroth charged before him and Chaos dove. Both of their half-hearted attacks were deflected with ease and Jenova returned with blasts of power that sent the both of them flying. He should fight her. Cloud knew he should climb to his feet and keep up his assaults; swinging this sword was the only thing keeping him anchored, keeping him from curling up into a ball and crying into the dirt. He needed to keep it up. Whether he died first or Jenova was immaterial. He'd fight and whatever happened, happened. He didn't want it to end. There were harder things to battle after this.

Out of the corner of his eye, Cloud suddenly caught sight of a very familiar streak of red. It swooped in the air, roaring half-formed curses from silvery, dripping jaws, then descended upon him in an unwatchable blur, filling his vision with fangs and a pair of brown mako eyes. Pinning both of Cloud's arms under blood-slicked paws, Chieko snapped at his face and tore his legs up with her hind claws, laughing insanely as she bantered.

"You weren't anything, "she muttered delusionally, "She didn't love you either, you see? She stole her power from you just as she did from me, you were just another pawn in her aims, like Hojo, and me and that red-eyed man. No one loves you, and you really are my brother because we're both the same, we're murderers that no one loves that everyone wants dead. No family, no friends, nothing to follow and as loose and uncared for in this world as leaves blowing in the wind."

Chieko sobbed her words, even as she raked her claws and horns over Cloud, playing sadistic games of tic-tac-toe on his unprotected chest. Vincent saw the torture and halted his assaults on Jenova to dart to his friend's side. He was breathing hard and trembling in pain, face obscured by snaking blood as red as his eyes but he kept it up. He couldn't complain, he had nothing to do but fight until he died. He'd fight for the people he detested and who feared him, regardless of his own emotions or the questions he kept asking himself about the justice or injustice of his deeds.

Jenova saw Vincent's aims, saw Chieko's appearance and smiled to herself, sending a bolt of power out that struck an attacking Sephiroth dead in his chest and sent him hurdling into the rocks, Masamune flying out of his hand as his head snapped backwards and his eyes shut, momentarily stunned. Darting forward in a twirl of white and light, Jenova impaled

Vincent through the back with a suddenly-formed sword and he immediately crumpled to the ground, curling in on himself, wings catching the wind and billowing forlornly.

"Mother. . ." Chieko whispered, tears rolling off her pink nose and splattering Cloud's face as he struggled on the ground beneath her claws, "What shall I do? Tell me, I'll do anything you want me to, I promise."

"Just hold him, dearest, let him watch what happens next." Jenova laughed imperially, moving through the air with her flawless white body, a half an hour's worth of battling not to be seen on her form. There wasn't a scar, a mark, a single flaw upon her. Only her hair had been shortened, a ring of black that slithered around her head, the curls of her power entwining with the strands and shining with a beauty that didn't make sense. She approached Chaos' fallen form and flipped him over onto his back with a gentle kick from a pale little foot as he struggled to heal himself, knowing his endurance was slipping. He'd been fighting for too long, longer than he ever had as Chaos in the past, and his strength couldn't last. He didn't know how much longer he could go on before she had him.

There's one more piece of the puzzle left, Vincent, she hissed into his mind, I've taken Cloud, taken Chieko, I took what remained of me from Sephiroth's corpse years ago, Hojo's cells were diminished and weakened by Cloud. . . so, love, that leaves only one man. . . or should I say, one demon?

Vincent glared at her silently, saying things in his eyes that he never could express in words. He hated Jenova as he'd hated few other things. She made him realize weaknesses about his himself that he didn't like. She'd made him a killer. She'd stolen his very humanity.

Do you know what I'll do when I've taken my cells from you, Vincent? I'll end your world. This has all been play for me. A chance to fight, physically, those beings I hate so dearly. I can end this world at any moment with a single thought, such is my power.

Jenova lowered and stroked the side of his face, a gentle smile on her bright red lips. As she watched with emotionless eyes, Vincent writhed as Chaos vanished, skin lightening, bones reshaping, claws and horns disappearing with a splash of hot blood. After a minute or two, it was Vincent Valentine laying in the dirt and bleeding from his back. She pushed black strands of matted hair from his eyes for him, then ran a hand over the cool metal of his claw. Smile never breaking, she moved that hand up past the tarnished iron, tickled fingers over the warm flesh of his upper arms and onto his chest, then lay her palm over his stomach lovingly, a warm hand that tingled him, almost a pleasing sensation he was so cold.

"Are you cold?" Jenova whispered, "I'm sorry."

Power flared as Vincent grit his teeth and screamed in pain, Jenova doing to him as she'd done to Cloud, focusing the cells in his possession into an accessible line of distorted flesh running down his chest. Let her do it! he laughed brokenly in his mind, Let the bitch have them back, he never wanted them! If she could only take the claw and the damned tinkering that had kept him from being the tired old man he should be, he'd be ecstatic. But let her take Chaos, he didn't need a monster to hide behind anymore!

"Vincent!!"

CJ stared off with wide eyes at the scene so close, separated from it all by nothing but a few loose boulders. His dad!! Under Chieko! And Vincent!

"No!!" Ifalna hopped up, tears shining in her violet eyes and she ran forward to clutch her brother, trembling all over.

"Ha. . ." Jeek muttered from the ground, following their gaze, "You can have yer dad back, kid. I think ya probably deserve him more'n me. Just don't go dyin' again, eh? Be there for him, he needs a pal."

With a little cry of rage, CJ kicked Jeek a final time in the side and then took a few hesitant steps towards the battle even as Jenova glanced up, smiling wickedly. She gave the little boy a once over with snapping yellow eyes, then pulled a pale arm back, a wheel of razor-sharp energy glinting in her hand. Like a scalpel, she ran the blade down the length of Vincent's exposed chest, cutting to the bone. Then, laughing so heartlessly it hurt them all to hear, she lowered her head and ran a fat pink tongue over the wound, from throat to navel, lapping up her power like a dog.

"No! You leave 'em alone!" CJ commanded, running forward then freezing in his tracks as Chieko looked towards him, ears perking at the sound of his voice. She licked her jowls, brown eyes glinting, catching the light shimmering in the air and then dancing with it as tear after tear snaked down her furry cheeks.

"You're alive. . ." she growled, her gaze pasted on CJ as he took a step backwards, Ifalna hanging off him, "No. . . Cloud can't have you. . . it's not fair, if I can't have what I want, he can't have you!! It isn't fair! It isn't fair!"

"Who is that. . .?"

Cloud took a deep, shaky breath as Chieko leapt off him. He lay there for a minute, not believing his ears and then he dismissed the voice as a cruel trick.

"Chieko. . . "CJ breathed, swallowing hard and trembling as that insane red monster approached with clacking claws and a desperate blood lust in her eyes, "Get away. . . please. Dad! Daddy, what're you doin'? Dad, help. . . "

No, that wasn't CJ because if it was CJ then Cloud immediately knew that he was damned.

"Daddy. . . "Ifalna whimpered, "Daddy, please, please, please. . . Cheeko's scary. . . "

And if that was Ifalna, his baby girl. . . why'd it have to hurt so much? And when would it ever end. . .

~\*~

"No!!"

Tifa lunged forward and it took both Reeve and Cid to keep control of her. The sounds she was making tore Berk in two.

"Berk, don't you get any ideas. . . " Reeve warned through grunts, sweat sticking his collar to his neck. The young Turk looked at him once, grit his teeth, and made up his mind.

"Fuck you, Mr. President, sir!" he snapped, drew a four-barrel COP pistol from a hidden holster underneath his pant leg, strapped around his calf, then leapt from their cover and dashed out to help.

"Berk!! No, come back!!" Marlene wailed, swinging her head up from Dragon Weapon's sights to follow him with wide eyes. Stupid brave bastard! He had no business thinking he could fight something so strong!

"Marlene, keep your eyes on the battle! Fire as soon as you get a clean shot!"

"Don't worry, Marlene!" Nanaki cried, grinning up at his friend as he would when they used to have ladder-climbing contests in Cosmo Canyon, "I'll go after him!"

"Son of Seto, you'll do no such thing!" Bugah ordered, stepping forward and trying to grab him by the mane. The attempt was unsuccessful and Nanaki slipped away, leaping up and over their barricade in a streak of red. The Elder grumbled something about lack of respect then began backing the others away from Dragon Weapon as the machine roared and creaked with power.

"Good job, Bugah!" Cid snapped, features strained and dyed green with the light of the mako dancing in the space, "I see how CJ and Eef slipped right past you now! Remind me never to let you watch my kids, okay?"

"We were trying to keep this monstrosity from blowing us all to hell!" Bugah bellowed in response, shielding his eyes from the massing of power, "Those children don't understand what's important and neither do you! Marlene! What's it look like up there?!"

Marlene heard her Elder's words as though through a fog. Perched on Dragon Weapon's control console, she was seven feet elevated off the ground and the way the weapon clamored and thundered with energy it was all she really heard. The machine's silvery body pulsed with mako, the slim, razor-finned missile jutting from its front was nothing but a slender tube of greenish-white that burned the eyes to look at. Her heart roared in her chest in time with Dragon Weapon's reports, waves of power vibrating up through her spine and making her dizzy. But with steely determination and an ounce of recklessness, she kept her right eye firm to the sights, the battle in the distance blaring in her mind. One shot. . . there was one! No, Cloud was standing now, standing between her and Jenova and gazing at his children as Chieko approached them. He was blocking the view and she cursed it, not even realizing the significance of what she was looking at, absorbed now only with finding a way to blast their enemy, save Berk, save them all.

"Marlene!" Bugah hollered, forced to step backwards as the mako burned painfully, everywhere, more than he'd ever seen. This was more than those eight linked materia, more than their pathetic scientific tinkering. This is what Sephiroth had hinted of on the airship: the Planet's power. "Marlene!" he called again, panicking as the air thickened with the energy and stung his eyes. He could barely see the young woman anymore through it all. She was embedded in that glow like shell in sand but she had her orders.

"What's going on?" Reeve demanded, kicking Bugah in the shin to get his attention, "Tifa, honey, please, you can't go out there, you'll be a hindrance to Cloud. Jenova will kill you in spite. . . please. Bugah, what's this fucking machine's problem, eh?"

"The Planet. . . "Bugah explained softly, not turning around, eyes piercing the depths of the swirls of green, "It's up to it, it'll do what it pleases. . . "

"Guess I shouldn't have bad-mouthed it then, "Cid mumbled, "It's probably pissed now. Hey. . . anyone else hear that?"

"I can't hear crap over the noise of this thing!" Reeve hollered, squinting his eyes to avoid the light. His chest throbbed with it for some reason he didn't understand and it hurt so he thought of other things, of building his new Shinra and his new Midgar. Of starting over for the better.

"No! Listen!" Cid demanded and even Tifa stopped her struggles to try and make the sound out. She strained her hearing, blinking tears from her eyes as Dragon Weapon thundered with the power of Life.

"It's a chopper."

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She'd killed them. She'd killed them herself. She remembered so clearly dropping them from sixty-eight stories up and then her pleasure at being able to help her mother. It had been an accomplishment and she'd been proud. Jenova had been proud of her too.

But now they were back. That little boy and girl who looked so much like the man who'd killed her father. And their deaths had meant that man was just as miserable as she. Their being dead meant she and Cloud were on equal terms. So they couldn't be allowed to live now. It just wasn't fair.

"Back off, furbag!!" Berk thundered, running forward and waving a pitifully small gun in the air. His blue jacket streamed behind him and CJ thought with redoubled vigor that blue was his favourite color. Smiling shakily up at his dad who for some reason was just standing there looking at him with a horrified, frightened expression on his face, CJ grabbed at Ifalna and took off running backwards, leaving the guy with the gun to deal with the big cat.

Berk didn't really appreciate it. But he'd asked for it.

Sweating profusely in the cold Northern air, he raised his pistol and emptied all four shots off into Chieko. He was an amazing marksman but he was also scared shitless. Three bullets embedded themselves in the front of her chest as she charged, and the fourth grazed her head, up around one of her torn ears. Great shots, sure, but he'd been aiming all four to strike her right between the eyes. After the noise of the rounds died away, Berk stood there, rubbing the gun between cold fingers. That was it. Damn. Four bullets, about all he was good for. Damn, damn, damn. . . He closed his eyes as that red monster galloped forward to rip his head off.

Berk stood there for a long time, distractedly examining the insides of his eyelids, hoping that there'd be enough of him left for a decent funeral; forget open-casket, he wasn't going to go fooling himself, but it would be nice if Chieko left enough of him to stick in a pine box. Then Marlene could leave flowers at his grave every Sunday morning and wouldn't that just be sweet as pie?

After a time, the fact that he was still able to be thinking such morbid thoughts at all began to gnaw at him. Where were those teeth and claws and horns that were going to rip him into pieces? Something warm was breathing in his face. Something warm with catty breath. He figured he'd might as well open his eyes. Maybe there'd be a miracle or something.

Well, hallelujah.

Three inches from his face, Chieko had paused. Berk stood perfectly still, staring up at her and not breathing as she stared at something or someone over his blue-clad shoulder. She blew shaky, shallow breaths onto him that ruffled his forelock and his loosened collar, tickled his eyelashes warmly, but then made him shiver as they ran across the snaking sweat dripping out of his hair. The tips of his fingers tingling and cold, Berk tightened his hand around the grip of his gun despite its uselessness, then took a very slow, very labored, step backwards. When she let him do it, brown mako eyes still wide-open, bloodshot and strained towards that something or someone behind his back, Berk took a couple more and before he knew it, he was jogging backwards and returning to Dragon Weapon, ready to throw up from nerves.

Nanaki saw the Turk retreating out of the corner of his one eye and stepped forward towards the huge red creature, head lowered to attack. His keen hearing picked up the sound of a helicopter closing in but he ignored it, yellow eye narrowed in anger and curiosity.

"You're Chieko?" he asked softly, cocking his head to one side as the November winds whistled between the both of them. The air was quiet for just a moment, expectant. "I've heard much of you. They say you look like me. . . I don't see it."

Chieko kept staring, seeing that phantom figure of nightmares and lovely daydreams there fleshly and whole before her tear-filled eyes. There was a roaring in her ears, a mechanical buzzing so loud it was deafening. But the sight of her brother was even louder. He did look like her. He really did. The sight wasn't infuriating as she'd always imagined it would be. Instead it made that ache in her chest throb deeper, made a lump rise up in her throat. That first act of treachery towards her had been committed by this creature though. He'd been the first betrayer.

She was so confused.

Jenova laughed at it.

Why was this funny? Chieko wondered forlornly. . . . and why'd it hafta hurt. . .

The roaring was an unidentifiable blast of sound now. It broke through Chieko's thoughts like a fist and she saw that reflection of herself move backwards and away, frightened. But he wasn't really a reflection. He was noble and proud and handsome, as she'd always aspired to be. But she'd never been able to pull it off, had she? Chieko was so ugly. Not beautiful like Jenova, or even whole like Nanaki. Chieko was ugly and unimportant and everyone wanted her gone. The roaring came to a head and there was a sharp pressure all over her body suddenly, an explosion that didn't make sense and her vision left in black and red swirls as jagged metal shards cut her to pieces, fires started and burned her, things crushed and screamed as they bent and she screamed too. Screamed because her life had been a waste.

~\*~

"Bansai!!!"

Reno hurled himself out of the plummeting Shinra helicopter, gripping his nightstick in his three-fingered right hand, and landed deftly on the rocks, letting his legs buckle and then roll under him, breaking his fall. He twirled a few times on the ground, eventually springing back to his feet gracefully, his crimson banner of hair following his movements in a robust sweep of red. Nanaki watched his landing with one surprised yellow eye, then yelped and jumped clear as the chopper he'd flown in on nose-dived into Chieko, engulfing her in black steel that lasted for a moment and then disappeared in repeated explosions of bright orange fire. Panting and rubbing a bruised knee, Reno watched her burn, eyed her writhing form beneath the carnage in complete stoicism. Shocked at his sudden appearance, Nanaki looked up to Reno's face, straining to see what was behind the sunglasses. His efforts were futile though, Reno was keeping his emotions in check. All he said was, "Scratch one cat."

As her body melted away, Chieko looked out and saw them. They watched her so calmly and she wondered what she looked like, deluged in these fires. Maybe Hojo would be there. . . maybe she'd see him again and he could tell her what to do. . .

"Nanaki. . . !"

He saw her looking at him through dimming mako eyes and took a cautious step towards her, the heat from the fires pushing against him like a thousand hot hands. "Nanaki. . . "she called again and he paused, a strange feeling in his heart. "Nanaki. . . I hate you. . . "

And she said no more.

Reno stepped towards his comrade, wondering why his shoulders were bent and trembling, features grim and harsh as the firelight played over them. He glanced down at the creature and gave a sniff. "Yo, Red. . . "he began, cocking an eyebrow, "Why ya cryin'?"

"I. . . I don't really know. . . c'mon. . . let's get back to the others. . . "

~\*~

"Fuck me but copper-top makes one hell of an entrance. . . and I was impressed by Jenova's! Ha!"

Cid raised his voice to a roar to be audible above Dragon Weapon's symphony of mako and rage. The entire four-sided cavity that he and the others were sheltered in throbbed with the green glow, making it impossible to be heard. Didn't keep Cid from talking though.

"Incoming!"

Berk dashed back into the safety of the enclosed space, heart thumping hot and panicked in his ears. He grabbed an outcropping of rock to stop himself then whipped about in time to see the chopper's explosion light the world in red, a blinding flash of white and orange, Chieko's dying roars mixing with the sound. Was that. . . Reno? Berk blinked quickly in disbelief, panting hard, sure his tortured lungs would burst straight out of his chest. He collapsed onto his knees, clutching his throat and coughing blood, fighting for air but forcing his eyes open as Nanaki and his boss dashed into the space, a strange look in the four-legged creature's face; sad and angry and confused.

"I couldn't find the children!" Nanaki informed in a cracking voice that was nearly lost in the Weapon's thundering, "I

think they panicked and hid and it's too insane out there to look. The power's mounting, Jenova's complete!"

"Marlene!" Bugah called but he might as well have been a mute. Marlene was wrapped in the pulsating green of Dragon Weapon, enshrined in the Planet she loved and fought for, ready to destroy its enemy for it. Bugah strained his hearing and thought he heard her shouting, "One clean shot, Elder, just one clean shot! One clean shot!"

Berk pulled himself to his feet, scrabbling at the rough stone and scraping his knuckles up. He noticed he was still gripping his gun and dropped it unceremoniously to the ground, flipping it the bird.

"You shouldn't flip the bird at inanimate objects, "Reno scolded, helping his protege to stand, "Reserve such sacred hand signals for special occasions, makes 'em worth more. That's Turk rule number. . . whatever. Lost track. . . "

"Heh, heh, yes, sir. . . "Berk chuckled, leaning heavily on his friend and gazing out at the battle, "How did you find us?"

"The sky's black for a five mile stretch, "Reno answered easily, "Wasn't hard."

"I got a better question for you! "Reeve shouted above the din, "Why'd you crash a two million gil chopper into that monster? Do you have any idea how broke I am?"

Reno laughed, a long loud one full of release and pain, a contradiction of a sound. Maybe Elena hadn't been all hot air. It felt rather proper for him to be here right now, rather right no matter how it turned out. Heh. "Seemed a good idea at the time!"

The lightening that had been playing over the blackened skies now began to intensify and Nanaki cast a worried eye towards it, giving Dragon Weapon a wide berth as he cantered closer to Jenova's form out there in the middle of the blasted stretch of gray and barren stone, the Northern Crater at her back like a promise of what she was going to make the world. A void of black space.

"This is it. . . "he choked though no one could hear his soft words, "This is it. . . "

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Jenova smiled, red blood dribbling from the corners of her mouth.

"I believe that is all. . . "she murmured. Movements slow and measured, like a dance, she picked Vincent up by the scrap of black coat still wrapped around his throat, picked him up five feet off the ground, strangling him by it. He watched through half-shut crimson eyes as blood ran from the wound in his chest, snaking a cold trail down his stomach.

"So, Cloud. . . "the monster began, content to hold onto her prisoner as he kicked faintly and turned blue, "Your children are alive after all. You've seen them with your own eyes. Tifa tried to tell you, Vincent tried, even I told you the truth but you wouldn't believe. What about now? There they are, just over there cowering behind those rocks and watching you with tears in their innocent violet eyes. . . tears because you obliterated their home and killed their friends and you wouldn't go to help them as Chieko tried to tear out their throats."

Cloud bore the words as he might a dagger point being played like a drill into his eye. An unmoving statue, still as stone, he stood and let the wind play in his hair, taking a deep breath of it. He tasted the Highwind's fire and the recent blaze of that helicopter. He tasted the foulness of the air and the crisp knife that was the swirling cold of the Northern Continent. He stood there tall in the warring gale with the strange lightening rippling over the voided skies, casting slow glances at it all. The curling power of Jenova caught his eye too, all that curdled white, so bright and beautiful; but it wasn't really. What was that poem. . . ? Beauty is nothing more than the beginning of terror, which we are still just able to endure. . . All angels are terrifying. . .

"What's wrong, Cloud? Ah. . . I should leave you alone, I promised I would, didn't I? That's all you asked of me. That, and you asked me to destroy your world. That was before though, correct? Now you know the truth but it's too late to go back. The Planet saved your children, you know. . . oh, yes. Not the Planet though, the LifeStream. There is no Planet, only you humans and your collective lives. You create the idea of a Planet because it is comfortable to think of it as so, but the power lies in your own hands; in the LifeStream. . . souls, that's all that is real, souls and humanity and all the things in between. You're living on a rock. It doesn't care for you, it isn't anything. I don't want to destroy your Planet, just the people. The Planet isn't anything, isn't alive. . . can I stress this enough for you, Cloud? When you began your vendetta, you weren't out to kill a Planet, you were out to kill your race; your friends and your family. But it was the souls of these people that saved CJ and Ifalna when Chieko threw them away. Don't hate the Planet. . . hate me. I want your hate. You cannot hate a rock. You can hate the Life that occupies it and makes it live. You can hate yourself. You can hate your fellow humans. But you cannot hate a rock. And you shouldn't. You specifically, shouldn't. The souls of your friends saved them for you and you thought nothing was watching. But they were watching, they're always watching. So am I. I watch and I

wait to destroy those souls. I am that slit of night looming in the dawn sky; that last rumble of thunder before the storm dies away. The dark shadow that never leaves a room no matter how many candles you burn. But I truly have too many definitions to give you just one, Cloud, Vincent. I am something you can never kill or ever flee. I'm always there. . . always."

"And so are we. . ." Sephiroth added, picking himself up off the ground and holding Masamune close, "Always. . . this can't end here, today, it'll never end, it can't. Elements need each other or they disappear. Kill everything and what will there be for you?" He shook his head as Jenova smiled down on him, black locks blowing gently, "Nothing."

"Ha. . . but that is my favourite word. . . and a small price to pay to prove a point."

Jenova hovered there for a moment, taking in her surroundings, taking in the sight of the three men she'd tortured to achieve her aims, and smiled indulgently, lifting Vincent up a bit further, leaning close to his face and planting a cold kiss on his forehead. He laughed weakly at the act before she straightened her arm above her head and lifted him bloodied and limp into the air. Carelessly, she threw him away with incredible force and he landed roughly in the distance, skidding a few feet in the ice and dirt before lying still.

"It is so good to win, so good to be so whole after so long, "she rejoiced, the winds blowing fiercer about her body, the raging lightening above increasing, "So much to do to make up for lost time and my playing with you wretches has only swallowed more of that precious time. But I think it was worth it. Now, however, it is time for me to move on. I cannot torture you humans forever, despite a deep wish that I could. But I am not cruel, I seem to remember saying that at some point and it still holds true. . . what I do, I do to halt your suffering. You should be grateful. . . ha. . .

"Ha. . . ha, ha, a wink of my eye and I wink out the sun, "she laughed, the winds blowing fiercer about her body, the lightening increasing. "And you thought I was weak. . . ignorant. . . but enough of that now, it's over. Maybe in a few millennia, a piece of mold will achieve consciousness and the cycle can begin again. Until then, I leave this Planet barren and lifeless. You've never seen a barren Planet. . . it's nothing but a rolling ball of rock and gas that careenes through the universe with no purpose, no point, no worth. . . it's a beautiful sight full of potential. . . ha. . . potential that Life, when it comes, inevitably perverts. Second chances, loves, puppets, pawns. . . second chances are wonderful. Yes. . . in a few millennia this Planet will no doubt be given a second chance. Life will find a way to worm up, take root. In millions of years, billions of years, perhaps humans will live here again, who can say? Counter elements are persistent, they fight. . . but for now. . . I'll leave a load of flesh in my wake to rot away, bones to blow dusty in the winds. . . consider your sins. . . consider what you've done. . . and please. . . don't do it again."

Jenova graced them all with one last smile as she raised her perfect white arms to the heavens she'd tainted. Sephiroth watched her soberly and backed away as she rose, clenching Masamune tight. He approached Cloud from behind and grabbed him roughly by the shoulder, pulling him back away with him as their enemy made her threats into reality. With nothing but her will, nothing but the dark desires of a demon who possessed the ability to counter Life, who'd been granted the power to hand out judgments as she saw fit, Jenova thinned the very air to nothing. Cloud started gasping for breath, Berk's sword falling out of fingers he couldn't control and losing its glow. She was taking the air. To hell with stealing the sun, that would take too long. Jenova was impatient. . . she'd take the air.

Sephiroth began to run, pulling Cloud with him, half-picking him up off the ground.

"Where are you scurrying to, little mouse?" Jenova laughed lazily, "This is something you cannot run from. Won't you try to fight me again? You've fought so hard, you and your race. You, won't you remain one last survivor to curse me as I leave this lifeless world for another? Where are you running to? But of course, you're lucky. . . you get to watch them all drown, you don't need air any longer, do you, my poor dead pawn? Where are you running? You've failed. What will you do?"

Sephiroth halted sharply, and Cloud collapsed to the dirt, gasping as he drew his hand away. The summoned General turned back to the monster with a sly, flickering smile shining out from behind a scrim of silver hair. He bowed solemnly and replied, "If you'll excuse me, madame, I'd like to counter you."

"What?"

Dragon Weapon roared like one of its namesakes as it exploded like a geyser from the concealing rocks, sending a shower of ice, steam, rocks and mako flying in the air for miles. Its projectile pulsed like a beating heart with eight materia and a Planet's worth of power, screaming in unbridled love, unbridled hate, the unbridled passion of every human who'd ever lived, loved, or died. With speed so fast it was invisible to the eye, evincing itself as nothing more than a beam of white, the missile screeched from the rocks, blasting a path straight towards the threat hovering so innocently in the middle of the field of stone. The air pulsed white and green, breaking apart into fragments of sound; yelling, and cursing, the noise of things crumbling, of fires burning, thunder rolling like shifting plates of sky rubbing against each other above but breaking through it all like a hatchet plummeting, the falling blade of a guillotine, Jenova screamed a protest. Nobody listened.

Spitting sparks, the missile hit its target's midsection and embedded there for a single tense second like a knife about to be twisted. Except Dragon Weapon was better than that. In a violent flash accompanied by assorted screams, the projectile exploded with a wave of power, Jenova's body shattering under the impact. She flew apart into twitching globules of dark-veined purple flesh, the pieces slithering and scrabbling, desperate to reconnect even as the residual mako of the blast weakened her further. As her power died, the farthest edges of the blackened, murdered sky began to glimmer faintly, a glow of fruitful blue on the rim of the horizon. Like spreading mist, the atmosphere slowly started to return, the Planet reclaiming its skies; rich, dark, promising thunderheads moving in to cover the void of blackness and sweep away the results of its own treachery towards what was natural. Girded with tinges of green, gray and purple clouds chased each other in the distance, clouds thick as cream and constantly changing shape in the renewed icy winds; fat clouds spreading like hands to brush the wrong away.

Below, it took a few long minutes for the energy expenditure to clear from the air. The atmosphere crackled to the touch, tingling the skin of the survivors as they looked on, looked at each other, wondered what had happened. Marlene put out one shaky, scorched hand to push herself up from the ground, distractedly realizing she was no longer fighting for control atop Dragon Weapon's panel but was now flat on her stomach with her face pressed into the dirt. Blinking away green after images, she tried to put out her other hand and climb to her feet but a sharp pain halted her efforts and she distractedly realized she'd broken her arm. She'd heard the Weapon had a tendency to do that from Berk and she laughed between winces.

"You all right?" the Turk whispered in her ear, suddenly there to provide a soft blue shoulder to lean on. He knelt stiffly and helped her up, letting her fall against him, weak and dizzy and needing someone to embrace. He obliged, planting a soft kiss on her neck. "You have great aim, ya know. . ."

Holding on to each other, they both moved off to help their friends, making their way solemnly over the shattered remains of their hiding place. Behind them, Dragon Weapon was a hollow, smoking shell of silver and circuits but it looked towards Marlene as though to say thanks. She smiled weakly at the contraption, spent and tired there in the dim light, and Berk laughed softly at her broken arm, holding her close and wrapping her in the flaps of his jacket, asking if he could write dirty limericks on her cast when she got one.

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Mmm. The air smelled good. It was cold, as Vincent preferred it, cutting into his lungs.

Breathing deep, he opened his eyes and lay on the ground, arms tired at his sides and covered with dirt. For a few moments, he stared at the blackness but then, laughing, he pushed dark hair out of his eyes with two tarnished fingers of his claw and sat up. For just a second, he surveyed the line of dripping red running down his chest and tickling his abs with a chilly touch, but then he looked to the distance and saw some of the sky was back. He tucked his legs up under him and pointed his eyes into the distance to watch, letting the cool tones fill his vision. He hadn't just been babbling last night on the beach. He loved the skies. Seeing them in Chaos' red had pained him as few things could. Being able to watch his favourite sky of all now, that sky before a storm, almost seemed like some kind of a reward. He didn't ask for anything else. He didn't want anything else but to be able to stare at the clouds forever. He just wasn't sure what else to do now. Vincent was almost sorry the battle was over.

Drifting mumbles. He heard CJ and Ifalna whispering close by, too terrified to come out of hiding with the carnage littering the blasted field. Lost, they looked to their dad, Cloud just starting to come around in the distance, Sephiroth standing over him with his hair moving casual over his shoulders in the wind, sliding over his cloak, a silver pool in the cold light. The General looked to Cloud, then glanced away towards the remains of their enemy; dark slithering shapes sliding over the rocks and burning them, still trying, still scrabbling with an insane intensity to kill it all. He smiled down at them in honest satisfaction, swiped Masamune against the sides of his pant leg, then sheathed it at his back, breathing in the freezing air.

"Sephiroth. . .?"

Cloud turned heavily onto his side, jagged rocks sticking at him from underneath. He blinked slowly, looking up, trying to remember who he was. Like seeping gas, a merciless mist, events curled into his memory and returned to remind him of his life; who he was and what he'd done. The crevices of his brain were filled cruelly with the facts and they burned him until he couldn't breathe. How unfair. They'd just stopped Jenova so that he and every other one of them could breathe and now he was denied air again. He choked against the unfairness of it, swallowing hard and staring at the swordsman standing over him expectantly. "Sephiroth," he repeated, "I understand now. What happened so long ago. I understand. Of all the ways to learn. . . but. . . but I understand what it's like to be a tool now."

Sephiroth shook his head and smiled, stooping over to give Cloud a helping hand to his feet. "It isn't important," he said evenly, "That was a long time ago."

"Doesn't seem so long though, does it?" Cloud whispered, standing now on two wavering legs and surveying the wreckage. The surrounding rocks had all been leveled. A powdery dust blew at them on the breeze.

"No, it doesn't. Sometimes it seems like it was all only yesterday. History has a habit of repeating itself. Angels fall, devils rise, good men are hurt by bad. You shouldn't fixate on it though, your life didn't end then."

"Hard to forget your past when it won't leave you alone. It's like ignoring a bullet in your stomach. I keep getting caught up in these struggles. . . why does the Planet hound me? Why do these elements hound me?"

Sephiroth shrugged, unable to answer. He wished he could help this man with a swipe of his sword but that was naive. Jenova's advance had been stymied but that didn't mean they could return to their lives as they'd lived them. That beast had left too many claw marks in her mad scrabbling for revenge. She'd left enemies in her wake they could never slay. And her claws were still twitching.

"What was that power?"

Jenova's voice was still just as beautiful, still just as enticing.

"I demand. . . I demand to know what that was. . . I was so close. . . so, so close. No. . . no. . . this isn't fair. . ." she wailed softly, her voice eerie and disembodied in the wind. "I was close to it, I tasted your deaths on the tip of my tongue, where the taste is sweetest. . . where did that sweetness go? I won't be denied my turn. . . not after so long. You know it's unfair. . . you know it's wrong to take it from me. You'll go on torturing yourselves, lighting fires that you'll leap into, writhing in agonies that you weave for each other simply because I am not here to counter you with my own pain. No, no, no. . . it's not too late, I can still free you all, still correct the balance. . . another reunion, another song of destruction and we'll dance together and you can kill for me again. . . I'll love you all if you'll kill for me again. . .!"

Jenova's voice was still just as beautiful but it couldn't influence any of them anymore. She'd taken her cells back and now she could rot in isolation with her struggles for power and revenge. Pieces of her lay scattered all over the frozen ground; bleeding portions of purple flesh, as indestructible as her evil but as vulnerable as her pride.

"You're insane. . ." Cloud sighed, walking forward unsteadily, his arms crossed over his chest as he gazed and gazed upon that force that had intruded upon his perfect life. He had been a manipulated pawn. He had been tortured, his family put through hell all in the name of a cruel force's revenge, the desires of a thing without a name but with one sole purpose. The realization and the acceptance of it was humiliating and painful. His life. . . those thirteen years he'd forged for himself, shattered with Jenova's presence. . . gods. . . all of it was over-- buried in the debris he'd made under those false fucking facts she'd convinced him of. His entire life-- gone. He was worse than dead, this was worse than if she'd cut his throat, or if he'd followed that little boy's advice and ended his own existence. He was dead but still breathing. Alive but in pieces. And all for-- all for--

"All for nothing. . ." he choked, "For nothing at all. It's all. . . just dust on my fingers. BI-blood on my blade. A corpse under my feet. Ha. . . but what do I matter, right? I'm just a speck of sand on the surface of this Planet. And hardly material at all. Right, Jenova? I'm just a human. A weapon, a tool. I'm just a pathetic shell who loved his kids too much. Just an easily manipulated fool. Whose life. . . whose life was taken over a matter of pride. The pride and judgment of a monster with the face of an angel." He spread his gaze thick over the carnage, rage and anguish playing in alternating patterns over his features. The mako monster, that murderous thing from the Shinra building that had kidnapped his children to begin with, that beast's words echoed back to him. He'd said that scar would never leave him, that "J". And it hadn't. Even now, he realized that cut was a scar on his soul. More than a scar though, a wound that would never close, that would bleed and gall him until he died. It hurt so much. Hurt. . . hurt because he'd put that gash into his soul himself. Not this purple shit. Not the pieces of Jenova, but Cloud Strife had been his own worst enemy. His own. And it had only taken the coaxing of a monster to set him off.

Cloud kicked at the pieces of Jenova, kicked harder and harder until he was stamping his feet on the rocks and cursing violently, falling forward onto his knees and sobbing brokenly. "Is this all? This shit. . . this meaningless shit I can crush in my fist. . . all of that pain for this shit's pleasure. . . now. . . now what do I do?"

"Kill your guilt, Cloud. . ." Jenova hissed mockingly, "Try. Attempt to get the blood off. I've seen many men try. But it never fades. Ask Sephiroth."

"I never meant for it to happen but there's no way to take it back. Things can never be as they were, there's no way. I want my life back, Jenova. Why can't I take it back from you, you stole it! Don't you have it hidden somewhere I can snatch it away!" He put his head down in his lap and trembled with the dark thoughts raging in his mind, unwillingly reliving every murder. They'd all been distant crimes, suggestions that he'd leapt on without realizing the consequences, those

consequences blocked by her control; destroy a building associated with pain, it was easy, it was final. . . but don't pay any mind to those you'll crush as it falls. Level a city of crime and bad memories but forget the good people living in it, the people that'll die or be homeless because of a moment's rage. He had forgotten or suppressed such thoughts. But he couldn't anymore. He just wasn't so delusional.

"You're all like that. Able to be manipulated by a fault or a weakness. Why should I be punished or taken advantage of because I am able to see it and use it? Ha. . . ha. . . unfair, so unfair to me. Unfair, unfair, unfair. . . you all play this game of delicate balances unfairly. . ."

Cloud smeared an arm across his face, bright eyes searching out the sound of that voice as it chanted that one word, unfair, into the air like a song. The voice was calling from nearby, it had a definite source. "Shut up," he growled in hopes that it would listen, "I know you don't care, that you can't care but you have to shut up. You have to. My friends have. . . they've defeated you. You can't hurt anyone anymore." Cloud straightened with his words, taking a step forward and shouting at the air, "Do you hear me? You're defeated, we'll forget you, you'll die. Immortal or not, if no one remembers, you'll die. That's the only real way to die, ya know. Being forgotten. Live forever in pieces, you unconscionable sack of shit. But die too. Because no one's going to bother remember something so cruel. No one. So you can shut the hell up now." Cloud turned his head to the right and left, laughter echoing in his ears, that beast's mirth at his pain and the fruitlessness of their struggles. She wasn't listening to him, and she wasn't quitting her struggles. She was laughing, just laughing. The sound was a hot poker in his brain.

Vincent looked up again at the screeching noise of the voice, taking his eyes from the sky. Where was it coming from? How could it still even speak anymore? He had to know. He had to know that it was over, that they wouldn't have to fight again, that he'd saved his friend and made up for Chaos' murders. Those murders were his. That demon was his, he was sure of it now. It was what he'd been in Hojo's eyes and in the eyes of the world. He hadn't been able to leave that evil Turk behind in his wooden box. The monster of his past had lived on in his soul. And these past few days, it had killed again. Chaos would never have been born if he hadn't decided to become a killer. He'd never have been born if Vincent had killed Hojo when he should have, when he'd confronted him in that mansion, Lucrecia's screams in his ears. The murders were his. The pain was his. The blood of his victims truly stained human flesh, not demon claws. But Jenova was dead and so was Chaos now. Right? He had to be sure. He had to know that it was over. He had to have some peace after so long a battle.

A wave of dizziness washed over Vincent as he tried to stand, so he went slower, very carefully pushing himself against the remains of an upright boulder and then inching to his feet, groaning with his wounds and leaving a faint trail of red on the rock behind him. He leaned there, trying to catch his breath, listening, wondering.

"I cannot 'lay down and die', Jenova contradicted with a sneer, "I cannot die. I am an element of nature, and as immortal as the sea, or the sky, or --"

"Yeah. . ." Cloud cut in, moving carefully amidst her remains, kicking stones from his path, "We know."

"So will you allow me to perform my task now and end your lives?"

"Ha. . . you just don't give up. . ." Cloud muttered, laughing in disbelief.

"I cannot. Until the balance is restored."

"We cannot allow that balance, and you're aware of that, creature," Sephiroth spoke, stepping forward, "Right or wrong, humanity wants to live. You're taking your defeat quite well though. I wonder why. . .?" Sephiroth allowed himself a self indulgent smile as he cast an eye to the sky, as though listening to something. And he was. It was nearing that time he'd been expecting. It was nearing the end.

"My defeat? So stupid. . . so naive and hopeless. I explain and still you cannot comprehend. Pathetic human fools. I shall prevail at some point. There is nothing you can do to me. I will win soon. . . I'll win, you'll die, I will move on."

"Maybe," Sephiroth relented, dropping a black-gloved hand into his pocket, "But not for a long, long time."

Cloud turned away from peering at the destruction, thinking he heard something strangely noble and determined in Sephiroth's tone of voice suddenly. With a confused, wary frown, he saw the man take something round, red, and glistening from a pocket in his cloak, holding it lightly in the palm of his hand. He looked at it for a moment thoughtfully, letting the sphere catch the faint morning light, the white glow from the rim of sun way off in the distance shining rainbow prisms off of the storm clouds. Wordlessly, he flung the summon materia into the dirt and it lay there shining, promising, glinting.

"What are you doing?"

Jenova's voice wasn't mocking anymore. It was direct and sharp and full of stifled rage. Cloud listened to that rage with a twinge of fear in his heart, knowing what that monster did when in such a temper. On his guard, though feeling like a fool

for fearing something that was lying in pieces on the ground, Cloud backed up a bit closer to Sephiroth, taking in their surroundings through feverishly bright eyes. Those eyes strayed towards the rocks beneath his feet, the very ground spreading out around them.

Tendrils of white; a spreading mist; dampness off a moor in the morning. It curled cold up his legs and Cloud paced backwards a step, sweat beading out on his forehead.

"What is she doing now?" he whispered frantically, darting his gaze all around, clenching his teeth and fists in rage at the possibility that maybe this wasn't over yet, that Jenova had some other trump up her sleeve, some other hand to deal, trick to pull, person to kill. Sephiroth calmly eyed him, then turned back to looking at the sphere of bright materia laying embedded in the dirt.

"That isn't Jenova," he answered softly, "That is the Planet. The same thing that powered that Weapon a few minutes ago. Whatever its selfish reasons, it offers aid. I believe that Life has enjoyed its past two thousand years of domineerance. It's in no hurry to have it end now. To hell with counters."

"The Planet. . ? How can you tell the difference? Jenova and the fucking Planet, they both look the same. White and curling as though they'd suck the soul from your bones for a nickel. The mako monster wanted Vincent and I dead, you said yourself that the Planet gave you orders to kill us. But then Jenova's aims are no different. Humankind doesn't matter to either of them. Who the hell do you trust?"

"Puppets or corpses, Mr. Strife," Sephiroth answered, unperturbed, "You have to choose at some point in your life or someone else will choose for you. I ask you this though: Do you trust your lover? Do you trust your friends? Than I say you trust Life, the Planet. Because as cruel as they are, they are one and the same. If your children had died, it was no fault of Life. It lights a candle, fuels a fire. When that fire dies, it doesn't look. It doesn't watch. It's too busy moving on and creating more opportunity and starting new blazes. You want reasons? Look to your gods. Don't blame those elements they've created to occupy your world. You want to cast blame? Blame yourself. Blame humans, the Cetra. They were greedy and wrong, as they always are. But Jenova is greedy and wrong too. . . ha." Sephiroth shook his head, eyeing the materia, "You know what, Cloud? I don't have any answer for you. I suppose I don't even know myself. Death does not reveal answers, it simply gives you more time to contemplate the questions. Bah. Raise your children and live your life, ignore the subtleties lest they drive you mad."

Cloud was silent as Sephiroth moved forward, black boots obscured by the gorgeous curlings of green and white springing up from the soil; writhing out of the rocks. He watched them, head cocked and features calm, the dancing strains the same green as his eyes.

"What are you doing?" Jenova demanded, forcing a smug, imperialistic laugh into her voice. But her true tone blared through. She was desperate. She was anxious. And for the first time in a long, long while, she was scared. "There is nothing you can do to me. Nothing. Days and years and millennia to learn that simple truth and still you haven't?! Nothing you can do! Nothing!!!"

Sephiroth shook his head. That wasn't true. "As the Cetra did," he explained, "You can be sealed. You will be sealed away where you can't harm anyone. You're too cruel and cutting, Jenova, you're too evil. Evil is a common word but you give it new connotations."

"NEW CONNOTATIONS?! I am more than that!! Not some piteous shell of a monster you can seal away, but an idea, a definition that cannot die! You cannot stop me! I'll always be there! Cloud, Vincent, Sephiroth, every one of you, I'll always be there in the back of your mind! You cannot stop me, you cannot!! Evil?! I AM NECESSARY!!! Can't you feeble-minded humans understand that and accept it and die??!!" Jenova voice was mounting to a roar that shook the air and Cloud resumed hunting out where it could be coming from, running into the midst of the blast in desperation. The wind blew cold over his uncovered chest, lashed his neck with his matted hair. He had to silence that consuming sound, keep it from spouting the words that were so true and so wrong all at the same time. They boomed forth with unimaginable reports, drilling into their skulls.

Where was it coming from?!

Vincent scanned his surroundings, claw clacking a nervous rhythm on the rock behind him. So close. . . he could hear that source so close and. . . moving closer? It was out there. . . not those trembling pods of purple breaking apart beneath his feet, but out there, hiding in the soot of the blast. He pushed himself forward off his boulder, taking a few labored steps towards it, thinking he saw something moving close by. A glimmer of damp in a patch of dry black ash.

The Planet's power was building all around them and Sephiroth watched it impatiently. It would seal Jenova away, it would halt her interference in the order of Life and he could finally rest, perhaps. He'd leave the living to live and he could finally die. Finally sink away, forget and be forgotten. . . it was a thought that had him fidgeting his fingers in anticipation and he glared at the ground, kicking at the rapidly brightening LifeStream anxiously. He heard that voice too. How was it

still raging, still so strong? The blast had been great and they shouldn't have had to listen to such ranting at all . . .

Jenova laughed, long and loud and sadistic but enraged too. "Fools. . . "she cackled, "Arrogant fools. . . always the same. . . seal me away only to be haunted by me for the rest of your lives. You cannot forget me, arrogant moronic, STUPID pigs. . . I am more than this physical flesh. I am . . . so much more. . . "

A glimmer of silver. It caught the light glowing so intensely all throughout the atmosphere, caught the Planet's energy and sang with it as it lay forgotten on the ground.

The children listened to the voice in terror, backing further away to be rid of it. Hadn't they just watched that monster be blown to bits? Hadn't dad taken care of that threat, wasn't it over? Yeah, that was the case, they'd seen it. . . so who did this wicked woman's voice belong to?

"The Cetra, they sealed me. . . but they could not silence me . . . "

The LifeStream choked the air and Cloud couldn't help but panic, falling backwards, looking to Sephiroth but the General's eyes were shut, his features obscured by green. Cloud glanced down at his own hands but the mist was too strong; this strangling choke hold that the power had on the air. . . power everywhere and the weakened purple flesh at his feet seemed to dissolve under its influence.

"No. . . no. . . more than memories. . . if I must be denied. . . I won't be denied of it all. . . no. . . "

Wrapping around that silver, obscuring the shape with a bloodied limb, seeing a reflection of light even as that light made it too bright to see at all. But not blinded, not gone, not conquered yet. . .

"Insolent pigs. . . you won't forget me. . . I won't let you. . . "

Vincent straightened, finally making the shape out as it slithered into plain view only twenty feet away. A bloated bloodied torso sprouting snapping limbs, spraying dark blood and harboring two violent yellow eyes. It was bigger than he was and moving faster than he ever could but it didn't want him. It didn't want him.

Silver, razor-sharp, entwined, cutting, cold and precise. Shining like a song through the light-obscured air. She wouldn't be denied. The LifeStream was coming but she'd beat it yet. She'd beat it.

CJ and Ifalna pressed against the rock wall as though to sink into it as the Jenova monster sped towards them, Berk's sword wrapped in a strong, eager limb. Her power was diluted but she could prevail to an extent without it. A sword. . . it was enough. . . and suiting. A primitive tool, but the tool of man. Ha. . . two swipes through their hearts and she'd never be forgotten. She'd kill them again. And they'd stay dead this time.

A blur of black and a splash of blood and Jenova pulled up sharp. Vincent was there to stare her in the eyes, one hand and one claw wrapped around the blade of silver embedded through his chest. A sob tearing through his throat, CJ scrambled to hold Ifalna and he dragged the both of them away, staring at his friend's back and the sword end protruding outwards between his shoulder blades. The quaking mass of purple flesh darted yellow eyes at them desirously, struggling to free the katana from the man's body but Vincent grit his teeth and held it in, wedging the edge into the joint between his claw and thumb, the screech of steel filling the air.

And then he smiled.

"You are insignificant!! "Jenova thundered as the air pulsed brighter, her power faded. But she wrenched at the sword with all she had left, murderous eyes on the children as they stared at her in terror. "I won't be forgotten, I'll live, I'll kill something. . . I'll balance this rock and counter Life!! That's all I know!"

"Alright, "Vincent whispered, "But satisfy yourself with me. I learned a long time ago I was nothing but a pawn. And for a long time, I've been a dead pawn, a spent puppet broken on the field. I'm worthless. You're right. But those children aren't. We. . . agh! Dammit! We had this conversation once, don't you remember? In a-- in a nightmare-- I t-told you, told you a baby's life is precious, I t-told you then, and I'm not a liar. . . "

Jenova struggled to regain the blade but Vincent's arms were strong and his will was adamant.

"A martyr then, wretch?" she roared. He shook his head, grinding his teeth to keep up that deadly embrace.

"No, isn't it obvious? This is c-common sense."

As the Planet labored to seal its enemy, the air pulsed like a strobe, the wind roaring up to blast the remains of the blackened Crater as the LifeStream released all it would, all it could, of its power. Cloud clawed his way through it and wrapped two hands around the disgusting but slowly fading remains of Jenova, gripping it around outcroppings of filth-covered bone and flinging her away, the sword leaving Vincent's chest with a metallic sigh. Cloud hurled that moaning, wailing beast to the dirt, tendrils of white engulfing the flesh of its counter and stifling her divided power as the atmosphere boiled. He slammed his fists into the decaying creature, smashing it into the ground. Jenova cursed him, she cursed them all, she screamed for murder even as she was rendered harmless, sealed again after that teasing taste of

freedom. But Cloud suddenly turned away, attention refocusing. Because there was just too much blood. Not her worthless, purple filth but real red human blood. His friend was hurt.

"Vincent. . . "he gasped, dropping to his knees and scrabbling to staunch the flow of crimson, fingers slippery and wet. So much blood and it wouldn't stop coming, coloring that pale naked chest with red. No. No, they'd stopped the evil, they'd all be all right now. "I'd-- I'd thought you were dead. After I didn't see you for so long, I just. . . I thought you'd been killed." Cloud laughed weakly and Vincent smiled, squinting to see his friend through the light.

"Well then you shouldn't be sad, right? Just go on thinking that."

"Shut up, you morbid bastard, don't talk like that. You can't die so easily, not with the cells. . . not. . . "

Cloud looked down at Vincent's taunting, gushing wounds and his hands started trembling.

"I'm sorry. . . "he sobbed, "This's my fault, this isn't right, you can't die here. . . god dammit, you can't! This is my fault!"

"Stop it. No, it's not. Ha. I been living on b-borrowed time since, since Hojo killed me. It couldn't go on forever. I'm not important enough to mourn, s'don't start. . . "

He tried to raise his head up and lean closer to look Cloud in the eye but he suddenly couldn't. He couldn't even remember how it was he was sitting down, he'd been standing, right? Standing and watching as that realization, that flash of silver had soured his eyes and he'd ran, remembering that day in the cage. Then that pain and those words, her distorted face and the children's whimpers. Vincent wracked his brains but couldn't find a reason to regret what he'd done. He was glad. There just wasn't anything here for him anymore. But still so much for the others. He wanted them to find it, wanted CJ to be what he dreamed, wanted Ifalna to have quiet conversations with the clouds as he'd watched her do. Cloud deserved to be there and watch them live. Tifa deserved it, Reeve, all of them. He'd truly miss watching, but he knew that was all he'd done these past years. Always watching, never living. This now. . . this was nothing but inevitability. This was nothing but dying on the outside at last.

Spreading warmth on the rock behind his back, dripping to the ground, and suddenly the pain struck at him. Soft tears dimming his eyes, he moved his good hand up to grab at Cloud's arm and try to get him to stop hurting him so badly with that fist pressed into his sword wound but he hadn't the strength to wrap his fingers around his wrist so he gave it up and let the pain burn. He sat there for a long moment, staring at the air. He couldn't see the sky through the intensity of the Planet's glow and was sad for it.

"LifeStream looks like floss, eh?" he asked with a weak chuckle, moving a bloody claw up and playing the fingers through the green strands, "What's it doing?"

"I s'pose what it should have done from the beginning. . . I s'pose it's stopping her. . . I don't care though, it can do what it wants, as long as it lets us alone."

"Hmm. . . yeah. . . " Vincent watched the power blasting around them and Cloud watched it too. Neither of them could trust beauty though. Not anymore. Maybe never again. Screaming pain made Vincent refocus, breaths quickening, "Hey, Cloud. . . "he forced softly, "Hey, Cloud. . . promise me somethin'. Please."

"Yeah. . . "Cloud breathed, smearing an eye into each shoulder so he could see his friend through his tears. It didn't sound like Vincent anymore. The voice was too weak. Vincent never showed weakness in front of him, he'd never shown it in front of any of them.

"Don't let your kids. . . don't let 'em grow up to be like you. Or me."

"Ha, Vincent, there's nothing wrong with you."

"Maybe not. . . " After a moment, he added, "Nothin' wrong. . . nothin' with you either, Cloud."

"Everything else is just fucked up. . . " Cloud clenched his fists and laughed, not sure why. The air was getting so that they couldn't see each other but he kept a hand on his friend, wishing he could do more to keep Vincent warm. He was sure the wind against all that blood had to be cold as hell.

The hole in his chest had briefly burned like he thought nothing else ever could, burned through the bitter cold. But now Vincent found the pain subsiding to a mere throb, the river of life it'd released dwindling as the supplies ran low. The blood was only a trickle now and the light was fading. Death approached him tentatively, like an old friend who'd been away a long long time and was hesitant to renew acquaintances. He was tired, that battle had been long. But Jenova was sealed and those he'd fought for were safe. Cloud was all right, he'd be all right. And Chaos was dead. Hojo too. And. . . her. He was the last. Slowly, the remainders of what had kept him sitting up, strength, determination, denial, left him and Vincent slumped to the dirt. But it seemed now his skin was less sensitive to its chill and its solidity. He floated upon the stones, wave after beautiful, exhausting wave lapping warmth from his body. Cloud's light-obscured face suddenly grew even less discernible and finally disappeared amidst the white. Heavy lids drawn over his eyes, mind nestled in the softness

of his being, alone in the dark and feeling very satisfied and safe there.

"No, man, sit up. C'mon. . . don't do this, Vincent, please. . . "

He felt everything he'd ever been falling away in onionskin-thin sheets, disappearing into a void he couldn't see. Every experience, every day, every laugh, and every time he'd ever cried. . . suddenly he was left with nothing but the knowledge of his own existence. That, and something else. . . that something that never left him, even in his dreams. Vincent thought he felt it now and was frightened.

"Cloud. . . "

Barely audible. Ha, he could do better than that. Maybe not. . . there was no breath to form the words. Vincent opened his eyes, not remembering how they'd closed. He licked his lips and tried to speak louder through the haze of white and black swimming before him. Forty-three years was such a long, long time. He was frightened.

"Cloud. . . ?"

"Mm?"

"D'ya th-think. . . think she'll remember. . . me?"

It was a struggle but he got the words out as that last bit of consciousness gently faded. His eyes closed and he gave a last labored sigh before he got to hear the answer.

Cloud's hand on his chest closed into a fist but Vincent didn't feel it.

"Yeah, man. No one could forget you. . . "

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Light roared about like a sea full of tides and tickling currents; sharp beams broke and cruised like sharks, rocking the two men embedded in the glow and Cloud stared blankly out at all the green, stared blankly at that peaceful face smeared with the blood and dirt of battle.

There was Vincent but Cloud knew he was alone. Alone in this trembling ocean that beat against him with no remorse. So painfully alone, such a solitary island he thought forlornly. He'd sealed himself away with his rage. And now that the tide was out, the rage ebbed, who would want to approach that miserable, barren rock?

Alone.

Left alone to fight that final enemy now. Left alone to fight himself. He'd fight his battle in a world full of people who feared him and Cloud was scared to strike the first blow, knowing he didn't deserve to win. He was a murderer to his race and it would've been easier to die than to live knowing that fact, easier to leave the Planet with only vague memories of a blonde-haired man who'd ruined a city and raged through their lives. How could he do anything else now? Anything else but die?

How cruel it was to be the last man standing.

"C'mon, Vincent, "he whispered, tears escaping his eyes as he watched that stoic face in the dirt, saw the ease there that he so desperately craved, "Let me come too."

The battle couldn't truly be called a victory until all the enemies were destroyed. Yet here he was, still breathing, his shattered heart still flinging itself against the walls of his chest as though wanting to flee, burst out and be free. He moved a fist up and pressed it against those resounding beats, feeling his own life flooding through him. A lot of life left in this scattered collection of limbs. And he'd have to live it, no matter how painful it was.

Weren't there people to live it with him? Did he have stay an island? He'd seen them before this light had come. He'd seen them watching him with something in their eyes that he'd longed for, that his heart had demanded even as he'd taken his sorrows out on a blameless world.

Time to live again. There was that desire, coming out of hiding after so long. Time to live even if it hurt; to live despite the difficulty. To fill his life with things to counter what he'd done. Could he do that? he wondered distantly, Could he really calm sins? Cancel them? Kill them?

Vincent had done it, he now realized.

Maybe he could too.

~\*~

Tifa saw him crouching so close in the mist and walked faster, picking up Ifalna, holding CJ close by her side, both children crying into her, sobbing because they didn't understand and they didn't like seeing their friends hurt. She paused while only a few feet from him, the air beautiful, like white silk with their Planet's power. He was crying. She didn't want to see him crying anymore.

"Cloud. . ." she called, the word floating like a gentle song to his ears. He looked up, the green light turning the lines of tears rolling down his face into emerald trails; spun silver. Cloud stood shakily, then picked his hand up with a hesitant gentleness from the man he knelt beside and gave his friend one last sad smile of gratitude for what he'd done.

"Have a bad week?"

She said the words softly, smiling in fear and grief and daring to hope he'd answer.

"Yeah. . ."

Cloud stepped towards her, hugging his arms close around his body, guiltily watching the rocks with a solemn expression to accompany the grief in his eyes. Tifa set Ifalna gently on the ground and moved forward, taking a deep breath. The two approached each other until only a short span of swirling space separated them. They stayed like that for a while, LifeStream dancing in the air. Staring off into the distance, CJ stood, hands in his pockets, watching the strains with glistening violet eyes. Ifalna reached an arm up and tried to catch it, laughing softly as it faded underneath her fingers.

"I'm sorry, Tifa. . ." Cloud whispered finally, "I've ruined everything." A fresh tear. Tifa saw it and lifted a hand up, smearing it gently over his chin. She moved both her hands up slowly, combing her fingers through his soft blonde bangs and pushing them out of his face, running smooth, warm palms over his forehead. Then, smiling gently, she slid each of her thumbs over his eyes, sliding the tears away. He watched her actions with his lips half-parted, barely daring to breath. A single breath might shatter this angel of glass and gossamer.

"No more apologies, Cloud. . ." she murmured, closing the gap between them, "And no more tears."

He grabbed her suddenly as though afraid she'd be taken away again, and held her close, feeding off her warmth until he could offer back a bit of his own. He wrapped one arm around her waist, and one behind her shoulders, amazed, as he always was, how she seemed to fit the contours of his body when they held each other. Tailor made for each other, he supposed. Some people were just like that.

"So what do we do now?" he asked, hating to speak at all but too aware of the circumstances to deny the question voice.

"This is a big world. There's a place for all of us in it. But who cares. . . let's just stay like this for a moment. . . like this. . . does the rest of it matter?"

"Yes," he answered, lowering a hand to rest it in CJ's hair as the little boy wrapped his arms around his leg and Ifalna wriggled between them. Cloud laughed through new tears, different tears, running his fingers over the small of Tifa's back and closing his eyes as the light became too painful to look at. "I've heard that second chances are wonderful things," he said softly, "Let's go find some."

~\*~

The brilliantly lit fog of LifeStream glowed until it was a vacuum of white. It built to a head that blinded the world, as though desirous to hide a crime from prying eyes, and that peak of power buzzed over the earth in visible, audible waves.

The final flash, when it came, was white and pure like snow. It drew a whispering curtain over the Planet with a soft sound, clearing away the intrusions gently, sealing its counter where it could writhe in isolation and leave its components be. Countless white feathers of light swept the earth with a loving touch, the glow blasting gloriously over the Northern Crater and filling the darker spaces, illuminating things that had never known light. It would live. It would all live despite the fact that it was too strong. And none of the people would argue with the decision of their Planet. The humans only wanted their lives, regardless of any natural laws or paper thin balances. And they could have them now, for a time. Storms would rage, Quakes would roll, but there was one element that couldn't touch them. And as Sephiroth promised, it wouldn't again for a long, long time. Sealed again, the imbalance restored.

When the flash died, it had taken it all, declaring checkmate with one last dramatic burst of fiery glory.

And then it left, letting the pawns take the board again.

~\*~

In a loose line, Reeve, Reno, and Bugah wandered over the rolling stones and unsettled icy dirt of the Northern Crater's rim, locked in unspoken thoughts and observations. The light and the divinity of their Planet's power had faded to nothing but a haziness over distant objects; blurring the far away crags of the Northern Mountains and making the dark clouds overhead even more subtle as they shifted their forms, curling in on each other in luscious patterns and cold colors.

"Hey, it's snowing again. . . "Reno breathed, his sunglasses pushed up and his deep aquamarine eyes brightening as the flakes fell. He grinned and craned his neck back, letting the cold white fall on his face, "Makes it feel like Christmas, eh?"

Reeve watching him and smiled faintly, halting in his ambling to lean against one of the Crater's rocky projections, nestling his hands in his pockets. With the winds died down, his breath rose up steamy white before him and he eyed it idly, Reno looking his way and giving a groan.

"Cut that out, "he ordered, "Quit breathing, it makes me want a smoke."

"Outta cigs?"

"At three gil a pop and me out of a job, I'm trying to be conservative."

"You couldn't be conservative if your life depended on it, Mr. Reno, "Bugah sighed, folding his hands into the wide sleeves of his robe. He heard a distant sobbing and turned to see Marlene and Berk sitting together at the base of the Highwind, his young friend crying into that Turk's blue shoulder.

"Marlene needs a doctor, "he remarked lowly, "We should be heading back, there's nothing more here."

"Aw, it's just a busted arm, she'll be fine, "Reno scoffed, turning from the snow and leaning beside Reeve, his red hair hanging in his face, "That's not why she's crying."

"I know that, "Bugah snapped, "I know that quite well. Why isn't Nanaki comforting her. Where is he?"

"He and Cid went off to dig that Chieko creature out of Reno's helicopter, "Reeve explained absently, eyeing the sky, "Or at least I think that's where Cid is. I saw them leaving together but he had his videophone, I think he's off somewhere crying to Shera about the Highwind. He said before that he felt the need to talk to his kids or he was going to go nuts. Worried about them I suppose."

"Plus he's gonna bitch about his airship, "Reno clarified, wanting to make sure this was obvious.

"Of course. It's hardly a concern though, I mean, he's been complaining to me about wanting to build a new one for years. Now he has to. He's probably secretly glad but he'd never admit it. Which is fine. Respect the ole gal's memory. But I've buzzed Ikari. There'll be choppers here soon. Can Marlene hold out?"

"Yes!" Reno repeated, getting irritated, "It's just a broken arm, I already looked at it. Broken in exactly the same place Berkie broke his. Ha, matched set. Too bad we don't have any materia but. . . " The ex-Turk's voice cut off sharply, his mouth clapping shut with an audible pop. There was an uneasy silence. The winds whistled through it, dropping snow in their hair. "Yeah. . . but Tifa had the healing stuff, right? Do you. . . do you think. . . ?"

Reno shook his head roughly and Reeve looked at him out of the corner of his eye, turning to take in the gray skies moving above them. After the flash had throbbed away, that sky had returned. But in what was almost a strange, cruel trade off, Sephiroth, Vincent, the Strifes and Jenova had disappeared. The three of them had wandered the Crater for almost an hour, hunting for their friends. Nothing.

Reeve pushed himself up off the wall and wandered with aggravated footsteps back towards where they'd last seen Jenova, before the light had begun to burn too brightly. Reno stared for a moment, then jogged after him, Bugah panting to keep up. "I'm sorry, Prez, "he called to his back as Reeve stalked away with his arms crossed over his chest, his shoulders up around his ears. He ignored him, his beat-up shoes kicking soot and dust as they carried him to the blackened, blasted field that Dragon Weapon had decimated. The space stretched empty around him, and their voices echoed eerily as they spoke.

"I'm sorry, "Reno repeated once his friend had halted in the middle of the destruction, lifting his tired head to glare out at it all. It was so empty. All that fighting to save their friends and where were they?

"Where did that fucking monster go?" he demanded savagely, threading his fingers through his dark hair, "Is this over or what?"

"Sephiroth said the Planet would seal Jenova, "Bugah stuck in helpfully, "I would assume it has."

"But what about Tifa? Cloud, Vincent and the kids? And where's Barret? That imperialistic flash, as though we're all

supposed to be really impressed, fall to our knees and start kissing the Planet's ass. . . what's it done with the very people we were fighting to free? I don't like these games. . . I hate them."

Reeve sat down on the blackened ground and let the snow blanket his head and shoulders, watching his hands as he played with his fingers in his lap. Reno paced as Bugah sighed and wandered away, meandering aimlessly with tired steps.

After the noise, everything else seemed too quiet. It allowed their thoughts to echo back at them harsh and loud, as though their own consciences and doubts were as real now as that beautiful voice of Jenova's had been. Reno didn't like the noises his head was making in his ears. He was tired of listening to ugly sounds, whether the source was a monster, the scream of a victim, or his own damned brain spouting surrenders. It was time to assault his ears with reality, with things that meant something. Time to be human again, now that it was possible to be so.

"What do we do next, President?" the ex-Turk finally asked, breaking the silence. Things were pressing even after their battle and Reno felt them, "Where we rebuilding?"

"So bloody eager to move on?" Reeve snapped, looking up with desolation in his eyes, "There's been no closure here today, nothing with "the end" written on it. I want them back, I want to know if we can expect Jenova to pop up and say boo in a week. . ."

"Since when is there ever closure, eh?" Reno returned, sitting down beside his President, snow soaking through the knees of his pants. He sighed, resting two hands on his legs, their black surroundings reflecting in his eyes, only the image there was blue, he offered to dye the bleakness with the very pigment of his eyes for anyone that bothered to look. "I'm sure she's sealed somewhere. Maybe back in the Crater, maybe she was blasted to the moon. Doesn't matter though. Something will rise to threaten whatever we decide to build. We'll just be better prepared next time, right?" Reno grinned easy and added, "I was pretty fixed on the idea that we were screwed. I thought we'd be dead right now. But we're not, we're all right. I think this turned out to be a pretty good day."

"Laughing at this already, huh?"

"Not laughing, "Reno corrected quickly, "Do you see me laughing? No. . . just. . . I'm trying to see us through a dead guy's POV, ya know? We made out pretty good. Be grateful. I'm damn grateful I'm still breathing. You need t'be too. So where we building, Reeve? Decided yet?"

"I don't know. . . near Kalm, I suppose."

"Gonna be hard. Hard without Cloud. . . without Rude. Hard for a lot of reasons, rebuilding something for the third time, something that could easily be blown to shit again. Maybe we are idiots for keeping up with our efforts, but better an idiot than a loser. Jenova hasn't conquered me. Planet hasn't either. What'd you say? Champion of the people? Let's go do it again. That's what your brand of Shinra was and now that it's been plucked out of the bad karma of Midgar and that seventy story pile of bricks, it can be it again. You gotta pick it all up for the human race, Reeve, a lot of people are counting on you. Cloud included, I'll bet. This whole god-awful Planet needs a renovation. Let's go buy some wallpaper."

"The human race, collectively, is a cold sort of idea. The warm parts, my friends. . . Cloud, all of them, people I knew. . . they're the reason I dragged my ass here to the top of the world. . . why the hell I came out here with this stupid swiss army knife. . . the only reason I'd want to build another company." Reeve laughed weakly, face turned down to the ground, "But you're right, the obligation's there. Gotta live, gotta rebuild, gotta keep it up. I'm President Reeve, friendless or not."

"Hey now, what am I t'ya? Chopped liver?" Reno joked, "That's it, I want the case of Coors I gave you on your birthday back."

"Mr. President!!"

They both looked up at the urgent sound of Bugah's voice. The little old Elder was kneeling on the ground a few feet away, looking intently to the frozen dirt. He called for Reeve again and Reno sighed, grabbing his friend's arm, hauling him to his feet, and the two men ambled over to see what the Elder wanted.

"Look, "he commanded, pointing a wrinkled white finger to the ground. Reeve peered past his shoulder and, with a bit of a start, saw CJ's glove lying in the snow. Three of the five fingers were wedged into the ground, the middle and forefinger sticking up to make a V. Whether the gesture was intentional or not, whether the kid had left his glove or lost it, didn't matter to Reeve. He saw what he needed.

"CJ. . . "Reeve laughed, breaking into a grin. "Ha. . ."

"What?" Reno demanded, thinking he could make out footprints leading away south towards town. Footprints and the three-toed tracks of a chocobo.

"I think Cloud, Tifa and the kids are fine, "Reeve declared, clapping him on the back, "I think Yunata's fine too. And I think CJ's right. . . Victory. . . ha. . . that kid's the clearest thinker I've ever known. Victory. . . let's be content with that for now. There's an obvious flaw when you think about the problems of tomorrow."

"And what's that?"

Reeve smiled. "It isn't tomorrow yet. Right now, it's today."

A distant hallooing caught their attention and the three snapped their gazes back towards the far away smoking Highwind as Barret Wallace waved a greeting, a fuming Marlene hanging off his arm, Berk on the ground and nursing a sore jaw. Reeve smiled and Reno broke out into laughter, Bugah tapping his foot and stalking off to play the mediator. The two friends chased after him as the snow fell thicker, winds blowing to cover the footprints they'd found, to clear the air, bathing the Crater in a shroud of white. Cold gales whistled over the debris, cutting out the noise of the distant helicopters, blowing dust and flurries of white and ice to cleanse the air of the sounds of fighting and swordplay yet echoing off invisible walls; dying screams that no longer had any place in the returning beauty as the Planet hastened to replace them with the sound of a snowstorm. Natural sounds, the shatterable silence of a snow-covered world, the proper bleakness of the North. No more agony, no more pain, just buzzing silence drenched the air.

Freezing. The winds were freezing the rocks of the explosions to the ground where they'd fallen, now able to resume their icy burn, and Sephiroth smiled as they caressed his face, billowing his hair out to one side in a waving flag of silver obscured by the flakes. He couldn't feel the cold anymore but it didn't matter, he'd cataloged that sensation along with a million others in his mind. He could remember when he couldn't feel. That was enough.

With soft green eyes, Sephiroth turned to stare idly at a half buried figure of black and red crumpled nearby. The snow was doing its best to cover him up too, another mistake at last corrected. But he was disappointed. He'd never gotten to talk to him, ask him that favor, ask him that question that had burned in his heart for years. A cheat, his leaving so soon; leaving to find the answers to his own questions and to finally find his heart. He'd lived a long time without his heart. Sephiroth knew what that was like. This Northern cold was nothing. Sephiroth knew what it was like to be truly cold; a cold that burned your soul. But he swept it from his mind as the Planet played a melody of wind in his ears. Whether he'd gotten what he'd wanted or not, at least he'd saved Cloud. And freed Vincent. At least he'd paid back just a fraction of his debt.

She was gone.

But Sephiroth just didn't know for how long. How long could one Planet fight against something so strong, keep it locked, sealed in her stomach like a terrible secret? It was honestly up to the humans, he knew that with all his heart. They were always the ones who set her free, as though somehow aware of their own suffering and longing to end it. But when the opportunity to do so came, they always fought. They were creatures full of contradiction and chaos.

Contradiction and chaos. . . Jenova had said she had many definitions. Perhaps that was one of them. Maybe there was a little Death in them all; their entire lives were nothing more than working towards that final Reunion, fighting it all the time. Losing his counterbalance, his love, had set Cloud off and he'd ran to clutch Jenova to him like an anchor. Vincent had had too much love and Jenova had sought him out to swallow it, kill it, balance it. . .

Did it come down, in the end, to being so easily defined?

The thought was unsettling; that such emotions, the very elements that made a man, were able to be categorized so accurately as such ideas. They were all so easy to manipulate; in the end, it was really nothing more than a matter of who would be unfortunate enough to be twisted and knifed by fate; who'd have their love stolen or granted. Every drop in the pool or snatch out of the supply was a step towards balancing or imbalancing a person; who'd be happy, who'd be miserable, who'd live their life in a maze because the fates hadn't been able to decide which they deserved?

Cloud had won his love. Vincent had lost his. Sephiroth had never had any.

In the end, it all came down to Life or Death; Love or Hate; Dark or Light.

And all the shades in between.

~\*~

The blizzard passed eventually but not until a long time after the swarm of black helicopters had hummed off southwards. The clouds rolled away from the Northern Crater and the sun burst out from a sharp, cutting heaven, reflecting blindingly from the snow, showing what the storm had made; a paper cut out of white and sky blue; a composition of stark Northern shapes. Sephiroth watched the featureless harshness, knowing what lay beneath it all and wishing it rest in peace. The dark secrets slept now. He hoped they had pleasant dreams.

In a transparent brush of black, he hopped from his perch and began making his way over the snow, glad his feet didn't leave prints through the virginal white. Let it all remain unmarked for as long as it would.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sephiroth thought he saw a flash of blonde, a glint of light from a mischievous violet eye. He turned in time to see an eager hand grab a red materia from the ground, the snow melted around it, the sunlight making the small orb glow.

"Hey, look, Eef. . . finders keepers, right?"

The hand darted back and Sephiroth wasn't fast enough to see the children running away. He only heard their giggles and smiled to himself, one hand resting on Masamune's hilt. The Planet whispered a reminding breeze into his eyes and he turned, taking a last deep breath. He hoped the boy took good care of that materia. Because Jenova just wasn't his responsibility anymore.

Sephiroth wondered if maybe he could ask that question of his himself, approach that woman himself. He wondered if that would be all right. Somehow, he thought the voices might not scream so loud now. Somehow, he thought maybe they'd welcome him, maybe they'd let him in.

Hopeful, smiling, anxious, he vanished. The Crater roared empty and the winds blew on. The dead slept. The living lived. There was nothing to see in the field of white.

-End-

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#### \*Notes\*

Okay, um, I just wanted to say a quick thanks to Lita, Chris, Zelda, and then everyone who emailed me all the time letting me know in no uncertain terms that I needed to finish this fic. Thanks for the pushiness, I prolly would have run out of enthusiasm a long time ago if not for you guys.

I hope that someone got something out of this story, I put a lot into it, including my own personal views on a lot of the characters. Heh, I'm pretty opinionated. I wanted to show that Sephiroth was just as much a victim as anyone else, that Hojo, though he's psychotic, does have an actual personality and some bit of depth to him, that Cloud and Tifa belong together, and that Vincent's life more or less ended when he was put in that coffin. Second chances aren't for everyone, there're just some circumstances where I'd imagine they're rather undesired ^\_^ But that's only my view of course. Not everything wrapped up all pretty but that's life, eh?

Well, I hope this story pleased some people, that's all I set out to do (that and write things that are fun to write. Yes, I have violent tendencies in fics in case you haven't noticed ^\_^) Thanks for reading the whole thing and uh, hee hee, watch out for voices in yer head ^\_~

GlassShard

Finished: 8/08/99