



Part Two:
SEWING THE SEEDS

Thoughts far away, Tifa turned the key in the door of her item shop Seventh Heaven, locking it with a secure click. She'd had a tiring day and the weariness showed in her large, rusty colored eyes. Last week she'd gotten a deal from one of her suppliers on hypers and tranquilizers, receiving huge markdowns on the items but only if she bought in bulk. And she had. Laying a lot of her personal savings on the gamble, she'd bought the man out of stock: nearly two hundred units of each of the drugs. Today, she'd opened Seventh Heaven advertising her new merchandise, hoping that the recent lay-offs over at the Sector Seven Steel Mill would boost business. Grieving men and women, sickened over the loss of their jobs, were only too willing to spend the last of their gil on temporary solutions. They'd flooded her shop, laying their coins in her hands and carrying away the drugs in droves. Uppers and Downers. Medicine for those with unhealthy souls. Tifa had felt a little guilty profiting off the misfortune of others, but the heavy sack of gil at her side comforted her a bit. The family had no need for the wealth, but it made Tifa glad to be able to earn her own spending money and buy CJ and Ifalna the occasional goodie. Still, the shop had been a madhouse all day, keeping the woman on her toes to meet her customers' demands. It hadn't helped when Cait Sith had called her to report that CJ'd been in a fight at school.

"You shoulda seen him, Tifa," the cat had told her enthusiastically, "This Ash kid was messed up! I almost felt bad for the little bastard, till we got back home and CJ told me all the stuff he'd said to him and Brittany and Sliver. Ooh, then I just got mad and wished I coulda been there to have Mog knock him upside the head."

"Don't let him hear you talking like that, Cait. He needs to learn that fighting is wrong."

The mechanical cat had laughed then, and said, "Tifa Lockhart saying that fighting is wrong? That would be like Cid Highwind insisting that smoking is bad for your health! I think I musta heard you incorrectly."

"No, Cait. All the battles I've ever been in have proven only one thing: Violence is futile. It's fate that decides all of it, not our fists."

"Well, if you want to instill that philosophy into CJ, then you'd better get cracking. He's in the armoury at this very moment re-enacting his grand and heroic battle in front of Mog."

Tifa stopped playing the brief conversation back in her head and yanked on the shop door, checking to be sure it was closed. Sector Seven wasn't the cesspool it had once been. The deeper, more dangerous elements of the place seemed to have been crushed under the destruction of the plate thirteen years before, but it still wasn't the best of neighborhoods. The bars on the windows proved that. Tifa remembered what the place had been like right after they'd finished rebuilding. The whole area had smelt of new lumber and fresh paint, recently built structures welcoming in those who were willing to start over. Many with good intentions had come, but many of those same old bad elements had reappeared to claim a piece of the place, setting new territorial markers and scaring away some of the families. Still, Tifa kept shop here in remembrance of her old bar of the same name, obliterated when the Sector Seven support had been blasted and the massive plate had screeched from the sky to snuff out the many lives below. In some ways, Tifa thought that she too had died that day. Her innocence had perished, been shattered cruelly by the cold push of a button. Reno had been the one to do it. She could never forgive him, even though he was Cloud's partner now. Not once in the twelve years he and her husband had worked together had she ever asked him to her home. And she never would, not unless he got down on his knees and begged her forgiveness. Being an ex-Turk and a proud man, she doubted she'd ever see that happen.

"Afternoon to you, Tifa. Is it Tuesday already?" Tifa turned and looked for the source of the call. Nat Gendi approached her from the street, a friendly hand raised in greeting. She always closed up shop early on Tuesdays, that'd been the reason for his comment. She smiled upon seeing the young man's happy-go-lucky face. He was their next door neighbor in Sector One, a slightly dry but still lovable accountant who often came over to borrow anything that wasn't nailed down. Tifa was surprised to see him in Sector Seven.

"Afternoon, Nat," she called, "What are you doing out here? You slumming it?"

Laughing, he replied, "In a way, perhaps. I'm calling on a client down the street. He just came into a good bit of inheritance. I'm going to try to help him keep all he can."

"You do house calls?"

"When the fellow who needs me isn't feeling too well, I occasionally step out to see them. Besides, he confided in me that Sector One makes him nervous."

"He shouldn't feel that way. That's a shame."

Nat shrugged. "Well, Sector Seven makes me nervous. Did you hear about the murders on Thirty-Second Lane the other night? That's only a few blocks from here. This area is dangerous. Though I gotta admit, Tifa, I admire how you can so easily move back and forth between the elements. You don't seem out of place no matter where you are."

Tifa assumed the man's words were a compliment, but she thought to herself that he couldn't be more wrong. She could probably relate quite well to Nat's new client. Sector One often made her uneasy. The former barmaid didn't know how to act around all those rich suburbanites. She supposed that was why she liked to spend so much time in her little Seventh Heaven. It was where she was most comfortable. As for Nat's comment, she only smiled and said thank you.

"Well, anyways," the man continued, "I was walking out the front door and I saw a fellow knocking at your house with a letter in his hand. I stopped him and told him to just put the letter in your box since no one was home, but then I suddenly had this urge to be this great humanitarian, so I thought I'd bring you the letter out here since I had to see that client anyways. Here you are."

Tifa took the envelope he held out gratefully and tore the seal off.

"What sort of fellow was it knocking?" she asked.

"Just some young guy. No one interesting." Nat was silent as Tifa skimmed the short note. Finishing it quickly, she stuffed it away in her pocket. Nat looked a little disappointed that she didn't immediately tell him its contents.

"Nothing too important," she said casually, "Just an old friend coming for a visit."

"Anyone I know? Is it that the one man you and Cloud always have over? What's his name. . . Vincent?" Tifa nodded, sweeping her hair behind her ears.

"That's right. He's coming down for Thanksgiving. We invited him last year, but he didn't come except for Christmas. I'm glad he's changed his mind this year." Nat shrugged and the two adults stood there in silence for a moment. Suddenly the accountant smiled and waved smally.

"Well, I'd better get going. Be careful walking to the station." He turned and begin making his way down the dirty Sector Seven street, his hands stuck awkwardly in his pockets. Tifa called goodbye and then grinned once he was heading away and couldn't see her. She hadn't missed how the mention of Vincent had caused the accountant to pale a bit. Their whole neighborhood tended to grow a little edgy and solemn whenever Vincent was down, as though haunted by a dark presence. Tifa was sure that was why she and Cloud enjoyed having him in their house so much. That, and Ifalna absolutely adored him. CJ and he often didn't speak very much. The little boy was just a bit intimidated by Vincent's quiet ways, but Ifalna herself was quiet, and enjoyed sharing silences with the man. One of the most beautiful things Tifa'd ever seen had been two years earlier during the holidays. She'd walked in from work one afternoon to find Ifalna comfortably perched on Vincent's narrow lap, the both of them peacefully asleep. That perfect picture of serenity had stayed with her strongly since then for some reason and she recalled it to comfort herself whenever she felt sad or hopeless. If a man as tortured as Vincent had been could find peace so easily, than anyone could.

Shouldering her bag, Tifa took off for the train station. A few dubious characters watched her as she walked, eyeing her darkly, but she had a reputation and not one of them dared even a catcall. She could take a man out with a single jab of her fist. And if a group of them tried anything, Tifa kept one of her best gloves, her God's Hand, tucked safely in her bag, ready at a moment's notice. She never felt threatened walking those streets alone.

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His broad arms folded across his chest, Barret Wallace stood looking out over the ocean, the sea breeze playing havoc with his grizzled face and the late afternoon sun in his eyes. He appreciated the planet's scenery more now than he ever had in his past. He'd been plenty willing to fight and die years ago for the planet, he just hadn't known why. And maybe, he thought now, there never really had been a reason. He hadn't particularly cared for it's beauty. He hadn't particularly cared for humanity. He hadn't particularly cared for righteousness. He'd fought for the simple passion of it. Every man needed a passion, needed a creed to believe in. The planet had been his. That is, until he'd discovered his true passion, his real love. Marlene.

As much as the girl had complained about the desert transport, the thing had been quick. The lengthy trip to Costa Del Sol had only taken them five hours, the ungainly transport surprisingly fast and agile in traversing the rocky terrain. They'd boarded the ship at Costa Del Sol at three-thirty and now were out upon the featureless sea, cruising steadily along for

Junon. Barret brought a large hand up over his face, rubbing his eyes wearily. So much was changing so fast. Each mile they traveled brought them closer to a place he'd sworn he'd never revisit. Midgar. The rotting city was a blotch on his memory. A black, steaming hole of corruption. Pictures of it suddenly flooded his mind; images of Shinra's cruelty and injustice, memories of his daughter trying to grow up in a place crowded with desolation and despair, the slums, where people lived hard existences, growing up, living then dying like faceless roaches in a colony. Growing up cold. He hadn't wanted Marlene to become just another lower class urchin, picking pockets and trying to scrape by. So he'd fought what he'd thought of as the reason for the slums' hellishness. Shinra, Inc. The company towers had loomed over their heads, preventing them from seeing the sky, from seeing any hope for a better future, squelching any uprisings with a well-aimed boot heel. Barret and AVALANCHE had tried to strike back, but wound up killing their own and themselves with the effort. The explosions of the reactors had hurt so many, hurt those he'd been trying to protect.

The man shook his head sadly now at the memories. He hadn't gone over his recollections in years. Living in the tranquility of Cosmo Canyon had had its many advantages. No familiar faces to trigger regrets. No landmarks to call up painful guilt for things he'd done. Only Marlene and the contentment he'd found at last. And his daughter was twisting that all around now.

She approached him suddenly from his left where she'd been leaning over the railing and watching the waters. There was little to do on the ship. Their voyage was a short one, and their ticket read third class so the bands and buffets that the first class passengers were enjoying deep within the bowels of the vessel were off limits to them. They'd stood just watching the passing water-scape and rummaging through their thoughts since the ship had pulled from dock.

"The sun off the ocean is pretty, isn't it?" she commented quietly, laying a hand on one of his arms. The man nodded gruffly. "Uncle Cloud told me that you can see the sky in Midgar now. He told me that since the plate's gone and the reactors have all been removed, the pollution has been cut dramatically. He says you can see the sky now. . . "

"I never minded that," Barret said, "I was always too busy wit' other things in Midgar ta ever be lookin' up."

Marlene patted her father's arm reassuringly. "There's always a time to start watching the sky, Daddy. It's never too late. The sky doesn't go anywhere, it never hides. It's always right there, waiting for you to look up. Even the skies over Midgar."

Barret smiled, pushing his daughter away playfully. "And just what're you implying in yo' oh so subtle way, girl?" Marlene grinned, slamming her shoulder into his side in an attempt to knock him off his feet. She couldn't budge him.

"Things change. And things stay the same," she murmured, rubbing her shoulder painfully.

"Yeah, it's just knowin' which does which that's hard."

"You're just stubborn," Marlene sighed, leaning back against the bulkhead dejectedly. Barret shrugged, half-shutting his eyes wearily.

"I can't be too stubborn. Here we are, you gettin' yo' own way. You're goin' ta Midgar, little missie. It's what ya want and by God, I can respect that. I can respect it, I just can't like it. And the sooner you accept that little fact, the sooner you and me's relationship can get back ta normal."

"You don't hate me for going, do you?" Marlene's voice was small. She sounded like a little girl again. Barret's heart softened, and he hugged her close.

"I could sooner hate breathing than hate you, angel," he said, kissing the top of her head, "I love ya more'n I love anything else in this world. And I'd do anything for you." The young woman looked up sharply at these words, hope in her eyes.

"Anything?" she asked, grinning madly. Barret grimaced, regretting what he'd so rashly said.

"Yeah. . . "he replied hesitantly.

"Well then, give Shinra, Midgar, and Uncle Cloud a second chance, dad. Re-enter the city with an open mind. It's where I'm probably going to be spending the rest of my life. Are you never ever going to come visit me again after you leave me there? Aren't you ever going to come and see where I work?"

"Didja know that Shinra killed yo' mother, Marlene? Didja know they destroyed our old home? Didja know they nearly publicly executed me?"

"But, dad, that was the old Shinra! That was Shinra under Rufus and his father! Things are so different now, so much better!" Marlene wiped a frustrated tear out of her eye, looking to Barret pleadingly, "Why don't you understand that Cloud works there now making it better, that he, and you, and Tifa and all of you, all of you are the reasons it works now! Appreciate the fruit of all that labor, all that fighting, all the deaths. The people years ago all died for something. Your friend Aeris died for something. It was all for that "little better thing", that chance for a better way. And the new Shinra is the result! I'm going there because they're doing what you did thirteen years ago: they're making the Planet safe. Safe and better. Now please, daddy, please please please give it a chance. See for yourself. Don't pass judgments until you've seen

what it's like now. Please?"

The man listened to his daughter's small speech without expression in his features. When she'd finished, he turned from her and gazed out over the waters. Then, nearly crying, he turned his eyes up to the skies. The sun was reddening as the afternoon wore on. Purple clouds covered the bleeding orb gently, moving across its face as though wiping its tears away. The atmosphere around it glowed and shimmered as though it too were an ocean, and the stars and planets were merely islands moving along in its currents. Barret wondered if the skies over Midgar were ever this beautiful.

"Alright, "he sighed finally, "I'll give it another try."

"Thank you, daddy!" Marlene threw her arms around his neck and covered him with kisses, her joy at his words plain in her voice. Barret hugged her back, inexplicably glad himself. He didn't know why. He hated to lose arguments. He pulled his daughter away from him suddenly, holding her by the shoulders at arm's length. He tipped her face up and gazed into it, giving her a wink.

"Ya know, girl, "he said softly, "I wonder if ya have any idea how proud I am of you."

Marlene smiled broadly. There was nothing else in the world she'd have rather heard.

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CJ sat sullenly in the darkness of his bedroom, staring at the wall as though he'd blow it to smithereens with the power of his gaze. Though it was nearly night outside, he kept the lights off to suit his mood. What had begun as a terrible day that'd suddenly rocketed to perfection, had now plummeted back down to even worse than it had been when it'd started. He was grounded.

Grounded for a month, he grumbled to himself. He couldn't understand it. His mom had given him the glove, given it to him. You didn't give weapons to people if you didn't want the person to use them, right? He'd tried telling his mom that and she'd gone off on a spiel about how that'd really been a test of his self control, about how being a great fighter was all about knowing when not to fight. That was about as clear as mud to the boy. He wondered if Ash had gotten in trouble. He doubted it. He'd probably gone home and told his mom that he got beat up so badly because he wouldn't fight back. And she'd probably nursed his wounds, said sweet, motherly words to him, and treated him like some kinda great martyr or something. Hmph.

His bedroom door creaked open suddenly, a shaft of yellow light piercing the darkness and throwing CJ's shadow up on the wall before him.

"Hey, Ceej, how's going?" Cloud asked, entering quietly and shutting the door behind him. He approached his son casually, sitting down on the foot of his bed. "Heard you got in a bit of a brawl today, eh?" CJ scowled, his disrespectful expression hidden by the shadows. Listen to him, he thought, as though he hadn't known I was going to get in a fight today. Why did dad think I wanted to borrow the Ultima Weapon this morning? Hope he didn't think I wanted it for show'n tell.

"Yeah. . . "was his only response, the word barely audible. Cloud smiled at his son, leaning back against the wall.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, "CJ answered, a little surprised.

"That's good. But you can take care of yourself, I know that. I never worry about you being at school, or walking by yourself whenever Ifalna stays home, because I know that you're a bright guy. You know what you're doing, right?"

"Yeah."

"You knew what you were doing today when you fought Ash, right?"

"I guess so."

"Who threw the first punch?"

"He did."

"That's good. Why did he want to hurt you?"

CJ shrugged his narrow shoulders, eyes pasted to the floor. He watched the little carpet fuzzies blowing around in the AC whirlwind. "I don't really know. He just doesn't like me, I guess."

"Have you ever done anything to provoke him? You're not mean to him, are you? You don't tease him?"

"No way. It's just the other way really. Him and his buddies are really mean to Sliver, Brit and me. They call us the three stooges. And Ash stole Brittany's lunch the other day. I was so mad."

"Which one are you?"

"Huh?"

"Which stooge?" Cloud laughed and CJ couldn't help but join him. When the sound of it had died away, the boy only shrugged.

"Mom lent me one of her gloves, ya know," he said almost accusingly, "Why'd she do that if she didn't want me to fight? I don't get it. Why am I grounded? You and mom used to fight things everyday. You used to kill things, fer crying out loud."

"That was outta necessity," Cloud said softly, "We were protecting you and Ifalna."

"But we weren't even born yet."

"Didn't matter. We knew you'd get around to it someday. We were just making sure that some day had a chance to come."

CJ scratched his head, not really understanding, but not really caring either. "So fighting out of necessity is okay, but fighting to defend yourself is wrong? I thought defending yourself was necessity. If I hadn't done something today, I'd probably be a pile of bloodied pulp on the ground."

"I know. Don't tell your mom this, but I think what you did today was great. I'm so proud of you I could just about burst. I'm going to talk to her later and see if I can get her to lower your punishment. How about two weeks instead of a month?"

CJ blinked quickly in surprise. The words had come so suddenly and hurriedly from Cloud's mouth that the boy was nearly bowled over. "Two weeks would be just fine. . . "he murmured a little dazedly. Cloud looked to him in concern.

"What's wrong, kid?"

"Nothing, I just. . . " CJ turned from the wall to face his father. His big violet eyes shone wetly and he spoke as though he were choking. "I. . . I was just so worried that you'd be so mad at me. . . " He threw himself into Cloud's chest suddenly sobbing, and the man hugged him tight.

"No, I'm not mad," he said gently, "I know what it's like to be beat up on. To have older, bigger, stronger kids come after you. I know about hiding in the shadows, waiting for them to pass so you can get to your house without a bloody nose for once. I bet it felt damned good to punch Ash in the face."

CJ didn't lift his head from Cloud's chest, but the man could feel him nodding.

"Well, that's okay. It's okay to fight if you have to. Your mom knows that's true. She's no pacifist, as much as she'd like to be. That was her glove you used today. She obviously gave it to you for you to use, don't listen to what she told you this evening. She's only grounded you because she's mad at herself. She can't make up her mind. She wants you and Ifalna not to have to deal with the things she and I had to deal with when we were younger but then, she wants to see you do just as good a job as we did, and she wants to be proud of you for it. She is proud of you, CJ, you know that, right?"

"Yeah. . . "the little boy sighed, his voice muffled and full of sobs.

"Then, you're fine. Here, sit up." CJ complied, the scant light of the room catching the twin lines of tears running down his face. Cloud wiped them away with his thumb, then ruffled the boy's close-cropped hair playfully. "You need a manly hair style. How 'bout we take you to the barber this weekend?" CJ grimaced, looking at his dad's conspicuous head of hair.

"Um. . nah, dad, I don't wanna." Cloud laughed.

"Well, I guess that's probably for the best. I don't think the copyright's expired on my hair yet. You'd have to pay royalties if I let you copy the style." The man laughed again, then rose from the bed. "It's nearing seven, Ceej. Mom wants you asleep by eight."

"But--!"

"I know, bed time's ten and you don't have school tomorrow, but let's let her cool off for tonight by doing what she says, okay?"

"Okay," the boy grumbled. Cloud smiled in a fatherly way and left the room, shutting the door softly behind him. After he was gone CJ sat quietly staring at the dark. He did feel a lot better. A tremendous weight had risen up from his chest when his dad had told him he wasn't mad. Not only had he not been mad, but he was actually proud! CJ beamed, grinning broadly through his recent tears. He laid back on his pillow, arms behind his head, staring up at the glowing green star stickers on his ceiling.

He was a little tired. It'd been a big day. He was glad his mom had made him brush his teeth and take a bath right after dinner. He got up and hurriedly took off his clothes, teeth chattering in the cold and fingers fumbling to quickly put on his pajamas. Then he hopped into bed. Oh wait! Grinning, he hopped out again and searched around in the pockets of his crumpled up t-shirt for the tooth he'd stuck there. The small molar rolled around in the palm of his hand like treasure. He

examined it in the dim light. Didn't seem to have any cavities. Good, cavities really brought them down in value. He climbed up into bed again, pulling the blue bedclothes up to his chin, the tooth laid squarely beneath the center of his pillow. For a while, he lay there sleepily, pictures of Ash being chased by a carnivorous tooth faerie fluttering through his mind. And then, jumping him from behind, he was claimed by sleep.

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"Tifa, you know I'm right."

Cloud's voice was insistent, calling to her from their bedroom as she stood brushing her teeth in the bathroom, one elbow leaning casually against the tile wall as she scrubbed.

"Mmmthbely mmhhbnem bthss arbththemmm. . ." she replied.

"Spit that toothpaste out and try again."

"I said I know no such thing. CJ's grounded because he busted up a little kid. He broke that boy's nose, did you know that?"

Cloud paused, sitting up a little in the bed. A grin spread over his countenance. "No, actually, I didn't know that. Ha ha, that's my kid."

Tifa groaned, rinsing her mouth out, replacing the toothbrush in its holder and flipping off the bathroom light. She entered the bedroom in only an over-sized tee shirt and socks, her hair down and spread over her shoulders. "It's not funny and it's nothing to be proud of."

"Oh, Tifa, stop it. I seem to remember hearing about you standing a hundred feet over the ocean on the Sister Ray and having a slapping match with Scarlet."

The woman reddened at the memory. Scowling prettily, she climbed into the bed, shoving his shoulder in annoyance. "Okay," she admitted, "I did. I've done a lot of stuff in my life I'm not exactly proud of. Can't I correct those mistakes now by trying to get CJ not to repeat them?"

Cloud scoffed, crossing his arms. "That wasn't a mistake. Scarlet was a little bitch. You shoulda punched her not slapped her."

"I should've turned the other cheek."

"Hmph. You did, as I recall, and she slapped that one too." Cloud chuckled lowly, watching Tifa's eyes narrow towards him. "Oh, c'mon, that Ash woulda kicked the crap outta CJ if the kid hadn't hit back. Hit back, might I add, with the glove you gave him. Self defense. Now, if CJ had initiated it, it'd be an entirely different story, but he didn't, he was only sticking up for him and his friends. So think about it, c'mon. It's bad enough that he's frigging suspended for two weeks. Don't ground him too. Any punishment he deserves is already being handled by that assistant principal woman. We're his folks, we should be supporting him, not pushing him further into the ground." Cloud leaned over and looked up into Tifa's face, searching for any signs that she was giving in. She turned and knocked him playfully upside the head, sighing huffily. He grinned, realizing he'd won.

"Two weeks," she relented, "He's grounded for two weeks. You can make up for the rest of his term yourself."

"Doing what?" Cloud asked mischievously. Tifa watched him, smiling despite herself. He was glowing almost with the passion of the small argument. His eyes burned through her own it seemed, as he gazed upon her like an adoring little kid gazes at his first love. A few locks of his blonde hair fell over his eyes and she brushed them back behind his ear for him.

"I'll think of something," she said temptingly. He gave her a lopsided grin and sat back up. She pulled the covers away and slid beneath them, reaching across his chest and switching off the lights. "Did you go in Hojo's lab today?" she asked suddenly, the question changing the atmosphere of the room entirely. He blinked in surprise.

"What? Oh, yeah. It's all taken care of. I went and spoke to Reeve first thing this morning about it. It was funny, he had a whole group of investors there, touring the facilities. He was acting all pompous and Shinra President-like but Reno and I waltzed right up to him and said, 'Hey there, Cait Sith, where's your mog? Come on, let's go look for it.' Then we grabbed him by the arms and hauled him into his office."

"You're going to get yourself fired one day."

"Are you kidding? The first thing ole Reeve said when we shut the door to his office was thanks for getting him away from those investors. He hates all the hustle and bustle and tact of protocol. He practically begged Reno and I to have lunch with him today. He says he gets so tired of constantly meeting with the same cold sorts. Men out only for his power or money. Reno and I though, we know him as a human being. Or as a mechanical cat at least, heh heh. Not as a name on

the company letterhead."

"He's lucky to have friends still. The more power a person attains, usually the lonelier they find themselves. It's sad." Cloud nodded. "But anyways, Hojo's things have all been destroyed? You didn't find anything strange, did you?" There was a little fear in her voice but Cloud made light to put her at ease.

"Ha, you forget where I was. Hojo's lab was fulla strange shit. But I didn't find anything too strange, not really. Great cache of materia there, but that was all. The few boxes or things that I actually looked at seemed to only be half-finished experiments, abandoned ideas, bits and pieces of various flashes of inspiration that were quickly forgotten. All got tossed in the trash though, so it doesn't really matter. Reeve lent me a whole clean-up crew for the day and we had it finished by four. All except a room that Neto wanted and then some storage closet with a busted knob that they said they couldn't get into. I'll have maintenance look into that tomorrow and then that'll be that. We can go back to the present, 'stead of living our lives in the past. Piece of pie."

Tifa laid back against her pillow. That was all she'd needed to hear. Cloud stayed sitting up in the darkness of the bedroom, breathing steadily, lost in his own thoughts. He dropped a hand down and searched for Tifa's, clasping her strong fingers in his own. The woman let herself go limp against the bed sheets, tired after her long day. She laid there for awhile with her eyes closed, tallying sales figures for Seventh Heaven in her head. Cloud had been proud when she'd told him of the success of her sale. They'd decided to put the money towards CJ's schooling. At least, the money still left after Tifa did some renovations on the shop. She smiled to herself wearily before slipping away into slumber. All was right with the world.

Cloud stayed up for a while after she fell asleep, watching enviously as her chest rose up and down with her steady, rhythmic breathing, wishing he could sleep so peacefully. But he turned away instead, staring out into the darkness. He hadn't felt quite right that day. Ever since leaving Hojo's lab that afternoon, he'd felt ill at ease. Actually, he told himself, it went farther back than that. He hadn't felt really content since the other night when he'd been in there for the first time and that voice had called to him so horribly. He had a strange feeling in the back of his mind, a strange nagging sensation, nearly like the one that'd bothered him whenever he'd been in the presence of Sephiroth. This worried him. He hadn't felt like that in years and years and been inexpressibly grateful for it. Grateful that he lived his own life now, grateful that no one would ever again turn him into a puppet, pulling his strings so that he had no control of his actions. The things he'd done had been terrible.

Cloud shut his eyes in exhaustion, laying his head in the palm of one hand. The old emotions hurt so much, even now, burning into his healed soul with a renewed flame. The wind whistled outside the house's thin walls, drifting to his ears creepily. Something just wasn't right. But he was full of it, he told himself cruelly, this all comes from being in Hojo's lab again. It's dredged up old false, dead feelings, stuck a foot in the soil and flipped it over, revealing the worms. "There's nothing there," he whispered softly, sweat for some reason beginning to collect coldly on his brow, "It's all in your head."

"Cloud. . . "Tifa murmured sleepily, eyes not opening, "Cloud, baby, go to sleep."

The man grabbed her hand and squeezed reassuringly. Shaking off the premonitions with a wave of his blonde head, he sunk down into the bedclothes and shut his eyes. He let the sound of her breathing and of his own beating heart lull him to sleep. He didn't want to face these strange feelings. He only wanted to slip into unconsciousness, and forget.

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Miles away, deep within the humbled remains of Hojo's laboratory, a presence stirred. It moved sluggishly at first, as though just waking from a long sleep, but soon, fueled by ambition and excitement, its movements quickened, its breath rasping loudly in its own ears.

"Calm down, great one," something hissed, the voice unearthly, strange and strained, but managing to comfort the anxious beast as nothing else could. "It's time now. But you have to be careful. Our enemies aren't fools. You have to move quickly in and out among them, like the shadow of smoke over a field, unseen, unfelt. Do you understand?"

The creature nodded what might be called its head. "Unseen, unfelt," it repeated. "Like the shadow of smoke over a field. Chieko, you'll be ready?"

The thing it addressed, Chieko was her name, nodded slightly, eyes half shut in anticipation. She grabbed at the photos that the beast grasped firmly, running her eyes over the images quickly. How easy, she thought, nearly laughing wickedly but stifling the mirth so it came out only as a frightening choking sound in the back of her throat. Too easy, but how could something be too easy? No, this was fate lending them a hand, was all. Fate was on their side. "Go, my friend. Go make them ours." Chieko pushed open a door for the beast and its considerable bulk passed through the narrow space quite

impossibly, as though its body melted and reformed in order to meet the constraints.

The main room of Hojo's lab was quite bare. All experiments, all chemicals, all of everything that'd spelled out pain and freakish torment to countless had been tossed unceremoniously in the garbage. The wire mesh composing the floor was rusted in some places, the corrosion eating away holes in certain spots. Dust motes hung lazily in the air, pining for their former perches. So empty. Nothing more now than an empty room. The lonely door in the rear swung open, defying the broken doorknob that the Shinra workmen had diagnosed it with. The beast practically flowed from behind it, filling the emptiness of the lab suddenly with a horrifying green glow and an astonishingly hostile presence. Quietly, the door shut behind it and the creature moved forward, a hissing noise accompanying its every step. It made for the wall quickly, huffing along like a locomotive straight into it so that you might've thought it'd knock the thing down in a shower of dust. But instead it melted through the solid concrete and steel, vanishing in a shower of green-tinted smoke. It reappeared on the outside of the Shinra building, the cold wind whipping it furiously. Clinging close to the exterior walls, it began moving its way quickly down the side, its movements like a snake's. Its mission was all that occupied the strange beast's mind. Many of the security guards and late-working employees that night thought they felt a chill rise suddenly in the air, breezing past them from outside as though there wasn't a wall there to protect them from the elements. But it passed quickly and they each returned to their lives not giving it another thought.

Flattening close to whatever surface volunteered itself, the beast slithered along the ground now, looking less like a living creature and more like some formless puddle of vapor. Silently it crept away from the Shinra building and down the streets of Midgar, sticking close to the gutters, tendrils of it wrapping around stray lampposts as it went, then breaking off, falling away, and dissolving into the air. Its two flashing white eyes were the only features discernible on its surface.

Once it had reached a certain point, the creature halted abruptly in its advance, its front part rising starkly into the air and sensing the immediate area. It was searching for mako. The hunt wasn't as difficult as it would have been, say, seven years before. Meteor had destroyed the mako reactors of Midgar and since then the concentration of life energy in the city had returned to normal levels, the powerful mako drifting back into the lifestream beneath the planet's surface where it belonged. The beast was glad for this. It made his job so much easier. He swiveled his eyes from east to west, feeling a slight tug and following it suddenly, stretching its long, lethal body flat along the cobblestones. A sign flashed by him as he raced down the streets. Sector One. Picture perfect homes opened up around him, aluminum siding, carports, white picket fences. Beyond their useless walls, unable to protect the many occupants from the beast's all-seeing eyes, things lurked. That which he sought lurked, waiting for him, knowing he was coming, or at least, knowing something was coming, but unable to act on the instinct. Chieko had told him he would be expected but it wasn't important, he would be---

The cobblestones chilled beneath his bulk, the creature suddenly halted sharply. There it was. He'd felt it. A huge concentration of mako calling out to him like a beacon. He looked to its source. A pretty little two-story house perched at the end of the block. The lights inside were all switched off, the windows dark as the home slept in perfect unawareness. If the beast had had lips, they would have parted then, angling upwards in a satisfied smile. But really, it told itself harshly, there wasn't any time for self congratulations. Gathering its straying mass about it like a cloak, it slithered up to the sleeping house, white eyes cutting through the night like knives.

~*~

With a bit of a start, CJ's eyes snapped open. He was all hanging out of his covers, a leg sprawled out over the edge of his bed. He pulled it into safety, snuggling back into the warm confines of his comforter. He shut his eyes again, contentedly listening to the soothing night noises of his home. Ifalna's soft breathing filtered through from the next room, the constant buzzing of Cait Sith's extension cord, a cheering noise though nearly inaudible, he was so used to it, was a gentle backdrop. There were a few random creaks as the house settled, but that was all. He was about to drift back to sleep when he heard it.

Thump.

His eyes opened again and he swallowed hard, suddenly sitting up in bed and then wishing to God that he hadn't. It was always worse when you acknowledged how scared you were when you're alone in the dark. This was a lesson that CJ had learned just as everyone does. When strange noises come to you in the dead of the night, to acknowledge that you hear them is the worst thing to do. Acknowledging that they're there is just the same as believing they're real. He sat perfectly still, covers gathered in his lap, and feeling that something was watching him. Nonchalantly, he laid back down, pulling the sheets close.

Thump.

His heart racing, he realized it'd come from outside. A soft, deep noise, nearly like a single muted heartbeat. He lay

listening for it again, terror beginning to cease him. For a long time there was nothing. Just his ragged breathing, and Ifalna's distant peaceful exhalations. He began to doubt his ears had ever heard anything.

Thump.

It was inside now somehow. Nearly from Ifalna's room, it had seemed. Beside himself with fright, he listened for the reassuring home noises. Cait's buzzing, the low rumble of the refrigerator running downstairs, Ifalna's breath-- No, he couldn't hear her anymore. Not a single noise came to him from her room. Just another low thump. Then another, closer now. And another. There was no doubt in his ten year old mind that it was coming towards him.

No! he thought desperately, a bead of sweat running ticklish down his face. Suddenly, he remembered the tooth lying in wait beneath his pillow. Could it be--? CJ didn't care if the faerie had come bearing sacks of gil. He wanted it gone. Now.

Thump. It was in his room.

"Go away. . ." he muttered, unconsciously pushing his head back against the headboard in an effort to escape the noise. "I don't care what you are. Leave now." There was silence for a long time, but some instinct told CJ it was an expectant silence and it worried him more than the noises had. But a long time passed and there was nothing. Summoning all of his courage, he sat up again, physically trembling. Very slowly, feeling a thousand eyes upon him he slipped a hand under his pillow and extracted the tooth. With a strangled cry, he hurled it across his bedroom and there was sharp ping as it hit the wall and then rolled about on the floor. There! he thought triumphantly, It doesn't need to come over here now. A minute or two passed and the boy began to feel a little better.

Thump.

It was under his bed, it was under his freaking bed!!

"Oh, god, oh god," he murmured, shrinking in on himself in terror. A faint hissing noise met his ears and he felt a small, nearly imperceptible pressure beneath his bottom, as though something's broad back were pressed against the underside of his mattress. Whatever it was shifted its weight or something, because the pressure moved. Spurred on by panic, CJ quickly threw his covers away from him, the cold night air hitting him like a punch. Clutching the side of his bed, shaking uncontrollably, he leaned over and looked under.

Two large white eyes, injurious and terrifying in their luminescence, peered back at him out of the darkness. A sickly green vapor curled from underneath the bed, burning his lungs when he breathed it in. He cried out in horror.

~*~

Cloud was having the nightmare again. He thrashed in his sleep, sweat thick on his face. He was watching himself face Sephiroth again. He was watching himself lose. This particular time, his failure was especially bloody, painful in a way that shouldn't be possible in a dream. Each time the Masamune sliced through his flesh, he seemed to truly feel the burn, the warmth of his blood as it flowed from the gashes, down his chest and onto the ground. Perhaps the pain was a special effect provided by his memories. Maybe they'd recalled the pain he'd felt so well that they could summon it up at random and play it back for him with all the clearness, all the quality of the original. It didn't matter. The physical pain didn't really effect him all that much. He was a master of pain, as strange as that sounded. He'd suffered though so many types of torture he figured he could write a treatise on the subject. After long enough, pain didn't affect him so much. Except for pain that struck at his heart and mind. That could burn him just as freshly now as it had the very first time he'd ever experienced real emotional pain. He guessed that would have been when Tifa and he had fallen at Mt. Nibel and she'd gone comatose. He'd been so scared that she would die.

Something made him suddenly sit up in bed fearfully. It hadn't been the finale of his nightmare either. In fact, he'd woken up so quickly, he didn't even realize he'd been having it. He glanced towards Tifa who lay looking at him, eyes wide in surprise.

"Dad! Mom! Help!!"

With every parent's worst fears racing through their minds, Tifa and Cloud shot from the bed and towards their children's rooms, tripping over themselves in their rush. The sight that met them in the hallway made them cringe.

"Daddy!" CJ wailed, his voice high in his fear, "Mama, help me!"

A living mass of green vapors stood filling the hallway leading to the children's bedrooms and the stairs. It was quickly forming into a solid creature as each moment passed. It glowed slightly, lighting the scene and the players a pale green. It turned its vicious white eyes to Tifa and Cloud as they appeared from their room and Cloud gazed at the monster in morbid curiosity. He was sizing up his potential enemy. It was massively muscled and immensely tall. Its huge hoary head bumped

the ceiling carelessly, countless spikes of bones projecting from its skull and backbone, up through the green haze and rapidly forming fur and leathery skin. Long, razor claws stuck out at the ends of each of its four legs, while it possessed a sizable stash of pointed teeth which poked out of its jaw at odd angles. The man thought it a rather ugly looking monster. Even worse than its face though, was the vapor emanating from it. Tifa waved a hand as the stuff drifted towards her.

What is it, Cloud?" she asked, somehow keeping her cool. Her husband grimaced.

"It's mako, Tifa. Don't breath it in, it's poisonous."

"Dad, it's got Ifalna!" Cloud whipped his head around, staring at the beast in fury. It had grudgingly turned itself away from the man and now stood facing CJ menacingly. It clutched the little girl in its front right claw. Ifalna lay gray and still, eyes opened but not seeming to see anything. She didn't scream or even cry out.

"Run into the armoury, CJ," Tifa called composedly. The beast blocked them from getting at their son. It had him pinned against the open doorway of the weapons room, its green tendrils flicking out purposefully towards the boy's ankles. Cloud inched closer to the monster, every fiber in his body wanting to lunge forward and attack it. But he didn't have a weapon. In his haste, he'd left his pistol sitting uselessly on the nightstand and there was no way he was going to leave now to go and retrieve it. CJ backed up into the armoury, whimpering, the beast clawing after him. Once in the room, he thought he might be safe. The monster seemed way too big to possibly fit through the doorway. But then his heart sank ten feet in his chest. The thing simply ducked its head down and began oozing its way into the armory, its burning green tendrils getting closer and closer to his mouth and nose. He'd already breathed in a bit of that stuff. He felt nauseous and weak, and his lungs burned as though they were on fire, demanding oxygen. He backed up further and further away from the approaching beast, until his small back struck the wall. He looked behind him to see the Ultima Weapon glinting brightly in the green light. He thought that if only his dad could get to his sword, he'd clean up on this stupid thing in no time. A few gunshots rang loudly from outside the room.

Tifa lowered Cloud's gun. It wasn't doing any good, the bullets had sailed right through the creature's head as though the thing were made of smoke. She'd grabbed her husband's pistol in hopes that it would help. But it wasn't. It was useless. They were useless.

"No good," she muttered, flinging the thing away, tears in her eyes, "CJ! Ifalna! Hold on, babies!" She ran forward, planning to plunge through the monster and into the armoury. If bullets went through it, why couldn't she? Cloud grabbed her shoulders roughly before she got three feet.

"It's mako, it'll kill you!" he yelled, voice thick with frustration, "Damn this all to hell, let me!" He pushed her back hard so that she'd trip and fall and not have time to follow after him, then sprinted forward, the cries of his son the only thing he could hear. "I'm coming, Ceej!"

CJ heard his dad's voice and for just a moment felt glad. He was rather light headed all of a sudden. Pressed so firmly back against the room's rear wall that he could feel the vibrations of the air conditioner through it, he watched rather apathetically as the huge mako monster crept towards him. He looked it in the face, noticing his sister's now limp form hanging loosely from the thing's claw out of the corner of his eye. The room was filled with green. Everything danced in front of his eyes as the air he breathed burned his lungs and made his vision grow darker with each breath. Distantly he seemed to hear his dad telling him to hold his breath, but it didn't seem to matter what he did anymore. It really didn't. His knees gave way beneath him and he collapsed. The beast caught him before he could hit the ground. It straightened suddenly, its goal achieved apparently, an unconscious child grasped in each claw.

Cloud burst through the monster's bulk and into the armory, his blue eyes glowing blindly with the mako he'd absorbed. He grabbed the Ultima Weapon off the wall and hefted it as though it were a part of him. "You sonuva bitch," he swore, glaring the monster straight in the eyes, "You coward, you stupid sneakin' bastard. Drop them now or I cut you in two." Cloud thought he heard a deep rumbling from somewhere far inside the creature's gut. He realized furiously that it was laughter. Raising his gleaming sword high about his head, he attacked, launching a devastating blow into the beast's midsection, where it looked most solid and vulnerable. Despite the seeming firmness, the blade passed through without a mark, only disturbing the mako that seemed to form the thing. But the green vapors immediately flowed back into place, leaving no mark behind. Cloud slashed again and again, in a matter of seconds striking in ten different places, desperately searching for some way to hurt it. He heard Tifa trying the gun again, the bullets flying through the thing and embedding themselves in the plaster walls. He halted his attack suddenly, looking up at his children. He couldn't tell if they were still breathing or not. He felt sick.

Without warning, the monster glanced down at him and gave what appeared to be a sly smile, nodding its head as though confirming a truth. Without a word, it suddenly formed itself into a thick tubular shape and exploded from the room like a rocket, bursting from the armoury, past Tifa, down the stairs and out the door, the two children quietly unconscious. Fueled by fear, Cloud and Tifa raced after it. When they were outside though and surrounded by the assaults

of the neighbors who'd been woken by the noise, there was nothing to see. It had vanished, leaving behind nothing but questions, sickening worry, and anger.

Tifa collapsed on the ground, oblivious to the cold, fists pressed angrily to her face, but tears flowing down over them as sobs racked her body. Cloud put a trembling hand on her shoulder, the Ultima Weapon hanging loose in his right hand. His face was blank, shocked and uncomprehending. His blue eyes were harshly lit by a strong internal light, causing the neighbors to whisper to each other. Cloud ignored them, his children gone, his soul split in two.

~*~

Same old Midgar, the man thought to himself as he walked slowly down the city's filth-encrusted cobblestone streets leading two Gold Chocobos by the reins. He was making his way through the Wall Market, a place still lively and loud even at three a.m. On either side of him, prostitutes flaunted their wares, calling out their fees brashly. Pimps stood watching in the shadows, the flash of lit cigarettes and puffs of smoke the only signs they were there at all. He walked, head up and shoulders straight past a building crawling with scum, drug pushers standing in the doorway doing business without a care.

"Looking for a little action, pal?" one of them called out as he passed.

Vincent shook his head, staring at the man from behind the locks of black hair before his eyes. The clink of the gun in his cloak, the glare of the harsh neon lights off his claw, kept the man from asking again. A few fellows eyed his chocobos enviously, tongues running over their lips, but they didn't try anything. No one felt too eager to die that night.

Vincent thought they were all rather hilarious. Not a thing had changed here, though much of the rest of Midgar had undergone a drastic improvement. Shinra's clean-up crew was too scared to even lay a finger on this place. And why should they bother? It makes a lot of money. He would've bet a large amount of gil that over half the men sporting at the Honeybee Inn were Shinra businessmen, hunting a little action. As far as morality went, the Wall Market didn't really phase him. Let the weak-minded have their fun, he thought. What else do they have in their short lives? They might as well indulge in physical pleasures, they may as well buy themselves a night of passion. Then they could return to their realities with satisfaction, retaining memories of their conquests to keep them happy even after the deeds were done. Vincent thought upon his fellow humans with a mixture of contempt and pity. They're so weak, he thought, gazing around him as humanity performed its play, as muggers killed, children fought each other for food, and tokers reveled in oblivion. Weak animals whose needs were very basic.

He reached the southernmost point of the businesses and they began to thin out and quiet down. He'd had a hard time gaining admittance to the city. The guard at the gate had been asleep when he'd rapped, his knuckles ringing hollowly through the thick, iron-plated doors. He hadn't been very happy at Vincent's waking him in the middle of the night. He didn't seem to care that he was paid by Shinra to stay alert and watch for strange characters who might try to enter Midgar with ill intentions. The short, plump little guard, his blue Shinra uniform quite ill-fitting, had stood staring up at Vincent through suspicious, narrowed eyes.

"State your name, stranger," the little man had snapped, hands on his hips.

"Vincent Valentine." The name sounded sort of familiar to him, but he wasn't sure. And it didn't matter anyway, perhaps it was familiar because he'd read it off a wanted poster at the station.

"What's your business in Midgar?"

"I'm visiting friends."

"Everyone's always 'visiting friends', aren't they?" the guard had asked, feeling quite clever in his sarcasm. Vincent had shrugged smally.

"It's quite a gregarious world, isn't it?" he'd answered, the hint of a smile on his lips. The guard's mouth tightened into a hard, short line. He didn't know what the word 'gregarious' meant. He did have a natural suspicion of large words thought. He glared up at the man.

"What 'friends' are you visiting?"

"Cloud and Tifa Strife."

"Oh!" The little guard straightened up at the mention of those names. Vincent wearily watched as he scampered around for his keys, eager to open the massive city doors and correct his grievous error. It was like this every time he came here. His appearance and coldness kept him from being trusted, but once it was discovered that he was a friend of the Strifes, the guards would bend over backwards to please him. He wished for once that he'd encounter the same guard so he could skip the whole spiel for a change.

Leaving Wall Market in all its garish splendor behind, he walked out into Sector Seven, the rusted metal sign declaring the area's name. The place was practically pitch. For some reason, there were no street lights here, only the steady buzzing of some distant generator, and the whining of a sleeping dog nearby. The sliver of moon above offered a little illumination. Just enough for Vincent to see the outlines of middle class homes spread out about him. And then enough for him to make out the silhouettes of three beefy men as they approached him from the shadows. He stopped walking and watched them coming towards him threateningly. He put a hand out to comfort Yunata, who he could feel was beginning to buck at the hostile men's appearances.

"Evenin' to ya, blackie, "one of the men called. He was nearly seven feet tall and built like a bull. He clutched a shotgun, but he probably didn't need it. His massive hands seemed to have immense crushing capabilities. His two partners were silent behind him but Vincent could see the glint of weapons in their hands too. A revolver and a nail bat. Vincent didn't answer the first man's greeting. He stood expectantly, Chaos clawing at him. After the scene at the cave, his defenses against the demon had been weakened. He didn't know how he would hold it off if he couldn't quickly dispose of these new threats.

"We'll be takin' yer mounts there, ya know, "the man said casually, "We could take your life offa yer hands fer ya too, if ya like. But we'd rutha not hafta kill ya. Messy, ya know." The fellow was trying to intimidate Vincent into not putting up a fight. The tactics had worked on plenty of victims before, but he just didn't know who he was dealing with now. Without a word of response, Vincent lashed out with his claw, expertly wrenching off the man's right hand before he could even think of pulling the trigger of his shotgun. At the same time, momentarily releasing his hold on his chocobos' reins, he drew Death Penalty from out of the black confines of his cloak. A single, quick shot rang out and the other shotgun-armed man fell backwards with only half a head, the force of the bullet ripping him apart. The thug with the nail bat raised his weapon quickly above his head, ready to slam it viciously into the clawed man's skull. However he froze, seeing that Vincent had raised his gun and had it aimed squarely at his exposed heart. For a moment that seemed to last forever, the two men faced each other, glowing red eyes against beady black ones. Then the thug dropped his bat and ran off. Vincent let him go. Patting his chocobos' heads soothingly, speaking soft words to them to quell their panic, he turned his gaze down to where the one man whose hand he'd taken was writhing on the ground, staring up with disbelief in his eyes. In less than thirty seconds, his entire life had turned to crap.

"Who are you?" he muttered, the pain making his words choked. Vincent knelt down and wiped the blood from his claw onto the dead man's shirt, careful to avoid treading in the blood spreading from his shattered head.

"Why do you care?" he asked, his eyes on his task.

"I wanna know if yer Satan or not."

Vincent frowned and stood up. "I'd watch your tongue if I was you, slime."

"Yer a monster, "the man said unafraid, "I seen you. I marked ya when you was walkin'. Ya got the makings of a beast. Red eyes, and that claw. . . I seen you in my dreams. You're gonna ruin the world, ya know that? I seen it in my dreams. You're the devil." The man was crying now, bawling like a little baby. Vincent blinked in deep disgust, wondering if the fellow was high or something, his words were so strange.

"Kill me!" he begged suddenly, his head falling back messily into the dirt. "I ain't nothing now without my hand! I can't shoot, I can't write, I can't do anythin' now! Just finish me, ya fucker! Do it!"

Vincent picked the two guns up from off the ground and flung them far away. Then he got a fresh grip on the birds' reins and continued on his way, leaving the man to lay on the ground and declare his benedictions, claiming Vincent was Satan, the enemy of man. "Kill me, ya bastard!" he continued to scream even after he couldn't see the red-eyed man anymore in the distance. "You heartless sonuvabitch!"

Silent and weary, glad the situation had been easily handled, Vincent made his way through the eerie streets of Sector Seven, Death Penalty sheathed again. The wind was picking up, scudding clouds over the face of the moon above. Soon, he left Sector Seven behind, crossing into upper class Sector Eight. The night was perfectly still about him, calming his perturbed mind. Yunata cooed softly in his ears, picking up pace to nuzzle his hand, as though sensing his uneasy spirits. He smiled at the bird gratefully and gave it a friendly pat on the side. However, she didn't stop at that. Vincent tried to continue on his way, but Yunata stretched her head and warked loudly, shattering the stillness of the night air.

"What's the matter?" he whispered, stroking her downy neck calmly, "Are you bored? Do you want me to ride for a while?" Eyes wide, the chocobo stamped the ground, it's unease spreading to the other bird and making him circle warily. The man tied them together, then swung himself onto Yunata's back, hoping his presence there would ease her worries. She calmed a bit, and he spurred her onward with a gentle nudge of his heel. Jerkily, she walked a few paces ahead, but then stopped, frozen, stark still in mid stride. Her wings flapped out in a gesture of fury and fear, her head plunged forward, neck stretching impossibly far. Bucking and rearing up, she nearly threw Vincent from her, but the man held on

tightly to the reins, pulling with all his might to keep her from taking off at full pace.

"Yunata!" he murmured, teeth clenched, "Stop! What is it?" The bird warked loudly, ignoring her rider, mindless in her fear. And then Vincent heard it. Hissing. It sounded like a thousand serpents in full chorus. All hissing. And it was coming at them.

Frantically, he turned his head to the left and right, searching for the source, but it seemed to be coming from everywhere at once. Soon, it was loud enough to deafen him. The chocobos warked in terror.

A green light appeared suddenly in the distance, making its way down the main avenue of Sector Eight. It threw sharp shadows, turning the scenery into a surreal, sickly mish mash of vapor and nightmares. The light grew, filling the atmosphere, gradually gaining form. Vincent's mouth hung open. From down the street, a living green cloud was rushing towards him, its only discernible features were dagger-like white eyes, and two dark smudges on either side. As it approached, flowing so quickly the man barely had time to get a good look, he saw that these two smudges were children, hanging limp in the beast's twin grasps. Their faces looked familiar.

"Ifalna. . ." he muttered, "CJ. What's going on?" Seeing the danger he was in, he summoned every ounce of strength in his arms and yanked the reins, turning Yunata away from the approaching creature and off the road. The bird chomped at the bit, chipping its tough beak and leaving a lot of golden feathers scattered on the cobblestones. Hissing and spitting mako, the beast slithered past, giving the red-eyed human only a passing glance. Vincent thought it sneered at him. It'd moved nearly fifty feet past when the thing suddenly halted. Gripping the children's bodies delicately, it slowly turned and looked again at Vincent, as though to confirm recognition.

"Put those children down, monster," Vincent commanded, not mincing words. He didn't know the details of the situation, but he could easily tell the thing was an enemy. He wondered briefly where Cloud and Tifa had gotten off to, and tried to hope they were alright. His eyes flicked up to Ifalna's frail face, nearly hidden by the thick mako cloud surrounding her and her brother. She seemed so still, so lifeless it frightened him. "Put them down," he repeated, anger creeping into his voice.

"Valentine. . ." the thing spat in a derogatory tone, "I don't have time for you now."

"Make time." If Vincent was unnerved that the thing knew his name, he certainly didn't show it. Letting go of the reins and gripping Yunata tightly with his knees, he withdrew Death Penalty, the muzzle still warm from the last life it'd taken. Not waiting for any kind of response from the thing, Vincent let go a shot that struck the monster straight between the eyes but the massive shell only passed through harmlessly. Renewing its hissing, the beast turned away and took off again, heading down the street with impossible speed.

"Oh no you don't." Quickly holstering his gun, Vincent slammed his heels into Yunata's side, regretfully releasing the pack chocobo with a swipe of his claw through the tether. Her fear quickening her naturally blinding pace, the golden chocobo gave chase, her rider keeping his seat with expert skill. The monster was already only a slight green tint in the distance, but the black of the night kept that light visible, and soon it grew larger, Yunata eating up the distance hungrily.

He passed back through the Wall Market in pursuit, the surprised faces of the scum and prostitutes only quick flashes that flickered and then disappeared in the corners of his vision. He nudged Yunata's sides and she picked up even more speed, summoning enormous wells of stamina from somewhere far inside. Soon, they were riding in the beast's wake, and Vincent yanked the collar of his cloak up over his mouth and nose, the mako slipping into his lungs. The bruised ribs he'd acquired in the cave that afternoon throbbed, the jarring motion of the chocobo sending stabbing pain into his chest. He was so close. The beast's green tendrils flailed behind it like a lot of tails, wrapping around Yunata's legs and claws. The bird balked a bit at the sensation, but Vincent only spoke soothing words and urged her forward. He didn't know what he'd do when he caught up, but he wasn't about to just let the creature get away with his friend's children.

The Shinra towers. Shinra's base of operations loomed suddenly before him, as they left the closely bunched buildings of Sector Six behind, bursting from the blackness of the slums like a red and golden fireball. The mako beast found a hidden well of speed and shot forward, CJ and Ifalna's heads lurching backwards with its sudden motion. As though it were nothing at all, it began a trek up the sides of the building, like some giant worm zipping up the trunk of a tree. Vincent nearly chinned himself as he jerked sharply on the reins to keep Yunata from colliding with the wall. The chocobo halted abruptly, almost falling over.

There's always complications, the man thought, watching the thing scale the towers. He kept his eyes pasted on it until it disappeared suddenly into what he thought must roughly be about the sixty-ninth floor or so. His days as a Turk told him that was where Hojo's lab had once resided. Hojo. A name that made his mouth dry and his eyes narrow ferociously. Images of the dead scientist's arrogant expressions, his freakish laughter, his disturbing actions, flitted through Vincent's mind without warning. He shook them off, determined not to fail Cloud and Tifa. He turned Yunata and made for a side entrance into the building. Panting, her steps heavy, the bird galloped where bidden. Vincent hopped off, patting her neck

in thanks, not bothering to tether her anywhere knowing she'd wait until he returned. Death Penalty in his hand, he burst inside.

Howard yawned. He smacked his lips, glancing at his wristwatch. Groaning, he yawned again, features dull with misery. The graveyard shift most definitely sucked. He was just glad that Reno and Cloud weren't around. With them home for the night, he could at least be comfortable in his boredom. He sat lazily in a leather office chair, feet propped up on a nearby ottoman, hands clasped over his sizable gut. He wondered how he'd managed to so royally piss off the fates that they'd seen to it he was assigned the late shift every night that week. They must really be mad at me, he thought wearily, to go to all this trouble just to make me suffer. I mean, managing to get me the dullest, most pointless shift in the entire schedule, a shift so uneventful that you can work it with your brain on auto-pilot the whole time, is really quite a feat. Maybe I should be grateful. Yeah. Hmph. And maybe I should cut my throat.

The tinted doors to the side employee entrance slammed open suddenly, and Howard looked upon them in mild surprise. A black haired, red-eyed man burst into the lobby, a massive gun clutched in his one good hand. Howard thought maybe he was a janitor there to do the floors.

"Hullo," he said amiably, giving a wave with one hand and then letting it drop back onto his stomach. "You're a little late, ya know." The man looked at Howard without even the faintest sign in his face that he gave a damn, then headed for the elevators. "You'll need the key, ya know," Howard called helpfully as Vincent slammed the button with a petulant fist.

"Give it to me." He approached the guard, a hand held out in front of him. Howard shrugged.

"Shouldn't you get your supplies first, mac?"

Vincent held Death Penalty up, wagging it a bit for emphasis. "I already have all I need."

Howard looked at the gun, then up to the man's face. He squinted his eyes, thinking really, really hard. "You're here to clean up, right?" he asked, an eyebrow raised.

"Hopefully." Howard smiled, thinking it was some strange joke, wanting to make sure he found it funny so he wouldn't look stupid. He reached a hand into his breast pocket and withdrew a key. He tossed it to Vincent with a smile.

"Lock up when you're done."

Vincent nodded, knowing something was strange, but not caring enough to stick around and find out what. He dashed into the elevator and punched the up button frantically. The door slid behind him, leaving Howard alone again. The security guard sunk down in his chair comfortably and went back to examining his ill fortune. He couldn't understand why a guard of his caliber was stuck with such worthless shifts. A waste of my abilities, he thought, lazily shaking his head and sighing. He hoped that janitor fellow did a good job on the floors. He knew if anything went wrong, his bosses would somehow find a way to blame him. Ridiculous, he thought and scoffed.

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Chieko had left the window open for it. Manipulating its vaporous body cleverly, the mako beast maneuvered through the small space, slipping inside the lab hastily. It could have easily squeezed itself through the molecules of the wall, passing right through it, but the children he carried were solid mass and not so conveniently movable. Once inside, the space lit up with his green luminescence, and the anonymous door he'd left through earlier opened up with a startling creak. The beast slithered towards it.

"Chieko," it called, its voice garbled above its own hissing.

"You've succeeded," Chieko said, eyes briefly looking over the two unconscious children, "Well done. Now quickly, inside." The mako monster complied, eyes blazing brightly. The doorway was small and seemed insignificant. You would have thought it could lead to nothing more extraordinary than a closet or a storage room. But as the unseen being Chieko and its beast moved into the space, door clicking softly shut behind them, you would have seen the narrow passage beyond the door open up into a broad, high ceilinged chamber, girded with rusted metal walls, marbled tiles making up the floor. Straw and blankets lay wadded in one corner, the scattered bones of small birds and mammals littering the space. A few cages lined the far wall, dirty with disuse. Another door was embedded beyond them.

Approaching the nearest cell, the mako beast let one of its tendrils materialize into a hand shape. With it, he threw open a grating in the cage and unceremoniously dropped the children through. He shut it quickly, then whipped around.

"I'm being followed," it said. Chieko nodded.

"I know. The plan is working far better than I'd hoped. You were only supposed to bring the children here, but fate again has shown its preference to our side. It's lead that clawed man to us. He comes here, but he doesn't know why. It's for

more than his supposedly noble excuse of saving Cloud's children. His mind is leading him here, slowly influencing what free will he has. Imperceptibly suggesting, prodding him forward. Now, we'll take him."

"We have to, Chieko. He knows where we are. He's coming here."

Chieko ran back towards the exit, gesturing for the beast to follow. "No fear, great one. This man will be easy to take. Simply drown him in your mists, wash his lungs with your poison. But carefully. He mustn't die. He's part of the process, a vital element." The creature followed her lead, its claws free now, it reverted into pure vapor, only its two white eyes revealing its sentience. At Chieko's words, it hissed a little disappointed. Killing the man now would be so easy, so simple and clean. But he couldn't. Time would have to be bided, and patience valued. The time would come soon enough when he could flood Vincent Valentine with his mako, unleashing the energy in waves that would rack the red-eyed man's mind and body until there was nothing left and he'd fall in lifelessness, no longer a threat. Being made of mako, and thusly made of life, it was strange that the beast enjoyed the sight of corpses so much. But it's pleasure in death wasn't a morbid one, or a preference born of cruelty. Death was just so simple, it thought. Better that mako should exist in it and in the planet. It was when the stuff met flesh, sparking life, that problems arose. He just so loved to correct those problems.

~*~

Warily, Vincent stood in the corner of the Shinra elevator, the thing moving upwards with a lurch. It was rather quiet in the small space, the only noise was that annoying music from the hidden speakers and the gentle hum of the elevator's machinery. It was a rather anti-dramatic situation. There he was, hunting after some indestructible kidnapper after a harrowing chase through Midgar and now he could only stand and tap his foot as the peaceful ignorance of the elevator engulfed him. In a way he was glad. It was taking all of his strength to keep from letting Chaos take over. Every event of the day all piled upon him; his plummet into Lucrecia's lake, his encounter with the vicious what he considered to be hallucinations at the cave coupled with the savage beating he'd taken. Then, in Midgar, the attack of those three men just a short time before. Every time he felt anger, Chaos became a little looser from its shackles. That was why he tended to shy away from humanity. Every human seemed out to steal something from him, to kill him, to cause him pain. The human race seemed incapable of letting him be. Perhaps he should let the animalistic side of him out for a while. Perhaps he should shed his human facade for just a bit and revert back to something far superior. The urge was nearly irresistible.

No! Vincent stepped backwards, his will returning to his possession with a painful snap. What the hell had that been? he wondered, his hand unconsciously tightening around the handle of his weapon. A foreign presence whispering suggestions. Had it been Chaos? He shut his eyes, sweat beading out on his normally apathetic face. Whatever it was, it was feeding off his annoyance with the situation and threatening to influence his thoughts. Keeping himself human was a strain enough without his own mind turning against him.

Without warning, the elevator slammed to a stop, sending the man to the floor. There was a flash of sparks, the brief smell of burning circuitry and suddenly the lights went out, leaving him alone in perfect blackness. He got to his feet and found the nearest wall, wanting something solid behind his back so he'd be free to counter anything that might come at him from the front. Death Penalty in a ready position, he stood awaiting his foe. At least that damned elevator music stopped, he told himself cheerfully.

Moments passed, the air buzzing in his ears. It was too quiet. He rubbed his claw gingerly against his chest suddenly, the pain in his ribs making him dizzy. He hadn't realized the kicks from that phantom had damaged them so badly. He'd have killed for a cure potion.

Slam! He flinched involuntarily as a massive vibration shook the elevator from the front. He wished he could see. His open eyes ached from staring into the darkness. There was another pounding, and he could hear the metal doors screeching and bending, buckling under the pressure. As they parted with the force, a faint greenish glow filtered through between the cracks. Vincent readied himself, sure the next blow would take them clean off and leave him facing the beast.

He was right.

The silver doors burst from their frame, sending fragments of jagged metal flying into his face. He blocked most with a few swipes of his claw, but shards cut into him and he felt the blood flow. The entire space was lit up with green now, and he quickly pulled the top of his cloak around the lower half of his face, strapping it tight. Hardly adequate protection from the poison vapors, but better than nothing. To his surprise though, once he'd lowered his claw from his eyes, he saw more than the mako beast standing before him.

The mako monster was there, yes, but it stood, or rather drifted behind another creature. A horrible creature. Vincent could barely believe his eyes as he gazed upon it, frozen for just a moment in shock. The new adversary was four legged

and nearly seven feet high at the shoulder, colored all over with fur the hue of dried blood. Leathery wings fanned from its back, but they seemed out of place on its lion-like body. Wicked claws, easily half a foot long, poked from its massively muscled paws. Vincent licked his lips, forcing his eyes to move up and meet the thing's gaze. Its eyes were unreal. They were mako eyes and they blazed a bright beautiful rusty brown. The face that surrounded it was not so pleasing. It was lionish to an extent, but twisted by some force. Its jaws hung open, rows of teeth like a shark's exposed threateningly. Its mane hung messily over its face, its ears had long before been ripped off, replaced with short but lethally pointed horns. Its pink nose was wet and trembling.

Vincent straightened, pulling himself together. He tugged his cloak into place curtly and eyed the two things in distaste. "Who are you?" he asked calmly, with just a hint of menace. He wasn't sure if the new animal could talk, but he knew the mako beast could.

"We are your enemies. But we are also your friends. You'll learn in time that what we do is for the benefit of everyone," the lion creature growled. Its voice was quite steady. But also, there was a female tinge to it that threw Vincent off. The man adjusted his grip on Death Penalty, Chaos clawing.

"You take helpless children from their parents in the dead of night. You hang around the remnants of a lunatic's laboratory. That's evidence enough to me that you both need to die. Go ahead though, offer me your friendship. But I warn you not to be surprised when I wad it up and blow it back in your faces."

She made no movement at the remark, but her fur bristled slightly, wings stiffening. Vincent tensed, ready to fire upon her.

"Go ahead, beast," she said suddenly, addressing the mako monster without taking her eyes from Vincent.

"Yes, Chieko," it replied, beginning to flow forward. The man looked from Chieko to the vaporous creature and back again, then pressed further into the elevator. He raised Death Penalty to fire, but found he couldn't move quickly enough. She scampered from him, standing somewhere out of view as the other monster moved forward. Vincent ground his teeth together, anger beginning to get the better of him. What had happened? He should have easily been able to take that Chieko out with a bullet between the eyes. Something was weighing his limbs down, slowing his actions. The foreign force couldn't stop him from doing what he wanted, but it could hamper him. The unfairness made him scowl. He loathed unfair fights. He was disgusted by enemies that took advantage. The anonymous presence in his mind whispered lowly, and he recalled that night long long ago when he'd been a whole man. His last night as a human. Hojo had caught him unawares and put a bullet into him. Imagine that, catching a Turk unawares. He'd blacked out that night disgusted at the man's lack of honor, the unfairness taking precedence in his mind over the pain, over the fear. It was like that now, all over again. Mako tendrils began to fill the elevator, white eyes filling his vision, blinding him, but he couldn't do anything about it. Red anger consumed him. No. . . he thought, realization washing over him too late. God, no.

He doubled over in pain, a fiery burning wrenching him off his feet. His mind screamed in time with his voice as the agony of transforming into Chaos swept through his limbs. No, no, no, his thoughts repeated. It'd been years since he'd had to undergo this. All naive hopes that the creature had gone were dead now. No! It lived! It was alive and thrashing, stronger now than ever and joyous at its liberation. As blackness spread over him and consciousness throbbed away, Vincent nearly sobbed.

After only seconds, all traces of the man were gone. In his place was the Jenova-spawned creature Chaos. The thing looked at the gun clasped awkwardly in its claw and flung it away. It turned to face the vapor beast, its fanged jaw twisted in a grin.

"Take it out! Now!" Chieko called, a hint of panic in her dark voice. Chaos lunged forward, claws raised and slashed out at the mako monster. It sliced through the vapors and its claws cut through them as though they were flesh. Where they touched the mako, it faded away, the green vanishing from existence. The monster screamed. He was actually hurting it.

"Spawn of evil!" it hissed, backing off a bit. "You're a creature of Jenova. You possess her cells. Only that planet-devouring virus can harm life, destroy its energy completely. Jenova alone can harm me." Chaos gave it a smug look as though it had known this, then attacked again. The monster was more prepared this time. It parted before its claws, wisping higher and separating. Its white eyes snapped angrily and it launched a few tendrils towards its adversary. The green poison shot into Chaos' lungs and the demon stumbled back a bit, dizzy. Taking advantage of its disorientation, Chieko suddenly appeared and sprang towards it, claws extended. She struck it in its chest, knocking Chaos back hard into the elevator. She was larger and stronger than the demon and easily pinned it down. At least easily at first. Regaining its senses, Chaos twisted around, its wings coming forward and buffeting Chieko in the head. She roared in irritation, snapping her head back and forth to avoid the blows, digging her claws into the demon's shoulders. It bent its legs up suddenly and kicked her violently away, quickly hopping to its feet, head bobbing confrontationally, eyes glowing red, taking pleasure in the battle.

"You're strong," Chieko remarked, standing and spitting a bit of blood from her mouth. "But you won't do that again." She paced towards it patiently. Tough, she thought, but it was rash and uncalculating, that was its downfall. Chaos' next actions seemed to prove her point. Jaws parted and teeth snapping, it darted forward to attack. Chieko stood watching it calmly, sidestepping at the last moment. It pulled up sharp, whipped around to attack again, and was met with a blunt paw to the snout. "Stay down," she ordered and the stunned demon had little choice but to comply. Chieko nodded to the mako monster and it approached quickly, engulfing Chaos in a sea of poison. The demon's ragged breathing quickened, not comprehending why its lungs were on fire all of a sudden. In confusion, it thrashed about, getting awkwardly to its feet and clawing at the green cloud. Its blows hit home but the mako monster bore them, hissing painfully. Coldly, Chieko watched the demon weaken and fall to its knees, gasping for air, a line of bright blood trickling from its mouth. It amazed her how life could kill. How mako, the stuff that fired every living creature, could be used so effectively as a weapon. It was ironic, she supposed, and fascinated her immensely. It killed with such efficiency. It would inundate the victim with the spark of life, over-working any cells it came in contact with, often causing them to burst, but more often the only thing the confused cells could do was vibrate painfully, or multiply. The person's heart would become confused at the perpetual influx of life, and would beat faster, slamming itself against the walls of the rib cage in an effort to keep the foreign life energy intact. That's all a heart knows: keeping its owner alive. But as there was more and more to worry about, as fear tainted the victim's mind, as anger clouded it, panic consumed it, as the lungs were denied pure oxygen, and as adrenaline streamed through the veins, the heart would roar but then finally surrender, going into cardiac arrest. Thus mako, stuff of life, was able in its purest form to steal itself back vengefully, leaving only a corpse, a shell behind.

"That's enough," Chieko called as Chaos's eyes slipped shut. Regretfully, the mako beast rose from its still form and drifted towards Chieko, suddenly solidifying into a four legged, shaggy animal, horns looming from its back and claws clacking against the floor. The two watched the fallen demon, its chest rising and falling sporadically. After a few moments, it began to revert into a man. Slowly, with a sickening sound, the wings curled back inside its torso, its black skin paled and grew human, its bones reshaped. Suddenly Vincent lay there, blood trickling from his mouth. He groaned, then began to gasp in the oxygen, as though he were a diver resurfacing.

The mako beast lurched towards him and delivered a savage kick that sent his crippled body rolling into the wall. "Jenova bastard!" it hissed, nursing the gashes in its now solid flesh. "You don't deserve to live!"

"Hold off, friend," Chieko called, stepping forward, "We need him. Come on."

Barely holding on to consciousness, Vincent felt himself suddenly gripped in something's jaws. It clasped down firmly and he cried out as razor teeth pierced his skin and he was lifted off the ground. Warm, putrid breath blew into his face, and sticky saliva flowed down his limbs, mixing with the blood from his wounds and dripping onto the floor. His body on fire, his heart roaring, his mind full of questions, he suddenly blacked out, rolling into blissful unconsciousness with something like a sigh.

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The home was a mass of chaos and confusion. Thirty people or so mulled about it's front door, coming in and going out, voices loud, actions brash. Reno watched them all with a sinking feeling in his gut. He fingered the grip of his nightstick, the weapon hanging easily at his side. Running a hand through his blood-red hair suddenly, he gathered together his strength and let his voice boom forth.

"People!" he hollered, his voice reverberating in the still morning air. Faces turned to look at him, and he straightened casually, tugging at the collar of his shirt. "We need to get organized! How many people are here to help search?"

Most of them raised a hand, but some averted their eyes and shrank back, not admitting they were simply there to see what the hell that light and that noise had been the night before. Reno curled his lip in their general direction and gestured dismissively.

"If you're not here to help, get the hell out. Everyone else be quiet a minute." Those he referred to slithered away sheepishly. He frowned, the noise of the crowd dying down a bit.

"Who the hell are you to be giving orders, buddy?" an anonymous voice called out belligerently. Reno shrugged.

"Someone has to," he replied, "And I'm good at it, so shut your friggin' mouth. Now, we're going to split up into groups and each group is going to take a section of Midgar. One through eight. We're going to sift through this city with a fine tooth comb and bring those kids home." He received a few half-hearted cheers. Most of the people there were Cloud's neighbors. Outside of Shinra and a few acquaintances from his youth, Cloud had few friends. But the neighborhood was a tight-knit one and Reno was rather surprised how it had rallied together to help out the Strifes. He stepped into their

midst, grouping the people randomly together and assigning sectors to each. He felt as though he were leading a Turk mission again, as he gave advice and directives brusquely.

"Ask people you see if they've noticed anything odd, check houses, check shops, check alleyways. Look for clues. Don't do anything stupid, and don't act without backup. Be careful and good luck." He dismissed them and the massing of people immediately moved off in scattered directions, murmuring to each other conversationally. Most of them were yuppies and housewives. Reno hadn't much faith in their coming up with anything useful. They were just there for a bit of excitement, sorry that the kids were gone, but rather glad with the change of pace.

The man turned to face Cloud's home and entered awkwardly, only daring to do so because Tifa wasn't there. He'd never been invited in. He didn't mind, or feel cheated that he'd never once seen the interior of Cloud's house even after ten years of friendship. He was rather glad that he never had to worry about it. He wouldn't have felt comfortable in such an awkward social situation. He preferred to go in a bar with a buddy, get plastered, and talk about Shinra, women, and weapons.

"Mr. Reno!" Cait Sith lunged forward, embracing the man's narrow chest lovingly. Reno shrugged him off, throwing the overly-enthused cat to the floor. "Oh, Mr. Reno, thank Shiva you're here! Thank you so much for coming and organizing the search party! I just don't know what I would've done without you." Reno shrugged and straightened his jacket, pulling a few stray strands of hair behind his ears.

"No problem," he said coolly, eyeing the living room distractedly, "Where's Cloud gotten to?"

Cait shook his head sadly. "He and Tifa left last night right after it came. They're out looking for CJ and Ifalna."

"They haven't come back yet?"

"No. They left me a PHS so I could contact them if the kids returned." The gray and white cat offered him the communication device but he shook his head decliningly.

"You hold on to it. Now tell me, kitty, just what exactly happened here last night."

"I don't really know all the details. I was switched off up in my room when it happened. All I know is that a big monster came and took the kids. Cloud and Tifa tried to stop it, but they couldn't hurt it somehow and it got away."

"A 'big monster'? Not much of a description to go on, is it?" Reno stuck his hands in his pockets, putting his personal feelings aside and analyzing the situation like a Turk. He looked to the mechanical cat suddenly. "Is there anything else you can tell me? Like what direction it was headed, or what its offenses were?"

Cait shook his head again. "I'm sorry I can't be of more help to you but Cloud, Tifa and the kids are the only ones who know just what happened. None of the neighbors saw where it went after it left the house. It just vanished almost, or it moved so fast it seemed to. As for its offenses. . . " The cat's voice trailed away, hesitant to finish. Reno fixed his turquoise gaze onto the robot impatiently.

"Well?"

"Well, I didn't ask him why, but when they woke me up last night to tell me they were leaving, Cloud's. . . um, Cloud's eyes were on fire. Well, they weren't really on fire, of course, but they were burning so bright I couldn't look at him properly. And he was really sick. He could barely stand. Almost like that time so long ago in Mideel. Ya know, after he came outta the LifeStream and he'd had all that poisoning?"

"You mean mako poisoning?" Reno asked, one eyebrow arched. "I wasn't a member of your little planet-saving club, remember? I wasn't there."

"It was right after he gave the Black Materia to Sephiroth. He got sick with mako poisoning and almost died." Cait clutched at Reno's pants leg anxiously. "He looked like that last night, Mr. Reno. I was really scared."

The man looked down on the cat skeptically, then dropped his sunglasses over his eyes. "Well, I don't know about that. I'm going to go back to Shinra and consult some people. You stay here and tell Cloud to call me when he gets back, alright?"

"Alright. Tell Reeve I said hi."

Reno turned to go, Cait watching his back lovingly as though he were some sort of savior. Before stepping outside though, something caught the man's eye. Metal glinting off something on a table near the door. Cloud's pistol, carelessly dropped there and forgotten. He turned back to the cat with a question on his lips. "Why didn't Cloud take his gun?"

Cait's eyes opened wide and he moved a trembling paw in front of his mouth.

"He took Ultima Weapon," the cat whispered. Reno groaned.

"Shit," he muttered, "We're going to have a goddamned bloodbath on our hands."

"Vincent."

The voice was soft and almost comforting. It reminded him of his mother. Opening his eyes, he saw a woman standing over him, one of her hands stroking his scarred cheek soothingly. He didn't know her, but he didn't particularly feel like pulling away. Eyes gentle, she smiled at him, as though she was aware of every torment he'd ever suffered through and wanted to wash each painful memory from him. He blinked. He was in the crypt of the Shinra mansion, laying in his coffin, his cloak wrapped around his torso tightly. She stood at its side, gazing upon him.

"Who are you?" he asked, trying to sit up. She pushed him back down gently.

"I'm a friend, you needn't fear me."

He squinted his eyes at the woman, feeling he should know her. Her face seemed familiar. It was quite strikingly beautiful, like a Greek goddess'. Her voice was familiar too, entrancing and musical. He couldn't help but relax.

"Why am I here?" he asked calmly.

"I don't know, this is where you picked. You seem to be comfortable here. Maybe because for so long you slept in safety within the wooden confines of this box, content to think of yourself as dead and thusly immune from the hurts of the world. These old stone walls are thick, maternal to you."

"But I wasn't dead. I was asleep. And I wasn't there of my own free will. I was a prisoner, dreaming the same nightmare time after time until my mind hardened, my spirit grew numb, and my body became deformed. I don't feel safe here." She let him stand and leave the coffin. She backed away from him, watching him closely with a doctor's practiced eye.

"Take us where you want then, my son." Vincent eyed her curiously but said nothing. Slowly, he walked towards the door of the crypt, opening it wide and shutting his eyes against the shower of rotten wood and clumped mold that showered from the door frame. He stepped through and was suddenly in Lucrecia's cave. The woman stood by his side.

"I feel safe here," he said firmly, gazing upon the stone altar in contentment. For some reason, he expected her to be aggravated or jealous to be taken here, but she only gazed on him expressionless.

"We all have our havens, our shelters from the world. I like yours, Vincent, it's quite beautiful. Your love, Lucrecia, she hurt you, destroyed your life, yet you keep her close in your heart. You remember her though it causes you immeasurable grief. That's admirable."

"No, that's love," said Vincent matter-of-factly. The woman smiled, laying a hand on his claw before he could pull away. He looked at her as she peered into his red eyes, searching. Suddenly she drew back and he snatched up his claw in self-awareness, pressing it close to his side and letting his cloak hide it. The woman smiled, then began pacing, her voice steady and hypnotic as she spoke.

"Chaos broke out of you tonight. It clawed its way through your barriers and cried out in joyous liberation once it could rear its head freely. Why did you deny it for so long? You seem to hold such a bitter resentment against humanity, yet you fight that beast within you even more strongly than you do your human emotions. I don't understand."

Vincent shrugged, uncomfortable with the conversation. "I may not be a fan of man," he said simply, "But there are some things worse than humanity. The animal inside me is one of them. It kills without conscience, for the mere taste of blood on its tongue, finding pleasure in destruction."

"What's wrong with that?" Vincent turned and saw the woman's brows drawn over her eyes menacingly. "Why should you, misanthropist that you are, care for their lives? You're so much better than them. You're stronger, faster, better."

"What, because of this?" the man asked, whipping out his claw. He gestured vaguely to his red eyes, "Because of this? No, this doesn't make me better, it makes me a monster. If I could love others, if I could give love and take love without hurting the receiver, that would make me better. A new born baby is of more use to the world than I am. It, at least, has opportunity to be loved and add something wonderful to the world in its lifetime, leaving the planet a bit better off than it was before its birth. I've only taken things from the world in my life. Things I can't return. The least I can do now is keep Chaos from taking any more."

"Any more of what?" the woman asked, forehead furrowed.

"Life." Vincent gazed at her as though the answer were obvious. "Life is all that matters. The chance for it all to go on, to change. Opportunity, it's so important. That baby's life is priceless. Mine is a ruined purchase from the thrift shop." He laughed hollowly, "And I'll protect that baby's life with my own valueless one, Chaos be damned." The words felt good to say. He smiled faintly at her, then stepped back in horror.

"Stupid," she muttered, suddenly losing any semblance of beauty, her face contorting in a dark mask of hate and

loathing. "Stupid, pathetic man. Life is trivial. Life is wasted everyday as people live it dully, breathing, working, dying unspectacularly. It's power that matters. And control. It's what this planet has and it holds it over our heads like a carrot in front of a rabbit's nose!"

Electrical energy crackled in the air and Vincent sank to his knees, watching in disbelief as the kind, gentle woman transformed into some sort of dark beast. Her flesh bloated and turned purplish, veins and nerves sticking up through the pale skin in hues of blue and red. Wings formed of delicate membranes sprang from her back, razor-sharp at their edges. A thick, muscled tail dropped down, slapping the cave floor thunderously. She roared and the air shook.

"Jenova." Vincent said the name and the demon turned to look at him. Her eyes lacked pupils or irises yet they focused on his face uncannily. Words emitted from her but they shot straight into his brain, her lips unmoving

You do remember your mother, the voice hissed, My son, why do you deny me?

Vincent shook his head, teeth grinding. "Don't try your mind games on me. You're dead. This all happened thirteen years ago. You've got no place anymore on this planet."

Maybe not, but I've been alive all this time in your mind. I'm part of you, Hojo saw to that. We exist together, as one.

"Not as one, "the man growled, "I'm Vincent Valentine! I have a past, friends, a love, a history. You're some foreign force set loose in me by a freak. You may dwell inside me, but you're a separate thing with no control over my actions. I'm Vincent Valentine!"

Jenova laughed. Not for long. Her strange gaze bore down hard on the man and he found himself sinking beneath it. He looked down at his arms and saw they weren't human anymore. They were Chaos' arms, ending in claws. Leathery wings sprang from his back. "No, "he whispered, pain ripping through him as his flesh fell off in chunks, revealing the demon's pebbled bluish hide beneath. Blood gushed from his mouth as fangs grew in. "Nooo!!" he gurgled, breathing heavily, anger squeezing from his rapidly yellowing eyes. The cry ended in a feral snarl and Chaos reared its head upwards, releasing a roar into the night. Jenova chuckled, satisfied.

He awoke from the vision gasping, a stifled cry escaping his lips. Then he lay still, catching his breath, feeling himself to make sure he was human. His hand brushed his chest and he winced, his fingers coming away wet with blood. The dream hung in his mind like a plague.

"Not a dream, "he muttered to himself, "She's inside of me, watching me. She's back. Or she never left."

"Vincent!"

He nearly jumped at the sound of his own name, afraid she'd come to call again. He looked around. He was laying sprawled in a rather smelly cage, vertical bars filling his vision. The floor was metal, sprinkled with dirty straw. He felt like an animal in the zoo. The room containing his cage was dimly lit. The extent of his vision ended a mere three feet beyond the immediate front of his cell, the room receding into darkness beyond that.

"Vincent!" He turned sharply, a wave of nausea flooding him with the action. Every inch of his body ached and he was nearly overcome by dizziness. Mako poisoning, he groaned internally, noting that his lungs still burned as he breathed in the air. He coughed up a little blood unenthusiastically, then turned to face the voice. CJ Strife knelt in the cage beside him, his small hands grasping the bars. Vincent smiled at him, and the boy grinned back, relieved to see his friend was alive. Tears came into his eyes as he talked, his words spilling over themselves hurriedly.

"What's goin' on, Vincent?" he asked, "Why are we here? What're those monsters? Where's my mum and dad? I was so scared when they brought you in. You didn't wake up for the longest time, I thought you might be dead. Ifalna thought so too."

The man glanced down at the little girl through the bars. She held onto the hem of her brother's pajama top, the other hand covering her eyes once he looked at her.

"What's wrong?" he asked gently. At his words, she began to cry.

"I think it's 'cause you're so messed up, "CJ said helpfully. Vincent ran a hand over his face, and dried blood flaked off his cheeks. The gore was dried in streaks down his face, he probably looked a fright. Transformation always left him bloodied. He took a corner of his cloak and scrubbed at himself, the blood crumbling and falling away, nearly making him sneeze. He shook it from his hair, then swept it back away from his face. Eventually he looked a lot better, though still quite red. In the scant light though, it was hard to tell.

"See, honey?" he called softly, "I'm alright." The little girl looked up, her violet eyes wet with tears. She smiled, recognizing him suddenly.

"Vincent, "she whispered, sticking a hand through the bars. Vincent reached his own arm through and clasped her hand reassuringly. Then he gave CJ a pat on the shoulder.

"What were you dreaming about?" the boy asked, watching the man uneasily. Vincent shrugged, pulling his arm back in.

"Just stupid things," he said lightly. CJ shook his head dubiously.

"You seemed pretty scared. You were kicking a lot."

"Was I really? I think I was remembering a really hard test I had to take in school once. Either that, or your dad's cooking." The children laughed and Vincent smiled. "Are you guys alright?"

"Ifalna threw up for a while," CJ said casually, not mentioning he had too, "And it hurts to take deep breaths, but we're okay. Kinda hungry." The boy plopped down on the floor of the cage, sighing dejectedly.

"Have the monsters been back yet?"

"They dropped you off and were gone for a few hours I think. Then they came back, talked a little bit, and left again. They haven't been back in a long time."

Vincent turned himself around and leaned against the back wall of his cage, coming to rest carefully. His chest was hurting unbearably and he wasn't sure why. He unstrapped his cloak from his tunic and undid the first couple buttons of his shirt. He opened his collar up and looked down at himself. He couldn't see far, because blood had dried and kept the fabric stuck into the wounds, but he seemed to be hurt fairly badly.

"Whatcha doing?" CJ asked, peering through the darkness towards him.

"Nothing. Keep Ifalna from looking over here, will ya?" He turned from the boy's view and began carefully removing his shirt, giving an occasional grunt as he tore the fabric from his skin. Once the bloody garment lay crumpled at his side, he was able to survey the damage. Ten punctures up and down his chest, each like an individual knife wound. He could feel the same thing in his back though he couldn't see them. He'd been chewed.

CJ watched the man's actions, staring wide-eyed at the vicious wounds on his back. He had Ifalna's eyes covered with one of his hands, and the little girl said nothing in protest. She was too tired and too dizzy to argue. Vincent spent the next half hour tending to the wounds. There was really little he could do without any sutures or even any water to clean them. He set about ripping his undershirt into strips and binding them around the freshly gushing gashes. The little boy stared at him in horrified fascination.

"Does it hurt?" he called softly.

"Not really."

"The monster bit you?"

"I think so. I don't really remember so well."

"It carried you in in its mouth."

"Well, there you go." He pulled his stiff shirt back over his chest, moving carefully, then sat back against the wall, arm and claw hanging limp at his sides. He shut his eyes against the pain, a vein throbbing in his temple and adding a headache to his list of ailments.

"So what are we gonna do now?" CJ asked quietly.

"You're going to go to sleep. Aren't you tired?"

"Yeah. . . I was scared to fall asleep earlier 'cause I thought I'd wake up and you'd be gone."

Vincent opened his eyes and looked over towards him, his red gaze surprisingly comforting and gentle. "I'm not going to leave you, CJ," he said resolutely, "We're all going to get out of this together. You, Ifalna, and I. I'm going to sit up and think up a plan. You get some sleep and I'll keep watch. I'm here now. And you're both safe." The little boy lost himself in Vincent's words, believing him without question. He laid down besides Ifalna who'd already fallen asleep, her head leaning against the warmth of his side. He snuggled closer to her, and soon was softly snoring, his arm wrapped protectively around his sister.

Vincent sat quietly, fighting off the horrible pain that'd plagued him since he'd woken up. It was so intense it threatened to knock him back into unconsciousness. But no. He couldn't pass out now, he had to keep watch over Cloud's children. He had to plan their escape.

Why was he in so much pain? He couldn't understand it, the wounds hadn't been that severe. He writhed a bit, groaning. Something was wrong. Horrible agony shot through him, knocking the breath out of his lungs, but he kept himself from crying out, cherishing the peace that CJ and Ifalna had finally captured in their sleep, content to suffer silently if only to allow them to hold on to it.

"Does it hurt that badly?"

Vincent smiled, recognizing the hissing voice of the mako beast without even opening his eyes. Cold sweat snaked down

his face and he shivered, that simple movement sending bursts of pain into his head. He took a shaky breath.

"Speak quietly, "he said, his voice a gasp of pain, "You'll wake them up."

Surprisingly, the beast lowered its tone into a barely audible whisper. "Sorry, "it said and Vincent opened his eyes to look at it. It was solid and real now, not a mass of curling vapor. It's face was proud and noble, like a dragon's. It's body was massively muscled and rippled with strength. It glowed slightly green, throwing light onto the man's face and onto the spikes of bone that stuck out of its back. "Does it really hurt that much?" it repeated, eyeing the man coolly

"Nah, "Vincent murmured A burst of pain exploded against his insides and blackness crept into his vision. His eyes slipped shut. He felt as though he was dying. The mako creature stuck a claw into the cage and caught him before he struck the floor, nudging him back up into a sitting position. "Thanks."

"I'm going to kill you, "the beast said matter-of-factly Vincent shrugged as best as he was able.

"Do whatever you want, but let those children go."

"Not now, not yet, but I will kill you soon, "the thing continued as though he hadn't spoken.

"Why do you feel the need. . . "Vincent's voice trailed away as blackness swiped at his vision. Again, the mako monster had to catch him from falling, poking him in the shoulder to bring him back to consciousness. ". . why do you feel the need to-- to tell me that?"

"I don't want you thinking there is any way out of this. I don't want you to fight, in your stupid human way. Chieko, she has a different purpose for you. I just want you dead." The mako monster looked at Vincent with his head cocked at an angle, examining his pain-twisted face, wanting his words to sink in.

"Let the children go. . . "Vincent whispered, eyes shut, exhausted from the hurt. "You don't need them."

"We do need them. But don't worry, they'll come to no harm, I promise you that. After they've lead their father here to us, we'll release them. We don't want to hurt innocents. At least, I don't want to hurt innocents."

"How noble." Vincent felt as though he were suffocating, as though his head would burst, as though he were slowly dying. He breathed shallowly, like every breath was his last.

"It's Chieko's poison that you're feeling, "the beast said suddenly, "She filled you with it as she carried you in her jaws. It's more potent than my mako. My mako inundates you with life, life so strong, so pure that it kills you. Or at least it does if I allow it. But Chieko's poison is death, just the opposite, filling you with so much death that your life cries out in retaliation. Life is pain, pain is the only thing that let's you know you're truly living. Hence the sensation that you're feeling. If your heart doesn't stop first, you'll be fine, it'll fade soon enough."

"Let the children go. . . " Vincent's voice was barely above a whisper. Without emotion, the mako beast watched him writhe, curled into a fetal position now on the floor of the cage. The man couldn't fight it anymore. He was dying. Smiling slightly, he let what he assumed was death overtake his frame and he shuddered. He hadn't heard the beast's words. He could only hear the deafening noise of his blood beating in his head. His vision left him and he went limp, mouthing, "Let the children go. . . " but the words had no breath behind them. Chieko's poison was potent and the man was unconscious finally. The mako monster listened carefully, wanting to be sure that Vincent hadn't actually died. There. He could hear his rattling breaths, very quiet, very shallow, but still there. He turned away from the cage and began pacing slowly towards the exit of the room, thoughts dark. He'd been hoping that Chieko's death poison would kill him. He needed him dead. But not just him. The very Planet needed Vincent Valentine dead.

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Onward to Part Three: Branded

Argh, poor CJ and Ifalna. Hey, poor Vincent. Man, poor everybody, doesn't life just suck? What do you think that Chieko and mako beast are planning? Nothing good, I bet. Email me at GlassShard with your comments ^_^

Oh, and ya know that FFVII characters are copyrighted by Square, right? Okay, thought so.