

Volume VII



A NEW THREAT

FINAL FANTASY VII

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Since its release in 1997, Final Fantasy® VII has sold more than 10 million copies worldwide, making it one of the bestselling and most critically-acclaimed titles in video game history. Its success encouraged developers Square-Enix to continue the saga, telling the tale through various mediums.

The author of this novel (also known by his online alias ‘S and G’) has reproduced the saga in written form, basing the work closely on the Compilation of Final Fantasy® VII as a whole.

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This book is intended for private use only and is not for sale.

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PROLOGUE



The Flower Girl

It was a cloudless night above the city of Midgar, the darkened winter sky dotted with a thousand burning stars, the cold air numbing and penetrative. Gazing up, the young flower girl rose from her crouched position by the leaking Mako generator in the damp alleyway, and began towards the crowded metropolis street of Theatre Avenue. Her long pink dress, moistened by the round cobbles on which she had knelt, had become uncomfortable against her bare ankles. She glanced cautiously about her before raising her pale green eyes once again to the heavens, pulling her red denim jacket tighter around her chest. A nearby group of men whistled at her, waving as they stumbled drunkenly through the haze of people. She swung the basket of white and yellow lilies she carried back and forth across her body – a nervous habit she had adopted since her last flower cart had broken down – and, waiting patiently for the car to pass, she crossed the street.

As she stepped onto the low kerb on the opposite path, there came a terrible sound of thunder. Everything around her shook, throwing her mercilessly to her knees. The windows of Robson's Playhouse behind her exploded, scattering shards of glass over the pedestrians below. Long, rigid cracks appeared on the thick walls of the surrounding buildings, small chunks of their façades plummeting to the pavement. The frightened screams of many women rang out into the night, slicing through the air like wailing sirens. In the distance, above the rooftops, heavy black smoke

had begun to soar into the sky, sending its starry face into an eclipse.

The flower girl picked herself up. She groaned as she brushed the grime from her hands and dress, looking out over Fountain Plaza from beneath its sandstone archway entrance as she listened to each gasp and startled cry. In a corner of the space, a short way from where she stood, there emerged a party of five from a small lane hidden by the shadows. They were clad in unusual clothing, their voices hushed and secretive. After a few moments, the group dispersed, and all but one sped off across the square.

The lone man kept his gaze fixed straight ahead, as if deep in thought, his blonde hair drooping haphazardly over his handsome face. She began towards him, drawn by an uncontrollable urge; the coincidence of his likeness too great. *The hair...the outfit...that sword.* Taking quick, delicate steps, she pushed through the hoards of panic-stricken civilians to reach the man, her desire to speak with him a necessity in her mind.

“Excuse me?” she said softly as she drew near him. The man turned, his sparkling blue eyes passing once over her. “What happened?”



The Fight for the Planet

Cloud Strife heard the piercing whistle and sat up sharply, his eyes darting around the unlit carriage for traces of movement. The sound had dragged him unkindly from his thoughts; the murky world he had entered as he listened to the gentle rumble of the cargo train's engine. He scolded himself for allowing his concentration to drift, and exhaled, letting his tense body fall back into its slumped position against the shuddering wall once more. With a single rub of his weary eyes with the back of his brown, fingerless gloves, he lowered his hands to his knees, resting them on the baggy, dark blue combat trousers of his old uniform. Beneath him, he could feel the train gradually slowing, watching the dusty wooden crates of the hold tremble each time the brakes of the MK600 were applied.

“Crap!” he muttered in a low voice, pulling himself from the hard floor and adjusting the spiked armoured pauldron on his left shoulder.

He braced himself as the train pulled into the Sector1 industrial station, his body emitting a faint moan as he leant forward to grasp the thin handle of his Buster Sword. The great silver blade was made of a hard, durable steel alloy, trimmed at its base with gilded carvings around two circular holes, its parallel edges unequal in length; the shortest of which ended after four feet, but growing half a foot farther in order to meet the other at a deadly point. Cloud snatched the heavy weapon from the floor and held

it aloft for a second, the taut red leather around the handle a comfort against his fingertips.

As soon as the locomotive had drawn to a halt, he slung the greatsword over his back where it clung to its magnetic holder on his braces, and crossed the carriage to the shutters on the far wall. The doors were weak and rotting, and opened easily. He stepped out into the shadowy depot, the night air cool against his tired face. The nearby broken bodies of two dead guards were sprawled awkwardly on the grey concrete platform, the neck of one badly twisted. Ahead, he could see the enormous figure of Barret, the team leader, hastily climbing the steps to the depot's north entrance. Cloud scoured the compound, preparing himself for a possible assault on whatever security remained. When at last ten uneventful seconds had come and gone, he moved swiftly into the open.

“Hey?” came a shrill whisper from above. Cloud turned to see Wedge, another of the mercenaries, perched on the curved roof of the train, and again cursed himself under his breath that he must quickly regain his acute vigilance.

Wedge was short and heavy in build, his features highlighted by the tight yellow t-shirt he wore beneath his utility belt. Cloud guessed he was a couple of years younger than himself, possibly eighteen or nineteen. Wedge had been the least outgoing of the five-member team for the brief minutes Cloud had spent with them, listening silently as Barret had dictated exactly how he wanted his operation to be executed. Now, as he gazed up at Wedge, Cloud saw the teenager point a grubby finger beyond him to his left, towards the tall, arched exit a short distance from the head of the train.

“Area's secure. Head for the Reactor. I'll clean up here.”

Cloud nodded, and began to jog across the platform, the dull thumping of his large army boots echoing in the stillness of the yard. The station opened onto a wide, cobbled pavement, the round stones shimmering in the brilliant green glow of the lampposts. The factory buildings and warehouses on either side of the street appeared old and unkempt; their graffiti-laden walls

chipped and grimy. In the distance, west of the depot, stood the high gates of the Reactor complex, their menacing silhouette looming over the paths like ever-watchful eyes. Keeping to the shadows, he stealthily edged along the street, creeping in and out of the green light. As he approached, he could make out the shapes of Biggs and Jessie huddled together at the side of the gates.

He had encountered both previously, but had heard their names only in passing. Biggs was a youngster who, unlike Wedge, had made his presence at their briefing known. His thick, black hair was tied back with a red bandanna, his brown-eyed gaze cocky and arrogant. Jessie was the only female of the group, in her mid-twenties, and had been identified as the team's computer expert; a skill their leader had seen as crucial.

She was fiddling with the small, black laptop she had managed to connect to the control panel on the large doorway when Cloud pulled up behind them. He waited, without sound, for a long while, studying Jessie's efforts to gain entry to the Reactor closely. A series of meaningless binary codes flashed back and forth over the screen as the decryption program hacked the system, the pulsing digits almost a blur. Jessie swore, running her hands anxiously through the auburn hair she had thrown casually in a ponytail.

"You used to be in SOLDIER, right?" asked Biggs after a short time, the note of suspicion evident in his tone. He continued to stare at the laptop, tapping his foot rhythmically against the damp street, caressing his thin goatee. "Not every day ya find someone like you in a group like AVALANCHE."

"SOLDIER?" squeaked Jessie. "Aren't they the enemy?"

"Ex-SOLDIER. He quit and is one of us now." said Biggs, choosing this moment to turn around. He gave Cloud a quick half-smile. "Hey, I didn't catch your name."

"Cloud."

"Cloud, eh? I'm..."

“I know who you are.” Cloud grunted. “Listen, I don’t work for either SOLDIER or AVALANCHE. I’m only being paid to get this job done, and once it’s over...I’m outta here.”

“Whatever, man.” Biggs mumbled, tightening his bandanna. There was a tense silence, the teenager’s expression one of ridicule as his eyes returned to the screen.

“Hey!” hissed a gruff voice from behind them. The three turned to see the operation leader storming down the deserted street towards the gate.

Barret Wallace was an unnaturally tall, muscular man, his broad shape gargantuan in comparison to most. Clad in dark green combats and an unbuttoned, brown leather jacket whose sleeves had been torn from the shoulders, his dark-skinned chest exposed above a silver waist-guard. He had a short, black crew-cut and a thick beard of the same shade, and the constant growl of his fierce sunken eyes always seemed to threaten the party; but it was not his furious glare nor the deep scar on the right side of his face that intimidated them most.

Barret had long since lost his right arm but, in its place, grafted to his bulging limb slightly below the elbow, was a six-barrelled gatling-gun. Its ammo was compressed into the wide disc between the weapon and his joint, the coil of bullets wrapped within its greasy walls. He held his arm high as he charged, the stained metal dark and grey. It was his symbol for rebellion; for his war against Shinra.

“What the hell’re ya doin’?” he spat again, his wide nostrils flaring.

“We’re breakin’ in.” replied Biggs sarcastically.

“I thought I told you never to move as a group?” Barret snarled as he neared them. Wedge could be seen stumbling behind, struggling to catch his breath. “Idiots!”

“But...” started Biggs.

“Shut up.” snapped Barret. “How we doin’?”

There was a *bleep* from the control panel and Jessie took a step back. From within the complex, there came a faint rumble of machinery, and with a great groan, the gate began to part.

“Doors opening.” she whispered.

“Good work, Jessie.” said Barret. “Right, I’ll go over it one last time. Our target’s the North Mako Reactor. Meet on the T-junction bridge at its entrance. Security shouldn’t be very tight, given the time, but be careful. If anyone gets caught, you’re on your own. Okay, move out!”

The group warily entered the dark enclosure, Barret commanding the route he wished each of them to follow. As they separated, Cloud found himself glancing up at the shell of the main building. Its exterior was shaped like an enormous fin, housing an entire office wing, and acting as the casing for the industrial furnace. He clenched his jaw as his eyes fell upon the red Shinra Diamond painted at its height, and remembered his days in the Shinra Army, swearing his allegiance to the Company, and all they stood for. *How times had changed: a once-loyal member of SOLDIER, returning as a mercenary to haunt the very people who had deceived him.*

Trailing a north-westerly path, Cloud came to the bridge quicker than he had anticipated, encountering only a few Shinra guards as he slipped silently through the black maze of crates and chemical containers. He had covertly knocked most of them unconscious, leaving their still bodies hidden in the shadows. The bridge was not really a bridge at all, but a suspended metal grid connecting the outer shell of the facility to both main exits. Several hundred feet below, Cloud could see the Sector1 Slums spreading out from the belly of the Reactor. The ruined landscape was a slur of brown and grey from this height, disappearing under the Plate to his left, and towards the outskirts of Midgar to his right, as if in a great effort to remove itself from the upper-city’s leering glare.

He chose to stay in the dimness of the passage, delaying his crossing of the walkway until he was certain it was secure. *I’ve already made two mistakes tonight...there won’t be a third.* Minutes passed as he remained in the exit, peering out over the bridge as he waited for the appearance of another of the group. All that could be heard were the distant cries of disturbed birds

and an occasional drunkard's holler from the sector's suburb a number of miles off. He observed the thick bursts of smoke as it escaped the domed head of the Reactor's chimney, and stared, mesmerised, as it soared into the cold night air in unsynchronized spurts of pale green mist, obscuring the midnight sky.

Cloud's gaze shot back to the narrow tunnel opposite him, the sharp *clang* alerting him to his senses. He saw Barret and Jessie waiting in the opening, their voices lowered, and stepped momentarily out from the darkness to reveal his position. Barret nodded in acknowledgment of his presence and, scanning the area carefully, he motioned for Biggs and Jessie to follow him. Cautiously, they made their way towards the centre of the grid. Cloud hung back for a second, but moved out as they reached the perpendicular junction, knowing that if they had been seen, an ambush would have already taken place.

"Hey, newcomer, hurry up." ordered Barret. "It's this way."

They marched hastily across the bridge, quickening their step as they passed through the entrance of the plant. Cloud turned to see Wedge signal to him, remaining stationary in the tunnel as lookout. The four continued down the wide unattended hallway, a series of orange filament lamps their only light, until they came to a dead-end, a single electronically-locked door their only means of proceeding farther into the facility. Jessie looked up at Barret as she crouched next to the doorway and, when his nod of satisfaction finally came, she pulled her laptop from the battered and bruised rucksack she carried and began to work at the security panel.

"This your first time in a Reactor?" Barret asked as he and Cloud stood over her, counting the seconds before their next move. Cloud snorted.

"I used to work for Shinra." he said coldly. "What do *you* think?"

"The Planet's full of Mako energy." said Barret, frowning. "People here use it every day. It's the lifeblood of the Planet, but the suits at Shinra keep suckin' it out with these weird machines.

The more they suck out the Mako, the weaker the Planet gets. It's only a matter of time before..."

"Look, I'm not here to listen to your speeches." Cloud interjected. "Let's just hurry and get outta here."

"Ex-SOLDIER, huh?" growled Barret. "Tifa's old friend don't cut it for me; I don't trust ya. You're comin' with me from now on!"

"Figures." he muttered.

"Code deciphered." said Jessie, redirecting Barret's attention as he opened his mouth to reply. There came a thunderous *clunk*, and she and Biggs stepped forward to heave the heavy doors apart. They opened into a second, slimmer hallway, many corridors and stairways branching off from the polished tile floor.

"Which way?" asked Biggs.

"Straight ahead." said Jessie, her eyes locked firmly on the monitor of her laptop, reading from the blueprints of the Reactor's interior. "Take the third turn on your right. Big doors. It's marked 'Machine Room'."

Biggs led them as instructed, carefully checking the relative corridor before disappearing into its shadows. He brought them to a large, spacious chamber, adorned by several tall pipes and oil-stained pistons throughout. The air inside was tight and sticky, irritating to breathe, a few useless ventilation turbines rotating endlessly overhead, the multiple clicks inharmonious. A row of computer panels lined the back wall, the faces of all but one dead, above which hung numerous caution signs, warning of the dangerous gases present in the building's lower levels.

The rusting silver doors to an elevator stood in one corner, the lift seemingly the only other access to the machine room besides the adjacent office. All but Biggs crossed the long room and entered the elevator. The interior was a mass of buttons, their markings letters of an ancient alphabet. Cloud hit the 'down' button by the door and, when all three were safely inside, they began to descend.

"Little by little, the Reactors'll drain out all o' the Planet's life, and that'll be that." Barret continued to lecture. Cloud looked up

at him blankly, shrugging, but made no effort to respond. “Don’t you get it? The Planet’s dyin’, Cloud!”

“That’s not my problem.” came the flat reply. “The only thing I care about is finishin’ the mission before Shinra send in any soldiers or security robots.”

Barret gritted his teeth, his eyes screaming with rage, but said nothing. He turned away from Cloud and pulled the bullet belt from around his waist. Sliding open the slot on his gun-arm, he thrust the belt inside, cursing in silence. Cloud looked up to see Jessie staring at him, but she glanced away quickly, her expression growing nervous. There was a drone from the elevator wires and, with a smooth deceleration, their ride came to a gradual halt. When the doors finally parted, Cloud and Barret moved hurriedly out.

They emerged on a balcony overlooking the pale green pool of liquid Mako that danced around the base of the Reactor. Cloud calculated that they were now beneath the earth; the vibrant streams only in abundance below the surface. Before them, a single walkway extended out over the depths to the core activation system and pressure valve at the centre of the main Reactor. The valve was the control device for the enormous cylinder that was the protective casing to the Reactor’s internal machinery. It grew both high above and low below them, a mass of large pipes penetrating it at many different stages, arcing down to extract the energising Mako from the rivers. The substance swirled around the foot of the cylinder, staining its thick metal walls. Bright mists of the toxic fumes rose up through the tower, seeping onto the walkway where the two stood, and all the platforms they could see on the levels above.

As predicted by Barret, there were no scientists or technicians working at that time of night, a single sleeping guard the only other life. The man sat in his chair by the activation system at the far end of the grid, his arms folded, his red cap pulled down over his face, snoring. On the large monitor beside the guard, Cloud could see himself, captured by the overhead surveillance system.

They would have to be quick now that they were in full view of the enemy.

He began forward, his strides long and purposeful. The twin metal grating lines below his boots rattled noisily as he stalked across the walkway. Drawing nearer, he saw the man stir in his chair. The guard groaned, stretching his arms into the air, and glanced up, his eyes filling with fright. As he reached for his gun, Cloud's fist connected devastatingly with his face, the spray of blood splattering over his uniform.

The man howled in pain and confusion, groping clumsily at his nose as he tried to stand. Cloud kicked him hard in the stomach, the blow forcing him to double over as he cried out a second time. He stared vacantly at the helpless guard, his thoughts cold and merciless, watching as Barret pushed past him and grabbed the man by the throat, effortlessly hurling him backwards into the control system. The panels crackled and died as he smashed against them, a faint smoke escaping as he slumped to the floor.

Barret towered over the unmoving body and grinned; a wicked, vengeful grin; his hatred for Shinra leaking through the glazed expression. After a moment he looked away, his focus fixed on the pressure valve of the Reactor; the machinery's only manual shut-down mechanism. It was placed on a semi-circular panel which extended from the main cylinder, surrounded by a series of diodes and levers. The red diamond emblem had been painted slightly above the valve, the words 'Shinra Electric Power Company' written across it in gold. There came a strange humming sound from within, the noise dull and infectious.

"When we put this place into meltdown, it ain't gonna be nothin' more than a hunk o' junk!" snorted Barret, motioning for Cloud to join him by the valve. "Okay, SOLDIER-boy, you set the bomb."

"Shouldn't you do it?" Cloud asked, puzzled.

"Just do it! I wanna make sure you don't pull nothin'."

"Whatever, man."

Taking the device from Barret, Cloud found the small plastic explosive lighter than expected. He knelt down, concentrating as

he searched the panel for a suitable resting place for the time bomb, but stopped. There came a sharp, piercing drone in his ears, and his body was numbed beyond control. His mind ached, sending him into a haze of wild thoughts.

* * *

“Watch out,” he said as he hauled the door aside, “it appears this isn’t just a Reactor...”

* * *

“...what the hell?”

“Huh?” stammered Cloud. He looked over to see Barret glaring at him.

“What’s wrong? Hurry it up.”

“Yeah...sorry.” he mumbled, and leant forward to place the bomb directly below the valve.

He could hear Barret’s heavy breathing behind him as he punched in the code, the deep, throaty gasps annoying. Cloud set the countdown to twenty minutes, leaving them enough time to reach a safe distance. Suddenly, as he pressed the button to initiate the bomb, the alarm overhead burst into a scream, its low wail a continuous resonance within the high sweeping walls of the Reactor. Cloud sprang to his feet, heaving his greatsword from over his shoulder.

“Heads up!” shouted Barret. “Here they come.”

A barrage of bullets rained down upon the two intruders, the *twang* of chipped metal ringing out over the grid. Dozens of Shinra soldiers were swarming onto the platforms above Barret and Cloud, the sights on their automatic rifles fixed on them. Sparks flew in all directions as the shots bounced off the ground, flames of flickering orange dancing at their feet. Cloud risked a glance towards the elevator, Jessie’s beckoning wave seeming a thousand miles away.

There came a deafening roar as Cloud broke into a sprint, deflecting the bullets with rapid and skilful sword movements, Barret's gun-arm exploding into life as he came pounding along the walkway. The shells of the spinning gatling-gun tore through armour and flesh, the wounded infantrymen toppling over barriers and plunging into the deadly rivers below. Shots whizzed over his head, buzzing as they zipped past his ears. Running and ducking, and diving out of the way of the onslaught of enemy fire, they grew nearer the elevator, their legs pumping harder as their goal became ever closer. Jessie slammed the doors shut as they launched themselves inside, shielding herself from the trail of bullets that followed, and punched the button to take them back to the Plate.

The ascent seemed to last only seconds, Cloud's head thumping with the echo of gunfire. Darting into the machine room as the lift doors slid apart, he pulled his loosening braces and the Buster Sword's magnet tighter against his back, his thoughts a whirl as he charged alongside Jessie across the grubby floor, their entire surroundings now a flashing red. Barret barked unheard commands at the stunned Biggs from behind them, his booming voice barely penetrating the shrieking klaxons as he warned of their chase.

Taking a few seconds to heed the anxious cries of Jessie for him to run, Biggs spun on the spot, racing along the hallway to the main corridor. Reaching the turn, Cloud saw the boy's face fill with terror, skidding to a halt and ducking as a throwing knife sailed inches over his head, embedding itself in the plastic wall next to him. As if in a single motion, he took off again, disappearing down the passage from which they had entered the facility.

Cloud hurtled around the corner next, swinging his sword with all his strength as a glint of silver caught his eye. The might of his parry sent the flying blade back towards its wielder, forcing the young woman to leap agilely for cover behind the office stairwell. In the instant it took for his brain to register her outfit, a great

swell of realisation coursed through his body, turning him on his heels instinctively.

“Run!” he bellowed, tearing down the corridor after Barret and Jessie. “They’re here!”

Adrenaline raged around his veins as he came to the bridge, the stampede of boots growing from the hallways behind. He heard Jessie call out to him from the tunnel at the opposite side of the junction, but chose to ignore her, his trained mind working at speed. Turning quickly, he could make out the blue figures of the approaching soldiers through the dimness, and knew that they would be upon him in seconds. Grabbing the leather brace on his chest, he yanked a hand grenade from his pocket, pulling out the pin as he let the bomb fall to the grid.

“Get down!” he shouted, watching the others shield themselves as he dashed along the walkway towards them.

Hurling himself into the tunnel, Cloud felt the blast rip the bridge from beneath him, showering him with acrid dust and steel as he landed heavily on cold stone. Scrambling hastily to his feet, he peered back at the smouldering entrance to the facility, met only by the furious burning gaze of the woman. Through the thick smog he saw how pale she seemed, her dark bobbed hair falling across one side of her thin face. She wore the tight black suit uniform that he had come to know so well; an ill omen for most who witnessed it. Taking his eyes from hers, he looked grimly back at the others as they slowly stood, nursing their aching limbs, and realised they had no time to catch their breaths before the Army came for them again. Without sound, he set off down the tunnel, his determination driving him to reach the nearby sewers, and his escape into the night.

* * *

The detonation eventually came, a huge fireball soaring into the sky, the red flames of the crumbling Reactor lighting up the city. Cloud pulled the manhole cover closed as he surveyed the remote blaze beyond the rooftops, until all was submerged by smoke.

Trotting silently down the dark cobbled lane, he caught up with the others a number of paces in front of him, his ears still resonating with the blast. Even as far from the Sector1 limits as they were, the ripples of energy had found them, shaking the cramped sewer walls around them, and a sense that something had gone terribly wrong seemed to envelope the party.

The alley brought them at last to the Sector8 town square, bustling with the commotion of frightened and bewildered citizens. Taking a few seconds to blend in with the crowds, they retreated to the shadows of the bordering tenements, wary of suspicious eyes. Small pieces of jagged stone had come hurtling down from the side of the Les Marronniers Hotel not far from where they stood, smashing into thousands of fragments on the pavement, sending wisps of dirt swirling about their legs. In the aftermath of the explosion, there had ensued an eerie silence that smothered even the startled wails of people, now fading in the rising sound of emergency sirens. Thick smoke continued to belch from the distant site, black and heavy, disappearing into the night.

“That was much bigger than I’d imagined it’d be.” muttered Biggs at last, gazing up at the sinister cloud far above the clock tower. The large oval clock face had lost its minute hand, now simply reading ‘one’. “But, at least it should keep the Planet goin’ a little longer.”

“Yeah.” agreed Jessie quietly, shivering in the cold, her grime-covered face lowered towards the ground.

“Now what?” said Wedge.

“We’d better get outta here.” replied Barret in a hushed voice. “No doubt the Shinra’ve already dispatched SOLDIER to catch us. Everyone, rendezvous at the Sector8 station as planned. Split up and get on the train.”

“Hey!” hissed Cloud, grabbing Barret’s arm as he jogged off.

“If it’s about your money,” snapped Barret, pulling away, “save it ‘til we get back to the hideout.”

Cloud frowned as the group departed, leaving him alone in the chaotic Fountain Plaza. Remaining where he stood for a few

moments, his jaw clenched with resentment, he stared straight ahead, absently watching as the street lamps began to splutter and die; the blast having destroyed the electrical circuits. He could feel the faint droplets of grey fallout on his bare arms and face, the taste of burning on his tongue. Beyond the archway that led to Theatre Avenue, the advertisement posters of Robson's Playhouse for the 'Loveless' and 'Velvet Voix' productions had been torn from the wall, the bright colours of the long banners now dissolving into the path. The windows of Goblin's Bar had shattered, the glass strewn across an upturned car on the road. He closed his eyes, feeling the anger and confusion of the people around him, listening to their yells for answers, and it was then that he heard her.

"Excuse me?" came the soft voice from behind, scarcely detectable amid the turmoil. Cloud turned slowly, a strange sensation taking hold, and found himself gazing into the large, pale green eyes of a young woman. She smiled, brushing a strand of fringe from her angelic face. Her hair was long and brown, tied back with a ribbon and bobble of flower petals, and plaited as it reached down her spine. She was dressed in a pink, ankle-length dress, the buttons undone below her knees, and carried a small basket with her, the yellow and white lilies inside concealed somewhat by the thin blanket of dust that had settled. "What happened?"

"I...uh...I don't know." Cloud said quickly, shifting his eyes from the girl to the gathering squad of Shinra infantrymen at the base of the broad stone stairway opposite.

The armoured plating of their pallid blue Security Division uniforms stood out against the weakly-lit backdrop, the flickering lampposts reflected in the golden visors of their helmets as they spoke amongst themselves. The soldiers strained under the eagerness of their snarling guard hounds to break free from their leashes, some resorting to kicking the less tame of the canines in order to maintain control. Apparently acting on radioed orders, they suddenly moved sharply off down a nearby street, unwilling even to help the wounded in their path.

“Are you alright?” asked the girl, returning Cloud’s attention to her.

“I...um...yeah...” he stammered, conversing idly as the soldiers passed from sight. “I don’t see many flowers around here.”

“Oh, these?” she beamed, holding out the basket. “Do you like them? They’re only a gil.”

“Huh?” Cloud stared at her blankly.

“How about this one?” she offered, selecting a large white lily from the bunch.

“You...uh...” he faltered, his mind screaming for him to leave. Without concentrating, he pulled a small golden coin reflexively from his braces and tossed it into the basket, accepting the flower from the girl.

“Thank you.” she said, smiling gratefully “So, do you...?”

“I have to go.” Cloud interrupted abruptly, the words wilfully escaping his mouth.

“Oh,” she responded, a faint hint of disappointment in her voice as she glanced sheepishly at her feet, “I just thought...it doesn’t matter. I’m sorry to keep you...”

Although Cloud knew that his time window to reach the rendezvous point was thinning by the second, his heart desperately bade him not to desert the flower girl. He was mystified by this inner reaction, frustrated by his inability to overcome the abnormal feeling. *I need to get outta here. But, this girl...I’ve never seen her before, yet she seems so familiar. What the hell’s wrong with me?*

Growing annoyed with his mixed emotions, he took one last look at her pale complexion, and shook his head, stuffing the lily into his pocket as he started across the square in the direction the others had followed. He passed the large circular water fountain at the centre of the chequered area, picturesque but for the graffiti smear on its white marble rim that read ‘AVALANCHE: Protectors of the Planet’, and down a narrow alleyway between two rows of apartment blocks.

The lane brought him to a wide path, branching off to reveal a small segment of railway below, the dark tracks fading into the

underground tunnel. A low wall enclosed the section, a plastic signpost for the nearby station nailed to the brown granite. Only the discarded paper pamphlets for 'Loveless' dancing at his feet seemed to disturb the tranquil spot, some clinging to his legs, others fluttering across the road in the early morning breeze.

"You there!" he heard a man call suddenly as he stepped out onto the path. "You with the weapon! Show some identification!"

Cloud glanced up to see a second team of Shinra soldiers edging towards him from the adjacent street, their rifles raised at his chest. The faces of the privates remained hidden behind the screens of their masks, but he knew each one bore a menacing stare. He had forgotten about the Buster Sword, still strapped to his back, and knew he could be arrested for its unlicensed possession. Without warning, there came the lasting screech of a train's whistle from close by, and the rumbling underfoot grew heavier and heavier.

"I don't have time to be messin' around with you guys." he said defiantly, sprinting forward and leaping onto the stone wall.

"Halt! That's as far as you go!" roared the soldiers. "Someone grab him!"

Cloud closed his eyes again. For a moment he felt at peace; a sense of freedom washing over him. He heard the thunderous rush of boots storming along the street; but it was in vain. The shrill whistle pierced the night again, the sound within touching distance. It reached out to him; summoned him. The chilled wind blew against his face, its icy fingers crawling along his skin. With a final breath, he looked up, catching a glimpse of the tall Shinra Headquarters against the sleepless landscape of Sector0 at the city's centre. As the soldiers prepared to fire in a frantic attempt to prevent his flight, he exhaled, and threw himself from the wall.



The Promise

“Cloud never came.” Wedge said quietly, rubbing the mess of dark hair beneath his red do-rag.

He let his body slump against the crates of the cargo hold, the rough wood scraping his t-shirt as he slid down. The others did not speak for a time, their faces long and thoughtful. Wedge felt his eyes become heavy, listening to the drone of the locomotive’s engine, and to the vibrations of the carriage walls. The whistle sounded, letting them know the descent to the Slums was not far off. He sighed, expelling air that felt like a great weight upon his chest.

“I wonder if he was...caught.” muttered Biggs, eventually lifting his head from its position against the shutters on the side of the car.

“Doubt it.” answered Barret without enthusiasm. “He can look after himself.”

Biggs nodded, his sullen expression unchanging as his gaze sank back towards the floorboards. Silence again fell over the party, broken a short while later only by a muffled *thump* on the curved ceiling above them. Barret gazed up, his narrowed eyes studying the roof and the steel racks that rattled overhead. Their stomachs lurched momentarily as the train began to dip, reaching the city’s main railway line, making its way downwards around the Plate’s core support structure, the Central Complex.

“D’you think Cloud’ll fight to the end for AVALANCHE?” Biggs asked absently, his attention drawn by the small stones rolling towards the end of the hold with the floor’s decline.

“How the hell would I know?” snapped Barret, pounding the nearest crate with his enormous fist. “Do I look like a damn mind reader? The spiky-headed jerk isn’t even here.”

“What’s going to happen about our money?” said Wedge.

“Well, if y’all weren’t such screw-ups...” Barret barked, grabbing an empty box and hurtling it across the car at him.

“It’s...uh...nothin’...” Wedge mumbled, cowering as the box crashed against him. “Sorry, sir...”

As Jessie opened her mouth to protest, there came a second *thump* on the roof, followed by a low rumbling. The group exchanged wary glances, the sound disturbing them. Suddenly, the frail timber shutters flew apart, spilling the frozen air of the railway tunnel in through the gaping hole. Biggs stumbled backwards, grasping at something to stop him falling from the train, and found the extended arm of Jessie. Barret reacted first, raising his gun-arm towards the wide doorway, lining up his target. They waited, unmoving, as the luminous yellow lights on the stone pillars rushed past, blinding their sight for brief moments at a time. After a few seconds, the Buster Sword came hurtling through the open space and clattered noisily against the hard floor at Barret’s feet.

“Cloud!” cried Jessie. She gaped in awe as he manoeuvred himself from the roof of the speeding locomotive and swung into the car, landing in a crouched position amongst them.

“What happened to you?” demanded Barret, lowering his arm.

“Got side-tracked.” replied Cloud, dusting himself down as he rose. “Am I late?”

“Damn right you’re late!” growled Barret. “Comin’ waltzin’ in here and makin’ a big scene.”

“Whatever.” he scoffed dismissively.

“You don’t give a damn ‘bout no-one but yourself. We’re s’posed to work as a team. This is comin’ outta your pay, hotstuff.” He

pushed himself away from the wall and, barging Cloud aside, stalked towards the narrow doorway at the end of the carriage. “Wake up, knuckleheads. We’re movin’ out. Follow me.”

He slammed the door behind him, shaking it at its hinges. Biggs moved first, trudging slowly along the hold, with Wedge close behind. Cloud watched as Jessie stepped past him and hauled the shutters together. The sound of the rushing air died away in an instant, laying a veil of what seemed like makeshift silence over the pair. She smiled feebly at him, her freckled cheeks beaming a radiant pink, and scurried away. Cloud paused for a moment, reminded of his puzzling thoughts regarding the bizarre encounter with the flower girl. Snatching his sword from the ground and returning it to the magnet on his back, he began after Barret. *Get a hold of yourself...*

As he passed through the doorway and into the adjacent carriage, there came a recorded announcement over the loudspeaker; the crackling female voice listing the stops they would be making during the journey, ending in Lower Sector7: the Train Graveyard. The passenger car was much brighter than the cargo hold, a thin line of bulbs stretching along the centre of the ceiling. It was occupied by a lone beggar, his old face rugged and stained, lying beneath a torn woollen blanket on the hard bench.

“Thish ish my houshe.” he slurred drunkenly as Cloud walked by. “Make yourshelves at home.”

On his right, the windows showed the dark Midgar Slums melting away towards the invisible horizon, and he knew that they had already journeyed below the domain of the upper-city. He could make out three of the Reactor shells at the metropolis’ limits, the bulbous bodies of the facilities marking the boundary of the Plate. For miles, dim oranges and yellows could be seen, hidden only by the single Pillar at each sector’s centre, the lights of the sleepy villages fading away. Then, all was black again, the train travelling within another tunnel as it passed the border between Sector3 and Sector4, winding its way towards the earth.

Moving along the car, Cloud looked up to see Jessie gesturing for him to join her with one hand, pulling the ringlets of her hair from her face with the other. She waited by the small computer monitor at the far end of the carriage, the display buzzing to life, emitting a brilliant green glow. He reluctantly obeyed and, as he drew nearer, found himself gazing at the screen's three-dimensional map of Midgar.

Midgar had been originally built as a town but, as with every industrial revolution, expanded into what had gradually become the largest city on the Planet. However, as the world modernised, so had the city, giving birth to the multi-billion gil company, Shinra, Inc. Primarily established as Shinra Manufacturing Works, the discovery of Mako energy had granted Shinra an immortal status, swallowing their competition and becoming a monopolistic mega corporation. Their privatisation of the Armed Forces meant that the democratic parliament came to rely on them and, over time, faded into nothing more than a shadow government without influence.

Shinra had dominated global politics, economics and military affairs since the War with the Wutai Empire ended seven years before, and only a handful of incidents from resistance organisations had significantly challenged this. To coincide with the milestone celebrations which marked two millennia of the historical era $[\mu]$ - $\epsilon\gamma\lambda$, President Shinra had declared a new age, $[\nu]$ - $\epsilon\gamma\lambda$, welcomed by a population content with affordable energy, low taxes and modern technology.

Within thirty years of its founding, the company had constructed a second, slightly smaller city above the first, a symbol of its supremacy and triumph over nature. It was built upon a magnificent circular base, designed to satisfy the demands of the company's elite, and to become the location for Shinra, Inc.'s Headquarters. The Plate was now one of the Planet's main cultural and industrial hubs, boasting contemporary architecture and even tranquil public parks. However, held aloft by eight scaling Pillars, as well as the Central Complex, it had removed the

lower-city's sunlight, turning it into a wasteland of impoverishment and crime; into what was now known as the 'Slums'.

Both the Plate and the Slums were separated into several individual sectors, numbered 1 to 8, which in turn were divided into residential, industrial and market districts, but although the towns had once had their own identity, their names had drifted from memory. The Plate housed the higher echelons of Shinra employees and wealthier citizens, while in the Slums dwelled the poorer classes, living in the filthy, smelling waste of those above. Though public tunnels and elevators had until recently been available for use, entry to the Plate was now strictly monitored by the authorities in light of years of anti-Shinra activity, and could only be accessed by train.

The map on the display showed the vastness of the Slums and the Plate of the city, connected by a series of railway lines that circled the Central Complex, and the great height at which the Shinra Building stood at its core, the sky-scraping Headquarters the pinnacle of the city's design. Around the diagram of the main support structure, a broken yellow line appeared on one of the charted train routes, spiralling down to the Planet's surface and then disappearing to repeat the process.

"Isn't this program wonderful?" blushed Jessie, reading Cloud's blunt expression. "I like these kinda things. Bombs and computers...y'know, flashy stuff. According to AVALANCHE's rules, we have to memorise lots of information like this by heart. I'm great when it comes to technology or blueprints, but Barret can talk about pretty difficult subjects and principals sometimes. That's when it gets too complicated for me. But, I have faith that what he teaches us is right, and he's so dedicated to our cause. Just between us, he's not as stupid as people think.

"Anyway, let me explain this to you. This map is a complete model of Midgar, about one millionth to scale. The Plate's about five-hundred feet above ground. The dotted line shows the course our train is on. We're above Sector4 just now. You can

tell because it's the only part of the Plate still under construction. The red markers on the screen are the I.D. checkpoints. At each checkpoint, a sensor device has been set up. It can check the identities and background of each and every passenger on the train by linking it up to the central data bank at Headquarters. Anyone could tell we look suspicious, so we use fake I.D.s. It seems this train hasn't switched to security mode yet, but I'm sure that'll have changed by tomorrow."

She grinned, winking at him, and reached over to switch the screen off. The train's whistle resonated again, and they began to slow, pulling into a station. The carriage shuddered violently as they came to a halt, waking Biggs from his casual slumber on one of the seats. Cloud yawned and, dragging his feet over the sticky floor, sat down opposite Barret, leaning his greatsword against a board at the end of the row. He shut his eyes, the vision of the monitor replaying in his mind as the train started to move again. When at last he opened them, he was met by Barret's cold frown. He nodded at the window behind Cloud.

"We're almost home; you can see most of the underside now." he said, his tone one of distaste. "Cause o' the Plate, most o' the Slums don't have no night or day."

"A floating city..." muttered Cloud, glancing out over the dark landscape as it slipped by. "I rarely used to see it from down here. Pretty unsettling scenery."

"Yeah." Barret grunted. "Never expected to hear that outta someone like you, though. You're jus' full o' surprises. The upper-world...a city on a Plate. If it wasn't there, we could see the sky. It's 'cause o' that frickin' pizza that people below are sufferin'! The Slums are full of polluted air. An' on top o' that, the damn Reactors keep drainin' up all the energy."

"Then, why doesn't everyone just move onto the Plate?"

"Dunno." Barret sighed. "Probably 'cause they ain't got no money...or maybe 'cause they love their land, no matter how polluted it gets."

“I guess no one really lives in the Slums because they want to.” Cloud acknowledged, pulling the Buster Sword closer as he began stroking the intricate gold trimming at its butt with his fingertips. “It’s like this train; it can’t run anywhere except where its rails take it...”

* * *

“Yo, get over here.” called Barret as the group stepped, one by one, onto the run-down Sector7 station. He stood at the base of the ruined concrete stairs, tapping his foot impatiently as he waited for them to gather by his side. The station master paced back and forth along the platform, drifting amongst the few passengers, his red uniform taut over his bulging waist. Cloud was last to exit the car, greeted by the daunting sight of the Train Graveyard, causing his thoughts to wander.

An eeriness had fallen over him, the images that he had awoken to the week before seeping into his mind. The backdrop was blurred by a thin haze about him, the fumes of burning oil almost ghost-like. Through the raised piles of rubble was the cargo depot, and beyond that derailed train carriages were strewn motionless on their sides, damaged and unwanted, lain to waste in the Slums by Shinra. He could see a party of beggars huddled around a fire, their faces each telling a sad tale. Uncaring, he turned away, indifferent to the grim reality faced by the homeless men and women, and made his way down towards the others.

“The mission was a success.” Barret declared in a triumphant whisper. “But don’t get lazy now, the hard part’s still to come. An’ don’t none of y’all be scared of that explosion, ‘cause we gotta be prepared for anythin’. Alright, meet at the hideout. Move out!”

Biggs and Jessie gave a small clap which startled Cloud. He shot both of them a look of annoyance at their lack of professionalism, his gaze fierce and uncompromising. He waited without sound as Barret and the youngsters vanished into the distance, heading

southwest along the worn dirt path. When at last they had disappeared from view, he began to walk steadily in the same direction, following the group towards the nameless village that was their destination.

Prior to meeting AVALANCHE, Cloud had rarely experienced such poverty. In his early days with the Army, he had witnessed the Slum riots on television, but the images had been softened somewhat by a pro-Shinra broadcast and his mind had accepted what it saw. Everything appeared so grey and lifeless, spreading out around him, pinning down the mask of destitution over the once-prosperous areas of the city. The air felt heavy, a musky odour rising from the heaps of waste. Cloud limited his breathing to a minimum, fearing the inhalation of the soiled grime that he could almost taste. Beside him, the station platform was no more, the tracks ending abruptly in a large mound of sand.

He looked up, allowing his weary eyes to come to rest on the Sector7 Pillar. The enormous granite column stood alone at the centre of the sector, a few miles from each of the sector gateways, and had been designed to bear most of the Plate's weight above them. A single, mechanised skeleton structure grew up alongside it, stopping about one-hundred feet from the Plate to form a round podium. Bright red and green lights flashed continuously at the height of the steel frame, embedded at the back of his retinas each time he blinked. Beyond the Pillar, he could make out the tall gate to the Sector8 Slums, looming over the inhospitable land with its unwelcoming stare. His vision began to blur as he focused on the vast stretches of the city, so he lowered his head and hastened his stride, thinking no more of the surroundings, trailing the dusty road as it wound amongst the filth.

* * *

Cloud heard the thundering gatling-gun shots scream out as he entered the village, breaking the silence that he had become

accustomed to. He looked up to see the swing-doors of the Seventh Heaven bar burst open, a group of drunken teenagers staggering haphazardly out onto the timber veranda and down its crooked steps, followed by a red-headed man he recognised as a regular customer. Barret appeared seconds later, firing at the ground as they scurried towards Cloud, the bullets tearing up the dry earth behind them.

Seventh Heaven was the only building in the village whose design was more than a simple living area. It had been selected by Barret, the bar's co-owner, as the operations base for AVALANCHE, the money made by sale of food and alcohol the funds behind the activist group. Unlike the vast majority of homesteads around Midgar and elsewhere on the Planet, Seventh Heaven was run on biofuels and an old coal generator; Barret remaining true to his anti-Mako-consumption ideals. The electronic sign above the entrance crackled and hissed, the yellow letters flickering as current came and went. Barret stood at the base of the veranda's stairs, his arms folded across his broad chest, the barrel smoke of his gatling-gun drifting slowly into the air.

Watching the young punks stumble past him, Cloud continued towards the bar, his army boots crunching down upon shards of broken glass and metal. Scraps of iron sheets covered the ground, rough and jagged, the red layers of rust smeared across them. The outer walls of the small, single-levelled shanty homes on either side of the secluded area were made of the same material, some appearing weak and unsteady. Their roofs were lined with strips of misshaped wood, leaving obvious gaps where the planks were uneven. Great holes had been cut from the iron to represent windows, the house interiors visible even from a distance, although most displayed no valuable belongings.

"Hey, Cloud!" shouted Barret as he approached. "Get off your slow-movin' ass and get inside!"

Cloud strolled casually past Barret, and up the steps, into Seventh Heaven. He was met with a relaxed ambience of

cigarette fumes and faint background music; the radio playing 'Parochial Town' by The Moogles, a flourishing rock band from the city he had learned of in recent days. Through the haze, he could see Biggs, Wedge and Jessie at one of the pub's few low, rectangular tables, a selection of brown beer bottles placed before them. A young child sat among the three, giggling as they joked with her. As he entered, he saw her eyes light up in excitement.

"Papa?" she yelped.

Cloud stared at her, unsure of what to say. Embarrassed, she looked away, her pale face becoming a deep pink. Jessie and Biggs laughed, mocking her playfully as she shrank into the seat between them. The open boiler behind the table spluttered, the fire inside blazing, heating the room to an almost unbearable temperature. The bar was spacious in size, the lofty flag-adorned ceiling adding to the effect, decorated in the same ashen timber as before, and smelled distinctly of gun powder. He could see the kitchen area in the far corner, the steel worktops littered with utensils, and to its left the lone pinball machine. Opposite the kitchen was the bar itself, its long, polished counter running almost halfway across the floor.

The waitress potted around behind the counter, turning sharply from her task to see him. Leaning back against the drinks cupboard, she placed her hands on her hips as their gaze met, and smiled warmly. She had tied her silken black hair at the tail of her spine with a tiny red bobble, leaving some of her fringe to hang down at the side of her attractive face, hiding one of her large, brown eyes. As he came towards her, she placed the whisky bottle by her side on the shelf, and removed her coloured apron. She wore a tight white vest-top beneath, ripped above the waist to expose her flat stomach, and a short, casual black leather skirt over her long legs.

"Welcome home." she said, grabbing a handful of glasses, and dumping them in the wide sink beside her. She dried her hands with a thin towel, smiling up at him once more. "Looks like everything went well."

Her voice seemed relaxed, as if all the anxiety it had ever held had melted away. The voice was so familiar; so reassuring. Tifa Lockhart had grown up with Cloud in the small town of Nibelheim, on the Western Continent. She was twenty years old, slightly younger than he was, but her glowing face did not look much older than fifteen; the age at which Cloud had last seen her before his arrival in Midgar. To her, five years had passed, but to him, it had been a single week. It was she who had found him dazed and confused at the Sector7 station only days earlier and brought him back to the village, although they had spoken little of it since then.

“It wasn’t a tough job.” he shrugged, sitting on one of the stools at the bar, resting his sword against the counter.

“Did you fight with Barret?” she asked.

“A bit.”

“I should have known.” she chuckled, rolling her eyes. “He’s always pushing people around, and you’ve been getting yourself into fights since you were little. I kinda hoped you’d grown out of it.”

“Whatever.”

“I’m kidding.” she teased. “Now, how about I get you something to drink?”

“I don’t feel like it.”

“I can make a drink just as good as anyone else, y’know.”

“It’s not that.” he grumbled.

“Well, how about...” she cut off, her gaze narrowing as she spotted something hanging from his pocket. “Hey, is that a flower?”

“Huh?” he grunted, perplexed, only understanding the question as he glanced down to see the head of the white lily poking out from the side of his khakis. “Oh, you mean this?”

“Let me see.” she gasped excitedly, eagerly holding out her hand. He passed it to her without enthusiasm, absently observing her as she blissfully inhaled its sweet aroma. After a few seconds, she

pulled a glass of water from the bar and placed the stem inside. “Oh, it smells wonderful. Where did you get it?”

“It’s not important.”

“Well, I love it.” she professed. “You never see flowers here in the Slums because of the pollution. It really brightens up your day. Maybe I should fill the whole bar with them. What do you think?”

“Do what you like.” he muttered indifferently.

“Cloud, are you feeling alright?” she said, her spirited voice suddenly growing serious.

“Yeah...why?”

“No reason. You just look a little tired, I guess.”

Cloud opened his mouth to reply, but spun on his seat as the swing-doors behind him crashed open. Barret strode in, his eyes scanning the room. The young girl leapt from her seat, and sprinted towards him. She threw her arms around his right leg, burying her head against his waist-guard. Cloud frowned; he was yet to see the resemblance between father and daughter, the girl’s pale features an obvious contrast to Barret’s dark skin.

“Marlene!” he beamed, kneeling down to embrace the child.

After a moment, he picked her up, gently lifting her onto his shoulder. Once she was safely perched, he crossed the room to the orange pinball machine, effortlessly moving it aside to reveal a trapdoor cut from the floorboards. He bent down and pulled the hatch open, pressing a button at the base of the wall as he did so. In an instant, there came a hum from beneath them, the slender, spiral staircase lighting up as the basement came to life.

“Hey, Barret, what’s happenin’?” called Biggs.

“Get in here, fools.” he shouted, disappearing down the steps. “We’re startin’ the meetin’.”

Biggs groaned, slowly climbing to his feet. Wedge and Jessie followed grudgingly, the three of them crossing the room and making their way below. Cloud yawned again, unmoving from the bar. He lowered his throbbing head, nursing it in his hands. He could hear Tifa gathering the remaining glasses from the

counter, wiping its smooth surface with a cloth. After a few minutes, he sat up, pushing himself away from the bar, and stood.

“Make sure you get your pay from Barret.” said Tifa.

“Don’t worry.” he answered callously. “Once I get that money, I’m gone.”

The stone steps felt uneven as he made his descent, as if crafted by an inexperienced hand. The air became cooler as he reached the basement; the small, square room around twenty feet below the bar itself. Its walls were lined with grey concrete, thick pipes of corroding metals running within, and spray-painted atop the low doorway was the organisation’s logo; a skull and crossbones with the letter ‘A’ marked on its forehead. A large television hung from one corner, above the computer where Jessie sat, her eyes fixed on the monitor.

At the far side of the space, Barret stood with his back to Cloud, beating the punch bag with all his might. He had set Marlene down upon an empty crate at the side of the bag, her short legs dangling over its edge. In the centre of the room, Biggs and Wedge had gathered around the table, reading over blueprints of the Plate’s underground passages. Cloud joined them, glancing up at the television as it flickered on.

“...Sector1 Reactor bombed.” read the news reporter, a picture of an aging blonde, overweight man appearing on the screen behind him. “We have had an update on the explosion. In an interview within the last half-hour, President Shinra gave this statement: ‘We can confirm that the terrorist group AVALANCHE has claimed responsibility for this atrocity. In the aftermath of the bombing, Sector1’s mainframe computer and electricity circuits were temporarily knocked out. Financially, we have estimated almost one-hundred-million gil worth of damage. However, our thoughts are with the innocent civilians killed in the explosion. It is a grim consolation that many would have died in their sleep.’

“The President then concluded by saying, ‘It is expected that AVALANCHE will continue its reign of terror. But, citizens of

Midgar, there is no need to fear. I have immediately mobilised SOLDIER to join our security forces in protecting our communities against this senseless violence. Please understand my decision to place Midgar under martial law at this time.'

"Following the President's lead," the reporter continued, "Mayor Domino also spoke out against..."

"Assholes!" swore Biggs, switching off the television.

Leaning back, he lifted his feet onto the table-top, crossing one leg over the other, and folded his arms across his green tank-top. Jessie rose from her seat at the computer and scurried quietly over to them. Her head was low as she slumped into the vacant chair beside Wedge, her hands visibly shaking as she tried desperately to calm her nerves.

"Jessie?" said Wedge with concern, placing a chunky palm on her shoulder. "Is everything alright?"

"It's just that..." she whispered, her lips trembling, "we killed a lot of people tonight..."

"How do you know that?" scoffed Biggs.

"Didn't you...didn't you see the news?" she stammered.

"So what?" he laughed, patting her on the back. "You know the Shinra control everything that gets shown on television. Probably just tryin' to stir up some support for themselves after what's happened."

"It's not just that." she gulped.

"What're you talking about?" asked Wedge.

"When my bomb exploded..." whimpered Jessie. "It was...it was so much bigger than what we'd prepared for. Barret's plan was only to cause the Reactor to malfunction so that it would stop drawing Mako, but..."

"So, you just made a miscalculation somewhere." said Biggs. "Those people were all part of the Shinra, right? Think of them as collateral damage."

"How can you say that?" gasped Jessie.

“You knew what you were gettin’ yourself into when you joined AVALANCHE, didn’t you?” Biggs replied nonchalantly. “You knew there’d be casualties.”

“But, not as many as there were tonight.” argued Jessie regretfully. “I just wanted to do something to stop Midgar’s heritage fading away. I...I should have known better...”

“About what?” Wedge frowned.

“Our whole plan was based on something I found when I was hacking into the Worldwide Network on my laptop.” she began. “I stumbled across some old documents hidden in the files of a classified computer...ones I knew to be heavily encrypted. It turns out that the computer had belonged to a man named Fuhito who was high in the ranks of the old AVALANCHE...”

“What’re you talkin’ about?” moaned Biggs.

“In Fuhito’s files were detailed instructions on how to build a bomb capable of disabling a Mako Reactor.” continued Jessie. “I showed them to Barret and he told me to copy the instructions step by step. Every part of tonight’s operation was originally drafted years ago. It felt so thrilling to be following in the footsteps of the ones we’d named ourselves after that it never occurred to me how extreme the documents were. The old AVALANCHE were much more militant than we are, and the plans weren’t just to shut down the Reactor...they were to destroy it altogether. I should have realised sooner...”

“What’s done is done.” said Biggs. “Don’t let it bother you.”

“But, all those people...” she sobbed, briefly wiping a tear from her eye. “I need to...I’ll make sure the next one’s smaller...”

“Jessie...” comforted Wedge, his words seeming louder as the pounding rhythm of the punch bag died away.

“Yo, Cloud.” called Barret, bringing the sack to rest in his arms, oblivious to his comrades’ discussion. “There’s somethin’ I wanna ask ya.”

“What?” he said without interest, looking briefly up at the thin beads of sweat glistening on Barret’s wide forehead.

“Was there anyone from SOLDIER around tonight?” enquired Barret, his eyes locking with Cloud’s. For a second, Cloud’s mind raced through the night’s events; the train; the bomb; the black uniform. Slowly rising from his chair, he walked around the table to face Barret, their glares not once breaking. Eventually, he responded.

“None.” said Cloud, shaking his head once.

“You sure ‘bout that?”

“If there had been anyone from SOLDIER,” he said sternly, “you wouldn’t be standing here right now.”

“Don’t go thinkin’ you’re so tough jus’ ‘cause you was one o’ them.” Barret growled, stepping forward as he bore down on Cloud. Biggs sprang quickly from his seat, holding him back. Furious, Barret seized Biggs, and hurled him against the wall. “Don’t forget your skinny ass’s workin’ for AVALANCHE now! Don’t get no ideas ‘bout hangin’ on to the Shinra.”

“*Hangin’ on to Shinra?*” barked Cloud. “You asked me a question and I answered it!”

“What’s wrong, blondie?” he snarled. “You gotta problem?”

“I’m going upstairs.” said Cloud through gritted teeth, his dislike for the man escalating. He turned away, storming towards the steps. “I want to talk about my money.”

“Looks like somebody still misses the Shinra.” sneered Barret. Cloud paused beneath the low exit, remaining perfectly still, gripping the walls as tight as he possibly could. After a few seconds, he glanced over his shoulder, his blue eyes flaring.

“I don’t care about either Shinra or SOLDIER.” he retorted. “But don’t get me wrong...I don’t care about AVALANCHE or the Planet for that matter.”

Without waiting for a reply, he thundered up the stairs, the pounding of his footsteps echoing throughout the tight passage. Emerging at the bar, he grabbed a chair from the nearest table and sat down, tearing his gloves from his fingers. He ran his hands through his wild hair, gripping his jagged locks in fury. He breathed hard, enraged beyond control by what Barret had said.

What did he know? He hadn't been there. He hadn't felt the intensity of the flames; felt the anger of betrayal...

"What happened?" Tifa asked softly. His blinding thoughts diminished, returning him to his surroundings. She sank into the seat opposite, leaning across the table towards him, her hands clasped together, her deep brown eyes staring longingly into his.

"I really despise that guy..." he muttered.

"He's not a bad person," Tifa insisted, "he's just passionate. Barret takes a while to warm to."

"Yeah, well I'm not gonna stick around to find out."

"Listen, Cloud," she said steadily, "I don't know what went on down there, but I'm begging you...please join us. Barret's right about the Reactors; the Planet's sick. Slowly but surely...it's dying. Someone has to do something."

"Then let AVALANCHE handle it!" he snapped. "You're the ones who proclaim to be the saviours of the Planet. It's got nothin' to do with me."

"But, *you* know what we're up against." she pleaded. "There are SOLDIERS out there looking for us now. How much of a chance would you give Biggs, Wedge or Jessie against even one of those guys?"

"Gods!" he erupted, violently thrusting his chair backwards. "I've had enough of this! This isn't my fight!"

"So that's it?" she screamed. "You're just gonna leave? Just walk out on your childhood friend?"

Cloud stopped and closed his eyes. He breathed heavily, listening to the rustle of the boiler as the fire inside licked its iron walls. She had attacked him with the only thing that could halt him in his tracks. For someone so troubled with amnesia, Tifa had known that reminding him of a link to his past was enough to distort the rage. He hung his head and sighed. Picking up his chair, he returned to the table.

"Tifa..." he started.

"You've forgotten about the promise, haven't you?"

"Promise?"

“So, you did forget?” she accused him playfully. “It was seven years ago...”

* * *

The cold breeze fluttered noiselessly over Nibelheim, caressing the red rooftops, spinning the wind chimes on the side of the houses. Cloud hugged himself closer, admiring the many constellations of the late evening sky, high above the black mountains to the north. He shivered fiercely - being dressed only in shorts and a thin t-shirt - but, although his home was merely minutes from the old water tower at which he waited, he had not dared return to fetch warmer clothing for fear of not being there when she came. Around him, the lights of the houses and inn dimmed and were no more. Only the archaic yellow lanterns along the streets kept the town from being plunged into darkness under the long shadow of Mount Nibel.

Cloud stood. He had waited long enough. He climbed down the ladders on the side of the well, and hopped onto the wide platform below, suddenly stopping to listen. The faint sound had not been his imagination; quick, light footsteps were approaching the small frame. He glanced up, holding his breath in anticipation, and saw her. Tifa scampered across the square, her long, plaited pigtails bouncing behind her head as she ran.

“Sorry I’m late.” she gasped, letting her body fall against the tower. She panted hard, her face filled with exhaustion. Cloud helped her onto the wooden ledge, and together they sat down at its corner. “You said you wanted to talk to me about something?”

“Come this spring, I’ll be leaving for Midgar.” Cloud announced, clearing his throat. There came a long silence. He studied Tifa’s expression, her young face thoughtful.

“All the boys are leaving the town.” she said after a while.

“But I’m not like them.” he snorted contemptuously. “I’m not just going to find a job...I want to join SOLDIER. I want to be like Sephiroth.”

“Sephiroth? The Great Sephiroth? But...isn't it difficult to join SOLDIER?”

“I'll have to train really hard.”

“But, that means...”

“I probably won't be able to come back for a while.”

“Will you be in the newspapers if you do well?” she asked, her voice wavering. She turned her head from Cloud's.

“Well...uh...I'll try.” he stammered. The question was an absurd one, confusing him slightly. He gaped at her, but she pulled her face away, trying to hide the single tear that trickled down her cheek. “Tifa?”

“Let's make a promise.” she whispered, the softness of her voice as sweet and soothing to him as it had always been.

“Huh?”

“If you get really famous, and I'm ever in a bind, you'll come rescue me, right?”

“What're you talking about?”

“Just promise that whenever I'm in trouble, my hero will come rescue me. I want to at least experience that once.”

Cloud gaped at her in astonishment. “*Hero*”? *Had he heard her right*? He coughed, unsure what to think. After a few seconds, Tifa looked back at him, her features now a pale pink. She smiled, blushing slightly, and raised her gaze to the heavens. He did the same, and together they watched a shooting star pass gracefully over the deepening purple sky.

“Alright.” he agreed. “I promise...”

* * *

“...you remember now, don't you?” said Tifa.

“I'm not a hero and I'm not famous.” he exhaled, lowering his eyes.

“But you achieved your childhood dream, didn't you? You joined SOLDIER.” She placed her palm beneath Cloud's chin and

gently lifted his head towards her, so that their noses were almost touching. “So you have to keep your promise.”

“We were just kids back then, Tifa. It doesn’t mean anything anymore.”

“It does to me...” she smiled.

There came the sound of heavy boots ascending from below. Tifa withdrew her hand, allowing Cloud’s head to flop downwards again. The footsteps grew ever nearer, the force behind each deafening as they scaled the staircase. He looked up as the bulky figure came into view. Barret had completely removed his jacket and metal waist-plate, his enormous, muscular torso towering over Cloud like a giant stalking his prey. The burning-skull tattoo on his left arm seemed to add to his threatening appearance, almost distinguishing him as death itself.

“A promise is a promise.” he grumbled in a low voice. With a hint of reluctance, he dropped a small purse of money on the table in front of him. “Fifteen-hundred gil...it’s all yours, SOLDIER-boy. Now, if there ain’t nothin’ else, you can get the hell outta here!”

Cloud snatched up the bag and, leaning back in his chair, held it aloft, swinging it to and fro before him. His focus alternated between the money and Tifa, who looked over at him pleadingly, her eyes large and wide. Finally, he placed the pouch back on the table, and returned his attention to Barret.

“This is my pay?” he said haughtily. “Don’t make me laugh.”

“What? Then you’ll...?” cried Tifa, clapping her hands excitedly. Cloud’s concentration did not move from the dark stare of Barret.

“You got your next mission lined up? I’ll do it for three-thousand.”

“*What?*” he bellowed, fury spreading rapidly across his bristly face. Tifa jumped from the table, creating a barrier between the two. With great effort, she dragged Barret across the room to the bar, pushing him onto one of the stools.

“It’s okay, it’s okay.” she whispered. “We’re really hurting for help, right?”

“Three-thousand gil?” he shouted back at her. “Who does he think he is? That money’s for Marlene’s schoolin’...”

“Come on, Barret.” she urged, her hands pressed firmly down on his shoulders. Tifa lowered her voice further still, to a volume she hoped would be inaudible to Cloud. “He’s my friend, and I’m worried about him. He seems...disconnected.”

“If you ask me,” Barret responded in a hushed tone, “the guy’s trouble. But...he’s strong. Stronger than anyone I’ve ever seen.”

“I’ll keep an eye on him.”

“Do you trust him?”

“He hasn’t said much about what happened.” Tifa paused. “But, yeah, I trust him.”

“Friend or not,” Barret sighed in submission, “the second that changes, his spiky ass is outta here.”

“Thank you.” she nodded, releasing her grip on his shoulders. After a few moments of contemplation, he finally relaxed his body, and grew to his feet. Cursing under his breath, Barret made his way towards the trapdoor. At the height of the steps, he stopped, flashing an irritated glance at Tifa.

“Two-thousand.” he offered, his clenched jaw revealing his extreme discontent. Cloud nodded; it was more than he had hoped for.

“Deal.”



Second Strike

A promise is a promise...

Barret's words echoed in Cloud's mind as he watched the small beads of murky water trickle down his face in the mirror, the droplets gathering at his chin. *Had Barret's choice of phrase simply been a coincidence, or was there a deeper meaning to it? It was all becoming too strange...so surreal. But, what was he supposed to think? Was he going mad? But more importantly; what had happened to him?*

Cloud had regained consciousness less than a month before to find himself in the Midgar Slums, under the protection of a group of eco-friendly rebels, with no recollection of the past five years of his life. The events of Nibelheim were still fresh in his memory, as was the death of his mother, yet something was amiss. He knew he should be in mourning; that his emotions should be raw, but his heart told him that the grieving process had come and gone. All that was left was anger and hatred, and no explanation as to how he had arrived at this point. *Will the answers ever come?* Shaking his head vigorously, he tried to cast the questions from his mind, for he knew that his thoughts had now to turn to the job at hand.

Almost a week had elapsed since the bombing of the Sector1 Reactor. He had spent a lot of his time at the Seventh Heaven bar, each day observing the rugged customers of the Slum village as they came and went, choosing only to vacate its warm

surroundings on the evening of Barret's thirty-fifth birthday celebrations to wander the Slum paths alone and undisturbed. He had spoken little to Tifa about their last encounter five years before and now, standing in the compressed bathroom of the bar, washing himself with a substance that may once have been a clear liquid, he began to feel as if she had been avoiding the subject. He had often caught her studying him, staring searchingly at him, but she had dismissed her odd behaviour as an uncertainty about his anguish, and the simple relief of being reunited with her childhood friend.

The bathroom was no larger than the storage cupboard of his old family home in Nibelheim, the tight air within filling his nostrils with the putrid stench of rot and decay. Some of the long, sharp spikes of his golden hair hung loosely over his right eye, almost obscuring his vision, with the remaining few standing erect on his head. It was a style he had used since adolescence; a way of marking him as an individual.

Bracing his hands on either side of the cracked porcelain sink, he gazed wearily at his reflection in the stained glass; at the traces of past wounds across his toned chest and stomach. He had many scars, each telling its own story from his youth and intense training in the Shinra Army. There was one, however, easily distinguishable from the rest; a thin, oval gash, slightly above his gut. It stung to touch, as if the wound had once been deep. He breathed heavily; he had no memory of its existence, or how he had acquired it. *Another question that needs an answer*, he thought, shivering. *Is this connected to my amnesia...?*

Splashing a final dab of water on his eyes, he quickly dried himself, pulling on his dark blue poloneck and fastening the crested buckle of his old SOLDIER belt around his waist. Barret and Tifa waited at the bar, talking quietly between themselves. Marlene stood at the worktop behind them, bathing a beer glass in a pool of soap suds. They turned as Cloud approached, moving away from the stools. Tifa snatched Jessie's rucksack from the counter, slinging it across her shoulder, pulling on her fingerless

fighting gloves. Cloud stopped to take up his sword from against the wall, glancing at the gloves questioningly, the metal studs at the knuckles standing out against the padded red leather.

“I’m going this time.” she explained, grinning. “Didn’t Barret tell you?”

“He failed to mention it.” muttered Cloud, casting an accusing glance towards the hulking man.

“It don’t matter.” grunted Barret. “We all got our part to play, so it makes no difference who goes. The others are already at the station, so hurry it up. I’ll fill you in on the final details when we get on the train.”

“Let’s get going, then.” said Tifa, gesturing towards the exit. “Marlene, you stay here while we’re gone. And remember to lock up behind us.”

“Okay.” yelped the girl, waving as the trio passed through the swing-doors. “Hurry back.”

The chill of the late winter evening met Cloud as soon as he stepped onto the veranda of Seventh Heaven. To the north, a hazy line of deep purple on the horizon crept between the almost unending parallel grey of the Plate and Slums; the sun had already descended in the west. All was still in the village but for a single stray dog, sniffing curiously around the lone beggar as he slept beneath a sheet of iron. The soft yellow of burning gas lamps escaped through the windows of the shacks, lighting the otherwise dead pathway. With the darkening city limits far behind them, the three slipped noiselessly into the shadows, hastily making their way towards the Sector7 station.

* * *

“You know the drill.” commanded Barret, towering over Biggs, Wedge, and Jessie as they clambered anxiously aboard the train. “This ain’t no private car, so split up.”

The youngsters nodded, scurrying along the aisle, disappearing beyond the narrow door at the opposite end of the carriage. The train jerked suddenly; a guard’s whistle sounding to announce

the coupling of the last car. The filament lights flickered along the ceiling, dousing the pinewood interior in a dim golden colour. As Cloud and Barret began forward, many of the seated civilians rose hurriedly and scuttled into the next car, leaving the hard benches unoccupied. A single, dark haired man remained, his head buried deep in his newspaper.

“Hoodlums...” he mumbled under his breath as they passed. Barret stopped in his stride, turning to glare at the suited man.

“You say somethin’?” he growled. The man gulped, sinking into the bench, his eyes wide with fear as he searched for the other passengers. “I said, ‘you say somethin’?”

“W...what?” the man trembled, glancing apprehensively around him.

“Yo, look at that.” sneered Barret, grinning wickedly. “The place got all empty all o’ a sudden.”

“I...it’s empty because of g...guys like you...”

“What the hell’s that s’posed to mean?” Barret roared, striking the solid pane above the man with his fist.

“You...you’ve seen the news, right? AVALANCHE say there’ll be more bombings. Only devoted employees like me would go to work on a night like this.”

“You workin’ for Shinra?” snapped Barret furiously, aiming his gun-arm at the man’s face.

“Stop it!” shouted Tifa, placing herself in front of the barrel.

“I won’t give in to violence...” sobbed the man, breaking into tears, his entire figure quivering. Barret stared at him for a time, his vengeful gaze merciless, burning through Tifa as she divided them.

“You lucky fuck.” he muttered, reluctantly lowering his arm. “Ya better watch yer tongue in future. Next time...*she* won’t be there to save ya.”

Signalling for Cloud to follow, he stalked down the aisle, slamming himself into a vacant seat. Cloud sat across from him, neither speaking. After a few minutes, the whistle blew a second time, and the train shuddered, slowly beginning to move as it

pulled, almost unwillingly, out of the Train Graveyard. Cloud let his body relax against the wooden bench, silently listening to the drone of the locomotive's engine, the constant rumble easing his muscles. He pressed the back of his head against the cold glass, watching Tifa as she tried to console the man. *Why bother? He's probably just gonna brag about it to people at work, anyway...*

Through the windows, he could see the gradual incline of the railway against the landscape, the Slums falling away as the train grew towards the Plate. The transparent panel was the only partition between him and the grim beyond, the blackened image of lower Midgar daunting as he readied himself for the task ahead. Cloud closed his eyes. He felt the city's anger; it's sense of betrayal. *We were deceived by the same people.* After a long while, he looked up to find Barret leaning forward in his seat, his attention trained on Cloud. Behind him, a blur of green lights shot past the train; they had entered the tunnels.

"That guy said we'd made more terrorist threats." Barret recounted, appearing perplexed. "I don't remember doin' that. Maybe AVALANCHE's more famous than we thought, eh?"

"Probably Shinra just tryin' to justify there bein' so many police recently." Cloud responded, pulling himself up. "So, what're we gonna do now?"

"What the hell're you so calm about?" snorted Barret. "Shit, man, you're bustin' up my rhythm."

"You said you wanted to fill me in on the final plans."

"Listen to Mr. Serious-about-his-work." chuckled Barret, his smile fading when Cloud did not share his amusement. "I dunno if Jessie's already told you, but there's a security checkpoint at the Plate. Since the explosion at Reactor1, all systems have been tightened, an' the I.D. scanners are checkin' on all the trains. Usually, our fake I.D.s work...but not on this line.

"Cause the train stops at Sector0 on the Plate, where the entrance to Shinra's Headquarters is, the security system's a lot more sensitive. If our fake I.Ds get detected, the train will lock down an' we won't be able to get off until it reaches the station.

That'll be bad news for us 'cause they'll probably have a whole pack of soldiers waitin'..."

"Good evening," came an automated voice over the loudspeaker, forcing him to trail off, "and welcome to Midgar Transit. Estimated time of arrival at the Sector0 station is 23:45 Midgar Standard Time. I repeat..."

"That means we've only got three more minutes to the checkpoint." Tifa confirmed, joining them, her closed body language revealing her lingering discontent with Barret.

"So, in three minutes," frowned Barret, "we're jumpin' off this train."

"What are we going to do until then?" asked Tifa.

"We wait." Cloud answered bluntly.

"I'd better go check on the other numbskulls." said Barret, slowly standing. "I've a nasty feelin' they'll..."

The lights overhead flashed and cut out, engulfing the carriage in the deep red of the emergency lamps. The klaxon on the wall behind them burst into life, the screech of its relentless wail echoing throughout the train. Confusion spread across Tifa's face, her eyes darting along the darkened car. The shrill shriek of the alarm grew louder, to an almost deafening level. Barret spun, charging along the aisle to the adjacent car.

"I thought the checkpoint was supposed to be further down?" yelled Cloud, springing from his seat and stumbling after him. The train veered right, throwing them sideways. Barret landed heavily against the wall, letting out a muffled groan as he staggered to regain balance.

"Warning!" came the voice over the loudspeaker again. It was less pleasant than before, the tone of the recorded message threatening. "Type A security alert. Unidentified passengers confirmed. All cars will be searched and shut down systematically."

"What the hell's goin' on?" bellowed Barret, his booming voice a whisper over the siren. Suddenly, the door at the end of the carriage flew open as the train hurtled around another sharp

bend, sending Jessie sprawling to her knees as she ran through the passageway. Her expression was one of panic, hidden briefly as her bushy hair became untied and strewn across her face.

“We’re in trouble!” she answered, clambering to her feet in an attempt to hold the door open, desperately motioning for them to follow her back through. “I’ll explain later. Hurry!”

“Shit! Somebody blew it!” Barret swore as, one by one, they crashed into the next carriage. The door behind them slammed shut moments later, a heavy *clunk* sounding as it closed.

“C’mon!” called Jessie, sprinting along the train, the others at her heels. “They’re gonna lock all the doors. Just run!”

Cloud barged past the crowds of commuters, pushing many to the floor. The blood-red lighting, still ablaze, plunged the train into a darkened chaos. Mothers screamed, clutching onto their children. Menacing faces lined the narrow aisle, illuminated as if by hell itself. Hands reached out to stop them, an army of limbs blocking their way. Tifa cried out, flailing beneath the grasp of an old man. Cloud retaliated, bashing the man’s skull against a pole, knocking the hat from his grey head. Grabbing Tifa by the wrist, he yanked her away, hauling her through the end passage.

A blast of cold air hit them as they raced into the third car. Ahead, he could see Biggs and Wedge by the gaping doorway, the brilliant green of the tunnel lights written on their bodies. Barret and Jessie had already crossed the car, and had begun shouting unheard commands, frantically waving to them. The alarm continued to sound, the constant shriek unbearable. Cloud rushed forward, dodging the few mystified passengers, and arrived at the group within seconds.

“Alright...we made it!” yelled Barret. “C’mon, let’s go. We’re gonna dive outta here!”

Tifa squeezed past Cloud, and stood in the doorway, her back to the others. Sparks from the line flew up from beneath, the electric flames dancing into the air. Cloud looked out as the tunnel’s support-pillars shot past, the stone towers seemingly joined in a single, slurred motion. Tifa braced herself in the door frame, her chest heaving as she inhaled deep, lasting breaths.

She remained still for a moment, nervously contemplating her action.

“Scary, huh?” she smiled weakly, glancing at Cloud.

“Too late to be sayin’ that now.” he replied.

“Hey!” roared Barret. “There ain’t no time for that!”

“Okay, okay...I’ll jump.” gulped Tifa. Hesitantly, she turned away from them, and in an instant, she was gone.

“What now?” said Cloud.

“A leader always stays to the end.” grunted Barret. “Don’t worry ‘bout me. Just go! But don’t go getting’ your spiky ass hurt...it’s only the beginning o’ the mission.”

Cloud strode forward, placing his hands on the frame. The power of the air was greater than he had anticipated, forcing him backwards. He wrenched the Buster Sword from the magnet on his back, casting it from the train, failing even to see it hit the ground. With a swift movement, he launched himself into the unknown darkness, vanishing from sight. Barret quickly took up the position, his broad figure filling the space.

“Later.” he called over his shoulder.

“Be careful, sir.” called Wedge.

“You three take care of the rest.” With a fleeting glance, Barret nodded to them a final time, and threw himself from the doorway.

* * *

“Well, other than the early bail,” said Barret, wiping the smeared engine oil from his hand onto his jacket, “so far everything’s goin’ as planned.”

They stood on a raised walkway at the side of the railway lines, the concrete ledge no more than a few feet in width. It had taken almost ten minutes for the three to assemble, lurking in the shadows as they crept beneath the mounted cameras above the pathway. Cloud had doubled-back to reclaim his sword, and had found it etched into one of the tracks, the thick iron rod sliced

cleanly through. Heaving it from the metal, he had found no scratch on the steel blade, only a faint smear of rust. He had shouldered the weapon again and, when Tifa had finally caught up, they had followed the curving tunnel to where Barret waited in the darkness.

“Better not let your guard down.” instructed Cloud. “Not ‘til we reach a more enclosed area. This place could be crawling with things, not to mention the Shinra personnel that patrol ‘round here. Keep your eyes open.”

“What now?” asked Tifa.

“We need to get to the Sector5 Reactor.” replied Barret, starting along the footpath. “We should be in the lower levels of the Plate now. There must be some way to get into the tunnels under the city from here. C’mon, move it. The others’re gettin’ everythin’ ready for us.”

He broke into a hastened jog, his feet thumping against the ground. Cloud came close behind, scanning the walls for an access passage. The luminous green of the pillar lights had become a dim red, their glow faint and unrevealing. On the line below, he saw a grashtrike studying them, the beady eyes of the small parasite fixed on the intruders. The blue scales of its body arched back - a defence mechanism - kicking its pincer-like legs in the air. After a second, it scampered beneath their path, and disappeared completely. Cloud turned away, concluding the grashtrike to be harmless, wondering to where it had escaped.

“Shit!” Barret cursed, slowing his pace.

“What is that?” said Tifa.

Cloud glanced up. A short way ahead, the tunnel had been dissected by a barrier of white light beams, the thin lines extending horizontally across the tracks. A low hum of electricity resonated from the rays, buzzing erratically in the silent air like a dying insect.

“Shinra security sensors.” groaned Barret, frustration seeping into his voice. “We can’t go any further; damn things would give us away in a second. Cloud, can...Cloud?”

“I’m down here.” came his muffled voice. After a moment, he appeared from below the ledge, pointing at something. “I think I’ve found a way into the Plate.”

Barret and Tifa scrambled down, landing hard on the gravel at the edge of the line. They crouched beside Cloud, peering under the dark walkway. As their eyes began to focus, the shape of a square shaft opening took form, a glimmer of metal reflecting the unclear light of the tunnel. Picking a stone from the ground, Cloud tossed it into the gap, clattering against thin walls of aluminium as it fell through the duct.

“That’s one damn tiny hole.” concluded Barret. “You tellin’ me to squeeze down *that* to get under the Plate? No way!”

“You got a better plan?”

“Doesn’t sound like there’s anything that’ll get us stuck in there.” added Tifa.

“Yeah.” agreed Cloud. “But, if we go down this vent, we might not be able to get back up.”

“An’ we don’t know where it leads.” frowned Barret. With a sigh, he lowered his head in defeat. “Look, enough time wastin’. We never know when the Shinra’ll find us, an’ SOLDIER could be anywhere. It’s a risk we gotta take.”

“Then, let’s go.” nodded Cloud.

“But damn, man, that thing gives me the chills.”

Cloud skulked forward, lowering his legs into the shaft. It was no wider than three feet, but broad enough for him to manoeuvre himself into. From a distance, the train’s whistle could be heard, the piercing noise reverberating along the tunnel. *What the hell am I doing?*

With a deep breath, he let go, feeling his body drop against the frictionless walls of the duct, travelling as they dictated. Dusty air rushed past as he slid, his speed increasing with each second, his vision obscured by the clouds of steam drifting aimlessly throughout the shaft. He turned sharply to the left, the sound of scraping metal ringing out as the Buster Sword tore through the

corner. Before him, a square of dark blue came into sight, moving ever closer as he plummeted helplessly towards it.

Cloud was vaulted into a narrow corridor, strewn with force against the ground as the shaft came to an end. His head collided hard with the grey stone floor, sending his world into a daze. He gritted his teeth in pain, tossing his sword aside, rolling onto his back. The ceiling seemed to spin, circling above him like a colourless carousel, its chiming melody replaying in his mind, and moaned as a wave of nausea washed over him. A rattling to his right stirred him from his thoughts, and he glanced up to see Tifa fire from the duct, landing on her knees beside him.

“You okay?” she gasped, leaping quickly to her feet. She crouched over him, her face filled with concern, searching him for signs of an injury.

“Fine...” he mumbled, clasping at the wall, dragging himself up.

“You’re hurt.” she said softly, touching his forehead with her fingertips. When she pulled her hand away, Cloud felt a droplet of blood trickle onto his brow.

“I said I’m fine.”

“It’s just...” she started, cut off as Barret came crashing into the passage. He rose slowly, holding his arm.

“That’s the last time we go with your idea.” he scowled, wincing as he spoke.

“At least we got here.” Cloud retorted.

“Got where?” said Barret sternly. “We could be anywhere.”

“My guess is level six.” Tifa chimed in.

“What makes you say that?” Barret asked, puzzled.

“The sign behind you is pointing down to level seven.”

Barret spun, reading the painted white symbols on the far wall of the corridor, smiling wryly as his gaze fell upon the ladder hatch below the message. He trudged forward, his hand trailing the oil-stained wall, over the thin pipes and vent openings. The hallway’s light bulb wavered as he passed, bobbing from side to side, creating shadows of unrecognisable shapes over them. Barret knelt beside the hatch, inspecting the ladders, peering cautiously over the edge.

“Looks like this’s it.” he called.

“Apology accepted.” Cloud grumbled.

The ladders brought them eventually to a grilled balcony overlooking the internal frame of the Plate. Scaffolding-like platforms were suspended amidst the countless matrices of metal beams like makeshift walkways, extending east for a great distance towards the outer-city and Mako Reactor⁵. They were floored by steel gratings, with a collection of tall barriers lining their perimeters. Boxes and crates of ranging sizes had been left unguarded along the platforms, the randomness of their individual locations comforting, representing the irregularity of visits to the area. The base of the structure was undetectable in the blackness, the broad walkways a floating maze of silver against the cavernous backdrop of the inner Plate.

They descended a second ladder, the steel more worn than before, to reach the frame. Continuing east, the trio moved swiftly across the platforms, noiseless in the absence of the enemy. For more than an hour they hiked, their surroundings repetitive and seemingly unending, their legs growing weary. After a while, the grid began to decline, the three following a staircase down as their trail became narrow and steep. Their descent into the depths of the Plate became murky at best, with widely-spaced lamps of burning white and gold their only guide. The air thickened; a stale warmth hanging over them. Still they hurried on, time slipping from their advantage like dripping water from a tap. As they came to the final step of the stairwell, met only by a thin unlit walkway that spread into the nothingness before them, a brilliant light suddenly shone in their eyes, blinding them from their path.

“Sir? Sir, is that you?”

“What the hell, Wedge?” snapped Barret with annoyance. “Turn the godsdamn torch off.”

“Sorry, I...”

“What time is it?” said Barret, taking the shielding hand from his eyes as Wedge swung the flashlight to the floor.

“It’s almost two.”

“Shit, we’re late!” Barret hissed, his heavy brows furrowing as his thoughts raced. “We have to get out before sunrise. Where’s Biggs ‘n Jessie?”

“They’re waitin’ for us inside the facility.” replied Wedge, aiming the flashlight at the end of the walkway. Less than twenty feet away, they saw the end of the frame, rails of iron girders scaling the high, previously-invisible exterior wall of the Reactor. A large, numerical ‘5’ had been painted at the height of a set of ladders, leading to a large, circular passage. “That’s the ventilation system. It’ll get us inside.”

“How long?” said Cloud.

“Fifteen minutes...give or take.” answered Wedge. “Follow me.”

Climbing into the shaft, the sound of a distant hum reached their ears, echoing the dull sound that they had experienced at the Sector1 Reactor core. The ventilation passage was over seven feet in diameter, tall enough even for Barret to walk without hunching. Its sweeping walls had been coated with a layer of concrete, the surface jagged and chipped. A gentle current sailed through the tunnel, blown from somewhere deep within, smooth and refreshing. Small grills covered the ceiling at various intervals, the spinning fans behind their masks swirling clouds of dust into the air about their feet.

The party trailed the twisting tunnel, winding through chambers of piled garbage that had been dumped by lazy workers. Finally, they came to the last of the high, cubic compartments, an iron grid on the floor at its centre. With a great effort to stop the metal panel scraping the ground, Wedge lifted the grill aside, revealing a wide hallway below. The corridor was the same cool blue shade as the previous facility, lined by undecorated tiles towards a set of twin doors at its end. Cloud investigated the hall from the ceiling’s opening, suddenly drawing his head back as he heard the squeaking sound of footsteps.

“There’s a guard!” he whispered, holding a finger to his lips.

“Shit!” breathed Barret. “We can’t afford to set off the alarm! Wedge, is there another way in?”

“Don’t think so.”

“Godsdammit!” he spat, his voice low. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I didn’t know, sir, I...”

“Lower me down.” Tifa broke in, kneeling by the gap.

“What?” stammered Barret, his expression one of confusion.

“Quickly...lower me down.”

“Are you insane?”

“Just do it!” she insisted, balancing herself over the hole.
“Cloud, c’mon.”

Hesitantly, Cloud held out his arm. She took a firm grasp, briefly glancing down as the patrolling soldier passed beneath her. Silently, she dropped through the hatch, Cloud’s body straining as he suspended her above the ground. She clung to him for a second, her eyes trained on the guard, letting go as he stopped before the doorway. She landed gracefully in a crouched position, almost cat-like, rising as stealthily as she had fallen.

As he turned, bewilderment spread across the man’s face, blinking hard as if the image was an illusion. Tifa smiled seductively, prompting a mumbling response from the guard, beckoning him to her. Suddenly, she lashed out, cracking his jaw with her fist. The man cried out, dropping his rifle as he clutched at his chin. She kicked the weapon away, dashing forward, pushing him against the wall. With an untamed force, she smashed his head against the smooth tiles, a streak of blood splattering from his skull.

He fell, howling in agony, blinded by the pain of his snapped jaw. Kicking him once in the chest, Tifa left the infantryman doubled over, gasping for air. Barret appeared by her side, looming over the weakened private, his muscles flexed, his eyes maddened. The man reached out for help, his eyes wide with horror. With a snarl, Barret brought his boot thundering down, crushing his face into the floor.

The unconscious soldier was piled amongst the garbage of the ventilation tunnel, Cloud and Wedge hauling the limp body into the chamber before joining Barret and Tifa. The twin doors led

them to another corridor, at the end of which they arrived at a room at the base of a vast industrial furnace. Machines and cranes of enormous size sat lifelessly throughout the space, their greasy armour thick and powerful. An army of tall humanoid robots were gathered at the lower regions of the furnace, some recognisable as prototypes of the Airbuster series, their systems offline during the late hour.

Robotics was one of Shinra, Inc.'s many interests. The experimental beings, 'techno-soldiers', created by the Weapons Development Department were often thought to be useless by the department if not fit for battle, and left to deteriorate and erode in such conditions. Designed during the Wutai War and now deemed surplus to the Shinra Army's demands, many had found their way into the factories and places of labour, leaving little work for the people of the city; such was the cause of squalor in the Slums.

Walkways crossed the room on many floors high above the party, used for the inspection of the gargantuan cauldron itself. The furnace had been designed as a means of erasing the harmful scum created by the processing of Mako energy; an irony in AVALANCHE's eyes given the destructive effects that extracting Mako had on the Planet. The toxic substances could be heard bubbling from within the great cylinder, clouds of pale green steam drifting from its head, floating dreamily upwards, merging with the atmosphere.

Cloud crept warily out of the corridor, scanning the room for signs of movement. To his right, there came the approaching patter of footsteps. He stepped hastily back, quickly motioning for the others to press against the wall. He drew his greatsword, slowly holding it aloft, preparing to strike. The sound grew louder, the rapid scurrying irregular. Cloud held his breath, concentrating. As the figures rounded the corner, he sprang forward, knocking them to the ground.

"Hey!" yelled Biggs, raising his hands in surrender beneath the threatening blade of the Buster Sword.

“What the hell’re you two doin’?” barked Barret, pushing Cloud aside, bearing over Biggs and Jessie. “You could’ve been caught!”

“Unlikely.” squeaked Jessie. “Most of the facility’s deserted.”

“She’s right.” added Biggs, standing and brushing himself down. “There’re only a couple of guards roaming the place.”

“And we disposed of one of them.” said Wedge.

“Then where’re ya goin’?” asked Barret.

“We’re gonna pull out now.” answered Biggs. “We’ve set the bombs in the office wing, so there’s no need for us to be here any longer than necessary.”

“Good work.” approved Barret, helping Jessie up. She handed him her rucksack.

“The detonator’s inside.” she said, and turned, pointing to a darkened area behind the furnace. “There’s the access elevator. It’ll take you straight to the core.”

“Okay.” he nodded. “We can...”

“I’m sorry, Barret.” Jessie blurted out, interrupting him.

“Huh?”

“I let you guys down.” she said sheepishly, hanging her head. Biggs turned to face her, raising a confused eyebrow.

“Jess, what you talkin’ about?” inquired Barret, irritated by the delay.

“On the train... the I.D. check...” she stammered. “It was all my fault.”

“*Your* fault?” Barret repeated.

“I really put my heart into making a new card for Cloud, but,” she gulped, “it wasn’t even good enough to pass the normal scanners. I failed everyone. I’m sorry. Barret, I promise next time...”

“Ain’t no time for this!” Barret interjected furiously. “We’ll talk ‘bout it back at the hideout. Now, move out. You three get outta my sight!”

Biggs flippantly saluted Barret as he and Wedge hurried off down the corridor and disappeared through the doorway, helping the troubled Jessie along with them. Cursing under his breath at

the idiocy of his subordinates, Barret led Cloud and Tifa below the furnace shell, the podiums that encased the huge cylinder keeping the trio from view. The elevator was situated on the northern wall, its doors open, the bright blue light from inside summoning them. Quickly checking they were safe to escape the shadow of the walkways, they slipped cautiously into the lift, and began towards the subterranean levels.

The elevator brought the trio after a short while to a balcony above the Mako rivers. In front of them lay the bridge to the Reactor's core activation system; the interior of the facility's nucleus not unlike that of the previous mission. As Jessie had said, no personnel watched over the main Reactor, the drone of its internal machinery and the slurping of the ethereal liquids swirling below them the only disturbance of the silence. As before, the waves of reflected pale green light washed over the steel pipes at the depths of the building, their motion hypnotising.

Cloud looked up as they crossed the walkway, the towering walls of the complex climbing to a peak hundreds of feet above, becoming a darkened dome at the height of the Reactor. The thick mist of Mako fumes caressed the pathways and balconies on the many floors throughout the structure, their toxic fingers oozing over the grated paths. Short of breath from the searing temperature, Cloud inhaled deeply. As the dense stickiness of the Mako seeped into his lungs, he felt a great dizziness descend upon him, his thoughts becoming a haze. He fought to remain conscious; the importance of his mission thumping in his mind, and in one last effort to open his eyes, all grew quiet, engulfing him in blackness.

* * *

He stopped, the soft sobbing reaching his ears for the first time. Tifa knelt by the body of her father, cradling his head in her hands. Even from the walkway, Cloud could see the pool of dark blood forming on the man's back. The wound had been fatal.

The Masamune lay by his side, the long blade stained in red. *How many had it slain that night?* Tifa began stroking her father's face, running her fingers through his brown hair with great tenderness.

"Papa?" she whispered, her trembling voice floating over the air like a ghost. "It was Sephiroth. Sephiroth did this to you, didn't he?"

"Tifa...?"

She turned to Cloud, gazing up at him from saddened eyes. A single tear rolled down her cheek, marking a path through the grime on her face. She wiped it away, her expression filling with wrath. Cloud stared at her, unable to speak; to comfort her in some way. Silence fell between them, the presence of death too much for words. Tifa embraced her father dearly, eventually lowering his head gently to the floor. Standing, she snatched up the Masamune, her eyes fixed on the arched entrance of the control room.

"You came to this village just to investigate the disappearances, didn't you?" she wept. "All I wanted was to help. How did it turn out like this?"

"Tifa..."

"Sephiroth...SOLDIER...Mako Reactors...Shinra...everything..." she said through clenched teeth, darting through the doorway. "I hate you all..."

* * *

"Damn, man, get a hold o' yourself!" shouted Barret, shaking him by the shoulders. Cloud jumped up, startled by the experience, his breathing fast and irregular. He glanced anxiously around him, his eyes focusing on the Reactor casing; the pipes curving down from its walls; his feet; Tifa's worried face.

"You alright?" she asked, standing by him, her eyes uneasy.

"Tifa...?" he croaked, his expression dazed.

“What? What is it?”

“Tifa...no...forget it...” he mumbled. “C’mon, let’s just hurry and get this over with.”

“Get a grip, man.” snapped Barret, tossing the rucksack to Cloud. “Don’t mess this up.”

“Don’t you trust me yet?” said Cloud.

“With your background?” Barret answered derisively. “Tifa’s ‘old friend’ *still* ain’t good enough.”

“Whatever.”

Cloud turned, striding along the bridge, meeting Tifa by the pressure-valve. He knelt before the semi-circular panel, judging the best place to position the explosive. Tracing his fingers over the dials and levers of the plate for a satisfactory spot, he stopped, momentarily gazing up. He grew to his feet, and pressed the bomb against the painted Shinra Diamond. Barret snorted, acknowledging the decision. Cloud pulled the detonator from the bag, wiring it to the explosive, keying in the timer for the bomb’s countdown. After a second, the light on the black casing changed from green to red.

“Bomb’s set.” reported Tifa.

“Good work.” replied Barret. “Now, let’s get outta here. We don’t have much time before dawn.”

They returned to the elevator, wary of raising the alarm, and punched in the button to take them back to the Plate. With a groan, the lift’s cables came to life, jerking as the three made their lengthy ascent. After a few minutes, the doors opened onto the machine room. The area seemed cramped, crates and containers covering the floor in batches throughout the room. None of the computers on the left wall were operating, the monitors dead behind a curtain of dust. The fans overhead had ceased to rotate, the blades twitching, the warm air whistling as it passed into the ventilation ducts.

Barret crossed the room, snaking his way amongst the boxes, exiting into the deserted corridor via the already unlocked door. He waved the others to follow, striding down the passage, his gun-arm raised in anticipation of any threat to their escape.

Cloud drew the Buster Sword, covering Barret from behind. The corridor ended in another electronic door, the code visible on the panel, entered by Biggs and Jessie. Barret pushed the final key, watching triumphantly as the heavy lock was released, and hauled the doors apart, slipping out onto the T-junction bridge.

A red tint had appeared on the eastern horizon, the light proclaiming the rising of the sun in less than an hour. The air was cold, a few clouds hanging over the stretch of the industrial district, the sky a great array of beaming stars. To the west, the Midgar Mountains could be seen beyond the border of the city, the range fading into the distance, melting into the darkened landscape. The Slums beneath the bridge boasted little light, the houses a shadowy blur, spreading out from the belly of the Reactor shell.

“This way!” commanded Barret, turning left at the intersection. He marched along the suspended grid, his pace quick and purposeful, but stopped suddenly as he approached the exit. With a growl, he took a step back, his glaring eyes unmoving from the tunnel.

“Shinra soldiers?” gasped Tifa, her voice shrill and panicked.

The light blue uniforms moved from the passage, the simultaneous pounding of boots ringing out into the morning; a sound Cloud knew only too well. The squadron came to a halt a few metres from Barret, their automatic rifles trained on each of the intruders. Even in the dimness of the dawn, the visors of the soldiers’ masks radiated gold and silver, the faces of the men hidden by the thick screens.

“Shit!” Barret hissed, spinning as a second squad emerged from the opposite outlet. “What the hell’s goin’ on?”

“A trap...” Cloud muttered. *How did I not see this coming?*

He edged slowly towards Barret and Tifa at the centre of the junction, their backs to one another, guarding against the three pathways. The hushed song of birds in the rooftops cut the tense silence, matched only by hard, paced footsteps, echoing sinisterly throughout the corridor from which the trio had come. Cloud

closed his eyes, his breathing deep, gripping the long handle of the Buster Sword, his mind racing to find a solution to the situation. The footsteps drew ever closer, and not until they had come to rest did Cloud finally look up.

The man stood in the entrance to the facility, casually stroking his thick blonde moustache with one hand, nursing a cigar in the other. He was less tall than Cloud remembered, but his gut had remained as rotund as the memories had told, the maroon dinner suit he wore bulging before him. He seemed more elderly than he had in previous years, the appearance indicating that his seventieth birthday had since passed. With a lasting draw of tobacco, he arrogantly clicked his fingers, motioning for the infantrymen to lower their weapons. He grinned menacingly, glowering at them through disapproving eyes.

“Presi...President Shinra?” stammered Barret.

“And you must all be that...um...what was it?” he said hoarsely, his tone dismissive.

“AVALANCHE!” roared Barret. “And don’t ya forget it!”

“AVALANCHE, eh?” he scoffed. “As far as I can gather, you low-lives are no more than a mere shadow of your predecessors...”

“Shut your mouth!”

“And as for you, young man...”

“Long time, no see, President.” snarled Cloud, his jaw firmly clenched. He raised his sword, and brought it down at speed, embedding the powerful blade into the walkway. Disrespectfully, he leant on it, his hardened gaze meeting President Shinra’s.

“Ex-SOLDIER, I presume?” he leered.

“That’s right.”

“I knew you’d been exposed to Mako from the look in your eyes, and it doesn’t take a genius to see you’re still bearing the Crest on your belt. Tell me, traitor, what is your name?”

“Cloud.”

“Forgive me for asking, but I cannot be expected to remember each individual.” shrugged the President, the rubbery skin of his broad neck creasing. “Unless, of course, you become another

Sephiroth. Yes, Sephiroth...he was brilliant. Perhaps too brilliant..."

Sephiroth...

"I don't give a damn 'bout none o' that." shouted Barret. "This place's goin' up with a big bang soon, an' it serves y'all right!"

"And I must thank you." smirked the President, nonchalantly flicking the butt of his cigar over the railing. "Your troublesome little demolition job last week has rallied support for the Company tenfold. The people you fight for fear you, and look to us for protection. The only thing your hard work today will do is allow me to implement stronger police measures. We have already dismantled your poor attempt at an explosive down in the core, and backed up the files from the office systems. But, I think another controlled terrorist attack on the facility will give me all the ammunition I need."

"What?" whimpered Tifa, the sinking realisation that their efforts were being so sickeningly manipulated clearly affecting her composure.

"Did you really think we would let you destroy another Reactor without us knowing, my dear?" he chuckled. "We've followed your presence inside the complex since you were detected on the Midgar Transit. It is a pity, though. Such a waste of good fireworks just to get rid of noxious insects like you..."

"Insects?" screamed Barret. He aimed his gatling-gun at the man, but reluctantly lowered it as the clicks of a dozen rifle safety catches sounded. "That's all you can say? 'Insects?'"

"Barret..." Tifa pleaded, desperately trying to calm him.

"It's Shinra who're the parasites, killin' the Planet! An' that makes you King of the Insects, so shu'up, jackass!"

"You are beginning to bore me." sighed the President, glancing at his watch. From somewhere below, there came a faint fluttering. "I am a very busy man, so if you'll excuse me...I have an early meeting with the Executive that I must attend."

"A meeting?" flared Barret, charging towards the President. "Don't gimme that!"

Cloud lunged forward, dragging his comrade back. President Shinra laughed hard, shaking his blonde head scornfully. The fluttering sound rapidly became louder, ascending to a deafening level. Cloud stared in confusion as Tifa's hair rose from her spine, levitating behind her. The air began to swirl around them, Cloud's khakis clinging to his legs, heavy gusts forcing them against the barriers. Cloud had to shield his eyes as the silver B1a helicopter came into view, hovering stationary at the side of the bridge.

"Now, don't worry," called the President over the thunder of the wind as he was helped aboard the craft, "I have made a special arrangement for you all."

"Hey!" yelled Barret, fighting to break free of Cloud. "I ain't even started wit' you yet!"

"Goodbye..." he waved sardonically.

With a directing nod to the soldiers, he slammed the door. Both squads began to retreat, slithering back into the shadows of the complex's passages, their guns still fixed on the three. The helicopter slowly lifted into the air above them. Conscious of the seconds ticking away, Cloud turned to retrieve the Buster Sword from its slot on the walkway, and saw the chain-gun on Barret's arm begin to rotate.

"Goodbye, my ass!" Barret smirked, the gun-arm now spinning at a great velocity, its aim following the rising helicopter. In an instant, bullets were bursting from all six barrels' of the chain-gun, shooting into the air like pellets of fire.

The barrage battered against the helicopter, rocking it as it hovered over the bridge. Pieces of chipped armour rained down upon them, but not one hole appeared on the underside of the craft; the exterior having obviously been designed to repel such an attack. It remained above them, steadily drifting back and forth, almost parallel with the Reactor's head. Barret let his arm fall, the smoking barrels whirring to a halt. The three paused, mesmerised.

"We have to get out of here." said Cloud, starting towards the intersection. "The office block's gonna blow any minute now."

As if in recognition of their movement, the helicopter's nose dropped, the blades like a saw bearing upon an immobile tree. The moments passed as if they were an eternity. As he blinked, the world around Cloud seemed to disappear, his reality a hoax. In that second, he could no longer feel the cold morning air; could no longer smell the burning Mako fumes escaping from the furnace; could no longer see the first rays of sunlight clambering across the peaks of the Midgar Mountains. Then the adrenaline hit, spreading through his veins like wildfire. *Oh, shit...*

"Run!" bellowed Barret, the pilot's intent clear.

They spun on their heels, all three breaking into a sprint as the missile whistled through the air. Cloud had barely cleared the junction when it struck, a great surge of heat launching him forward. The Buster Sword was thrown from his grasp, clattering along the metal grid, and he found himself clutching at something to hold on to as searing pain pulsed through his body. Around him, the facility shook, the first of the bombs in the office wing exploding. Cloud opened his eyes to see the Sector5 Slums far below, but as Tifa began to scream, he realised desperately that they were now rushing rapidly towards him.



Encounters of Fate

'You alright? Can you hear me?'

"Yeah." mumbled Cloud.

'That time...' the voice continued, like a whisper deep within his head. *'Back then you couldn't even get by with just skinned knees.'*

"What do you mean 'back then'?"

'What about now? Can you get up?'

"What do you mean by 'that time'? What *about* now?"

'Don't worry about me. Just worry about yourself now.'

"I'll give it a try."

'Take it slow, now. Little by little...'

"...I know." he said. "Hey...who are you? Hello? Hello...?"

* * *

"Hello?"

Cloud wearily opened his eyes, the great weight that had been set upon them finally lifting. All was white, blinding him, his pupils straining to focus. He felt strangely at peace, as if his physical body had been drained of its senses. He inhaled, effortlessly drawing in a mouthful of refreshing and revitalising air. The white became a haze of gold. He blinked, shapes beginning to form amidst the brilliant rays of sunlight.

Sunlight...?

“You okay?” came the sweet voice again.

He glanced behind him, carefully turning his neck. There, gazing down at him though large, pale green eyes, knelt a young woman. Her expression was one of relief, a calming smile spreading across her angelic features. He relaxed, letting his head sink into the soft earth beneath him. He lay among a bed of white and yellow lilies, the scent of the flowers drifting over him. The girl stood, casually brushing dirt from her dress. After a moment, Cloud propped himself up, leaning heavily on his elbows.

“Where...am I?” he asked.

“This is a church in the outer district of Sector5.”

Of course, he thought, the sun...we're not very far from the edge of the city...

Through the stained-glass windows before him, he could see the burning sphere in the east, yet to arc above the Plate. It illuminated an array of colours and shapes, the insignia on each pane recounting various legends of the Gods. The body of the chapel was short in length but very broad, two rows of wooden pews lining the building to the high, arched doorway at its front. One of the tall oak doors had been left slightly ajar, allowing more sunlight to sneak in across the floor. Bulbous columns of ashen marble were located orderly throughout the vast structure like sentinels, holding aloft the sloping pinewood roof.

Behind him, the old alter stood alone on a wide stone podium, a red carpet running up the steps to its base. A single candle had been set on a cloth cover bearing the ancient religious symbol of the elements, the flame flickering gently, a chain of lilies placed carefully around it. Beyond the raised stage, a small doorway could be seen, leading to another room at the rear of the church. As he moved his eyes over the floor, Cloud saw several broken shards of timber strewn randomly around him.

“You suddenly fell on top of me.” explained the girl, as if reading his mind, and pointed to the ceiling. “It really gave me quite a scare.”

Cloud followed her finger, studying the gaping hole directly above him. The wooden beams that had formed the apex of the roof were now snapped completely, a few hanging loosely over the pews. The space was nothing short of ten feet, the jagged pattern like an enormous wound. He could see the underside of the Plate, the image somewhat blurred by traces of smoke, and the tiny shape of an emergency response helicopter circling beneath. Suddenly, he remembered all that had happened; *Barret...Tifa...the Reactor...*

“I came crashing down?” he stammered, his mind racing.

“Strangely, you’re not the first.” she sighed, pausing for a moment as if to reflect. “The roof and the flower bed must have broken your fall. You’re very lucky. It should have been enough to kill you.”

“What about the Reactor?” he asked. “I fell after the explosion.”

“I’m not sure.” she frowned, looking up. “I haven’t left your side since you landed here.”

“Well...uh...thanks...”

“You were thrown quite a distance from the Reactor.” she said thoughtfully, shifting her gaze between him and the hole. “It’s amazing you landed where you did.”

“You mean the flower bed?” mumbled Cloud, slowly sitting up. His back ached slightly, and his arms bore a small number of scratches, but he had escaped from the plunge mostly unscathed. He looked around the small patch, the lily petals glinting in the mesmeric light, their long stems buried deep into the rich brown soil. “Is it yours?”

“It belongs to everyone.” she answered, smiling softly, glancing at the flattened area where he had fallen.

“Sorry about that.” he apologised, scrambling to his feet, and watched as the flowers he had lain upon slowly began to spring up again. He turned to the girl, astounded by their strength.

“The flowers here are quite resilient,” she said, examining the bed, “because this is a sacred place.”

“A sacred place, huh?”

“They say you can’t grow grass or flowers in Midgar.” the girl replied, her voice filled with wonder. “But, for some reason, they have no trouble blooming inside the church. I love it here.”

She knelt by the side of the patch, carefully surveying the individual flowers. Before her, a young lily had wilted, unable to rise again under the weight of Cloud. She paused, offering up a silent prayer, and began to gently stroke the stem with her fingertips. Cloud gaped in awe as the flower trembled, and gradually grew into the air, erect above all others, as if a new breath of life had been passed through it by her touch. The girl stood, studying the lily. After a few seconds, her focus returned to Cloud.

“So, we meet again.” she grinned. Cloud nodded; he had recognised her immediately, and succumbed to the same unusual sensation of familiarity as before. “Do you remember me?”

“You were selling the flowers on the Plate.”

He pictured her as he had seen her at Fountain Plaza the previous week, the night of the Mako Reactor₁ bombing. The recollection of her pink dress, covered in dust, flickered in his mind. She was clad in the same outfit now, her red jacket tight across her curved chest. Her brown hair was long and smooth, tied back in a silken pink ribbon, and her fringe was parted, thick strands falling on either side of her perfect face. The girl radiated beauty and affability in abundance, beaming warmly in appreciation of his memory.

“Thank you again.”

“Huh?” grunted Cloud. “For what?”

“For buying one of my flowers.” she replied. “It was very kind of you...although you didn’t really say much after that.”

“I had other things on my mind.” murmured Cloud.

“I feel like talking now, though.” she said heartily. “Do you feel up to it?”

“I’ve got nothing to talk about.” shrugged Cloud. “I don’t even know your name.”

“Oh, you’re right.” laughed the girl, slapping her forehead playfully. “I’m Aerith, the flower girl. Nice to meet you.”

“The name’s Cloud. Me...I do a bit of everything.”

“Oh, a jack of all trades.” she giggled.

“Yeah, I do whatever’s needed.”

“Well, now that we know each other’s name, we have to find something to talk about. So...um...do you have any Materia?”

“Not really.” he answered, surprised by the question. He had not thought of it in a while. “It’s pretty difficult to come by outside the military. My sword is powerful enough on its own without having to combine magic anyway. I haven’t used Materia in a long time.”

Not since then...

“I have some.” said Aerith, reaching under the bows of the ribbon on the crown of her head. Easily finding what she was searching for, she held out her hand, inviting him to take a look. In the centre of her palm sat a small orb, no more than two inches in diameter. It had a glazed surface, a thin white mist swirling inside. Cloud had seen many Materia spheres before, but none similar to that which Aerith possessed.

“White Materia?”

“Yup. Odd isn’t it?”

“I’ve only ever used Materia for casting basic spells,” he frowned, intrigued, “but most of those were all Green Materia. What type of magic is White Materia?”

“It’s special.” she chuckled. “It’s good for absolutely nothing.”

“Good for nothing? You probably just don’t know how to use it.”

“No, I do!” she insisted. “It just doesn’t do anything. I feel safe having it; it was my mother’s...”

Her voice trailed off, her eyes wandering to the front of the chapel. Cloud glanced up to see a man standing at the end of the pews. He seemed to have passed without sound through the doorway, the shadow of his lean form creeping over the benches like a ghost. He wore an unkempt black suit over a scruffy,

unbuttoned white shirt, his bony chest visible even from a distance. His spiky red hair had been tied in a short ponytail behind his neck, a pair of thick-rimmed goggles keeping the thin locks from his sharp features.

“Don’t worry about me, Slick.” the man called cockily, his gaze meeting Cloud’s. Cloud felt his muscles tense at the very sound of his nasal voice.

“Cloud, have you ever been a bodyguard?” whispered Aerith, her voice shrill. “You *do* do everything, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Then, get me out of here.” she pleaded, clutching his arm. Cloud looked at her, analysing the fearful expression. The intruder’s presence had clearly sparked a growing anxiety within Aerith. “Take me home.”

He nodded, slowly beginning towards the pews. The man grinned menacingly, taking a few steps forward. Cloud came to a halt less than ten feet from him, his fists tightly clenched. He stared into his smirking blue eyes, a past hatred swirling inside of him. Aerith appeared by his side, pressing her body against his for protection. Silence fell over the church, the sounds of the morning drifting from afar. At last, Cloud spoke.

“I know you.” he snarled. The man snorted with amusement, rolling his eyes as he turned towards Aerith.

“Hey, sis,” he mocked, “this one’s a little weird, yo.”

“Yeah, I know you.” Cloud repeated, his voice fierce. “That uniform...you’re a Shinra spy.”

He started towards the man, but stopped dead as the sanctuary doors crashed open, two infantrymen bursting inside. They trained their rifles on Cloud’s chest as they advanced down the aisle, forcing him to retreat. He grabbed Aerith’s wrist, pulling her behind him as the soldiers drew alongside the spy, their weapons unflinching. Not taking his eyes from the rifles, he began to edge backwards, careful to prevent any sudden movement.

“Reno, you want him taken out?” said one of the privates.

“I haven’t decided yet.” replied the man, tapping his chin thoughtfully with his fingers.

“Let’s get out of here.” Aerith whimpered, drawing him towards the altar. “We can escape through the back.”

“Stop!” demanded the spy. “Stop or we’ll shoot.”

“We can’t fight here.” gasped the other soldier. “Not in the church.”

“Our orders are to retrieve the girl, yo.”

“You’re gonna catch holy hell, Reno.”

“Orders are orders.” Reno sneered. “And grab *him*, too...I want to know what the hell he’s doing *here*...”

“Sir, they’re getting away.” reported the first infantryman, his rifle tracking them around the flower bed.

“Then, follow them! Don’t let them escape!”

Cloud and Aerith had almost arrived at the doorway at the rear of the church as the soldiers began forward, a long red banner hiding the corridor beyond. The reluctance of the men to use their weapons in the place of worship was, much to the frustration of their superior, an advantage to the two. With the knowledge that they would not be fired upon, Cloud spun and sprinted through the low doorway, forcing the banner to the side, Aerith at his heels.

The passage brought them to a small bell tower, a single ray of concentrated sunlight blazing through the window at the summit of the sweeping wooden stairwell. Short planks of dry pine rested against one of the circular stone walls, waiting to be added to the scaffolding structure that climbed the interior. At the height of the scaffolding, Cloud could see a golden bell hanging from the rafters, the timber beams linking to form a grid wide enough for them to cross. From behind, the angry shouts grew nearer as the soldiers approached the tower.

“Which way?” said Cloud, frantically scanning the ground for any sign of a trapdoor.

“The window up there.” replied Aerith. “We can get to the roof from it.”

“Are you sure?”

“This isn’t the first time I’ve had to do this.” she answered flatly, making for the steps. “I just hope they don’t step on the flowers this time.”

They raced up the stairs two at a time, scaling the circumference of tower with the incline. Below, the privates and Reno charged into the room, immediately spotting their escape. Pushing one of the soldiers aside, the spy snatched his gun and fired. The bullets whizzed inches past Cloud’s face, embedding themselves in the thick plaster behind him. Ducking his head as he ran, Cloud lurched up the remaining steps. As he dove onto the scaffolding for cover, he turned, expecting to feel Aerith land at his side.

“Don’t let the Ancient get away.” roared Reno.

To his horror, Cloud saw Aerith struggling to climb the last bend of the staircase, one of the Shinra soldiers steadily gaining on her. Without thinking, he grabbed the weighted barrel next to him, the load of the liquid inside proving difficult to manoeuvre. Drawing strength from every muscle in his body, he waited for Aerith to pass beneath before hurling the drum over the edge of the scaffolding. It landed hard on the stairwell, shaking it at its foundations, and began to roll. The barrel quickly gathered speed, catching the surprised infantryman with a heavy blow to his stomach, thrusting him backwards.

Aerith joined Cloud moments later, her eyes filled with gratitude. Opening the window to its maximum width, he helped her pull herself onto the metal frame on the outside wall, and up onto the red slated roof. He watched as the defeated Reno called hopelessly out for their surrender once more before marching dejectedly out of the tower, the two soldiers limping behind. Taking his time to make sure the men had vacated the church, Cloud followed Aerith onto the roof.

He found her staring out towards the city limits that lay only a few miles from the chapel, glimpsing the barren plains and

jagged mountains beyond the southern entrance to Midgar. The shadow of the Plate was growing ever closer from the west, the sun less than an hour from disappearing over the great disc for the day. Cloud found it odd to see a significant portion of the Plate missing overhead, occupied instead by bare framework, Sector4 remaining several years from completion.

“Do you think we’re safe now?” Aerith asked eventually.

“Don’t worry,” confirmed Cloud, stirred from his thoughts of returning to Sector7, “he won’t come after us. I know his type; he’ll just go back to his boss and tell him that we got away.”

“I hope so.” she said quietly, forcing a laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.” she sighed. “It’s just...they’re looking for me again.”

“You mean this isn’t the first time the Shinra’ve been after you?”

“Like I said...I’ve had to escape this place before.”

“Have you any idea who that was?”

“No, why?”

“He was one of the Turks.” answered Cloud, his words growing serious.

“What *are* the Turks?” asked Aerith, frowning. “I’ve encountered them a number of times, but I’ve never known who they really are.”

“They’re a special organisation within Shinra that scout for possible candidates for SOLDIER.”

“This violently? They seemed as if they were trying to kidnap me.”

“Well, they’re involved in lot of dirty stuff on the side.” Cloud muttered. “Y’know, spying...murder...that sort of thing...basically anything that the Shinra want kept secret.”

“That guy Reno definitely looked like it.” she nodded. “Have you met him before?”

“No, but I know that uniform...”

“Cloud,” Aerith cleared her throat, shifting uncomfortably, “can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“Have *you* worked for Shinra before?”

“Yeah.” he replied, lowering his head.

“Were you ever in SOLDIER?”

“I used to be.” he said, glancing up at her in puzzlement. “How did you guess?”

“Your eyes...” she smiled, “they have a strange glow. It’s as if I can see the sky in them.”

“That’s the sign of those who have been infused with Mako.” explained Cloud. “It’s a mark of SOLDIER. But...how did you know about that?”

“Nothing...it doesn’t matter...”

“Aerith,” Cloud pried, his gaze reaching hers, “why are they after you? There must be a reason, right?”

“Maybe they believe I have what it takes to be in SOLDIER.” she shrugged.

“I doubt it. It’s really difficult to get into, even from the military, and from what I’ve seen...you’re not cut out for it at all.”

“Then, I don’t know what it is.” she said softly, looking down at her small laced boots.

“Okay.” Cloud exhaled, not wishing to interrogate her. Taking a firm grip of the slates, he slid down the side of the roof until he came to its edge. Slowly, he peered over at the old road that passed in front of the church. Piles of deserted scrap and abandoned materials lined both sides of the narrow path, the putrid air that rose from the heaps of waste infectious to breathe. “There’s a bundle of trash below us. I think we can jump down.”

Without waiting for a reply, he swung his legs around and dropped into the garbage. Seconds later, Aerith appeared at the ledge. Shielding his eyes from the falling debris of the roof, he held out his arms to catch her. She jumped, landing against Cloud, and together they tumbled from the refuse onto the road. Cloud quickly clambered to his feet, coughing as he swallowed the swirling dust.

“Sorry.” giggled Aerith, allowing him to help her up.

“What now?”

“You said you’d take me home, right?”

“Fine, but it’ll cost you.”

“Well, then let’s see.” she said, thinking for a moment. “How about I go out with you once?”

“That’s it?” he grunted. “That’s your offer?”

“Is something wrong?”

“Look, I usually only deal in gil,” he responded, assessing the situation, “but I really need to get back to Sector7, so I’d appreciate it if you could show me the way.”

“It’s a deal. But, I still get to go on a date with you, right?”

“We’ll see.”

“Then c’mon, bodyguard.” chirped Aerith, starting along the path, the limits of the city at her back. “My house is this way.”

* * *

The journey through the Sector5 Slums had taken a great deal longer than Cloud had expected. Aerith had described the village in which she lived to be the last in the residential district before the gateway to Sector6. However, unlike the frail but distinguished paths of Sector7, the two had spent most of their time clambering over the unending mounds of junk under Aerith’s insistence that it was a short cut. It had proven a difficult task as the day wore on, the guiding natural light fading as they ventured farther beneath the Plate, replaced only with the distant glow of street lamps and houses.

On more than one occasion, the duo had found themselves accosted by packs of small monsters that lived within the waste. Boundfats – stout, aggressive creatures with rubbery red skin and swollen bellies which had numerous purple spikes protruding from their backs – had sprung from amongst the garbage, their sharp jaws gnashing as they bade for blood. Without the Buster Sword, Cloud had relied on a rusted iron rod as a weapon as he

defended Aerith without difficulty. The sight of the boundfats seemed to upset Aerith, who recalled stories of children that had been attacked while searching for scrap metal to sell, getting too close to the monsters they had mistakenly come to know affectionately as 'hedgehog pies'.

After a few hours of trekking over the piles of filth, the two stumbled upon a wide trail that appeared to be the main road, dissecting the waste by almost fifteen feet. The worn street bore a series of footprints, some evidently more recent than others. They followed the path due west, the vast view of the upper-city's Central Complex looming before them. Cloud could see the lights of a train as it made its ascent to the Plate, appearing briefly before vanishing as quickly as it had come into a section of tunnels over the Sector4 domain.

At last, the street brought them to a residential area in Central Slums. Dozens of shanty homes and shacks similar to those of Sector7 began to spread out along the road, their makeshift walls sagging wearily as if they were on the brink of collapse. Kids ran to and fro about the path, many clothed in rags and torn garments, mockingly fighting each other with wooden sticks. Stray mongrels joined them in their chorus of playful rowdiness, only to be scolded by the passing drunk.

The main road eventually broadened as it approached the bordering Wall between Sector5 and Sector6, offering room for larger and less-neglected houses to mark its perimeter. Under the shadow of the Wall, a side street led towards the sector's marketplace and the entrance to Aerith's village. The marketplace itself resembled nothing more than a junk yard, made up by a number of item, tool and medicine stalls among others, and no longer acted as a route to the Plate as it once had. Now closed off to the public, a gateway had existed here as a passage to the upper-city, with access limited to the Midgar Transit.

With a pleasant wave to the store owners, Aerith led Cloud from the small piazza, guiding him along a small trail towards the

village that lay below the Central Complex. A handful of wooden shacks formed the centre of the derelict community, their exteriors dry and rotting, their roofs strengthened somewhat by rigid sheets of rough steel and iron. The area was enclosed by a collection of weathered caravans, most of which were without wheels or window panes.

Many of the villagers had withdrawn to their homes at this late hour, leaving only a few children to play amongst the garbage. Cloud could see a lonely beggar beneath a blanket of cardboard and newspapers sitting against the old well, his only friend the scrawny cat by his side, neither in an apparent state of good health. As they passed, the beggar groaned, hoarsely mumbling something under his breath.

Cloud followed Aerith to the rear of the village, beyond the caravans where the evening news could be heard from the crackling televisions inside. At the boundary of the site, a thin pathway wound for a short distance to the north. It brought them to a large house overlooking a sickly stream, a thick polluting scum sitting atop the still brown water. The building seemed out of place in the Slums, its size and design unique to any other Cloud had witnessed. It was a picturesque home, one without poverty and deprivation. Its walls were of thick sandstone, its clear glass windows and low pinewood door a novelty to its surroundings. Flower pots decorated the window ledges and high redbrick rooftop, the white lilies from the church a spectacular sight amidst the gloom of the lower-city.

Aerith opened the front door and entered, beckoning Cloud to join her. He was met with the thick aroma of baking as he stepped inside, the smell reminding him that he had not eaten all day. The ground floor of the house was an open-plan space, stretching from the doorway to the staircase at the rear of the homestead. The walls were of the same cream colour as the carpet, adorned with framed photographs and paintings. Two long cabinets grew the length of the room, one containing heavy

books and encyclopaedias, the other bearing ornaments of varying shapes and sizes. A dining table sat upon a brown hexagonal rug in the centre of the area, with a single vase of flowers placed on the white tablecloth.

“I’m home, mum.” Aerith called, taking off her jacket and tossing it over one of the chairs at the table.

“Aerith?” came a voice to their right. A short, dark-haired woman appeared from the kitchen, her eyes filled with relief. Wiping her hands on her white apron, she hurried over to her daughter and embraced her warmly. “I was getting worried about you. You’ve been gone for days.”

“I’m fine, mum.”

“And, who is this?” asked the woman, an air of caution in her voice.

“This is Cloud.” replied Aerith, letting go of her mother. “He’s my bodyguard.”

“Bodyguard?” she glowered. “You mean you were followed again?”

“It’s not like that.”

“Are you okay? You’re not hurt are you?”

“I told you, I’m fine.”

“I’m sorry, dear.” she sighed. “With the terrorist attack at the Mako Reactor and the power being out most of the day...I just wasn’t sure...”

“I’m okay.” Aerith reassured her. “I had Cloud with me.”

“Well, thank you, Cloud.” the woman offered with a brief bow, her voice less than convincing, not taking her eyes from him. “As you no doubt have guessed, I am Aerith’s mother, Elmyra. I’m very grateful to you for helping her get back here safely. I’m cooking supper right now, so you’re welcome to stay for something to eat. If you’ll excuse me, I’d better get back to it.”

“Okay, mum.” Aerith chuckled, hugging Elmyra again. Cloud watched as the woman gave him a quick smile, and disappeared into the adjoining kitchen area.

“I think it’d be best if I go.” he said quietly.

“What?” gasped Aerith. “Why?”

“I don’t think your mum’s comfortable with me being here.”

“Oh, don’t worry about her.” laughed Aerith dismissively. “She’s just very protective of me.”

“I suppose...”

“So, what are you going to do now?”

“Is Sector7 far from here?” asked Cloud. “I need to get to the Seventh Heaven bar.”

“Oh yeah, I promised I’d show you the way, didn’t I?”

“You’ve gotta be kidding.” spluttered Cloud. “Just give me directions. By going with me, you’d be putting yourself in danger again.”

“I’m used to it.”

“Used to it?”

“Mum?” called Aerith.

“Yes, dear?” replied Elmyra.

“I’m taking Cloud to Sector7.” she said. “I’ll be back in a few hours.”

“But, dear...”

“I’m going to show him the way.”

“Okay, I give up.” Elmyra groaned in defeat, appearing at the entrance of the kitchen. “You never listen once you’ve made up your mind. But, if you must go, why don’t you leave it until tomorrow? It’s getting late now, and dinner is almost ready.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” agreed Aerith, glancing at Cloud for his approval. He shrugged indifferently. “We’ll stay here tonight.”

“Then, it’s settled.” said Elmyra. “Aerith, please go and make the bed in the guestroom. Cloud can sleep in there.”

Mumbling something under her breath, Aerith crossed the room and climbed the staircase, the floorboards above creaking as she wandered around. There came a whistling sound of a kettle from the kitchen and Elmyra rushed to lower the heat of the stove. Moments later, she rejoined Cloud at the dining table. Nervously

fixing the tight bun she had tied her hair into, she bit her lip, raising her gaze to the ceiling.

“That glow in your eyes...” she said eventually, “you’re from SOLDIER, right?”

“Yeah. Rather, I used to be...”

“I’m really sorry about my attitude.” she apologised.

“Huh?”

“My behaviour when you first arrived.”

“Oh, it’s...uh...it’s alright...”

“I’m sorry to have acted like that.” continued Elmyra. “I really don’t know how to say this, but...would you please leave here tonight? Without telling Aerith?”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s just...I really fear for her safety. I wouldn’t like her going with you and putting herself at risk again.”

“I understand, but I’m not sure how to get to Sector7 alone.”

“You need to go through Sector6.” explained Elmyra. “There’s a gap in the Wall west of here, beyond the marketplace. From there, head north until you reach the gateway to Sector7. Sector6 is a little dangerous, though. There are bandits that hunt in that area, not to mention the security robots the Shinra sometimes test down here...so be careful. I’d suggest you get a few hours rest before you set off.”

“Okay.” nodded Cloud.

“I’m sorry to have to ask this of you,” Elmyra said with saddened words, “but you’re not the first boy from SOLDIER she’s met...”

“Cloud, can you come up here for a second?” shouted Aerith, her voice muffled as it travelled from the floor above.

“Don’t worry.” he said, making his way towards the stairs. “I’ll make sure she doesn’t know.”

“Cloud?” sniffed Elmyra. He stopped at the foot of the steps, turning to see a tear roll silently down her pale cheek. “It’s just...the last thing Aerith needs is to get her heart broken again...”



Wall Market

'You seem pretty tired...'

"I haven't slept in a bed like this in a long time."

'Ever since then...'

* * *

"I can't believe how much you've grown in just two years." she grinned, brushing the spiky locks of hair from his face.

"Mum, stop it." he moaned, rolling over on the sofa.

His body sank into thick blue cushions, reminding him of the comfort it had given him as a child. Everything about the house triggered a memory in his mind; whether it was the familiar smells of the furniture fabric, or the echo of the wooden floors around the stone walls with each step taken. There came a *hiss* from the next room as the stew gradually began to bubble in the boiling pot. With this, his mother stood and, taking one last look at him, she disappeared into the kitchen.

"The girls must never leave you alone." she called over the clattering of pans.

"Not really." he replied nonchalantly, kicking his boots to the floor.

"Cloud, I'm worried about you." she sighed, emerging again from her cooking. He glanced up to see her expression had grown serious; a hint of genuine concern seeping into her tone.

"I'm alright."

“There are a lot of temptations in the city.” she said, biting her lip. “I’d feel a lot better if you just settled down and had a nice girlfriend.”

“Mum, I’m only sixteen.”

“You should have an older girlfriend....one that’ll take care of you. I think that would be the perfect type for you.”

“Look, I’m not interested...”

“Are you eating right?” she asked.

“Yeah, the Company takes care of me.”

“Is that so?” she frowned, thoughtfully. “You can’t cook, right? I’ve been worried sick about how you were doing.”

“Really, I’m fine.” he insisted.

“Cloud...?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t ever forget that I’ll always be your mother...”

* * *

Cloud sat up in a cold sweat, breathing heavily. His heart was pounding, the dull thumping breaking the silence of the bedroom. Memories of his mother had come few and far between since he had regained consciousness a few weeks before, and seeing her face in his dreams did little to ease the numbing loss. Groggily, he picked up the small bedside clock, his eyes struggling to focus on the red digits. *6:53...I must’ve fallen asleep.* Outside the window, the derelict village remained under a blanket of flickering orange lamplight, as the winter sky was hidden by the Plate. He pulled the yellow duvet to the side, and climbed out of bed. With a great yawn, he yanked on his zipped boots, using one of the guestroom’s old cardboard boxes as support in an effort to minimise sound.

Carefully opening the door, he peered cautiously out into the hallway. The faint sound of snoring drifted from the room between him and the stairs, but nothing stirred. Taking his time to remain as noiseless as possible, he crept along the hall, the

creaking floorboards threatening to jeopardise his escape with every step. At last he reached the staircase and, gripping the banister, made his descent to the living room.

“You’re up bright and early.” chirped Aerith from her place at the dining table, looking up from her cooling mug of coffee. Cloud froze in his tracks; the sound of her voice had come as a surprise. “Were you about to leave without me, I wonder?”

“Aerith, how could I ask you to come with me when I knew it would be dangerous?” said Cloud, making no effort to hide his intentions.

“That isn’t your decision.” she replied bluntly, scowling playfully at him.

“But, your mum...”

“I said I’d show you the way to Sector7, okay?” she interrupted, her tone one of finality. “You kept your part of the deal by bringing me here, so I want to keep mine. Are you ready to go?”

“I suppose...”

“Then, what are we waiting for?” she grinned brightly, rising from the table as he trotted down the remaining steps. “Let’s get going.”

* * *

Aerith led him from the village, taking the road east of the marketplace that Elmyra had described the previous evening. They travelled along a discrete pathway, winding amongst the mountains of abandoned rock and machinery. The cliffs of junk closed in around them, growing high above the trail on both sides, blocking out the morning. Only the remote image of the Wall directly before them was visible, stationed proudly as the partition between the sectors at a height of almost fifty feet, allowing them to concentrate on their destination.

Cloud was frustrated at Aerith’s insistence on guiding him; he had not wished for her company. His task had simply been to return the flower girl to her home and, now that it had been accomplished, he had been set on making the journey to Seventh

Heaven alone, and as quickly as possible. Worse still, he was beginning to feel more vulnerable without the Buster Sword than he thought he may have, and craved its retrieval before encountering anything from Shinra's Weapons Development Department. Combating one of the armoured bullheads or hovering moth slashers alone would be effortless for someone of his abilities, but with Aerith around, anything could happen.

With the road gradually widening and the curtains of waste on either side becoming less dense, they passed another small flea market. Although the hour was still early, there was a lively commotion of bodies about the ragged stalls. Only a handful of stands were present, selling anything from majestically-coloured potions and outdated tools to grilled levrikon meat and sizzling Wutai-style noodles. Several similar bazaars existed around the Slums, and experience taught him that these were the best places to purchase black market Materia should the need arise. Spotting Aerith wandering absently towards the marketplace, Cloud took her arm, nodding towards the Wall with his unambiguous determination to continue on.

Within an hour of leaving Aerith's house, the pair had arrived at the end of the road, and at the makeshift entrance to Sector6, a low hollow forming a passage to the region beyond. The wiry corridor appeared to have been cut inexpertly and without consent, the cracked stone rough and uneven throughout. Anti-Shinra graffiti stained the walls, the colourful messages of hatred and prophesised vengeance melting into the rock and steel, some of which was even written in the kanji style of the Wusheng.

Ducking their heads, Cloud and Aerith slipped through the tunnel to a high ledge overlooking a deserted building site. The decaying frame of an iron structure stood tall at its centre, the crumbling beams of a planned five storey tower erect against their will. A few construction vehicles lined the perimeter of the area, stripped of their parts and left to rot over time. Beyond the decrepit plain, dark silhouettes of collapsed buildings that

seemed to have once belonged to an industrial sector took shape amidst a thin residue of dirt and ash.

“What happened here?” Cloud asked apprehensively as he absorbed the sight of the desolate landscape, its vast boundaries void of any visible inhabitants. *This place is a ghost town...*

“What do you mean?” frowned Aerith.

“The district, it...” he muttered, “it looks like it’s been destroyed... much worse than anywhere else in the Slums.”

“The outer-regions of the Sector6 Slums have always been in a terrible state,” Aerith answered with a shrug, “but what you see is only really because of what happened two months ago.”

“Huh?”

“You don’t know?” she gasped. “Were you not in the city?”

“I’m not sure.” Cloud said quickly, unwilling to share his loss of memory with her. “What happened?”

“The newspapers reported that Midgar had been hit by a freak storm.” replied Aerith, glancing questioningly at him. “Didn’t you even hear about it?”

“I don’t think so.”

“It was horrible.” she recalled, staring off into the distance. “There were flashes of light...everything was shaking...it felt like the whole world would end. I don’t care what the Shinra said; I’m positive I heard the roar of something that couldn’t possibly have been a hurricane. It was alive...an unnatural being...I’m sure of it. After the disturbance, I saw soft particles of matter drift down through holes in the Plate and, a few days later, I found Sector6 like this.

“Whatever it was had created enough energy to tear what remained of this area apart. I suppose it’s lucky only an abandoned part of the Slums was affected. Can you image what would have happened if some of the Plate had been damaged?”

“What about that?” he asked, pointing at of the broken stretch of tarmac that lay a short way from the border of the junkyard. It appeared to be the sole ruins of a highway through the olden Midgar, venturing north towards the gateway to Sector7. “It looks like we can still use it.”

“That’s where we’re headed.” she nodded quietly, reading Cloud’s gaze. She seemed crestfallen, as if reluctant for him to go any further.

“Then, c’mon.” bade Cloud without heed of her brief shift in mood, hastily finding his way down the rocky slope as he made his descent into the dusty site.

Wandering beneath a large yellow crane, its rigid arm extended over the yard, they joined the wide road. The grainy remnants of the painted white lines that divided the lanes could still be seen on the asphalt, trailing the freeway as it cut through the barren sector. The road itself had long since been in use, entire sections of the terrain bulging from their path as if they had been the victim of an enormous earthquake. There came a great glow of brilliant colours from the foot of the Central Complex a few miles from their position; a town bustling with life, illuminating most of the surrounding wasteland.

For a place he had believed to be unoccupied, the region was surprisingly teeming with suspicious movement from within the mounds of rubble that grew from the roadside. Boundfats bounced and grashtrikes scuttled in droves back into the bowels of the rusting machines and old abandoned shacks, considerably more wary of the travellers than the monsters of Sector5. Aerith explained that it was not uncommon for some of the men of the town to go on extermination hunts to rid the sector of such rodents, tired of the ineffectiveness of the Shinra security robots to eradicate them. As the two continued, strange sounds often filtered from the garbage a short way from their path, the eager thieves scouring through the Plate’s discarded trash for anything to sell at the marketplace.

By noon, they had come to the large gateway on the Sector7 Wall, the dim lanterns above the enormous grey doors casting eerie shadows around them. The gate was closed, and the guard shed at its base appeared vacant. Rattling the chained padlock of the small reinforced hut, Cloud swore; he would be unable to operate the controls manually. *What the hell am I gonna do*

now? It's pretty odd that there's nobody here. Is there no other way to get to Sector7?

Turning, he saw Aerith pushing herself back and forth on a swing in the neglected play-park at the edge of the road. His shoulders slumped, racking his brain for a solution, he trudged towards her. She didn't look up as he approached, staring dreamily at the round mog-shaped slide across the park. Its bulbous plastic shell had worn in colour, the small ears and puffy face of the mythical creature now a pallid brown, its tongue rolling out from its gaping mouth to a sandpit a few feet in front of it to form the chute itself.

"This is Green Park; my second favourite place in all the Slums." she said weakly; reflectively. "It was always filled with the happiness of children. This park is where I sold my first flower."

"Hmm..." Cloud grunted without interest.

"I can't believe it's still here after all this time...I should have brought that parasol..." murmured Aerith to herself, a fleeting half-smile of saddened memories flickering on her lips as she brought the swing to a stop, getting to her feet. Not taking her eyes from the mog, she strolled around the sandpit and, climbing on the railings of its steps, pulled herself up onto its head. Carefully manoeuvring her dainty legs beneath her pink frock, she sat above one of the creature's beady eyes, patting the shell with her palm. "Cloud, over here."

"Do I have to?"

"Yes, you have to." she demanded jokingly, her melancholy demeanour turning to laughter as she watched him grudgingly clamber onto the shell with slight awkwardness. Dropping into a seated position beside her, he glanced back at the stationary gateway and sighed.

"I'll just have to wait until someone comes through from the other side." he concluded with temporary defeat.

"Then, I guess this is goodbye."

"Thanks for showing me the way." said Cloud.

“No problem.” she smiled warmly. “A deal’s a deal, right? And anyway, I didn’t really have a choice; you bought a flower from me.”

“Huh?”

“You see, I like men who buy flowers from me.” she explained. “I’ve been selling them from my cart for a long time now. I don’t even do it for the money. It brings me so much joy to give them to strangers and see Midgar be brightened up a little, but they’re not exactly in demand. I guess the people in this city just don’t have the time to enjoy flowers anymore. Or maybe I charge too much?”

“I only paid one gil.”

“Well, I had a good feeling about you.” she snickered. “Some guys just want to hit on me. I make them pay a bit extra. Ten gil, twenty gil...y’know, whatever a girl can get away with. I once got some slimy Shinra Executive to give me five-hundred gil for a single flower. What a creep.”

“Do you always sell them on the Plate?”

“Plate...Slums...wherever I can give them a good home. There’s the annual tree light spectacle at West Park in Sector8 next week so maybe I’ll sell some there. I should really get back to the church and get them ready.”

“You gonna be alright going home by yourself?”

“Give me a break.” Aerith snorted. “I can look after myself. What about you?”

“I was in SOLDIER, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. So what rank were you?”

“Rank?”

“Y’know...what class?”

“Oh, I was...”

* * *

‘First Class.’

* * *

“...First Class.”

“Just the same as him.” Aerith pursed her lips, her voice faltering.

“The same as who?”

“My first boyfriend.”

“Were the two of you...serious?”

“Not really. But, I liked him for a while.”

“There’s not many people who make it to First Class.” said Cloud. “I probably knew him. What was his name?”

“It was...no, it doesn’t matter...” sniffed Aerith, resting her chin on her knees. “He disappeared over five years ago without saying goodbye. I haven’t heard from him since...”

Her words trailed off, the last few spoken as no more than a whisper. She began to rock her body gently, cradling herself for comfort. Unable to find the means to console her, Cloud gazed up at the damaged underside of the Plate. To the south, the burning green and red lights of the Sector6 Pillar continued to blink, the broad stone column unflinching beneath the great weight of the upper-city. He could make out a series of thin electricity cables connecting the top of the tower’s skeleton structure to the Walls that bound the sector on either side, each one penetrating them at different locations.

Time passed beyond consciousness, and Cloud suddenly found himself dragged from his thoughts by an unbearable grinding of cogs. He spun sharply, watching the gates as they shook and began to part. As he prepared to leap from the mog, Aerith clasped his arm, her firm grip holding him down. Confused, he glanced round at her questioningly, but was met by nothing other than her pleading eyes. Again their pale green sparkle sent a waver of familiarity through him, stronger now than it had been when they first met on the Plate, but he immediately cast the unwanted feelings aside.

“Aerith, what are you doing?” he shouted over the deafening rumble, tugging at her to let go.

“I...I don’t know...”

“I have to go *now*! This may be the only chance I get.”

She nodded despairingly, and reluctantly loosened her grasp on his arm. Quickly thanking her once more for her help, he sprang to the ground, and sprinted for the widening gateway. As he approached, he saw a strange outline form in the darkness of the Sector7 Slums. Pausing until the shape had negotiated its way through the channel successfully before making his break, he gaped in shock as his opposite number came into view, the orange light of the lanterns washing casually over it.

As he stumbled backwards, trying desperately to make sense of the sight, the chocobo strode elegantly through the high doorway, the magnificent red carriage it drew rolling smoothly behind. The tall golden bird shrieked as its master’s whip cracked its back, its powerful legs quickening in pace. The elderly moustached man driving the coach flashed his whip a second time, and the chocobo began to gallop towards the highway. As the wagon passed, Cloud had enough time to see the young woman at its rear, her dark hair falling across her shimmering purple dress.

“*Tifa?*” he yelled.

Tifa’s head shot up, gasping as she saw him. The internal machinery of the Wall groaned behind him, and the gate slowly began to close. Tifa called to him, her words lost over the sound. Unable to communicate, Cloud was caught in two minds, his opportunity of returning to Sector7 slipping away with each moment. He watched the carriage turn north, frozen to the spot as it vanished beyond the raised segments of hazardous road, and scolded his indecisiveness as the doors finally clanked shut behind him.

“Cloud, what happened?” shouted Aerith anxiously, rushing from the slide.

“That girl...I know her...” he stammered.

“The girl in the coach is your friend?”

“Yes...but something’s not right.”

“She’s being taken to Wall Market.” panted Aerith. “That place is scary for a girl...in a lot of ways.”

“What do you mean?”

“Wall Market is the most glamorous place in the Slums...but it’s heavily connected to the underworld. Its bars are filled with thieves and criminals, and the town is rife with murder and prostitution...”

“That doesn’t sound like Tifa at all.” muttered Cloud, his brows furrowing. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“We’d better find her fast.” agreed Aerith, starting towards the highway.

“We?”

“You didn’t think I’d let you go on alone, did you?”

“Aerith...”

“C’mon,” she called over her shoulder, “hurry up.”

* * *

The lone entrance to Wall Market buzzed as the duo grew closer, the letters of the word ‘South’ lighting up in sequence on the electronic sign above the path. Cautiously, they slowed beneath the flicker of luminous green, observing the main street as it made its way towards the grand mansion at the heart of the town. The inhabitants of the road wandered aimlessly hither and thither; some struggling to find their balance under the influence of severe alcohol abuse, while others strolled arrogantly through the crowds escorted by underdressed women.

Of all the locations Cloud had been since finding himself back in Midgar, Wall Market was by far the most exuberant. Situated where the Central Complex and the Sector5 Wall merged, the stone border of the town formed a barricade against unwelcome intruders. It had taken little less than twenty minutes to reach the edge of Wall Market, following the twisting highway to the origins of the sphere of radiance and blare of club music. Although running as fast as Aerith’s legs would allow, they had fallen behind the mysterious chocobo and carriage, surrendering

the valuable time of their rescue operation to what had become a search mission.

“Stay close to me.” Cloud instructed as they ventured inside the town’s boundaries, marching a few steps in front of her.

The large buildings that lined the main street had been assembled using the same makeshift materials and scrap metal that every other within the city’s Slums had, but the introduction of row upon row of burning yellow bulbs along their exteriors had transformed them into an exclusive range of bars and shops. Glowing neon signs and advertisement boards flashed all around, blinding them as they veered through the hoards of rowdy youths.

Men whistled at Aerith as they passed, some grabbing her hand in an attempt to prise her away from Cloud. She pulled herself tight to him as they walked, alert to the threat of sexual predators at every turn. The farther through the district they wandered, ever-nearing the central estate, the more bizarre the names of the buildings became. Cloud read them one by one, trying in vain to find any indication as to where Tifa may be; ‘Joel’s Potions’, ‘Mukki’s Kitchen’, and ‘Big Bro’s Gym’ some of the most noticeable.

Growing frustrated, he looked around as someone tapped his shoulder. Surprised to see a child in such an inappropriate environment, he did not react as the boy stuffed a paper flyer into his hand. Frowning, he began absently along the street again, skimming over the pharmacy coupon, and stormed straight into an older man. Murmuring his apology, Cloud glanced up as the man brushed past him, his eyes widening.

“Aerith...” he hissed, spinning her around to face him.

“What?” she asked, her expression growing fearful. “What is it?”

“That man, the one with the moustache...he was the one driving the carriage.”

“Are you sure?” she said, biting her lip. “What are we going to do?”

“I’m gonna follow him.” Cloud replied purposefully. “Maybe he’ll lead us to Tifa.”

They began after the man, slipping stealthily through the crowds on the path, making sure to remain an inconspicuous distance behind him. Within less than a minute, the man had turned onto a side street, rejecting the offers of the prostitutes that stood petting themselves teasingly on the corner. Cloud grimaced as the women called to him with the same flattering lines moments later, the sores on their faces as unattractive as the revealing clothes they wore. The two trailed the man a short way along the road, cautiously spying on him as he disappeared into an alley between the weapon store and a pawn brokers.

Peering carefully down the lane, Cloud saw the man climb the steps to a low doorway at the far side of the passage, nodding to the long-haired bouncer at the entrance. They scurried down the alleyway after him, edging their way around the trash cans against the walls of the buildings, and emerged in a small secluded close. The area appeared deliberately bare; two female mannequins draped in costumes of black and yellow stripes on either side of the doorway the only exception to the grimy surroundings. Striding forward, Cloud was stopped abruptly as the bouncer stepped in front of him, his powerful arms folded across his chest.

“An’ where d’ya think you’re goin’?” he sneered, blowing cigarette smoke into Cloud’s face.

“I need to speak to that man.” growled Cloud.

“The Honey Bee Inn is a private club. Only members can go in. We gotta keep ourselves respectable, see.”

“I’m looking for a friend...a girl named Tifa...”

“Tifa?” snorted the doorman. “You’re pretty fast; Tifa’s our newest girl. Just arrived from Sector7 all bouncy and fresh-faced. I hear she’s the cute barmaid at that Seventh Heaven. Might be good for some servicin’, if ya know what I mean.”

“Is she here?” Cloud asked, his fists clenched with fury. “I have to speak with her.”

“Not so fast, kiddo. She’s havin’ her interview right now.”

“Her interview?” Aerith gulped.

“Here at the Honey Bee Inn, it’s customary for all the new girls to be taken to Don Corneo’s mansion.”

“Don Corneo?” repeated Cloud.

“You don’t know who the Don is?” spluttered the man in mocked amazement. “What’s wrong wit’ you? Everyone from ‘round these parts knows Don Corneo. He’s the famous businessman.”

“Well, then I guess I’m not from around these parts.”

“He’s the one responsible for the construction of Wall Market. Without him, all our lives would be meaningless. He usually lives at the mansion in the middle of town, but sometimes likes to go to Wutai to dabble in some foreign action. Catch my drift? Rumour has it he wants to settle down, an’ is lookin’ for a bride. Though, not that it’s any of your business...”

“Aerith, c’mon.” Cloud commanded, irritably turning from the chuckling bouncer, and marching back down the alley.

“Hey, where are you going?” she called after him, darting to keep up.

“We need to get to Tifa.” he answered in a low voice. “And I’m sure we’ll find her with this guy, Corneo.”

“Cloud, you really don’t know who he is?” she gulped. “Don Corneo is a gangster. One of the biggest mob bosses in the city.”

“I don’t care who he is...”

Struggling to match his near-jogging pace, Aerith followed the determined Cloud back to the main street. Unlike many old districts of the Slums, Wall Market spread out in a grid formation, making navigation significantly simpler. Due north, against the looming backdrop of the Central Complex, the distinct, curving multi-gabled roof of Don Corneo’s home could be seen with its majestic Imperial Wutai style. With a clear view of the mansion, they were able to make their way to the wrought-iron gates of the grounds with ease, the reverberating boom of disco music fading as they approached. Through the steel railings, they could see the mafia establishment rise like a regal palace above the derelict buildings of Wall Market. Its stone

exterior was pale in colour; a direct contrast to the grey filth of the Slums, spectacularly illuminated by beams of yellow light that shone from lamps at the base of the structure, adding an extra dimension to the brilliant red of the roof.

At the end of the ornate cobbled pathway that led from the gate, there stood the main entrance to the estate, not far from which rested the carriage that had bore Tifa. The excited squeals of the chocobo could be heard from the small stable at the side of the mansion as it fed on greens, the animal evidently being rewarded for completing its task for the day. After a few minutes of Cloud scouring for any structural weakness to the barrier, one of the security guards wandering the grounds took notice of them, adjusting his red waistcoat as he made his way towards the gate.

“What d’you want?” he snarled, his gruff voice unwelcoming as he glared at Cloud, flexing his muscular tattooed arms.

“We’re looking for a girl named Tifa.” answered Aerith, unfazed by his rude approach. An expression of curiosity took form on the man’s dark face as he tilted his head in puzzlement, his spiked yellow mohican drooping to one side.

“So?”

“We heard she’s here.” added Cloud. “I need to speak to her.”

“Look, it’s a nice story,” he scoffed derisively, “but the Don ain’t really into men. Your friend here, she’s a looker. She can come in any time she wants to hang with old Kotch. But you...don’t let me catch you ‘round here again.”

“Who do you think...” snapped Cloud.

“Can you give us a moment?” Aerith reacted with a forced laugh, covering Cloud’s mouth with her hand, and hastily pulling him aside.

“Aerith, what’re you doing?” he spat with rage.

“You wait here.” she whispered. “I’ll go take a look inside and tell Tifa what’s happening.”

“No, you can’t!”

“Why not?”

“You *do* know what kind of place this is, don’t you?” hissed Cloud.

“Then, what are we supposed to do? You want to go in with me?”

“You heard what that guy said, didn’t you? If I bust in there, it’ll cause too much commotion.”

“I have an idea.” she winked, turning from him, and walking seductively back to where Kotch stood.

“Aerith, wait...”

“You stay right here.” she purred lustfully, running her tongue across her lips, stroking the man’s pierced chin with her fingertips. “I’ve got a gorgeous friend I want to bring.”

“A friend, huh?” Kotch repeated, his eyes widening in anticipation. “Sounds pretty good to me...an’ I’m sure it’ll make the Don very happy indeed. We’ve seen many girls come here, so I hope your friend will be something extra special.”

“Trust me.” Aerith grinned, slowly drawing her hand from the guard’s hopeful face. “She’ll *definitely* be something special...”



Don of the Slums

“I can’t believe this is your plan.”

Cloud stared at his reflection in the clothes shop mirror, shaking his head in disgust as he let the dress unfurl over the ground at his feet, hiding his army boots under plaits of blue cotton. The costume clung to his figure, taut over the braces and belt of his outfit underneath, but the shape of the leather accessories added to his illusionary bust. Around him, he sensed the bemused smirks of other customers, a muffled laughter coming from a group of aged women at the far side of the store.

“You are worried about Tifa, aren’t you?” Aerith responded, unable to wipe the smile from her face as he fought to tie the red bow round his waist. She turned to the shop owner by her side, a man she appeared to know personally. He was burly in stature, with a wild mane of wavy black hair and a thick beard to match. “So, what do you think?”

“This might be interesting.” Gaskin chuckled with entertainment. “I was gettin’ a little bored with just makin’ regular clothes for women. This may be a new business for me.”

“I’m sure there’re plenty of guys in Wall Market who’d make use of it.” sniggered Aerith. “It looks good on him; he’s so cute.”

“Hey...”

“I still can’t understand why a tough-looking guy like him would want to dress up as a woman.” muttered Gaskin, as if thinking aloud. “Just make sure he returns it in good condition, okay?”

“Don’t worry, I will.” said Aerith.

“I don’t look right.” moaned Cloud, joining them by the counter.
 “This is never gonna work.”

“There’s definitely still something missing.” agreed Aerith, her forehead wrinkling.

“What about a wig?” suggested Gaskin, booming with hearty laughter at his own joke.

“A wig!” squealed Aerith. “Of course.”

Disappearing into the backroom of the store, the tailor returned after a few minutes bearing a selection of artificial hair. Aerith studied the range and, selecting a wig that matched Cloud’s own colour, she handed him a long blonde hairpiece. Pulling it on reluctantly, his humiliation escalating, he opened his eyes as she dabbed his cheeks with a sprinkle of powdered makeup, and stumbled backwards.

“What are you doing?” he snapped, rubbing his face with the back of his hand.

“Stay still or you’ll smudge it all.” ordered Aerith, holding up the brush a second time. “We need to make you look as feminine as possible, right?”

His temper simmering, Cloud waited in silence until she had applied as much makeup as she deemed appropriate. Thanking Gaskin for the loan of the garment, the two left the store. The hike to Don Corneo’s estate proved more difficult in the dress; Cloud eventually opting to carry the plaits at his ankles. He grew angry as Aerith teased him, constantly erupting into a fit of giggles with every mistimed step.

“You have to walk...more nicely.” she coached, panting as she tried to catch her breath through the hilarity.

“What do you mean “nicely”?”

“Y’know...seductively. You have to make the guards feel that you are genuinely interested in them.”

“I don’t know if I can do this...”

“Oh, you’ll be fine.” she gestured encouragingly, watching him grit his teeth. “Remember, you’re doing this for Tifa. And besides, you look lovely, Miss Cloud.”

As they approached the gate to the grounds, they found the entrance to the mansion to be patrolled by a new member of security. Aerith waved to gain the man’s attention, leaning alluringly against the barrier as he strolled pompously along the cobbled road towards them. He was robust in stature, with deep-set eyes and short silver hair that complimented his dark skin, constantly adjusting the jacket of his burgundy suit. He nodded politely to them, pushing the switch to part the gates. Cloud lowered his eyes to shun the man’s shameless gaze, his heart thumping as he and Aerith passed into the estate.

“Right this way, ladies.” the guard instructed, motioning towards the mansion, groping Cloud’s rear before taking the lead. “Hmm...firm...”

He brought them to the main hall of the manor, the grand mahogany doorway opening into the expanse. The tiled floor of the foyer sparkled with polish, bare but for an enormous circular oriental rug at the foot of the broad staircase. The maroon rug had been woven in the form of a giant aquatic serpent wrapped around a golden sword; a representation of the Water God, Leviathan, and the Crest of Wutai. Emblems and insignias of ancient cultures had been painted on the wall in colours of deep red and orange, their meanings long forgotten in an age of science. Two huge urns had been set opposite one another at the twin openings to the corridors leading from the hall, each large enough to hold an adult inside. It was clear that even businessmen with such heinous connections to the criminal underworld had taste.

Clicking his fingers as a signal for the two to follow, the guard climbed the red carpet of the stairs, ascending to the balcony of the second floor. At the peak of the steps, there stood a slender

set of doors with the symbol of a rising sun upon them, and intricately-crafted lamps positioned on either side. The man moved swiftly to the left, gliding along the smooth walkway that sidled the wall until he came to the ingress of a narrow passage.

“Ladies, please make your way to the cellar.” he said, gesturing for them to continue down the stone tunnel. “My name is Leslie, and if you need anything to freshen up, do ask. I’ll go inform the Don of your arrival.”

The corridor had been designed in a medieval fashion; the heavy walls and ceiling of cold slabs adorned by chains of linked iron. The passageway ended after only a few feet, declining to become a straight stairwell leading to the depths of the manor. A glow of candlelight filtered from a chamber below, the hazy strands of radiance creeping over the stone. At the base of the steps, they found a room filled with bizarre restraining devices and littered with unusual sexual accessories. In the corner, gazing dreamily into the blazing fireplace, sat Tifa in her stunning purple dress. Seeing her, Cloud felt his embarrassment grow tenfold, turning his back on her in shame.

“Tifa...?” asked Aerith, wary of Cloud’s reaction to the situation, her voice echoing somewhat. Tifa jumped from the chair at the sound of her name, clenching her fists as she glowered suspiciously at Aerith.

“You...” she spluttered, her brows furrowed with confusion, “you’re the one who was in the park with Cloud, aren’t you?”

“That’s right.” nodded Aerith.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Aerith Gainsborough. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Well, there’s no point in introducing myself; you already seem to know who I am.” Tifa said brusquely.

“Cloud told me.”

“Oh...”

“Don’t worry,” smiled Aerith reassuringly, reading the expression on Tifa’s face, “we just met. It’s nothing.”

“What are you talking about?” stammered Tifa, blushing. “Why would I be worried?”

“Have I misunderstood?”

“Cloud and I grew up together. Nothing more...”

“Poor guy,” chortled Aerith, watching as he reluctantly looked up, “having to stand here and listen to both of us call him ‘nothing’.”

“Cloud...?” mouthed Tifa, her eyes straining in the dim light. As she suddenly became aware of his presence in the shadows, her jaw dropped, staring at him in astonishment.

“Tifa...”

“Cloud, what the hell?” she gasped. “Why are you dressed like that? What are you doing here?”

“Tifa...”

“Forget that...” she said in grateful disbelief, crossing the room and throwing her arms around him, “what happened to you after you fell from the Plate? Are you hurt?”

“Tifa, give me a chance to answer.” he replied uncomfortably, pulling away from her embrace and moving towards the fire. “I’m dressed like this because there was no other way to get in here. And I’m alright...Aerith helped me out.”

“Well, I think you’ve made a good job of your makeup.” Tifa snorted. “If you hide your face in your hair bit more, you could probably pass as a lady even up close. I wonder what Barret would say if he could see you now...”

“Don’t start me...”

“Cloud, I don’t know what to say. I’m really glad to see you’re okay. I thought you were lost...maybe even dead. I was afraid; there’s still so much I need to know...so much I have to tell you...”

“Well, it’s nice to see you came looking for me.” he said coldly.

“I would have,” gulped Tifa, hesitating as she chose her words, glancing uneasily at Aerith, “but there was a problem.”

“A problem?” frowned Cloud. “Is that why you’re in a place like this?”

“When we got back from Sector5, there was a weird man prowling around the bar, asking Marlene questions. Barret caught him and squeezed some information out of him. That’s when the Don’s name came up. Barret thought it was nothing, but something the man said has been bothering me.”

“What was it?”

“He seemed desperate to make sure we were going to be in Sector7 today. I also noticed the soldier at the Wall gate wasn’t there when the carriage wanted to pass. The driver had to get out and activate the lock himself. In all the time I’ve lived in Midgar, I’ve never seen that.”

“That’s strange.” said Cloud pensively. “The guard on our side wasn’t there either, but the control shed had been completely barricaded. That means Shinra only intended one-way traffic. What do think’s goin’ on?”

“I don’t know.” she shrugged. “But, I wanted to come here and get the story straight from Corneo’s mouth.”

“What now, then?”

“Well, I’m kinda in a bind.” sighed Tifa. “Corneo is looking for a bride. Every day he gets three girls, chooses one of them, and then...well...y’know...”

“I get the picture.”

“Anyway, I have to be the girl or else I’ll never find out what he’s planning.”

“But, there’s three girls here.” Aerith interjected. “If we work together, at least one of us will get to question the Don, right?”

“I guess...”

“No, Aerith.” refused Cloud. “You can’t get involved in this.”

“Oh, but it’s alright for Tifa to be in danger?” she retorted stubbornly, placing her hands on her hips.

“I don’t want Tifa in danger either...”

“Are you sure you can do this, Aerith?” asked Tifa, paying no attention to Cloud’s argument.

“I grew up in the Slums.” she waved dismissively. “Trust me, I’ve been caught up in a lot worse than this.”

“Aerith, you can’t...” started Cloud.

“Ladies?” called a voice from above them. They all turned to see another of Don Corneo’s attendants descend from the tunnel, pausing in the arched opening to the basement. He also wore a stylish suit, but had long, dark hair tied back in a ponytail. “It’s time, ladies. The Don is waiting.”

He lingered in the same spot until all three had begun to scale the steps, goggling at each of them in a somewhat perverse manner. Thinking quickly, Tifa had ensured that Cloud walked closely between her and Aerith, minimising the threat of exposure as the man trotted behind. In an attempt to swivel his hips in an attractive way, Cloud heard the raspy breathing of the attendant become louder and harsher, entranced by the movement.

As they reached the balcony overlooking the lobby, the man darted ahead of the line to the large doors at the centre of the terrace. He knocked twice, and held his ear to the golden sun crest, listening for an answer. When at last the reply came, he bowed to them and pushed the crest apart, motioning with his hand for the trio to enter.

The room beyond was as long as it was broad, laden with extravagant colours and shades. Another, much wider carpet stretched from the doorway to the lavish camphorwood desk at the far side of the study, decorated with the images of intertwining snakes. Statues of mythical creatures had been placed at regular intervals along the walls, their sizes increasing methodically as they drew toward the curtained portal to a bedroom at the rear of the room, revealing the Don to be a dilettante of such artefacts.

Behind the desk sat a squat man, his beady eyes glistening with anticipation as the three approached. Taking one final draw of smoke, he set his cigar into its holder, and grew to his feet. His plump face and head was completely bald except for a single line of bright yellow hair that ran from his forehead to his crown, and he wore nothing but a luxuriant bathrobe, the bulge of his overweight stomach visible for all to see.

“Alright, ladies,” ordered the attendant from the hallway, “line up in front of the Don.”

Obeying, they shaped a horizontal row a few paces from the desk. Don Corneo strolled around to meet them, sleazily trailing his fingers over the surface of his workspace with one hand, swirling his glass of red wine with the other. Leaning against the desk, he let his eager eyes wash over them; Cloud glancing away each time the Don faced him, silently hoping that Aerith’s idea was not about to backfire.

“Good...splendid...” Corneo swigged his wine, tapping his fingers on his chin. “Let’s see, which girl should I choose?”

Stepping slowly forward, he sauntered across the small space to where Aerith stood, holding her chest out. He grinned mischievously as he gaped at her bosom, licking his lips as he began to stroke her pale complexion. She blew him a kiss, causing him to smirk in a greater lust. Casually ambling from Aerith to Cloud, and then to the busty Tifa, he conveyed little interest in selecting either in her place. Returning to his desk, he gathered his cigar, and made for his bedroom.

“I have made my decision.” he announced flatly, brushing one of the thin drapes aside. “My choice for tonight is the little beauty in the pink dress. Come, my dear.”

“Be...be nice, Don...” Aerith teased in a dry voice, starting hesitantly towards him. Quickly glimpsing Cloud and Tifa, she gave them a faltering smile.

“Scotch, you and the boys can make use of the other two.” called Corneo from over his shoulder, taking Aerith’s hand and guiding her to the back room.

“Yes, sir.” bowed the assistant. “Thank you, sir. Come on then, girls...we’ll have our own fun.”

Careful to avoid eye contact with the man, Cloud vacated the room, Tifa close behind. Rubbing his hands together in excitement, Scotch led the two to a room farther along the walkway. A mist of cigarette smoke partially obscured their vision as they followed him into the staff area, the stench of sweat filling their nostrils. The space resembled the surrounding Slum; layers of trash piled high in the corners, the half-empty beer bottles strewn lazily on the floor.

Cloud counted six security guards and other mafia personnel inside the room, almost all of whom had been consumed by the news report on television, repeating the images of the Mako Reactor5 bombing. Two of the gangsters sat on cushions around a small table, taking turns to snort lines of a white powdered drug as they continued their card game. A series of discarded leaflets littered the floor, advertising a new bar for the popular Turtle’s Paradise chain. Wandering to the blackened window on the opposite side of the quarters, Scotch cleared his throat, gaining the attention of most of them.

“Gentlemen,” he declared, gesturing at Cloud and Tifa, “it might interest you to know that we have guests.”

“Don’t worry, ladies,” shouted one of the guards, turning from the sofa, his drooping nose ring and foul features making him resemble a sickly bull, “we’ll take real good care of you.”

“This is all thanks to the big boss.” added Scotch as he dragged Cloud to his side, his eyes flashing with intent. “Well, ladies, are we all ready?”

“Get off of me!” growled Cloud.

“Come on, dance with me beautiful.” laughed Scotch, pulling him closer. “Hey, you’re in pretty good shape. Look at your tight little body...well, actually, it’s more like muscles...”

“I said get off me.” yelled Cloud, thrusting Scotch hard against the wall.

“What’s wrong, babe?” chuckled Scotch, playfully holding his hands up in submission. “Don’t you wanna come have fun with us? We wanna play with you...”

“I’m flattered, but no thanks.” he snarled, tearing the wig from his head and hurling it to the floor at Scotch’s feet. “I ain’t interested in a bunch of scrubs like you.”

Scotch gasped in horror as Cloud yanked the dress off, stumbling backwards over the television. In anger, the men of the room jumped to their feet, tossing their bottles aside. The glass exploded against the wall, the fumes of alcohol immediately encircling the quarters. Kicking off her shoes, Tifa quickly joined Cloud by the window, bouncing on her toes as she fell into her martial arts stance.

“Godsdammit! You think you can get away with this?” roared Scotch, finding his balance, glaring furiously at the stationary henchmen. “What are you waiting for? Apps, get them! Knock the crap out of them!”

Without waiting for the sentence to finish, the guard with the bull ring pounced across the room, diving at Cloud. Reacting instinctively, Cloud shifted his body out of the way, and seized the man’s neck as he flew through the air, smashing his head against the wall. As he crumpled in an unconscious heap, two others burst from the sofa. Cloud ducked as one of them swung a punch, catching the man’s crotch with his knee.

Glancing up, he saw Tifa leap from her standing position, bringing her leg round in an arced motion. It connected heavily with the second attendant’s chin, a loud crack sounding as his jaw snapped in two. He tumbled to the ground, howling in pain as he clutched his face. Tifa landed as agile as she had taken off, her

expression one of vengeful satisfaction. Cloud felt a burning rage well up inside himself, his blood boiling as he met the fierce gaze of Scotch.

“What the hell’s the matter with you weaklings?” he screamed at his fallen comrades. “Do I have to show you how it’s done every time?”

Ripping his suit jacket from his body, he charged at the two, his face twisted in resentment. Dodging as Cloud brought his arm forward, Scotch thrust his shoulder into his stomach, sending him onto his back. With a swift movement, he blocked Tifa’s attack with his forearm, swiping at her legs in an attempt to compromise her footing. She sprang the trap, kicking him as she hopped over his trailing ankle. He cursed her as he was knocked to his side, yelping as he felt Cloud’s strong hands haul him up.

“W...wait...” he moaned sheepishly as the grip tightened.

“Tifa, you ready?” said Cloud.

“Do it!”

Summoning all his might, Cloud lifted Scotch into the air and released his grasp. As he did so, Tifa launched herself forward, flipping her body in a somersault. Her foot collided with Scotch’s torso; hitting with a force so hard that he was thrown against the window, the black glass shattering as he shot through it, his howls coming to a sickening end as he landed on the solid earth below. Turning away from the window, Cloud saw the remaining guards retreat from the room, their frightened curse words echoing from the hallway as they clambered down the stairs to the foyer.

“What’s so funny?” he asked, seeing a mischievous smirk appearing on Tifa’s face.

“I didn’t know you could fight so well without your sword.” she slapped his back playfully.

“It’s one of the first things they teach you in the military.” frowned Cloud. “Essential if you wanna get into SOLDIER.”

“I guess.” she said, rolling her eyes. “And it’s not as if you’re a stranger to conflict. You were always at it as a child.”

“What happened to my sword, anyway?”

“After you fell, we found it on the bridge beside us.” replied Tifa. “Barret wanted to leave it behind, but I wouldn’t let him. I knew if you came back, you’d want it.”

“Where is it now?”

“At the bar. You can get it once we find out what’s goin’ on.”

“Yeah, c’mon.”

Stepping over the bodies of the grounded men, the two raced from the staff area and back to the study. Slipping noiselessly through the doorway, they could make out the muffled voice of Don Corneo pleading with Aerith in the bedroom. They burst through the curtains in time to see him scramble across his double bed to where Aerith sat, his face pink with desire. The ties of his bathrobe had become undone, and his greasy figure was on show. Aerith brushed his hand away as he began to caress her hair, taking a few seconds to realise that she and her tormentor were not alone.

“Cloud?” she cried, jumping from the bed.

“What the hell?” shrieked Corneo, dragging the yellow quilt over his body to hide his naked flesh. “Help! Someone help! Scotch? Leslie? Apps...?”

“There’s no use.” sneered Tifa. “Your men have deserted you.”

“But...but...who are you people...?”

“Shut up!” demanded Cloud, the adrenaline of the fight still pumping in his veins. Corneo stared at him dumbfounded, his petrified eyes switching between the three as he began to quiver. “We’re asking the questions now. That mouth of yours is gonna be put to work in other ways.”

“What do you want?” he asked timidly.

“Information.”

“Wha...what information?”

“What did your assistants find out in Sector7?” barked Tifa.
“Talk!”

“And if I don’t?”

“If you don’t tell us what we want to know,” answered Cloud, his glare unforgiving as he nodded towards Don Corneo’s genitals, “I’ll chop them off.”

“No...not that...” he squeaked. “I’ll talk...I’ll tell you everything...”

“Well...?” said Tifa.

“I made them find out where the man with the gun-arm was.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s what I was ordered to do.”

“By who?”

“No...” the Don trembled. “If I told you that, I’d be killed.”

“If you don’t tell us,” Aerith snapped, glaring down upon him, “I’ll rip them off.”

“It was...it was Heidegger of Shinra.” he wailed. “Director of Public Safety Maintenance.”

“The General of the Armed Forces ordered this?” gasped Cloud in confusion. “But...but, why? What are the Shinra up to?”

“I can’t say...”

“If you don’t talk,” erupted Tifa, “I’ll hack them off.”

“You...you’re serious, aren’t you?” gulped Don Corneo, cowering into his duvet, beads of sweat forming on his brow. “I promise...I’m not fooling around.”

“Then, tell us!”

“Shinra’s trying to infiltrate what’s left of the rebel group, AVALANCHE. My job was to confirm that their hideout was in the Sector7 Slums.”

“Why?”

“Because the Shinra are going to crush them...literally.” he stammered. “They’re going to break the Support Pillar that holds up the Plate above it.”

“Break the Support?” spluttered Tifa, unable to compute the information.

“The plan is to completely wipe out the terrorists.”

“If the Plate comes down, there’ll be a lot of devastation.” Cloud shook his head. “Why are you still here?”

“I’ve been assured that Wall Market won’t be affected.” replied the Don, a note of relief in his tone. “I’m safe where I am.”

“You ignorant bastard!” screamed Tifa. “How could you be so uncaring? Thousands of people will lose their lives if this happens...”

“People that the Shinra have deemed expendable.”

“Why, you...”

“Tifa!” shouted Cloud, grabbing her as she tried to attack Don Corneo. “Tifa, get a hold of yourself...”

“We have to warn the people in the Slums.” Aerith said frantically. Her teeth clenched, Tifa mumbled something in agreement, and started towards the doorway.

“Wait.” whimpered the Don.

“What?” hissed Cloud, turning to see him pull himself up against the bed’s headboard.

“Please, it’ll only take a second.” he begged. “It’s just...how do you think scum like me feel when they’re forced into positions like this?”

“Personally, I think that they’ve pretty much given up on life.” spat Cloud.

“Close...but no cigar.” Corneo chortled menacingly, a wicked smile forming on his lips. Reaching up, he grasped a thin silver lever above his head, and heaved it down. Everything slowed as Cloud spun, opening his mouth to warn the girls, but the words had barely left his throat when the floor beneath their feet gave way, and the three began to fall.



The Wrath of Shinra

“...and that concludes my report, sir.”

President Shinra nodded in acknowledgement, studying his reflection in the long windows of the Great Hall. Evening was upon the city, and the darkening silhouette of the Midgar Mountains was forming on the western horizon beneath the gathering rain clouds. Before him, the broad streets of Sector7 were ablaze with the glow of lampposts, the orange light illuminating the bustle of traffic as the Shinra employees made their way home for the night. He allowed his eyes to pass over the residential district in the suburbs of the sector, feeling no emotion as he thought of the people’s fate.

“Very well, Reeve.” said the President, turning from the window.

Ambling leisurely across the polished silver floor, he returned to his grand desk. Director Reeve had already placed the files of his investigation at the side of the computer monitor, conveniently hiding the classified Deepground material that had lain there, and was now waiting patiently for his next command. He enjoyed Reeve’s participation as part of the Executive, finding him to be more focused and genuine than any of the other Department Heads.

“What is our current situation with the...um...plan, sir?” his subordinate asked quietly, his voice laden with dread. President Shinra looked up at him from his workplace to see the colour draining from Reeve’s face, his cheeks growing white against his

sleek black hair and goatee. From behind, there came the booming sound of footsteps, the dull thumping echoing throughout the vast Presidential Office.

“Ah, here’s Heidegger now...”

Reeve glanced around to see the obese shape of Director Heidegger approach them from the western stairwell, his hulking body swaying as he strode between the tall columns of marble. As he neared the desk, he made an attempt to mat his thick beard to his chest, the strands of bushy hair unfurling across his emerald green suit. The President stood to greet him, making his way to the centre of the hall.

“Mr. President.” Heidegger announced himself hoarsely. “Director Reeve.”

“How are the preparations coming along, General?” enquired President Shinra.

“Smoothly, sir, very smoothly.” he cackled, holding his bulging gut. “As you asked, I have assigned the Turks to this.”

“Sir, are we really going to go through with it?” protested Reeve, his troubled gaze flitting between the two. “Simply destroy an entire sector because of a group with only a few members?”

“You know exactly why we can’t afford to allow any remnants of AVALANCHE to linger.” replied President Shinra coldly. “What’s wrong? You want out?”

“No, sir, it’s just...” mumbled Reeve. “Sir, I’m sure you’re aware that I was one of the architects of this city, and it feels very personal to me. Now, as Head of the Urban Development Department, I’m involved in the running of Midgar. That’s why...”

“Reeve, you should flush your personal problems in the morning.” scoffed Heidegger, his sneering eyes narrowing beneath the long scar that marred the right side of his face.

“The Mayor’s against this, anyway.” Reeve retorted, glaring furiously at his counterpart.

“Domino?” snorted Heidegger. “He just sits in this building all day, reading in the library and feeding his face. You call *that* a

Mayor? You know fine well the city council don't have any authority in these matters..."

"That's enough." interrupted the President, his tone assertive.

"Then, if you'll excuse me, sir," said Heidegger, stuffing the folder he carried into the arms of Reeve, and saluting his superior, "I must finish making the final arrangements."

"Very well, dismissed."

"That man..." growled Reeve through clenched teeth, watching Heidegger as he disappeared from sight.

"You're tired." sighed the President, placing his hand on his shoulder. "Why don't you take a couple of days off and go somewhere? I can organise a flight to Costa del Sol for you if you'd like? My wife tells me the weather is great at the moment."

"I'll think about it..." he muttered, trudging towards the eastern stairwell. Saying nothing further, President Shinra walked slowly back to his desk, unable to stop the thin smile spreading over his lips.

We'll tear down Sector7 and report that AVALANCHE did it, he mused, slumping into his padded throne. Then, we'll send in the rescue operation courtesy of Shinra, Inc. and declare that our war against terrorism is finally over...this is perfect...

* * *

Cloud gagged, spitting the sewage water from his mouth as he struggled to find his footing in the stream. He grimaced as he felt the cold slime trickle down his back, his eyes adjusting to the cloud of dust that had fallen with them into the tunnels from Don Corneo's old garbage chute. Seething with hatred for the gangster, he swore under his breath, picking a soggy strip of newspaper from his hair. He heard Tifa groan behind him, splashing around in the filth as she pulled herself up against the high stone wall of the walkways that ran alongside the shallow waters.

"You guys alright?" Cloud asked, helping Aerith to her feet.

“Yeah.” Aerith spluttered, wiping a clump of damp fringe from her face. Her frock was dripping with brown water, clinging to her figure, causing her to shiver.

“This is terrible...” said Tifa frantically, her expression consumed by fear. “What’re we going to do?”

“We have to get to Sector7.” answered Aerith. “We have to warn them.”

“But, we don’t know where we are.” Tifa moaned despairingly, glancing around the passageway. A low curved ceiling of redbrick spread in both directions, lit only by a small number of flickering filament bulbs. There were no signs, no directions; the Slums sewers the last place anyone wanted to be. “It may already be too late...”

“Don’t give up.” encouraged Aerith, her optimism resolute even in such dire circumstances. “Never give up hope.”

“But...”

“C’mon, Tifa, it can’t be that easy to destroy the Pillar, right?” she smiled warmly.

“Yeah, you’re right.” Tifa agreed thoughtfully, a glimmer of positivity creeping into her tone. “Let’s get going. We still have time.”

“Aerith,” murmured Cloud, “it’s my fault you got mixed up in this...”

“Oh, don’t start that again.” she snapped, wading past him. “It was my decision not to go home. Stop feeling sorry for yourself...there’s other things we need to worry about now. We need to hurry!”

Stunned into silence by Aerith’s severity, he started after her and Tifa. They were able to move quicker than he had anticipated in the knee-deep scum, the flow of water travelling in the same northerly direction as the three. Cloud grew frustrated at the height at which the sewer walkways had been set above the stream, leaving them unable to heave themselves out of the slime. Even with his superior agility, the compact walls proved too challenging to mount. Negotiating their way through the empty

bottles and cans that drifted aimlessly alongside them, the party came to a tall iron barrier in the centre of their path, the rusting stakes filtering the garbage so that the water may continue beyond.

The foul stink of waste seeped unpleasantly into their nostrils as they paused to contemplate their next move. With Aerith's insistence that they were going the right way, Cloud was volunteered to help the girls clamber over the top of the railings before climbing the barrier himself. Once successfully on the other side, they quickly discovered a steel ladder that led to the overlooking pathway.

Navigating the tunnels, they continued to follow the northerly route, the trio racing through the sewage system as they became increasingly oblivious to the weight of their sodden clothing. The dank sewer walls arced around them, their bricks oozing with accumulated grime. As they sprinted under the failing lights of the passages, Cloud could see a number of rats and red caesar crabs scuttle from the walkway and into their hiding places within the channels.

For over an hour they sped towards Sector7, constantly expecting to hear the sounds of its demise. They knew that their own lives would be sacrificed if they did not make it on time, and this fear drove them on, giving strength to weary legs, and desire to heavy hearts. When at last they came to the end of the tunnel, all of them gasping for clean air amid the putrid fumes, they found an access ladder ascending to the outside world. Scaling the reluctant steps, Cloud was able to push aside the cumbersome manhole cover, peering out over the surroundings through the light haze of burning oil.

The sewer opening was located between a series of abandoned railway lines, upon most of which rested the remains of train carriages. Disused locomotives from years gone by had been left to rot in the junkyard, the models of the once-famous MK100-70, MK100-90 and MK93 IIs deemed obsolete by the existence of Shinra's current Mako-efficient MK600. Engine parts and other valuable segments of the cars had been torn from their holdings

and piled haphazardly along the tracks, their ghostly shapes casting eerie shadows over the broken ground. In the distance, beyond the shattered glass windows of the wagons, he could make out the lights of the Sector7 station, its platform deserted. Cloud hurriedly yanked himself up the last few rungs of the ladder, and was promptly accompanied by the girls.

“This is the Train Graveyard.” gasped Tifa as she took in the landscape, her teeth chattering as the chill of the evening met her damp dress. “Seventh Heaven is not far from here. We have to get to the others. Barret...Marlene...”

“We’ve made it this far...” nodded Cloud.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

Together, they took off once more, heading west through the Train Graveyard in the direction of the village. Tifa led them between the overturned cars and mounds of neglected machinery, quickly finding her way to the edge of the junkyard and cargo depot. She screamed wildly at a group of beggars a short way from their path, startling the grubby men and women as they sat around their blazing oil drum, unheeding of her instructions for them to escape the sector. They met no villagers wandering the trails of the Slums, Aerith praying aloud that the alarm had already been raised, and arrived little more than ten minutes later at the Seventh Heaven bar.

“Barret?” yelled Tifa as she burst through the swing doors, anxiously searching the lounge for any signs of life. “Jessie? Biggs? Anyone...?”

“Tifa?” squeaked a voice from beneath the counter. “Tifa, is that you?”

“Marlene!” cried Tifa, rushing to the bar, embracing the shaken child. “Marlene, where’s your papa?”

“He said he was goin’ to fight the Shinra.” she whimpered, burying her head into Tifa’s shoulder. “They’re at the Pillar. Tifa, I’m scared...”

“It’s okay, honey.” Tifa comforted her, stroking her hair as she turned to Aerith, a pleading gaze in her eyes. “Aerith, Cloud and I

are gonna go help our friends. I need you to get Marlene out of Sector7.”

“Don’t worry.” Aerith said with determination. “She’ll be alright.”

“Thanks,” said Tifa gratefully, passing Marlene to her, “it means a lot.”

“Tifa...” sobbed the child.

“Don’t worry, sweetie, we’ll see each other very soon.” Tifa whispered reassuringly. “You have to go with Aerith now, okay? I’ll come get you, I promise.”

“Good luck.” said Aerith, taking Marlene’s hand in hers as she began towards the exit. She stopped momentarily in the doorway, glancing back to Cloud, offering him a faint nod before they disappeared into the night. “Be careful...”

Hastily changing into dry clothes, the two equipped themselves with their respective weapons; Cloud thankful to retrieve the Buster Sword as Tifa donned her studded red gloves. Abandoning the bar, they sprinted the short way to the Pillar, scrambling across the mounds of debris as a shortcut through the trails. Even from the distance, they could tell something was not right atop the Pillar’s skeletal support structure. Spontaneous flashes of light had broken out on the circular platform at its height, indicating a gunfight had already begun.

They quickened their pace as much as their aching legs would allow, adrenaline pumping through their veins. As Cloud and Tifa approached the tower, they were shocked to discover a small crowd had gathered around the fenced perimeter of its base. The mob watched in entertainment as the events above unfolded, some having even brought their children, oblivious to the severity of the situation.

“All of you, listen to me.” roared Tifa, barging through the group. “It’s dangerous here...”

“Young lady, if you don’t stop pushing...”

“Everyone...get away from the Pillar now! Forget everything and get out of Sector7!”

“But...”

“Now!” Tifa demanded. “Your lives are at risk...”

“Do as she says.” ordered Cloud.

As a silver-haired man at the head of the crowd opened his mouth to retaliate, Cloud drew the Buster Sword from its magnetic holder on his back. He held it aloft threateningly, the weapon commanding them to evacuate the area. Slowly, their arms raised in defence, the mob slipped around Cloud and began to hurry off along the trail. Tifa thanked him appreciatively, adjusting her gloves as she glanced up at the tower.

A sharp *twang* of metal rang out from high above them as bullets ricocheted off the steel frame of the structure, the noise reaching their ears for the first time. A narrow staircase climbed the circumference of the erection, the limp bodies of Shinra soldiers lying bent and broken at regular intervals. As Cloud clambered through the hole in the fence and into the enclosure, dashing towards the steps, the sound of thunder continued to reverberate all around.

“What the hell *is* that?” shouted Tifa as she fought to keep up with him.

“Rifle shots...” answered Cloud, starting up the stairwell, taking two at a time. “I’d know the sound of the Army’s guns anywhere. C’mon, the others need our help.”

The battle grew louder as they gained in height, the shrieking rotation of Barret’s gun-arm adding to the chorus of bullets. The faster Cloud ran, the more difficult he found it to avoid the corpses of the infantrymen, once misjudging his jump over a woman and stumbling on the stairs in his frantic attempt to reach the summit. As he veered around a corner of the staircase, galloping up the tenth flight, he heard Tifa call out from behind him. Twisting his body as he moved, he saw her kneel over the figure of a young boy, the bandana around his forehead unmistakable.

Biggs...

“Keep going.” yelled Tifa. “I’ll help him.”

Without replying, he hastily continued to climb, the roar of gunfire ascending to a deafening level. As he passed the thirteenth storey, one of the wounded soldiers snatched out at his ankle, aiming his automatic rifle at him in an effort to halt his progress. Dodging the line of sight with great agility, Cloud kicked the gun from his hand, stomping on the man's face as he leapt past.

Nearing the top of the tower, he looked up to see a thick electrical cable attached to the central structure on the level above, and noticed that the line extended all the way to the now-widened Sector7 Wall gate. Returning his attention to the grated steps, he suddenly stopped, the bloodied body before him halting him in his tracks. Jessie lay awkwardly across his path, her auburn hair matted to her freckled face, almost hiding the thin trickle of blood that had escaped her mouth. She smiled weakly as she saw him, grimacing in pain as she clutched her chest.

"Cloud..."

"Jessie...what happened?"

"We weren't warned fast enough..." she coughed, the words hurting her as she spoke. "Cloud...I thought...I thought you didn't care about what happens...to AVALANCHE..."

"Jessie, try not to speak..."

"Because...of our actions...many people have died." she wheezed. "This is our...our punishment..."

"Jessie, please..."

"We fought for...the Planet, but...all we did was murder...in the name...of justice. Are we...really any better...than Shinra...?"

"I don't know..." he exhaled, lowering his head.

"Barret and Wedge are up top...go help them."

"I will." said Cloud, bounding over her legs. "We'll be back for you."

"And, Cloud...?"

"Yeah?"

"Sorry I...wasn't much...help..."

With her last words, her entire body seemed to sink, slumping against the railings. Bending down to close her eyelids over,

Cloud lifted his gaze, the distant sound of fluttering reaching his ears. From the south, he could see the image of a black BO9 Shinra helicopter emerging on the horizon, rapidly approaching the Pillar. He wrapped his fingers firmly around the leather handle of the Buster Sword, an uncontrollable fury taking him. Spotting Tifa on the level below, he waited for her to join him, her blank expression suggesting Biggs had not made it, and together they made the final ascent to the height of the support structure.

They came to a wide platform of grilled steel that encircled a chunky stone column, one face of which was lined by a series of computer stations and monitors. Panels with switches and diodes were situated alongside the stations, the control circuits strangely active with timers and pressure meters. Almost a dozen lifeless forms of Shinra troops lay scattered across the platform, their shining blue armour pierced with several bullet holes, an enraged Barret standing giant amongst them. They spotted Wedge near the barrier opposite them, scouting the helicopter's movement as it soared around the enormous granite Pillar before them.

"Tifa...Cloud...you came!" cried Barret, rushing to meet them. "What the fuck's goin' on?"

"The Shinra are...trying to destroy the Pillar..." spluttered Tifa, struggling to catch her breath.

"What?" he spat, his face riddled with puzzlement. "Those bastards! Why?"

"No time to explain. What's been happening here?"

"We've managed to stop most o' the soldiers," Barret replied, gesturing towards the bodies, "but this chopper has us surrounded. We've got to be ready for an attack any..."

"Sir!" called Wedge suddenly, retreating from his post. "Sir, they're coming back!"

Barret raised his gatling-gun, tracking the craft as it arced across the sky. Without warning, the nose of the helicopter dropped, accelerating towards the support structure. In an instant, the barrels of Barret's gun-arm began to spin, the whirring motion

growing faster with each second. Charging forward, he unleashed a barrage of bullets at the aircraft as it closed in above them, screaming obscenities at the top of his lungs. Each piece of shrapnel rebounded ineffectively off its target, the impenetrable windshield unflinching under the assault. As if possessed by an unseen entity, Barret spun mid-step, thundering back towards Cloud and Tifa, his boots pounding heavily against the metal grid.

“Get down!” he bellowed, hauling them to the ground as a twin trail of bullets tore up the platform a few feet away.

Cloud followed the carnage with his eyes as if everything had turned to slow motion, watching in horror as Wedge’s torso was ripped apart. Time seemed almost at standstill as his body was forced farther backwards with each unstoppable bullet that passed through him, bringing him closer to the ledge with every unwilling step. The piercing rattle of gunfire felt like it had now faded to nothing more than a numbed echo, as if it was all a dream. With one last attempt to cling onto life, Wedge snatched clumsily out at the low barrier as the machine-gun fire ceased. Cloud tried in vain to find his feet, his legs unable to react as his comrade collapsed, disappearing from the platform.

“Wedge!” Tifa’s scream cut through the air like a knife. Looking up, Cloud saw the helicopter circle overhead, the blonde male pilot swooping dangerously close to the Pillar. His senses sharpened once more, reality taking hold. “No!”

He glanced around at Tifa, a tear escaping down her cheek as she sank to her knees, and saw a flash of red from the corner of his eye. There came a *bleep* from the control panel, and Reno stepped back from the computer station, a wide smirk on the Turk’s lean face. His fiery ponytail hovered momentarily behind his head in the harsh generated wind as the helicopter swept past again, his black suit uniform flailing about his scrawny limbs.

“That’s all, folks.” he jeered cockily. “Mission accomplished, yo.”

“What have you done?” wailed Tifa.

“The Emergency Plate Release System has been activated.” he answered with a casual shrug. “And there’s nothing you punks can do about it.”

His teeth clenched, Mako eyes flaring, Cloud slowly reached over his spiked shoulder pauldron, seizing the handle of the Buster Sword. Reno's grin faltered briefly as he saw Cloud draw the huge blade, his bare biceps flexing as he lifted it towards the Turk. Raising a single arrogant eyebrow, Reno slipped his hand into his jacket, retrieving his electromagnetic rod from its inside pocket. For a few seconds, the two stared at one another, focusing their battle-hardened minds.

Reno moved first, hurling himself into the air with tremendous speed, his EMR poised to strike. Cloud swung the Buster Sword, parrying the attack with the blunt edge, the strength of the block causing Reno to stumble backwards. He came at Cloud again, his footwork a blur as he danced around him, but he had not anticipated the ex-SOLDIER's own speed. With a powerful thrust, Cloud's fist connected hard with Reno's chin, leaving him stunned. Defenceless and blinded by the sudden blow, Reno was unable to prevent Cloud's boot crunching against his unguarded stomach.

As Reno staggered back, Cloud felt an anger take hold of him; a rage he had not known since waking in Midgar. Releasing his strength, he brought his sword crashing down on the Turk. Reno dodged once, twice; his agility impressive even in his dazed state. Cloud swung hard and fast, the blade slashing effortlessly through the grilled floor as Reno used all his techniques to evade the onslaught. Struggling under the force of the strikes, Reno raised his rod to deflect, yelping as the Buster Sword sliced cleanly through it.

Reno fell against the wall of the central column, crying out pitifully as he held up his hands in surrender, still clutching the butt of his weapon. Cloud loomed over him, his expression unforgiving, the blade hovering above his head like an executioner. His hatred for Shinra pulsed inside him, urging him to exact his revenge, but he knew he needed the Turk alive to stop the destruction of Sector7. Reaching down to grab Reno, he saw

a pale green haze form suddenly around the man's forearm, but could do nothing as the Thunder magic struck his chest.

Cloud howled in pain as the electricity ripped through his muscles, causing him to drop his sword as he began to spasm uncontrollably. Jumping to his feet, Reno pushed Cloud away, springing against the stone column. In a single motion, he kicked himself off the thick wall and cracked the butt of the EMR against the back of Cloud's head. As Cloud tumbled to his knees, Reno mockingly saluted Barret and Tifa.

"You little shit..." roared Barret, his gun-arm again beginning to rotate.

"No one gets in the way of the Turks, yo." he sneered, grinning as he saw the helicopter draw level with the platform. "It's time..."

As Cloud tried to grab him, Reno leapt over his head, dashing towards the craft. With the last few steps before the edge, Reno launched himself over the barrier and, in the split second he was airborne, Barret's gun exploded into life. Reno shrieked in agony as the bullets ripped through his right leg, landing awkwardly on the floor of the helicopter, clutching at his thigh. Barret kept firing long after it had rose above them, following the aircraft as it disappeared over Sector6.

"We have to do something!" Tifa said desperately, pounding on the keyboards of the computer stations with her fists. A slur of binary had taken over the screen, jamming the system as she recklessly slammed the control panels.

"Tifa, get a hold of yourself." shushed Cloud, groggily pulling himself up and dragging her away from the column.

"Why aren't you helping?" she screeched hysterically. "Cloud, you have to help me stop this..."

"I can't."

"What?"

"It's not a normal time bomb..." he said.

"But, you have to do something..."

"Stay here!" he commanded, allowing her to break free of his grasp. "Don't touch anything."

He stepped forward, his blood pumping hard, transfixed by the incomprehensible data on the monitors before him. Tossing his greatsword to the ground again, he began to scan the switches and buttons in front of him for a means to negate Reno's actions. From somewhere around the tower, the horrendous fluttering of a helicopter's propellers reached his ears, the sound breaking his concentration as he realised how close it seemed. Perplexed, he turned slowly to see Barret and Tifa edging towards him, shielding their eyes from the vicious blast of air.

Beyond the platform, a second helicopter rose to a position a short way above theirs, its metallic black body glimmering under the searchlights of the Pillar. Cloud could make out the dark-haired female Turk pilot through the windscreen as she flicked an overhead control, her uniform blouse and jacket unbuttoned above her chest, recognising her immediately from their mission at Mako Reactor1. In an instant, the side door of the craft slid open, revealing a suited man in the space.

Tseng, the Chief of the Turks, glared in disgust upon the party with a manner of superiority, only for his brows to furrow as his eyes met Cloud's; the momentary flash of confusion barely detectable. The two had participated in an assignment together many years earlier to the remote Modeo region in the north, but they had not interacted before or since then.

His lengthy black hair wavered around his spine in the strong gusts, blown back from the unmistakable forehead that bore his birthmark spot above his nose. Although only in his late twenties, Tseng was widely known throughout the Shinra Corporation as the brains behind the Turks; within his cool exterior lurking an uncompromising and ruthless personality, and a fierce loyalty to the company. Having learned his trade through his mentor, the great Veld, Tseng was now the unwilling lapdog of the Head of Public Safety Maintenance, Director Heidegger, but still commanded much respect from all those whom he worked with.

“I wouldn’t play around with that if I were you.” he called, nodding towards the computer panels on the column.

“Shu’up jackass!” retorted Barret. “Tell us how to stop the bomb!”

“You’ll have a hard time disarming that one.” said Tseng without care. “It’ll blow the second some stupid jerk presses the wrong button.”

“Stop it!” pleaded Tifa. “Think about what you’re about to do. What about all those innocent people in the Slums? Why can’t you just call this whole thing off and arrest us?”

“AVALANCHE should have thought of that before it came to this.” Tseng scowled accusingly. “Now, you’re too late. Only a Shinra Executive can disarm the Release System.”

“Shut yer hole!” snapped Barret, aiming his gun-arm at Tseng.

“I wouldn’t try that,” Tseng wagged his finger, unflinching with the threat, “you might just make me hurt my special guest.”

With the sharpest of movements, he hauled a young woman from an area of the hold hidden by the shadows, throwing her to her knees for all to see. The girl cried out as she hit the floor, her body slumping against the frame of the doorway. Her face was concealed by her dark hair, falling to the side as Tseng pulled her to her feet, dragging her by her sodden pink dress.

Pink dress...

“Aerith!” bawled Tifa.

“Oh, so you know each other?” Tseng chuckled with surprise. “How nice it is that you could see each other one last time. You should thank me.”

“What’re you gonna do with her?” snarled Cloud.

“I haven’t decided.” said Tseng pensively, frowning once more as he glanced at Cloud. “Our orders were to retrieve the last remaining Ancient. It’s taken us a long time, but now I can finally report this to the President.”

“Aerith...” yelled Tifa.

“Tifa, don’t worry.” she answered, temporarily attempting to wriggle free of Tseng’s arms. “I took her somewhere safe. Get out of here, this thing’s about to...”

“I told you not to speak!” spat Tseng, slapping Aerith hard across the cheek. As Cloud opened his mouth to curse him, a siren atop the computers burst into an alarming wail, the monitors blinking with warnings in deep red.

“Looks like it should be starting right about now. Think you’ll get out in time?” shouted Tseng over the din, fixing his suit tie beneath his collar. “Violet, get us out of here.”

As the door to the helicopter closed over, Tseng gave them a mocking wave, forcing Aerith back into the hold. The aircraft lifted off in the direction of Sector8, fading from sight as the first of the explosions could be seen at the height of the Pillar. Seconds later, the inevitable sound of rumbling reached them as shards of granite fell like concrete hail onto the platform. Diving away from the plummeting rock, Cloud felt the structure tilt as chunks of the Pillar ground their way through the metal surface. A second blast saw an entire section plunge to the earth below, shaking the tower at its foundations. Glancing up, he caught sight of Tifa and Barret darting for the stairwell, keeping their heads low, beckoning him to hurry.

The three sprinted down the stairs as fast as their legs would carry them, taking most flights in only two bounds. The entire support swayed around them, jerking violently as the limbs of the frame were torn from its body. In his hurried descent, Cloud made out the trails winding their way through the sector in the distance, the paths cutting through the derelict land with great ease. He saw the gateway to Sector6 a short way off, and longed to pass through its gaping doors. He stopped suddenly, still two-hundred feet from the ground, an idea forming in his mind.

“Wait!” he instructed, losing his balance as Barret crashed into him from behind.

“What’re you doin’?” roared Barret. “We’re runnin’ outta time!”

“Look!” said Cloud, pointing to the electrical cable jutting out from the level above where Jessie’s body lay. It was the same line he had seen on his way to the platform and now, as he studied it

more closely, it appeared sturdy enough to bear their weight. “We can use that wire to slide outta here. It’s our only chance.”

“Are you fuckin’ insane?” Barret stammered in disbelief.

“We won’t make it if we don’t.” Cloud responded, leaping onto the railing. Careful to retain his stability, he swung the Buster Sword across the encased wire, gripping the enormous weapon by the handle with one hand, and its blunt face with the other.

“Cloud...” gasped Tifa.

“C’mon.” he urged, facing them. “We have to go now!”

“You better hope this works.” Barret shook his head as he clambered onto the barrier beside Cloud. Holding the line, he bent down to allow Tifa to toss her arms around his broad neck, straining to stand as the tower trembled once more. With her securely clinging to his back, he clamped his gun-arm onto the cable. “Let’s do it...”

Without waiting for Cloud’s signal, Barret jumped from the ledge, lurching forward as he and Tifa began gliding along the steep wire. Cloud watched for a moment as they rocketed towards the sector gate, gaining in speed with each passing second. Taking a deep breath, he threw himself from the support structure, clashing his sword with all his might, sparks shooting into the air about him as the blade scraped through the wire casing.

As the earth raced towards him, he caught glimpses of people running wildly to escape the horror, while others admired the explosions on the Pillar in an entranced state, unaware of the fate with which they would soon be met. His flight became even more rapid, the surrounding landscape merging to form a blur of grey and brown. In the instant he saw the end of the cable, its bulging casing penetrating the Wall to Sector6, there came a sound unlike any Cloud had experienced before. With an unexpected jolt from the line as its tension was disabled, he was hurled to the ground. He landed hard on the worn trail, skidding to a halt against one of the few lampposts.

“Cloud!” cried Tifa anxiously from somewhere nearby.

Clutching his ribs, he tried unsuccessfully to stand, his world a daze. The frightened screams of women and children pierced his thoughts, his ears detecting them even over what was now a thunderous groan of rock and steel. As he felt a strong hand pull at him from behind, there was a tremor of the sector beneath his legs. He heard Barret calling his name amongst his clouded mind, stumbling through the tall gateway, the underside of the Plate seeming closer than it had done before.



The Ancient

“*Marlene!*” wept Barret, pounding his gun-arm on the smouldering rubble.

Cloud hung his throbbing head, lost for words as his comrade grieved the loss of his daughter. Barret was one of the few survivors of Sector7 that had returned immediately to the site in search of loved ones, ripping shards of rock and steel aside as he fought his way desperately through the wreckage, tears streaming down his grime-splattered cheeks. A thick smog of ominous ash had settled over Sector6’s Green Park, the stagnant grey haze engulfing the now-crumbling gateway between the sectors and the bewildered crowd that had gathered around it.

The entire region had been obliterated; the Slums buried deep beneath the crushed remnants of what had been the Sector7 Plate. An eerie silence had enveloped the city, broken only by distant sirens. Hundreds of feet above, Cloud could see the jagged underside of the Plate, its hinges torn as the sector caved in on itself, and the fleeting image of an overcast night sky beyond. Sprinklings of debris continued to rain down upon the devastated stretch of now-lifeless homes of the residential district, some floating to earth with a peaceful ignorance.

“*Marlene!*” Barret howled again, slumping to his knees, unable to break through the wall of destruction any further as the layers of compressed rock congealed. Carefully making their way through the scattered ruins, the two joined him, Tifa placing a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Barret...”

“Biggs...Wedge...Jessie...” he whispered angrily, his breathing erratic, lashing out at a protruding pipe. “Godsdammit! Godsdammit all to hell! What’s it all for...?”

“Barret...?”

“Marlene...” he sobbed, wiping the tears from his swollen eyes with the back of his hand, smearing his face with dirt.

“Barret...” repeated Tifa, crouching by his side. “Marlene is...I think Marlene is alright.”

“Huh?” he spluttered, turning towards her with a stunned and bleary gaze.

“Right before they captured Aerith,” explained Tifa, her expression remaining dark through the encouraging words, “she said “don’t worry, I took her somewhere safe”. Barret, I think...I think she was talking about Marlene.”

“But...how...?”

“She took Marlene from Seventh Heaven.” said Tifa, glancing up. “Right, Cloud? She promised to take care of her.”

“R...really...?” croaked Barret, staring confusedly at her, his frantic mind anxious to accept the possibility. As rapidly as it had come, the hope evaporated, and he lowered his eyes. “But, the others...”

“All three of them were killed before the Pillar collapsed.” Cloud confirmed, his tone without emotion.

“Show a little respect, ya heartless bastard.” snapped Barret, scowling at Cloud as he staggered to his feet. “Think I don’t know that? But, we...all of us fought together. I don’t wanna think of them as dead...”

“What about everyone else?” Tifa said softly, biting her lip as she too allowed a tear to escape down her cheek. “All those children...”

“This is all screwed up!” Barret snarled through gritted teeth, hatred seeping into his voice. “They wiped out an entire sector just to get us? They killed so many people...”

“Are you saying it’s our fault?” protested Tifa. “Because AVALANCHE was here? Do you agree with that Turk? Are you saying all those innocent people lost their lives because of us?”

“No, Tifa.” he replied, shaking his head slowly, his jaw clenched. “Hell no! This ain’t us. It’s the Shinra. It’s never been nobody but the damn Shinra. They’re evil; destroyin’ the Planet just to increase their power an’ line their own damn pockets with gold...”

“Barret...”

“If we don’t do somethin’, they’re gonna kill this Planet.” spat Barret, nodding towards the distant exterior shell of Mako Reactor6. “Our fight...AVALANCHE’s fight ain’t never gonna be over ‘til we get rid o’ them.”

“I don’t know...” Tifa answered quietly, pulling uneasily at her silken black hair.

“Don’t know what?” asked Barret with bewilderment. “Don’t you believe me?”

“It’s not that.” she said quickly, sighing as she offered an apologetic hand. “It’s just...I’m not sure about me. Y’know, my feelings. I have my own motives for hating the Shinra, and hiding behind AVALANCHE’s actions was a good way of dealing with that. But, if all this is the cost of my own personal revenge...”

“I understand.” Barret conceded, looking back over the wreckage. “But, after everythin’ that’s happened, surely there ain’t no turnin’ back now?”

“I don’t know...”

“An’ what about you, Spiky? You’re gonna go help that girl, right?”

“Yeah...” Cloud replied sullenly, frowning as he glanced up at Barret. “But, before that, there’s somethin’ I gotta know...”

* * *

“In my veins courses the blood of the Ancients. I am one of the rightful heirs to this Planet.”

* * *

Sephiroth...?

“What is it?” asked Tifa.

“It...” gulped Cloud, wincing as the searing pain in his forehead grew sharper. “It’s about the Ancients.”

“What about them?” she said curiously.

“I need to speak to Aerith’s mother.” he responded absently, already winding his way back through the rubble, brushing through the gathered mourners.

“An’ where d’you think you’re goin’?” called Barret as he and Tifa followed questioningly.

“Sector5.” Cloud shouted back, raising his voice over the solemn crying of the masses. “That’s where she lives, just beyond the border of the sectors. If Aerith *did* get Marlene out of Sector7, that’ll be where she took her. So, if you wanna see your daughter, you’d better hurry up.”

“I suppose we should go with him.” shrugged Tifa, watching Cloud as he passed through the play-park, stepping over the shattered fragments of what had been the outer casing of a large mog-shaped slide, and started in the direction of the desolate Sector6 highway.

“Yeah.” murmured Barret, taking one last glimpse at what remained of Sector7, his thoughts succumbing to vengeance. “Let’s go see Marlene...”

* * *

Cloud found their trek across the broken freeway to pass much quicker than it had that morning, each distraught individual he saw restoring the sinister images of the terrible night that had changed his life five years before. Men and women called out longingly for their families; children for their parents. The anguished crowds had merged with the droves of curious

onlookers, the inhabitants of the surrounding districts investigating the source of the quake that had stirred the foundations of their homes.

A bustle of activity had commenced across the heavenless sky of the Slums, not unlike the commotion of the roads themselves. Aircraft of Shinra, Inc.'s emergency services soared beneath the Plate, their searchlights illuminating the devastation in a hypocritical rescue attempt. Cloud was able to read Barret's anger with ease as his brooding eyes tracked the helicopters; his dark features laden with resentment for the audacity and deceit of President Shinra. In his own heart, he began to feel the desire to see it all end; the actions of the Shinra in Sector7 matching even the most nightmarish of his memories of the tragedy at Nibelheim.

Under the shadows of the construction site machinery they crept, climbing the sharp mound to the gap in the Sector5 Wall. The monsters of the Slum seemed to have retreated into the garbage, alarmed by the collapse of the Pillar. Retracing the path he and Aerith had taken through the canyon of junk and waste, they passed northwest into the marketplace, coming soon after to the small village beneath the Central Complex. Although the gas lamps of the shacks and caravans shone brightly throughout the impoverished community, most were undisturbed, the dwellings left unguarded in the typical probing inquisitiveness of the locals to witness the aftermath of Shinra's hideous plan.

At last they arrived at the low pinewood doorway of the Gainsborough house, a thin blanket of fallout dust settling upon the flowerpots on the sloping roof and windows. Knocking three times, there came nothing more than a muffled reply. Cautiously, Cloud opened the door and peered inside, his fingers reaching for the Buster Sword as a security measure. Elmyra looked up from the table at the centre of the room, her lips trembling, her eyes reddened under the light of the overhead lamp. Dabbing at her cheeks with her pale handkerchief, she beckoned the trio into her home, straightening her emerald green skirt as she stood courteously to greet them.

“Cloud, wasn’t it?” she asked, her voice dry as she attempted to smile.

“Yeah.” he nodded once, staring uncomfortably at the cream carpet beneath his feet. “We...uh...we’ve come because...”

“It’s about Aerith, isn’t it?” she sniffed, wiping another tear away. Cloud lifted his head slowly, his uncertain gaze shifting from the book cabinet to the flower vase on the table, finally resting upon Elmyra.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly, “but...the Shinra have her.”

“I know.” sobbed Elmyra, inhaling deeply to compose herself as she gestured for them to fill the chairs around the table. “Come, have a seat.”

“You know?” stammered Cloud, too startled to acknowledge her hospitality. “But...how...?”

“They took her from here.” she answered meekly.

“The Shinra were *here*?”

“They brought her and a little girl here in a helicopter.” said Elmyra, pointing a weary finger back towards the village. “It seems Aerith allowed herself to be taken into custody by the Turks in exchange for the girl’s safety.”

“Marlene?” gasped Barret, his expression revealing untold relief and emotion.

“You *know* Marlene?” asked Elmyra in astonishment, studying the man’s gargantuan appearance apprehensively as she stood over him, her focus flitting briefly between his gun-arm and facial scars.

“My name’s Barret Wallace.” he said, his humble tone unusual to Cloud. “I’m her father.”

“*You’re* her father?” scolded Elmyra, her brows furrowing with disapproval. “How in the world could you ever leave a young child alone like that? She said you had gone to fight...”

“Please don’t start with that.” he begged, hanging his head in shame. “I think ‘bout it all the time. Y’know...what’d be left for Marlene if the worst happened? But, you gotta understand

somethin'...I don't got an answer. I wanna be with my daughter, always...but I gotta fight for the future of the Planet...for her future."

"So, you're stuck in a vicious circle?" she concluded.

"You understand, right?" Barret said hopefully, as if he were silently pleading for forgiveness.

"I think I do." Elmyra replied kindly, placing a caring hand on his heaving shoulders. "You must have been through a lot after everything that's happened. Marlene is asleep upstairs. Why don't you go and see her?"

"Thank you." said Barret gratefully, rising restlessly from his chair and hurriedly crossing the room. He stopped at the foot of the pinewood steps, turning hesitantly to meet Elmyra's gaze with sincere regret. "I'm really sorry 'bout Aerith."

"She did a very brave thing." Elmyra smiled appreciatively. "The protection of Marlene is what she wanted. Now, go...go to her..."

"Yes, ma'am." said Barret, climbing the staircase with an eagerness that Cloud had never seen of the man.

Elmyra remained standing with her back to Cloud and Tifa at the dining table, lost in a daydream as she listened to Barret's heavy footsteps on the strained floorboards above them. Marlene's cries of endless joy to be reunited with her father seemed to awaken her from her thoughts, the heart-warming sound refreshing amidst their current concerns. With a great effort to re-establish herself in the reality of the circumstances, she slowly joined the two, her body sagging as if she bore a great weight. It was more than a minute before Cloud spoke.

"Elmyra, there's something I need to ask you." he said tentatively, selecting his words.

"Yes?"

"Aerith suggested to me that she has been in some sticky situations with Shinra in the past." he answered. "If there's any way we can help her, I need to know the real reason they were after her."

“Aerith is...” started Elmyra, but paused, exhaling at length. Her round face became taut, as if in deep thought, carefully mulling over her response. “Aerith is an Ancient.”

“What did you say?” spluttered Tifa.

“Aerith is an Ancient.” repeated Elmyra. “The sole survivor it would seem.”

“The sole survivor?” Cloud frowned, mystified. “But...aren’t you her mother?”

“Not her real mother.” she replied softly, her eyes wandering aimlessly over the old photographs on the wall. Several portraits of Elmyra and a young Aerith hung above the cabinets, their faces beaming down over the room with happiness. “It must have been around fifteen years ago...during the War. My husband was a lieutenant in the Shinra Army stationed in Midgar. He got the call one day and was sent to the front line somewhere on the Wutai Continent. After he had been gone for a few months, I received a letter from him to say that he was coming home on leave. I was so excited. On the morning he was due to return, I went to meet him at the train station...”

* * *

Elmyra heard the piercing whistle of the passenger train as it eased to a halt at the Lower Sector7 station, and quickened her pace. She hastened along the sandy path, her heart pounding furiously inside her chest, making no attempt to hide her broad grin. Arriving at the end of the elevated concrete platform, she saw that she was not alone in waiting for her husband; two or three other young women of a similar age were grouped by the low steps, their faces laden with exhilaration. As she neared the women, the station master crossed the platform and hauled the shuddering door of the carriage aside.

The burning white lights of the wagon shone brightly from inside, radiating what seemed like a heavenly glow. One by one,

the soldiers appeared from the doorway, and were met by a passionate embrace from their spouse. Elmyra smiled as each of the men welcomed the love and affection with enthusiasm, longing for her turn to feel her husband's strong arms around her. She remained at the foot of the steps for a short while after the last couple had departed, her anxious gaze fixed upon the doorway. Helping an elderly man from the train, the station master casually checked the compartment before sliding the door closed and putting his whistle between his lips.

"Excuse me?" she called in desperation. "There must be some mistake. My...my husband..."

"Sorry ma'am." said the moustached man indifferently, glancing at his timepiece. "Train's leavin'."

Elmyra lowered her head in bitter disappointment as the guard blew his whistle a second time, her heart sinking. With a great rumble of its Mako engine, the Midgar Transit's MK100-70 locomotive began to pull slowly out of the Sector7 station, the gentle *click* of the tracks echoing into the distance as it made its way towards the Central Complex. Stumbling backwards in a haze of disjointed musings, she sat on the edge of the cold stone wall, cradling her head in her hands as she fought to restrain a sob. *Why isn't he here? He said he would be on that train. Maybe he's just been held up at Headquarters...*

* * *

"...my husband wasn't on the next train, or any that afternoon." continued Elmyra, fresh tears forming. "I never found out what happened. I suppose his leave was just cancelled. After the hurt of not seeing him, I made the trip to the Sector7 station every day in the hope that he would finally come home. Then, one evening..."

* * *

Sighing with frustration that the journey from Sector5 had once again been in vain, Elmyra turned from the platform as the station master sounded his whistle, drawing the carriage doors shut as he did every night. She had become accustomed to the man in the tight red uniform, Hauser, and although he had often offered words of support and kindness over the weeks, she had grown to dread his presence at the station; his last signal condemning her to the long walk home alone.

The warm air of the early summer evening felt thick and humid against her skin, her cotton dress clinging to her body. The burning gas lamps of the station illuminated the path that led back to the Sector6 gateway, the orange light swathing the old trail of dirt and waste in murky silhouettes. Heavy clunking sounds resonated from the nearby Train Graveyard as cargo trucks were shunted back and forth within the ghostly junkyard by some deformed buffer train, the repetitive thuds ascending raucously into the otherwise silent sky. As the last cart was rolled finally into the siding, bringing with it a peaceful stillness, Elmyra slowed in her tracks, listening intently.

“Mama...” whimpered a small voice from the shadows. Elmyra looked back along the path from which she had come, straining her eyes as she noticed two shapes partially concealed by the charred body of a burnt-out vehicle.

“Is someone there?” she called nervously.

“Mama...” came the girl’s voice again.

Cautiously retracing her steps, Elmyra approached the car. As her eyes adjusted to the dimness of the spot, she could make out a young child, knelt over the form of a beautiful woman. Elmyra rushed to her side at once, her mind blanking as she tried to speak, unable to find words of comfort as she saw the life drain from the woman’s angelic face. The tiny girl clasped her mother’s hand, tears trickling down her round cheeks as she obediently slipped a small white object into her dress pocket. With great

effort, the woman reached out to Elmyra with her free arm, meeting her frightened gaze with fading green eyes.

“Please take Aerith away from here...” she whispered with her final breath. “Please keep her safe...”

* * *

“...you used to see that kind of thing a lot during the War.” Elmyra recalled, inhaling deeply. “I had no children and I was probably lonely, so I decided to take Aerith home with me where I knew she would be taken care of. Just as her mother had asked...”

“She and I quickly became very close. That child loved to talk, and was unusually wise for her age. She was only seven, but she spoke to me about everything. She told me that she and her mother, Ifalna, had escaped from some kind of research laboratory somewhere, but her memories of the place were hazy at best. She often said that Ifalna had already returned to the Planet, so she didn’t feel alone...”

“Returned to the Planet?” repeated Cloud, questioningly.

“I didn’t know what she meant at the time.” sighed Elmyra, her glazed eyes staring blankly ahead. “I asked her if she was talking about a star in the night sky, but she shook her head and said that she was referring to this Planet. She was a mysterious child in many ways...”

* * *

Elmyra could feel Aerith studying her as she worked at the stove, the strong fumes of the frying fish floating throughout the house. Aerith had always loved the smell, drifting around the living space with delight each time Elmyra had chosen to cook the salmon her sister had sent from the Kalm market. Glancing over her shoulder, she was surprised to see Aerith’s youthful face wedged between two of the wooden railings a short way up the staircase, her lips trembling fiercely.

“What’s the matter, honey?” asked Elmyra, setting her utensils on the worktop and wandering from the kitchen. Aerith removed her head from the banister and hurried down the remaining stairs to where Elmyra stood, burying her face in her bosom. After a few seconds, she began to weep softly, pulling herself tight against her mother’s body.

“I’m sorry.” Aerith apologised. “I didn’t want to cry.”

“What’s wrong?” Elmyra said without much worry, hugging the child soothingly. “Has something happened?”

“It’s just...” sniffed Aerith, raising her head. “I don’t want *you* to cry...”

“Me?” chuckled Elmyra warmly, stroking her hair. “Why would *I* be crying?”

“Someone dear was coming to see you,” Aerith replied with a gulp, her saddened pale green eyes meeting Elmyra’s, “but their spirit has already returned to the Planet...”

* * *

“...at the time, I dismissed it as another of her strange concerns, and tried to console her.” Elmyra continued. “I thought it had been nothing more than a dream, and tried to explain to her that she had perhaps imagined it. She argued with me that it was not a dream, but something she had sensed. She kept repeating that she was not upset for her, but for me. I didn’t understand what she was talking about, and simply put it to the back of my mind.

“Several days later, I received an official notice from Shinra, Inc.’s Department of Security to inform me that my husband had been killed in action. The convoy carrying his unit through the Tamblin Mountains had been ambushed by anti-Shinra mercenaries and blown up. Many good men died that day. The ambush itself became known as one of Shinra’s heaviest losses in the Wutai War.

“It took me a long time to come to terms with the death of my husband. For a while, I blamed Aerith, even though I knew it wasn’t her fault. I wouldn’t speak to her. I couldn’t even look at her without feeling that she was somehow responsible for what had happened. All the while, she tried to comfort me. She never gave up; she was like an angel. Eventually, I was able to mourn him and move on, and Aerith and I’s relationship grew even stronger. Although we had been through a lot, we were very happy. That’s how it was until one day, almost ten years ago, we had an unexpected visitor...”

* * *

The knock at the door startled her, causing her to spill a little of her coffee over the newspaper. Aerith giggled as Elmyra wrung the wet pages, the dripping coffee splashing into her small saucer. She rose from the table, exchanging confused expressions with Aerith as the firm knock came a second time. Without haste, she crossed the room and opened the door slightly.

A man in his late teens stood on the doorstep, his head jerking suddenly away from the flower pots on the window ledge as Elmyra appeared. He was a handsome young man, his pale complexion perfect but for a birthmark at the centre of his forehead. His sleek black hair had been tied behind his head in a short ponytail, and he was clad in a formal black suit, straightening his crisp white shirt collar as he cleared his throat.

“Elmyra Gainsborough?” he asked politely, holding out a hand.

“Yes?” she replied suspiciously, making no effort to shake it.

“My name is Tseng.” he continued, unfazed, withdrawing his arm. “I am an assistant to Chief Veld at Shinra, Inc.’s Investigation Division of the General Affairs Department.”

“I’m sorry...who?”

“I get that a lot.” smiled Tseng. “We are more commonly known as the Turks.”

“Can I ask what you are doing here?” posed Elmyra.

“May I come in?” he deflected. “I would like to speak with you and your daughter.”

“Very well.” said Elmyra hesitantly, holding the door open for him to pass. He thanked her, wiping his polished shoes on the mat before entering the living space. Aerith glared at him as if in immediate recognition, dropping her dolls to the floor as she backed towards Elmyra.

“So this must be her.” said Tseng, a tone of satisfaction in his voice.

“This is...the Shinra man...from the park.” Aerith stammered fearfully. “Mum, why is he here?”

“So, you’re the one who’s been following my daughter?” growled Elmyra, allowing the girl to cower behind her. “What is it that you want?”

“We would like you to return Aerith to us.” he answered flatly, his gaze unmoving from Aerith.

“Excuse me?”

“Shinra has been searching for her for a very long time.” said Tseng.

“You want to take Aerith to Shinra?” squeaked Elmyra, bewildered by the request.

“Only if Aerith would like to come with me.” he nodded. “She is very important to us.”

“No!” screamed Aerith, clutching Elmyra’s waist tighter. “I’ll never go back there! Never!”

“Aerith, you are a unique child.” Tseng explained, his words very soft. “You are of special blood. Your real mother was an Ancient.”

“You’re wrong!” cried Aerith in denial. “I’m not an Ancient.”

“The Ancients are destined to lead us to a land of supreme happiness.” Tseng proceeded in a gentle tone. “Aerith, you’ll be able to bring joy to all the people of the Slums. That’s why Shinra would like your cooperation...”

“I told you, I’m not an Ancient!” she wailed. “I’m not!”

“But, Aerith, surely you hear voices sometimes when you’re alone?”

“No!” Aerith refuted, furiously shaking her head. “I don’t!”

“But...”

“Mr. Tseng,” Elmyra interrupted uncompromisingly, her jaw clenched, “I think it is perhaps time you left...”

* * *

“...and that was how I discovered she was a target for the company. I’d known for some time about her unusual powers, but it was really only then that I learned she was an Ancient. She’d always tried so hard to hide the things that made her so special, so I acted as if I never noticed. She has abilities beyond even her own understanding. You’ve seen the flowers at the church haven’t you? They grow there because Aerith’s power helps them. She has the gift of life that her ancestors had, but I don’t think she ever saw it that way. I suppose it was these abilities that Shinra wanted.”

“It’s amazing how she’s avoided the Shinra all this time.” Cloud acknowledged.

“Avoided?” chortled Elmyra with faint amusement. “I wouldn’t exactly say that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Five or six years back, Aerith ran into a spot of bother with a militant group.” she said with a deep sigh. “It was a young man from Tseng’s organisation that helped her out. I never told her, but they’ve been keeping a close watch on her ever since. I guess protecting the subject is just part of surveillance duty to them. Wherever Aerith goes in the city, the Turks are sure to be nearby. I’ve seen Tseng a few times over the years following her with a camera, but he never tried forcefully to take her into custody. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he had feelings for her. It seems the company needed Aerith but were reluctant to do anything against her wishes, so they wouldn’t have kidnapped and hurt her.”

“I know there have been a number of attempts to persuade her, though.” Cloud frowned, Reno’s smirking face flashing in his mind. “But, why now? Why did they decide to take her now?”

“On the way here, Tseng found her and Marlene trying to escape Sector7.” answered Elmyra, lowering her gaze. “They probably wouldn’t have made it out of the sector in time otherwise. I think he took advantage of Aerith’s willingness to sacrifice her freedom for Marlene. He knew that if he agreed to bring the child to safety, Aerith would surrender herself and go to Shinra without a fight...”

She was cut off as the thunder of Barret’s boots resounded from the top of the stairs, growing louder as his enormous frame reappeared. He bore an expression of determination, purposefully restocking the bullets into his gun-arm as he descended. As he met them at the table, he spun the barrels, making sure the ammo was loaded. Elmyra seemed somewhat undisturbed by this, not in any way intimidated by the hulking man.

“How’s Marlene?” Tifa enquired sincerely.

“She’s fine.” he replied with a relieved nod. “I put her back to sleep. I’m just so glad she’s alright.”

“What are you all going to do now?” asked Elmyra, sending a pleading glance among the trio.

“Cloud, you’re gonna go help Aerith, right?” said Barret, almost like a command. Cloud remained silent for a moment, his face cast in deep deliberation.

“Yeah...”

“She’s done so much for me an’ Marlene.” Barret continued, checking and rechecking his weapon as if he were entranced. “An’ if it’s the Shinra you’re dealin’ with, I can’t just wait around, can I? I’m comin’, too.”

“What about you, Tifa?” Cloud asked slowly, looking up at her as she bit her lip.

“I don’t have a choice.” she said quietly. “It’s my fault...I was the one who got Aerith involved in this.”

“Don’t say that.” Elmyra shook her head, placing a hand on Tifa’s arm. “Aerith wouldn’t think you did.”

“You can’t afford to let yourself feel guilty like that.” Cloud told her, rising from the table, shouldering the Buster Sword. “We’re going right into the heart of Shinra...you better be prepared for the worst.”

“I know.” mumbled Tifa as she stood, her features set firmly. “I’m gonna do my best, no matter what. Right now, I feel like I have to push myself to the limit. If I stayed here...I’d go crazy.”

“I’m really sorry to have to ask you this,” said Barret sheepishly, turning to Elmyra, “but can you take care of Marlene for a bit longer?”

“Of course,” she smiled, “I don’t mind.”

“It’d mean so much to me to know she was safe.” he said appreciatively. “But, Midgar’s gettin’ too dangerous now. You’d be best to go somewhere else for a while.”

“I agree.” Elmyra nodded, her mouth pursing as she considered her options. “I have a sister in Kalm. She has a daughter around the same age as Marlene. I’ll take her there as soon as I can...but only on one condition.”

“An’ what’s that?”

“Swear to me you’ll come back to her.” Elmyra ordered. “Don’t go getting yourself killed.”

“I’ll come back.” grinned Barret. He held out a hand for her to shake but, unable to express his true gratitude the way he desired, wrapped his good arm around her in a hug, whispering in her ear as he did so. “I’ll get your daughter back. I promise...”



Castle in the Sky

The smog of dust and grime had all but dissipated as the trio passed beneath the glowing neon sign at the entrance to Wall Market, the hazy green light illuminating what remained of the misty particles. A hubbub of bodies inhabited the long streets of the town, the survivors of Sector7 seeking refuge around the many fires that had been lit for warmth outside the stores and eateries. It seemed that most had made the short journey from Sector6's Green Park, their sad eyes trailing the three as they ventured through the crowds.

Although populated with those who had suffered great and terrible loss in the last few hours, Wall Market's restlessness had not in any way ceased; its bars crawling with drunks, and its nightclubs reverberating with music. The night air was consumed by the scents of fried foods and alcohol, the litter of the main road a feast for scavenging rodents and birds. Around them, the lamps lining the path began to flicker at set intervals, the electrical circuits of the district clearly affected by the collapse of the Sector7 Pillar.

Led by Tifa, they turned onto a side street, ignoring the cluster of scantily-clad prostitutes at the corners, and continued north towards the edge of town. Tramps and beggars lay asleep at the side of the road, covered in scrap and newspapers, unmoved amongst the chorus of barking by a pack of stray mongrels. Above the rooftops of the shacks and tents, Cloud could make out the darkened silhouette of Don Corneo's now-seemingly-

abandoned mansion, each and every curtain drawn and lamp extinguished inside. He felt his anger rise as he thought of the man, but glanced quickly away, determined to keep his mind focused on the mission.

Beyond Wall Market, the grand structure of the Central Complex grew ever nearer, the high frame of its circumference void of light in the aftermath of Sector 7's destruction. As they approached the border of the district, they saw a small fenced-off stairwell etched from the concrete boundary, the graffiti-covered passage rising away from Wall Market. Even from the road, the railway tunnel of the Complex was visible as the stairway's destination. Barret stopped at the foot of the stone steps, his suspicious eyes analysing the Shinra logo marked 'No Entry' on the barrier.

"This it?" he asked in a low voice, scanning the silent buildings around them.

"This is it." nodded Tifa. "Just as the blueprints showed."

"When'd you memorise this?" queried Barret, folding his bulging arms. "Hell, I never even saw that blueprint."

"It always helps to have a backup plan for every situation." Tifa answered with a hint of condescension. "You should know that better than anyone."

"Don't get cocky." snapped Barret. "That ain't important, now!"

"This route is probably one of the few not still monitored by Shinra." she explained, brushing off the retort. "Thanks to some of the old anti-Shinra groups, the public highways that ran between the Slum markets and the Plate were closed off years ago. The company still use them for easy access to their weapons storage facilities around the edge of the city, and the surveillance on those roads is pretty heavy."

"So what now?" frowned Cloud.

"If I'm not mistaken," replied Tifa, "we should be able to make it to the Plate through the underground railway and service tunnels."

“We need to get to Sector0, remember.” said Cloud pensively. “Best way is probably through Sector4. Do you know how far up the tunnels go?”

“Does it matter?” Barret said impatiently. “What do these steps look like to you?”

“Just a normal staircase.”

“Oh, yeah?” he gushed mischievously, beginning towards the gate. With a single shot, he blasted the padlock from the barrier, allowing the doorway of the passage to swing uselessly open. “Well, to me it looks like the shiny golden staircase of hope.”

“Okay, that was a bad analogy,” grunted Cloud, “but I understand what you’re trying to say.”

“If we follow the internal passages of the Central Complex, we should be able to find our way to Shinra Headquarters beneath the surface.” concluded Tifa. “To me, it seems this is the only way to save Aerith.”

“Then, there’s nothing for it.” Cloud acknowledged, his expression firm as he started up the steps. “Let’s go...”

* * *

The steep ascent into the Central Tower and navigation through the dead service passages below the Plate proved more costly of time than the three had anticipated. Almost two hours had elapsed since they had begun their journey to the upper-most regions of Midgar. The climb itself had been far from quick, but it was a series of errors and miscalculations in coordination that had ensured a frustrating and tiring venture into the deep, twisting darkness of the upper-city’s underground.

At brief intervals throughout their trek, they were able to witness the horror of Sector7; its homes and buildings flattened and black like burnt paper, emergency rescue teams scouring the wreckage without so much as a single life to be found. Of the entire expanse, only a section of the Train Graveyard remained

intact; the tasteless irony of a place inhabited by lifeless Shinra machinery being the sector's last survivor. Stretches of torn metal and debris hung suspended from the Plate and Central Complex, desperate to plummet to earth in an attempt wreak greater havoc. All about them, the city had fallen beneath a blanket of silence, a hatred swelling against AVALANCHE for the atrocity, oblivious to the hidden and cowardly smirk of Shinra, Inc.

At last, the trio came to a disused sewer tunnel adjacent to the Sector0 railway station north of Sectors 4 and 5. Only the faint trickle of water along the base of their path stirred amidst the cold musty walls, the brown current leading them northeast through a slither of drifting steam. After a short hike, they turned a corner to find a thin ray of white light dissecting the clouded air from the world above. Ascending the ladder at the side of the walkway, Barret heaved the manhole cover aside, and clambered out into the plaza. He quickly checked that they were alone and, holding out his arm for the others to follow, helped them out into the night. As Cloud pushed his foot away from the final rung, he allowed his gaze to rise, and felt his breath catch in his throat.

Before them, the foundations of Shinra, Inc.'s Headquarters loomed over the cobbled plaza like the monstrous underbelly of a mythical creature, spreading itself across sixteen square city blocks. Unending rows of windows lined the arcing face of the main building and smaller adjacent towers on either side, the golden glow radiating from each intensifying its overly-synthetic appearance. Beyond the first thirty floors, the central body of the skyscraper slimmed in breadth, forming what seemed like a second structure, individual from its support. Masses of waste-emitting funnels and generators stood alongside the upper-building, belching Mako fumes into the already-overcast sky, every one marked by the Shinra Diamond. At the pinnacle of the Headquarters, the final ten levels narrowed further to become an even more secluded part of the construct, culminating in the Presidential Office seventy storeys above them.

Noting the direction of the signposted Highway 23 that snaked eastbound past the rear of the Building, Cloud instinctively grasped the handle of the Buster Sword as the sound of scraping stone cut the silence behind him, spinning in time to see Barret slide the manhole cover back to its rightful position. For the first time, he noticed the surroundings of the broad concourse on the southern side of the complex, his mind finally registering the environment as he took his eyes from the vast Shinra Headquarters.

The Sector0 north and south squares were isolated from the rest of the Plate by an enormous fortress wall, the respective gateways to Sector8's downtown district, the train station, and the construction yards of Sector4 situated within. Water soared high into the air from the elegant fountains atop the stronghold that enclosed the grounds of Headquarters, the bright spotlights beneath magnificently illuminating each spray as it sliced through the midnight sky, as well as the paved section the three now occupied. Collections of evergreen trees lined the street, somewhat hiding the formidable sight of the mass Mako piping and containment blocks within their boundaries.

To Cloud's surprise, it was Tifa who first began towards the marble steps at the grand entrance to the Shinra Building, her gaze fixed determinately upon the upper-tower as she sought to redeem what she felt was her responsibility. She marched without falter across the south plaza, passing through the reaching shadows of the bronze statuettes, and stormed up the broad stairs. Stopping on the pavement twenty feet from the main doorway, she turned to glare at them, her stern face lit up by the beaming white lamps underfoot.

She was joined presently by Cloud and Barret, both continuously searching the backdrop for traces of movement. Cloud frowned as he approached Tifa, questioning the unusual lack of military personnel or even Shinra employees around the Building in such a time of crisis. Together, they surveyed the

foyer of the Headquarters through the tall partition of glass that shaped the base of the skyscraper, shielding their unadjusted eyes from the brilliant radiance of its interior.

As his vision became accustomed to the brightness, Cloud was able to make out a young female receptionist at one of the desks on the right of the doorway. She sat busily typing at her computer monitor, ignorant to the three and the few members of staff that scuttled across the expansive hall behind her. Staring beyond the girl, Cloud saw a large holographic screen at the centre of the lobby, displaying images of various Shinra projects taking place throughout the city, on either side of which grew a sweeping carpeted staircase that rose from view.

“You oughtta know this buildin’ pretty well, huh?” whispered Barret, drawing Cloud from his thoughts.

“Not really, now that I think about it.” he replied blankly, squinting hard as he analysed the internal layout.

“Huh?” spluttered Barret. “I thought you were a First Class SOLDIER?”

“I was.” growled Cloud in frustration. “The military aren’t based at Headquarters; the Midgar Army barracks are located to the east of here. SOLDIERS spend most of their time there when not on duty. We only got our mission briefings at Headquarters, and that was usually on the forty-ninth floor. I don’t really know any other part of the complex. It was only completed a few years ago.”

“Oh, yeah?” Barret snorted. “Even I’ve been here before, back when I still had both my hands. Came with a delegation from my hometown when the company was wantin’ to build a Reactor in the Corel Mountains. Heard ‘bout this place back then. Every level above the sixtieth is part of the special block an’ not easy to access...even for employees...”

“That must be where they took Aerith.” deduced Cloud.

“You see any guards in there?” asked Barret eagerly.

“No.”

“Me neither.” Barret grinned, starting forward. “Let’s go!”

“Wait a second!” hissed Tifa, grabbing his arm. “You’re not thinking of just walking right through the main entrance, are you?”

“What else does it look like?” Barret brushed her off. “I’m gonna tear Shinra a new asshole after what they’ve done tonight ...”

“That’s not going to work.” Tifa insisted assertively. “The security may seem pretty light now, but it won’t stay like that if someone raises the alarm. We’ve got to find another way...”

“Ain’t gonna be no other way!” argued Barret. “If we keep wastin’ time like this, there ain’t no tellin’ what they’ll do to Aerith...”

“I know that!” she gulped, again tugging on his ragged shirt, seeking support from Cloud with a pleading glance. “But, if we get caught here...”

“I agree with Tifa.” sighed Cloud, watching Barret’s face contort with rage.

“Then, what do you suggest, Spiky?” he snarled.

“I think we should be careful and find another way to sneak inside unnoticed.” he said calmly. “We need to try and keep a low profile.”

“Awright, SOLDIER-boy,” fumed Barret, casting a furious stare at the unsuspecting employees, “we’ll play it your way for now. But, I ain’t leavin’ here without a fight!”

“Let’s just concentrate on finding Aerith first, shall we?” Cloud proposed, spotting an alleyway not far from where they stood, almost fully concealed by the darkness of the increasingly-overcast night. “C’mon, this way.”

Ducking low and slipping along the street around the edge of the tower, his footsteps as silent as possible, Cloud motioned for Barret and Tifa to follow him west of the glass entrance. The lane ran between the western wall of Shinra Headquarters and a detached structure by its side, idle according to the piles of trash that had accumulated. Panels of brickwork and steel rose on both sides, steam whistling over them as it shot from the grated air

vents. The once-pale walls of the buildings had become smeared with grey and yellow; stained with the Mako fallout that had been pumped into the atmosphere by the chimneys above.

At the end of the cul-de-sac, a single green lamp indicated a fire exit approximately fifty feet from them. Nearing the light source, they saw the rusted metal doorway had been chained by thick links of iron. Cloud quickly glanced back, ensuring they had not been pursued, and brought his weapon crashing down upon the chains. There came a shriek of parting steel as the Buster Sword tore through the links, almost severing the door cleanly in two. Catching the falling metal as it toppled helplessly to the ground, Barret threw him a questioning stare, to which Cloud simply responded with a shrug.

They found themselves at the foot of what appeared to be one of the emergency stairwells for the skyscraper. Trapped within the bare concrete walls, the air inside had fallen to a temperature lower than that of the outside world, the rising vapour of their breath filling the hallway about them. Old cardboard boxes and garbage bags had been stacked haphazardly next to the doorway, concealed by the single dim light of the level, with numerous red insects buzzing around the floor under them, investigating the moulding cigarette filters that lay there.

“We really gonna take these stairs all the way up?” groaned Barret, half-heartedly counting the steps.

“We gotta save Aerith, right?” said Tifa, beginning her climb. “So, don’t argue.”

“Yeah, but talk ‘bout outta the way.” he shook his head, exhaling irritably as he started after her. “I dunno why you guys insist on doin’ this.”

“We don’t want to start a commotion.” repeated Cloud. “At least not until we find Aerith.”

“I doubt that’s possible.” muttered Barret. “We ain’t exactly the type to blend in with the Shinra suits.”

“I know...”

“An’ it seems I got you all wrong.” he smirked as the three reached the sixth floor and continued to scale the stairwell.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Cloud glowered.

“I never figured that even you’d fight for someone else.”

“Who cares what you figured?” Cloud snapped, unable to contain the pulse of fury that Barret’s words had generated. “The only reason I even considered comin’ here was because she helped me out after I fell from the Reactor. Somethin’ that neither of you did.”

“Don’t start, man.” retorted Barret. “We had other things on our plate, an’ you know that!”

“Guys, c’mon.” pleaded Tifa, breaking them off. “Can’t this wait ‘til later?”

“Awright,” grumbled Barret, “but how much farther do these stairs go?”

“Why don’t you ask them?” Tifa answered impatiently.

“You don’t think it’s one of those endless staircases, do you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” said Tifa. “See, this floor’s marked ‘14’. We’re definitely getting somewhere.”

“But, we’re still a long way from the top.” he moaned, pounding his fist against the wall in frustration. “Damn, man, any more of this an’ I’m goin’ back...”

“And take as long getting down as you did getting up?” scoffed Cloud.

“Look, all I know is I’m just flesh an’ blood...” he replied, waving his gatling-gun, “well, ‘cept for this partner o’ mine. Don’t piss me about just ‘cause I ain’t ex-SOLDIER or a fitness freak...”

“What did you call me?” Tifa barked.

“Never mind.” Barret sniggered to himself. “But, godsdamn the Shinra...they ain’t no good for nothin’. Why’d they have to make these buildin’s so damn tall?”

“What the hell are you babbling about?” said Tifa.

“Marlene, daddy just wanted to see your face one last time...”

“Will you stop acting like a retard and climb?” ordered Cloud, pushing him from behind.

“Pull it together, Barret.” encouraged Tifa, skipping up the final few steps to the next floor. “We’re almost there.”

“Really?”

“Maybe...”

Although slowing to allow the panting Barret to catch his breath, Cloud and Tifa were reluctant to stop their ascent for him to rest. The hard patter of boots echoed throughout the space with each footstep, creating unease amongst the armies of bugs that infested the painted red and yellow pipes along the walls. For most of the incline, the dark emergency stairwell was undisturbed by anyone other than they but, with the occasional lost employee or security guard opening one of the exits and inspecting the hallway, they were more than once forced to cower in the shadowy corners until their path was again deserted.

As anticipated, the stairs came to an abrupt end at the sixtieth floor. A faint trickle of light seeped through the slit in the doorway, the room on the other side scarcely visible. Pressing his face against the narrow strip, Cloud peered into the small lobby. The floor was vacant but for a single sentry asleep by the glass portal to another staircase; one leading farther into the special block of the Shinra Building. Mirrors lined the walls opposite, reflecting the elevators and seating area as well as the tiled silver floor. Taking his eye from the slit, he informed his comrades of his findings.

“I don’t believe this!” grunted Barret. “After that, I never wanna see no more stairs in my life...an’ you’re tellin’ me we need to go up again?”

“What else can we do?” posed Cloud. “The elevators will definitely have some kind of identification device that’ll stop us goin’ any further.”

“But what about the guard?” asked Tifa, her voice anxious.

“We’ll just creep past him.” said Barret, a hint of menace flashing in his eyes. “If he wakes up, I’ll make sure he wishes he’d never been born.”

“Remember, we don’t want to raise the alarm.” Cloud reiterated, glaring at him. “Try to be as quiet as possible. This is the real thing, so stay focused. Okay, let’s go.”

Sliding its handle slowly downwards, Cloud pulled the door ajar. They were met with a welcome blast of warm air as they escaped the chill of the emergency stairwell; the difference in temperatures undeniable even though separated only by a thin screen. One by one, they skulked along the north wall of the bleach-scented foyer without sound, avoiding the rustle of the tropical plants situated in each of the corners. A low barrier encircled a large square opening at the centre of the room, indicating a vast shaft that stemmed the height of the Building’s core, allowing them to cautiously scan the corresponding area on the levels below. Approaching the glass portico to the second stairway, Cloud was able to see himself in one of the security feeds on the monitor next to the sleeping guard, and knew that they must be swift and wary as they progressed.

To Barret’s delight, the stairs leading from the lobby proved less steep and easier on the legs than before, the broad marble steps shimmering under the golden lamps of the compact walls. Oil paintings of famous landmarks and towns surrounded them, the magnificent colours of many recreating the views of the coastal city of Junon by dusk. After only a single flight, they came to a spacious landing bound by white panelled walls. Opposite the steps was an unusually-jarred electronic doorway, beyond which a canteen area could be seen. Holding his arm out, Cloud motioned for the others to hang back, passing Barret his sword as he ventured onto the level by himself.

The cafeteria seemed to span the length of the Shinra Headquarters’ northern face, encompassing most of the sixty-first floor. Through the curving windows along the western wall, Cloud could make out the blazing lights of a sleepless city as the residential districts of Sectors 6 and 8 mourned the loss of their sister. A small garden patch was located in the centre of the

lounge, the reaching branches of young birch trees shading the benched area beneath. Though brightly lit and far from silent with the dull drone of electricity, the canteen was occupied by a lone man, seated at one of many round dining tables, his nose buried in the evening newspaper. Glancing up as he took a sip of coffee, he jumped with a start at the unexpected appearance of Cloud, spilling a few droplets on his shirt.

“Godsdamnit!” he cursed, snatching a handkerchief from his pocket and briskly wiping himself in frustration.

“Sorry about that...” said Cloud, standing over the young man.

“And so you bloody well should be!” he hissed angrily, brushing locks of his wavy blonde hair from his face. “Have you any idea how long I’ve been waiting for you guys to show up?”

“Well, I...”

“Three hours!” he interrupted, slamming his newspaper on the table. “The Shinra Repair Division said they’d send you straight away...those lying bastards! My boss has been taking a fit with the state of this place. He’s out in the city somewhere searching for his wife and I’m supposed to be looking after his son. If he finds out I’ve left the boy alone for so long, I dunno what he’ll do. What the hell kept you?”

“We’ve been busy since the attack...” Cloud improvised, blurting out the first answer that came to him.

“I know it’s been hectic,” the man hung his head, “but for heaven’s sake, we’re talking about the security of our Department Heads. After the Sector7 bombing, the whole place’s been put on A-level alert, but not much good that’s gonna do if half the building is falling apart. Why hasn’t it been dealt with before now? Gods, it’s been over two months since the incident that caused the whole situation. The doors to some of the levels are just being pushed open. I mean, look at this floor...the bloody thing won’t even close.”

“Which floors are unlocked?” asked Cloud.

“I’m not sure.” said the man thoughtfully. “You’ll have to ask the Mayor.”

“The *Mayor*?”

“I know it sounds ridiculous,” he rolled his eyes with disapproval, “but Mayor Domino has been put in charge of getting the security problems fixed while the Executive is busy dealing with the aftermath of the AVALANCHE attack. You’ll need my keycard to access the library on the sixty-second floor. You’ll find the Mayor there. Tell him Arkham sent you.”

“Uh...thanks...” Cloud murmured as he accepted the I.D. card from the man. It was incredibly light, fitting perfectly into his palm, made of white plastic with Arkham’s photograph and the Shinra Diamond on its front, and a magnetic strip on the back.

“Now, go on.” he directed, waving Cloud away as he returned to his newspaper. “We don’t know what kind of risk this place is under.”

With an obedient nod, Cloud departed the cafeteria, hurriedly rejoining Barret and Tifa in the hallway. Both had remained hidden for the duration of the conversation and were only too impressed to learn of his inadvertent acquisition of the keycard. Suggesting that they follow Arkham’s instructions and seek out the Mayor for further information, Cloud led them in their ascent to the next floor, edging their way carefully up the deserted stairwell.

At the height of the steps they were met by a hall similar to that below; a single security door at the corner of the landing the only decoration to the otherwise-bare walls. The doorway itself had a metallic facade, and bore a large printed ‘62: Executive Library’ upon it, illuminated slightly by a beam of red light above the entrance. Swiping the magnetic strip of the keycard through the slim card reader at its side, there was a faint *bing* as the light turned blue, and the door slowly parted.

The trio found themselves immediately inhaling the stale air of dusty books as they ventured into the library. About them, all was still, the gas lamps hanging from the ceilings evidently dimmed to create a peaceful mood. The layout of the library was such that the exterior of the stairway was an isolated shell at the

heart of the level, with a soft red carpet spreading from it in every direction. Throughout the expanse, its walkways were lined by row upon row of steel brackets, adorned by countless books and manuscripts. The shelves had been arranged by department, each represented by an individual colour and coordinated by importance.

Cloud began along the aisle before him, his fingers trailing the labels of the yellow bookcase. A bronze plaque above his head identified the section as Shinra's 'Urban Development and City Planning Research', the spines of the filed reports numbered in perfect order, most of which were authored by Director R. Tuesti. He mentally read the titles on some of the folders; 'Architectural Constraints of Midgar'; 'Problems with Plate Construction in Midgar'; 'An Illustrated Guide to City Planning'; 'Midgar City Map: Sectors 0-4'; 'Midgar Highway Project', among several others.

Turning right, he came to a block of red columns under the title of 'Weapons Development Research'. This section of the library was significantly larger than the previous, spanning the length of the floor to the blackened windows of the tower's south face. Documents and reports as wide as any Cloud had seen before sat unmoving on the broad steel plates. Tilting his head as he walked, he continued to read: 'Special Regulations of Long-Term Mako Weapons', 'Materia Production and its Military Uses', 'Plans for New Land Weapons', 'Economic Report: Budget Committed to Anti-Shinra Activities'.

"This place's a goldmine." whispered Barret from behind, his deep voice hoarse in the noiseless aisle.

"What do you mean?" asked Tifa.

"Jus' think how hard we could hit these bastards if we'd access to this information." he said, tapping the plastic folders with the back of his hand. "This place holds all the Shinra's secret stuff. We should burn it right now!"

"Let's not get hasty." disagreed Cloud. "Don't you understand the meaning of stealth?"

“Hey, screw you, man!” growled Barret. “I saw my friends die tonight ‘cause o’ the Shinra. I want nothin’ more than to destroy this company once an’ for all!”

“Can we please just concentrate on finding the Mayor?” Cloud responded without remorse. “Keep talkin’ like that and you’re gonna get us all caught!”

Without waiting for Barret’s reply, he stormed down the passage on his left, oblivious to his comrade’s infuriated cursing as he came after. The blue shelves of the aisle were labelled as the ‘Scientific Research’ files of the corporation, most of which had been organised by date. Only a select few caught Cloud’s attention; ‘Data on Experimental Animals Living Near Midgar’, ‘Mako Energy and the Rise in Life Forms’, ‘Biological Characteristics of the Ancients Throughout History’, ‘Profile on Dr. Gast, Biologist (Deceased)’, but he stopped dead as he read the tags of the last volumes in the block.

The documents, ‘Ancients Project’ and ‘Project Jenova, Professor G. Faremis’ respectively, lay undisturbed before him, a seal of classification taped around them. Gazing upon the latter file, he fought the strong urge to pull it from the shelf and rip it apart, his blood boiling as he remembered the name. With great effort, he tore his eyes from it, and allowed them to fall unexpectedly onto another paper nearby. Cloud frowned as he realised he was not looking at a report, but the marker for a text that had once resided there. A small, partially-hidden sticker had been placed on the empty slot, the only proof of the file’s previous existence. Leaning closer, he squinted to read the miniscule print of the sticker; ‘X. (‘Project Jenova G’ Document Erased)’.

“Can I help you?”

Cloud stumbled backwards, his mind caught between the meaning of the strangely-destroyed report and the sudden voice, glancing up to see a stocky man at the end of the aisle. He was dressed in a white shirt and tie, his overweight stomach

protruding from his belt, carrying a heavy collection of hardback books.

“We...uh...we...”

“May I ask what you’re doing here?” said the man suspiciously, his stare shifting from the Buster Sword to Cloud, a glimmer of recognition in his eyes.

“We’re looking for the Mayor.” answered Cloud, raising his hands in submission. “We’ve just come from the Repair Division. They told us he’s in charge of the security problem.”

“Ah, yes.” nodded the man politely, his tone sounding less than convinced. “He has been expecting you. If you’ll please follow me.”

Turning on his heels, the man paced down the passage from which he had come, his quick feet scampering over the carpet. Winding amongst rows of tall bookcases, some of which housed information on law and civil defence, he eventually brought them to a reading area in the eastern-most corner of the library. Seated there in one of the leather armchairs, his back to the midnight sky, was a frail elderly man, sipping tea from a Shinra, Inc. mug as he browsed the pages of a manuscript entitled ‘Modern History of the Space Exploration Program’. He looked up as they drew nearer, smiling welcomingly as he set the folder on the low mahogany coffee table nearby.

“Oh, hello,” he said pleasantly, taking his spectacles from his face and placing them into the pocket of his brown cardigan, “and who might you all be?”

“We were sent by the Repair Division.” replied Barret before Cloud had a chance to open his mouth.

“Well, how do you do?” the man chirped. “I’m Domino, the Mayor of Midgar. Actually, between you and me, I’m Mayor in name only. The city and everything in it is run by President Shinra, not by the council. My only real job is to watch over Shinra’s important documents. Funny, isn’t it? The Mayor...a librarian...”

“We was told you could get us upstairs.” interrupted Barret eagerly.

“Were you now?”

“I’m sorry, sir.” Cloud apologised, glowering at Barret. “Please forgive my colleague’s rudeness. We have been asked to look into the security problem on the levels above. I spoke with Arkham in the canteen who said that you have a better idea than he would of what levels are in need of inspecting.”

“Indeed I do.” Domino pondered, leaning back in his chair. “Hart, leave us.”

“Sir...?” stammered the assistant questioningly, again focusing worryingly on the Buster Sword.

“Hart, you are free to go.” repeated Domino in a firmer tone. “I would like to speak alone with the workmen.”

“Very well, sir.” Hart agreed reluctantly, bowing his white head to each of them before making his way from the reading corner.

“Did you see, by chance,” began Domino as he watched his deputy disappear amongst the shelves, “what it was I was reading when you arrived?”

“Not really, sir.” Cloud shook his head.

“It was about the failed rocket launch, Mission YA-79, four years ago.” revealed Domino, lifting the file to show them.

“Yeah, I remember that.” recalled Barret. “Wasn’t that the one that was televised across the world?”

“The very same.” grinned Domino with unexpected enthusiasm. “The launch itself was merely one of President Shinra’s publicity stunts to try and consolidate the fading support for the Company at the time due to AVALANCHE’s insurgence. I did not plan on analysing the report itself, but only to skim through it. I have taken a fond liking to reading the background history to famous people of the Company throughout the decades, you see. The profile in this of Captain Cid Highwind, for example, interests me greatly. Did you know that he was the youngest-ever pilot to fly in the Shinra Air Force? So appreciative of his duty during the Wutai War was Shinra that they granted him medal upon medal, and eventually named their first long-range airship in his honour.

“However, the more I read of this fascinating report on the launch of the rocket, Shinra26, the more I realised that it only takes one small thing to ruin the most prepared of operations. Even with the best engineers in the land...even with the greatest pilot in the world, still they were unable to go ahead with their plan because of one tiny hitch. I believe that this can apply to anything you can think of if you simply put your mind to it. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I’m sorry, sir, I don’t follow.” Cloud mumbled in confusion.

“You’re not from the Shinra Repair Division are you, my lad?” sighed Domino, matching Cloud’s gaze without compromise.

“What makes you say that, sir?”

“I’m not surprised you made it this far without being spotted.” Domino chuckled to himself. “To the lapse, uneducated eye of many employees in this place, you are just another worker. But did you know that you have been wandering around bearing the Crest of SOLDIER on your belt? Nobody of that status would even pretend to be part of the Repair Division.”

“I used to be in SOLDIER.” Cloud said stubbornly. “I wear this to remind me of who I once was.”

“Interesting.” Domino nodded with curiosity. “But, my dear boy, it would be wise to keep out of sight as long as possible. Your outfit and armour are very similar to the uniform of top ranking SOLDIERS. There are few who would not notice that in the Executive suites above, and your Mako eyes don’t disguise you in any way.”

“So, you’ll help us get upstairs, then?” asked Tifa optimistically.

“Of course.” laughed the Mayor, laying his keycard on the table. “My card will give you access as far as the sixty-sixth floor. I’m sorry, but after that, you’re on your own.”

“Thank you.” said Cloud, taking the I.D. “But, sir, can I ask why you would want to do something like this?”

“To mess with them, of course.” Domino sighed victoriously, clasping his hands together. “Since they came to power, the Company has been treating me like a common employee and I’m sick of it. Enemies of Shinra though you are, I can see in your

faces that you're not here to cause devastation. I believe you will achieve what you came for and leave them suffering. This ought to make us even. Just goes to show you can't judge a book by its cover, eh? Now, go, before someone sees me talking with you."

Wishing them luck, Mayor Domino began to chortle lightly to himself, again picking the YA-79 report up from the table. The trio retraced their steps along the maze of aisles, taking their time to avoid the suspicious stare of Hart. It took a few minutes to return to the electronic door of the stairwell, the white wall of the central landing emerging between the bookshelves. As Cloud approached the card scanner, he glanced up at the small glass panel on the doorway, and ducked from sight, dragging Barret and Tifa to the floor with him.

"What the hell?" spluttered Barret.

"There's someone out there." shushed Cloud. "Stay where you are."

Slowly rising to his feet, Cloud peered carefully out into the hallway. A scrawny man much older than him waited at the foot of the stairs, flicking hastily through the pages of a clipboard. His thinning face was sharp and grey, as if all life was gradually draining from his skin, his greasy black hair tied in a long ponytail behind his back. The man wore a faded laboratory coat over a white shirt and brown trousers, most of which was stained with blood or chemicals and clearly unkempt. Watching the scientist begin to climb the steps, his shoulders hunched as if bearing the full weight of his crooked body, Cloud felt his mind spin, falling to his knees as the searing pain shot through his head.

* * *

"Oh, it's you. How is your assignment coming along?"

“Chief Veld has arrived and the final preparations are underway, but...is it really necessary to go this far?” he replied, his voice full of unease.

“Your opinion is of no importance to me.” scoffed the scientist, lifting his spectacles as he examined the boy’s face.

“But...”

“So, this is the one, is it?”

* * *

“I...I know that man...” gasped Cloud, his words catching in his throat as he groped the wall for balance. The very image of the scientist had sent a chill down his spine but, no matter how hard he fought to remember, he was unable to recall why the man’s presence had paralyzed him with fear.

“How?” frowned Tifa.

“I...I don’t know...” he gulped.

“That’s Professor Hojo.” Barret identified, leaning against the glass as the man disappeared onto the floor above.

Hojo...

“Who?” said Tifa.

“He’s the top researcher here.” explained Barret. “There was a profile of him that Jessie found in the files of the old AVALANCHE. I think they tried to recruit him once. He’s Head of the Science Department or Biology Department...somethin’ like that...”

“Biology Department?” exclaimed Tifa. “I bet he’ll know where Aerith is. Cloud, hurry up and open the...Cloud?”

“I...I’m fine...” he winced, holding himself upright as he panted for breath. *Professor Hojo...that face...why do I know his face?*

“You sure, man?” said Barret.

“Yeah, c’mon.” he answered, dragging his thoughts together, and quickly slipped the Mayor’s keycard through the slot. “Let’s follow him.”



Company Men

Professor Hojo's mumbling could be heard from the flights above as he read aloud from his clipboard, accompanied only by the shuffling squeaks of his shoes. His footsteps were paced, suggesting each marble stair proved a difficult obstacle to his frail legs, moving leisurely through the floors with his attention trained solely on his report. His drawling voice filtered eerily down through the stairwell of the special block to the pursuing trio, low and nasal as if it was perpetually laden with disgust.

Swiftly and quietly, Cloud, Barret and Tifa trailed the scientist from a secure distance, cautious not to alert him to their position. Cloud noted the levels as they ascended from the markings on the security doors; '63: Department of General Affairs', '64: Executive Lounge and Gym' and '65: Executive Infirmary'. After a short time, Hojo came to a halt on the landing of the sixty-sixth floor. With what seemed like an eternity as he perused the final passages of his document, he finally swiped his card and ambled through the electronic doorway.

As the door closed after him, the three scampered up the remaining steps, biding their time for the right moment to continue after Hojo. To their frustration, they found that unlike that of the sixty-second level, the security door marked '66: Executive Conference Rooms' formed an opaque partition between themselves and what lay beyond. Pressing an ear

against it, Cloud listened acutely for the muted sound of the professor's footsteps as they vanished from detection.

"You hear anythin'?" asked Barret.

"Not a thing."

"What now?" said Tifa, her large brown eyes showing a fleeting concern.

"I guess there's only one thing for it." Cloud replied with a shrug, pulling Mayor Domino's keycard from his brace pouch. With a direct swipe through the reader, the light above them switched from red to blue as before and the door parted.

They were met with the view of a magnificent broad corridor, lined by the most luxurious of maroon carpets, whose intricate weavings of gold and silver were a grand spectacle against the pale marble floor. Spacious open-plan secretarial offices bordered the main hallway, with a handful of smaller passages branching off towards numerous administrative and filing rooms. The carpet continued the length of the decadent corridor until it reached an extravagant pair of twin mahogany doors, one of which waited ajar for Hojo to skulk through, closing hurriedly behind him as he disappeared from sight.

The comrades began noiselessly down the hall, warily surveying the few unoccupied offices through blinded windows. Oil paintings of Shinra Executive members gazed pompously back at them from the decorative walls, their elitist expressions ridiculing those less significant than themselves. As they approached the mahogany doors, there came a cough and scrape of a chair from a nearby room, warning them of an employee's presence as the clicking of heels drew closer. Acting instinctively, the trio raced down an adjacent passageway, bungling their way through the first door they found.

The stale stench of urine filled their nostrils as they quickly realised they had stumbled upon the men's lavatory. The sound of their anxious breathing echoed around the white tiled bathroom, intensified by the mutual silence as they waited for any indication of being followed. When at last a number of dragging minutes had come and gone, they relaxed. Cloud

exhaled deeply as he leant against one of the cubicles, his mind throbbing as he considered their next move. From across the bathroom, he could see his weary reflection in one of the tall mirrors, his hair matted to his head with sweat and grime. He sighed, half-heartedly running a hand through his spiked locks, but stopped dead as a strange sound reached his ears.

“What is it?” enquired Tifa, seeing the puzzled look appear on his face.

“Be quiet for a second.” he shushed, holding a finger to his lips as he strained to distinguish the whispering voices.

“I hear it, too.” Tifa gasped. “Where’s that coming from?”

Taking a moment to locate the source, his eyes darting around the room, Cloud suddenly pulled the stall door aside and pointed towards the ceiling. Amid the spotless porcelain panels on the roof, the grated opening to a ventilation shaft rested a few inches from the wall. Climbing on the toilet lid, Cloud lifted the heavy dust guard into the duct, leaving a gaping square hole above the cubicle. The voices grew louder, drifting airily from the shaft.

“I think I can hear President Shinra.” said Cloud as quietly as he could.

“You hear what he’s sayin’?” asked Barret.

“No, but I can get closer.”

“You think you’ll fit in that tiny godsdamn hole?” snorted Barret.

“Well, I’m about to try...”

* * *

“...considering the large number of prospering factories, storage facilities, weapon-testing sites and other investments we had in both the Plate and the Slums, not to mention the closure of the Mako Reactor,” read Reeve, his glazed eyes fixed upon his notes on the conference table, “the damages from both this incident and the one concerning the Turks and Fuhito two months ago have resulted in a loss to the Company of approximately ten billion gil. The Urban Development Department has estimated

that the cost of completing construction in Sector4 and rebuilding Sector7 is...”

“We’re not rebuilding.” the President interrupted flatly.

“W...what...?” spluttered Reeve, gripping the edge of the long pinewood table as he staggered to comprehend the decision.

Struggling to catch his breath, his thoughts spiralling through his mind, he saw what small number of Department Heads had managed to attend the Executive meeting glance up at him with mocking stares. The obese Heidegger sat opposite Reeve, stifling a smirk as he turned his bearded face back to President Shinra at the head of the table. Clearing his throat, the President remained impassive, stroking his moustache as he chose his words. Behind him, the enormous window shimmered with the orange light of the Conference Room, the lamps casting long shadows over the pallid stone columns on either wall.

“We’re leaving those sectors as they are.” instructed President Shinra eventually.

“But...I...” stammered Reeve as he slowly sank into his black leather chair. “I don’t understand.”

“We’re restarting the Neo-Midgar plan.” explained the President, a thin smile spreading across his lips.

“The Neo-Midgar Program?” Scarlet gasped, her aristocratic voice one of surprise.

Scarlet, Director of Weapons Development, was one of only two females on the Executive. Her manipulative and intellectual ability had proven second to none in the few years she had taken to quickly rise through the ranks of Shinra, Inc. She was a woman in her late thirties, fully aware of her outstanding beauty as she seduced staff and Executive alike time and again to achieve what she wanted. Now, seated closer than any other to President Shinra as she so often was, she teased the men with a tight red dress that had been fitted to emphasise a bust that was cleverly hidden by the strands of her silky blonde hair.

“After all these years,” scoffed Heidegger, “it was mine and not that fool Veld’s Turks that completed their task.”

“Then, the Ancient...” concluded Reeve.

“The Promised Land will soon be ours.” President Shinra declared triumphantly. “However, we will be needing some additional funding. Reeve, I want you to raise Mako taxes by fifteen percent in every region.”

“Sir,” he protested, “if you increase taxes, the people will lose confidence in the Company. You know what our public ratings have been like over the last few years because of terrorism...”

“Nonsense.” boomed the President. “The ignorant citizens won’t lose confidence. As long as we make them think that their money is going to benefit them in the long term, the people will blindly do as we say. If we promise that AVALANCHE has been eradicated for good, they’ll be helpless but to trust Shinra, Inc. even more.”

“After all,” laughed Heidegger in his usual hoarse manner, “we’re the ones who saved Sector7 from AVALANCHE, remember?”

“Do we have the casualty figures yet?” Reeve asked.

“We announced on Shinra News that there were little civilian losses,” replied Scarlet with a wry smile, “but early indications show the death toll figure to be in the thousands and rising. We can’t have the public thinking we didn’t do enough, can we?”

“Are you still debating the decision, Reeve?” President Shinra posed, staring intently at the Director of Urban Development.

“I...I just think we could have thought it through a bit more.” he responded uneasily. “Considering the damage on Reactor1 and Reactor5 caused by the recent terrorist attacks, an incident like this is bound to have some detrimental effect on the Company. The Chief of the City Planning Division earlier asked me to pass on that because of the poor management of the city’s Reactors, the machinery is becoming inefficient, and it’s badly affecting output. With that in mind, now that Reactors 1 and 7 are out of commission for the foreseeable future, we are all but running on half power. I can’t help but feel that the consequences on the energy supply will...”

“That’s enough, Reeve.” halted the President, his jaw clenched. “Let us keep our focus elsewhere for now.”

“Sir, will you be including the Space Program in the new budget?” asked Palmer in a bid to change the subject, springing enthusiastically from his seat.

Palmer, Director of Shinra’s Space Exploration Department, was a man desperate to keep his branch alive. Like Heidegger, he had been a major suit in the running of Shinra, Inc. for many years, but his influence had somewhat diminished since the failed launch of the rocket, Shinra26, and his presence at in the Conference Room was often considered unnecessary. With all his life ambition centred upon the possibility of space travel, the role of his department now was to aid Scarlet and Weapons Development in their design and implementation of compact rocket engines into some of their more advanced security weapons. An aging man, he had grown heavy and greasy, his thinning grey hair receding from his round face, but had not once lost his passion and hope that the Space Program may one day again be the focal point of the Company.

“Sit down, Palmer!” ordered the President irritably. “This isn’t the Honey Bee Inn!”

“But...”

“Reeve and Scarlet will divide the extra income from the tax increase.”

“What about Public Safety Maintenance?” frowned Heidegger.

“Do you have anything new to report from either the Army or SOLDIER?” said President Shinra.

“Nothing, sir.” Heidegger replied. “The Vice President has been addressing the Navy and Air Force at Junon today. He should be returning to Midgar as we speak. The Security Division have not encountered any resistance from your order of martial law, and I have deployed the Turks to locate Corneo. All is in order.”

“Then why do you need included in the budget?”

“No reason, sir.” Heidegger gulped pitifully. “I just...”

“Anyone else wish to request extra income for their department?” said President Shinra derisively, his inquisitive gaze moving across the faces of the Executive from whom there came no response. “No? Then, shall we proceed?”

“Yes, sir.” mumbled Heidegger.

“Hojo?”

“Yes, Mr. President?” came the cantankerous voice of the scientist from the last seat of the conference table.

“How’s the girl?”

With a weak groan, Professor Hojo rose from the desk, pushing his chair away from him, and brushing a few loose strands of his oily fringe behind his ear. Taking the clipboard in his hands, he quickly flicked through its few pages before setting it down again, nodding silently to himself as he analysed the findings. He began to pace slowly back and forth across the carpet, his feet barely moving with each step, his body hunched as always. The Executive watched him for a number of seconds, awaiting his report, but it was almost a minute before he finally spoke.

“The research lab has completed its initial tests.” he revealed.

“And what are your results?” asked the President eagerly.

“As a specimen,” answered Hojo, adjusting the square lenses of his glasses as he walked, “she is inferior to her mother, Ifalna. We are still in the process of comparing the girl to her mother, but for now there is a high difference of eighteen percent.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means,” continued Hojo, “that her strengths as an Ancient are less concentrated and developed than that of her mother. Our research will need to be more intense to ensure maximum results.”

“And how long will this research take?”

“I’ve estimated a realistic duration of around one-hundred-and-twenty years.” replied Hojo, not breaking stride.

“One-hundred-and-twenty years?” spluttered President Shinra.

“It’s probably impossible to finish in our lifetime,” said Hojo, “or the lifetime of the specimen for that matter. That’s why I’m considering breeding her. We could create a specimen with the blood of the Ancients that could withstand our research for a long time.”

“But, what about the Promised Land?” posed the President, his voice uneasy. “Won’t that hinder our plans?”

“That’s what I still need to find out.” shrugged the scientist. “The girl is strong, yet has her mother’s weaknesses.”

“When will you know?”

“Soon, sir,” said Hojo, a wicked smile crossing his face, “very soon. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must return to my work. If you need anything else, I’ll be upstairs.”

The Executive remained unmoving and without sound long after Professor Hojo had departed, most awaiting President Shinra’s permission for them to leave. The President sat expressionless at the head of the table, his eyes adrift with the scientist’s potentially-devastating news. After a while, he reached forward, arranging the records before him into a single bundle.

“That concludes our meeting.” he muttered as he stood. “Goodnight, everyone.”

Following his lead, the Department Heads grew to their feet and, one by one, made their way from the Conference Room until only Scarlet inhabited the vast office. She continued to gather her paperwork without much haste, repeatedly altering her cleavage and hair until eventually, having assembled her files, she strode elegantly across the room to the mahogany doors. Stopping at the entrance, she wrinkled her nose, and glanced up with disgust at the ventilation opening above her head.

“Something stinks...”

* * *

“So, did you find anything out?” asked Tifa, stepping back as Cloud dropped expertly from the shaft.

“There’s a few things, but I don’t have time to go into them right now.”

“What about Aerith?”

“Hojo has her somewhere in his department.” he explained, once again attaching the Buster Sword to its magnetic holster.

“Is she alright?” said Barret.

“I don’t know.” Cloud shook his head. “They’ve been doing tests on her.”

“We have to find her.” Tifa said worriedly, starting immediately towards the door. “We have to stop them.”

The main corridor was empty as the three passed cagily from the confines of the bathroom, each of the Executive having departed the sixty-sixth floor oblivious to the lurking presence of the trio. Taking hurried strides across the carpet, they came quickly to the electronic door and escaped into the empty stairwell. Ensuring the path was clear to continue their pursuit of Professor Hojo, they began up the steps, their backs pressed against the wall to maintain vigilance.

They came to landing unlike the others they had scaled after a single flight, unquestionably designed to ward off unwelcome personnel. Red and yellow signs warning of radiation and biological hazards were pasted across the plastic-coated walls, the print on each visually striking against the white surroundings. A bronze plaque at the height of the stairs read ‘67: Department of Biological and Biochemical Development: Storage Chamber’, its polished face gleaming with the mirrored images of the three. Contrary to the extreme caution asserted by the displays, the security door of the sixty-seventh floor appeared as limp and powerless to defend its department as that of the sixty-first floor canteen. With a single tug by Barret on the lock, it slid weakly open, and the party moved hastily through.

A slim corridor furnished only by walls of sterile white and occasional sealed doorways wound southwest of the stairwell, its cold linoleum floor echoing their footsteps as they walked, the dull sound resonating before them like the low drum of a death march. Disturbing scythe-like claw marks had been gouged into the hard plastic at random locations alongside them, one of which had torn rashly through the card reader, identifying a possible source of the entrance’s electrical malfunctions.

As the passage turned sharply in a more westerly direction, a row of windows appeared, its expansive view overlooking Sector5 and the sky-scraping industrial cranes of the under-construction Sector4. Reflected on the long glass panes, a series of electronic doors came into view, guarding unique and unusual laboratories.

Through the small transparent panels on each, Cloud saw confined workspaces occupied by a handful of scientists as the three slipped past undetected. Several rooms were lined with shelves of jars and beakers containing bizarre materials and fluids, while others merely housed hulking tanks filled with substances that resembled liquid Mako.

After a short distance further, the corridor broadened and forked, with a second narrower pathway diverging towards the heart of the building, its shadowy walls labelled as the link to the 'Cell Block'. Situated adjacent to the hallway was a large office, visible through the windows, its purpose clearly for surveillance and control. A lone technician was sat next to one of the computer monitors at the far side of the room, clad in a worn grey suit, his attention concentrated upon alternating camera feeds of the various laboratories.

Beyond the office, the passage opened into the vast Sample Storage Chamber, partitioned by a tall pair of iron shutters that were currently fully drawn. A light mist of chilled air filtered from the entrance of the area, its ghost-like drear as unsettling as the room itself. The spacious layout was not unlike that of a cargo ship's hull interior; a high arcing ceiling of reinforced steel hanging over an assortment of units and containers. Dozens of wooden crates and boxes, every one stamped unmistakably as bio-hazardous, were lain untidily amongst the countless glass cages, all enclosed by scaling colourless walls.

Wild monsters of many species had been imprisoned within the collection of capsules, most of which scratched ineffectively at the unbreakable glass, desperate to claim liberation. Cloud was able to identify a number of the creatures from the Monster Investigation Program missions he had participated in during his time in the Army; floating firebombs like those found on Mount Nibel, the aptly dubbed 'death claws' whose six pincer-like arms reflected their vicious nature, winged ahrimans whose single sad eyes mirrored their longing for flight, and a selection of genetically-modified crimson hounds – the superior relatives of

the guard hounds that the soldiers of the Security Division often utilised.

As he, Tifa and Barret cautiously crept along the edge of the room, there came a wheezing cough from nearby. Quickly crouching between the crates, Cloud peered through the cold haze, and saw the shape of Professor Hojo approximately twenty feet from them. The scientist stooped by the side of a rotund cylindrical capsule near the western face of the room, his nose pressed curiously against the transparent shell as he gazed transfixed at the creature inside. From his restricted position, Cloud was unable to make out which species of animal Hojo was observing, only a flicker of orange light from within the cell granting him a clue to its identity. Hojo muttered excitedly to himself for a few moments longer, tapping a crooked finger on the thick glass, but turned sharply as the sound of approaching footsteps reverberated from the rear of the chamber.

“Is everything ready?” Hojo inquired impatiently.

“As you asked, professor.” came a man’s voice.

“Very well.” said Hojo. “We shall be starting immediately.”

“Is this the specimen for today’s experiment?”

“Yes.” replied Hojo proudly, glancing back at the container.

“Sample 418...my precious specimen.”

“Precious specimen, sir?”

“Oh, yes.” Hojo said hypnotically. “Extremely rare, this one. Be careful when raising it to the Fusion Chamber.”

“Certainly, professor.” answered the technician. “I’ll do it right away.”

Taking a minute to gather his thoughts as he skimmed once more through the charts on his clipboard, Hojo scurried after him, quickly disappearing from sight in the direction from which the man had come. After a few seconds, there came the *clank* of a closing steel partition, accompanied by a hum as the two made their ascent in an unseen elevator. Remaining motionless for a short time, Cloud listened intently for any further traces of movement. Satisfied that the area was clear, he stood, weaving his way between the crates to the centre of the area.

Only the dry scraping of claws and saddened howls of defeat from the caged monsters around him disturbed the silence of the Sample Chamber as he neared the largest of the capsules, frowning with puzzlement as the glowing orange light began to drift back and forth across the inside of the container. Wiping a thin layer of condensation from the surface, Cloud peeked inside, and gasped with disbelief.

A beast with a large feline body almost six feet in size, coated in fiery red fur, sat within, its back to Cloud, staring dreamily at the ceiling. Swaying unenthusiastically from side to side, the tip of its long tail blazed with a brilliant flame, illuminating the cell around it. He could see the animal had been scarred in battle, with the remnants of numerous wounds imprinted across its body, but noticed that amidst the dark tribal tattoos on its legs, a large 'XIII' had been branded to the bicep of its left foreleg. Grooming its spiked mane with a heavy paw, brushing against the eagle feather pinned behind its left ear, the creature turned its head unexpectedly to absently meet his gaze with its single remaining eye, an expression of mental exhaustion bore upon its thin, wolf-like face.

"Hojo's precious specimen..." whispered Tifa from aside Cloud, her voice laden with despair as she watched the animal sink to the floor. "Poor thing...are they gonna use it for an experiment?"

Cloud said nothing. He took his eyes from the prison, letting his attention wander from the beast as he sought to locate the elevator that would allow them to follow Hojo to the next floor. Scanning the mist as he strolled towards the rear of the room, his focus fell upon an unusual container a short way from him. Unlike the others, the capsule had been constructed with thick plates of iron, curving to form a low synthetic igloo. An unnatural pink radiance emanated from the small window on the dome, drawing Cloud to it as his mind became entranced. Stopping before the hatch, Cloud read the plaque above the panel and at once felt his heart stop.

Jenova...?

Bracing his arms on either side of the porthole, Cloud inhaled deeply and peered inside. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he saw the naked form of a humanoid female take shape before him. Her disfigured body was covered by a frail layer of deathly blue skin, stretched and torn in places, wrapped within a cocoon of organic matter. Small globules of yellow puss oozed from open sores on her chest and stomach, the viscous substances staining her fragile skin. As the pink glow grew fainter, Cloud gasped in horror; a sight more gruesome than he could have imagined meeting his widened eyes. Where the head of the being had previously existed, nothing but a stump of neck protruded from her shoulders. As he gaped jaw-dropped at the figure, a great ringing sounded in his ears once more. Crying out with pain, Cloud fell to his knees, memories of that night flooding his mind.

...the intensity of the flames...the anger of betrayal...

“Cloud?” wailed Tifa, rushing to his side. “Cloud, what’s wrong?”

“Jenova...” he stammered. “Sephiroth’s....so they brought it here...”

“Not again, man!” said Barret with frustration, standing over him, his brows furrowed. “What the hell’re you doin’? Get up!”

“Did you see it?” gulped Cloud.

“See what?” asked Barret.

“Inside the container...” pointed Cloud. “It’s moving...still alive...”

“What’re you talkin’ ‘bout?”

“Take a look for yourself.” Cloud insisted, slowly dragging himself to his feet. With a look of annoyance, Barret stepped forward and held his face against the window. After a few seconds, he sprang back, his expression contorted with apprehension.

“What the hell?” Barret spluttered with disgust. “What is that thing?”

“The body of Jenova...” Cloud answered solemnly.

“But, where’s its fuckin’ head?” swore Barret. “How can it be alive? It don’t make no sense...”

“It doesn’t matter what it is.” interrupted Tifa, her tone stern. “We still have to find Aerith, right? We’re just wasting time thinking about it. We need to go. Right now!”

With great determination to escape the unsettling presence of what remained of Jenova, Cloud snatched his greatsword from the ground and jogged after Tifa and Barret. They came to a metal railing situated at the northwest corner of the room, guarding what appeared to be a simple lift shaft. Pulling the grate aside, Barret examined the cramped hollow, before slamming the button to recall the elevator. Within less than a minute, the three had climbed aboard the tiny lift, and readied themselves for what awaited them.

As the railing parted on the floor above, the trio burst from the elevator with their weapons held aloft, expecting to be met with an army of scientists and technicians. To their surprise, they found that the area was almost as uninhabited as the previous level. The arrangement of the room in which they now stood was as expansive as the Sample Chamber, void of any prisons, however, but for a solitary glass capsule at the centre of the room, encased by a shimmering energy field. To their left, a bulbous incinerator had been constructed into the wall and an elevated steel walkway grew along the lengthy perimeter of the area above it, ending at an enormous control system situated on the southern face. A male technician busied himself at the computer monitors, as oblivious to the intruders as Professor Hojo; standing before the lone container, speaking into a handheld recording device.

“...December 20th, [v]-εγλ 0007.” reported the scientist. “2:46am. Sixty-eighth floor Fusion Chamber. Ancient sample breeding experiment...”

“Aerith...” gasped Tifa, spotting the girl inside the tank as she shirked away from Hojo. In an instant, she began forward, sprinting across the room. “Aerith!”

“What the...?” growled Hojo as he spun from his position, startled by the interference. “What do *you* want?”

“We’re taking Aerith back!” spat Tifa, knocking him aside. “We’re getting her out of here!”

Within the cell, Aerith had sprung to her feet, joyous as she thumped his fists eagerly against the glass. Screaming at the top of her lungs, her pleas for help were unheard through the soundproofed barrier. Summoning all her might, Tifa thrust her body against the energy shield in a resolute bid to break it down, powerless to damage the field in any way. Snarling with anger as he regained his balance, Hojo lurched towards her, pushing her to the ground.

“Get away from her!” roared Barret, his gun-arm targeting the infuriated scientist as he and Cloud charged across the open floor.

With obvious distaste, Hojo took a reluctant step back, his arms raised in surrender. His scowling eyes passed from Tifa as she pulled herself up, to the barrel of Barret’s arm, before settling upon Cloud. He observed his outfit with perplexed interest, his recognition of the resemblance to the SOLDIER uniform undoubted, but his menacing expression became twisted as he met Cloud’s stare. His eyes blinking furiously with bewilderment as he studied the young man’s face, Hojo pointed a frail finger at Cloud.

“*You...but how...?*” he mumbled. “You can’t be here! It’s not possible! You’re all outsiders, aren’t you?”

“You should’ve noticed earlier.” Barret said through gritted teeth.

“Maybe.” shrugged Hojo, slowly turning back towards the container, bemused. “But, it seems there are so many ironic things in this world.”

“What d’you say?”

“Nothing.” Hojo cackled.

“Hey!” demanded Barret, the barrels of his gatling gun slowly starting to rotate. “Answer me when I’m talkin’ to ya.”

“Or else what?” scoffed Hojo. “Are you going to kill me? I don’t think you should.”

“Why’s that?” Cloud hissed, drawing his sword and pressing its tip to the scientist’s throat.

“Think of your friend.” he replied impassively, tapping on the field, causing strange ripples of static to resonate around the point of contact. “The equipment here is extremely delicate. Without me, who would work it? I recommend that you think things out logically before you make any rash moves that may compromise her safety.”

“Professor?” called the technician from the controls, his voice assertive. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.” Hojo responded, waving away the comment dismissively as he sneered at the three. “Now, bring in the specimen.”

“Yes, sir.”

With the flick of a switch, there came a rumble of activity from below. From behind Aerith, a circular trapdoor appeared in the middle of the cell floor, large enough for a person to pass through. She turned anxiously to face the hole, her back pressed firmly against the curved interior walls, but it was not until the flooring had returned to its original position that she was overcome by a true wave of panic. Banging on the wall in a futile attempt to escape, Aerith screamed in anguish as the red beast bore its dripping fangs before her on the pedestal. Arching its back, the creature howled, its burning tail flailing wildly behind it as its maddened eye locked onto her.

“Cloud!” screeched Tifa, pounding on the container. “Help her!”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” bellowed Cloud, tossing his weapon aside and claspng Hojo’s throat himself, squeezing as tightly as his grip would allow.

“I’m lending a hand to two endangered species...” wheezed Hojo, his wicked smirk unflinching. “Both are on the brink of extinction. If I don’t help, these animals will disappear.”

“How dare you!” barked Tifa. “Aerith is a person just like us.”

“Not like us, my dear.”

“That thing’s going to kill her!” Cloud snapped, watching Aerith edge around the glass in an effort to widen the distance between herself and the animal. “Barret, can’t you do something?”

“Stand back!” commanded Barret as he raised his arm towards the doorway of the prison.

“Stop!” yelled Hojo, scrambling to break free of Cloud’s grasp. “What are you doing? My precious specimens!”

An eruption of bullets battered against the shield, sending sparks of crackling electricity in every direction as the onslaught ripped through the energy barrier. With a deafening burst, the field shattered, exploding in a blinding flash of brilliant white. Grunting with discomfort, Cloud turned his face from the blaze of light, his grasp on Hojo momentarily loosening. Capitalising on the opportunity, the scientist immediately leapt from his stranglehold, rushing towards the capsule as the firing ceased. As the radiant beam began to dissipate, he hauled the container door aside, protecting his eyes as he examined the inside of the cage.

With a tremendous roar, the silhouette of the red beast quickly took shape amidst the cloud of light. Rearing up on its hind legs, using a great surge of strength, it launched itself forward through the doorway, pouncing on the stunned scientist. Falling to the ground under the weight of the creature, Hojo cried out as it began tearing savagely at his laboratory coat with its fangs. Cloud glanced up to see Aerith cowered against the far wall of the cell, her petrified gaze unable to shift from the animal.

“What are you waiting for, Cloud?” Tifa called over Hojo’s pleas for help, her voice seeming distant. “Get her out of there!”

Instantly regaining his bearings, Cloud darted into the capsule, assisting Aerith as she clambered to her feet. To his surprise, she embraced him, wrapping her arms around him tightly as she held him close, her entire body shaking violently with fear. Taking her arm, he led her from the container, stopping suddenly as she froze mid-stride. Looking up, he could see Hojo stumbling frantically across the room in the direction of the exit, leaning heavily on the technician for support as he clutched his chest. The beast had now turned to face the four, its curious stare

passing between them. Aerith whimpered, retreating behind Cloud as he reached down to close his fingers around the handle of the Buster Sword beneath his boots. Seeing this, the animal smiled and sat down before them.

“He was rather strong.” it said in a hoarse but articulate voice. “More so than I had previously anticipated.”

“It...it...you talked...” gasped Tifa in astonishment, her mouth hanging open.

“Yes, I did.” replied the beast, panting softly. “And I will talk as much as you want if you acknowledge me as ‘he’ and not ‘it’.”

“What...are you...?” croaked Barret, finding difficulty in releasing his words.

“How very direct of you.” he chuckled, his branded shoulders bouncing slowly. “An informed question, but one that is difficult to answer. My race has long since been referred to by its original name. My only honest answer is: I am what you see.”

“Do you have a name?” asked Cloud.

“Professor Hojo gave me the title Red XIII.” he said. “It is a name which has no relevant meaning to me whatsoever. You may call me what you wish. However, more importantly, are you alright, miss?”

“I...I’m fine.” answered Aerith, presenting a nervous half-smile as she reappeared by Cloud’s side.

“I must apologise for my behaviour just there.” he offered gravely. “Please believe that I was merely acting to throw Hojo off.”

“Don’t worry about it...Red...” nodded Aerith, giggling slightly.

“She seems alright.” sighed Tifa. “In more ways than one.”

“Excuse me, but I too have the right to choose my partner.” Red XIII retorted defensively. “Personally, I’m not attracted to two-legged beings...”

“We don’t have time for this.” interrupted Cloud. “Now that we have Aerith, there’s no need to be here any longer. We need to hurry; Hojo has probably already activated the alarm.”

“I agree.” said Red XIII, turning on his heels, his golden ankle-bracelets jangling against the floor. “There is a time and a place

for questions, but it is not now. We must get out of here as quickly as we can.”

“We have to get back to the emergency stairwell.” Cloud concluded. “It’s the only way we’d have a chance of getting past the Army or security weapons.”

“Come,” instructed the beast, “I know the way.”

Charging towards the passage down which Hojo had escaped, Red XIII led the group to a broad corridor marked as ‘Unstable Specimens Inspection Area’. Panels of grey plastic enclosed the colourless stretch, interrupted at set intervals with doorways protected by impassable laser beams of luminous green. Scurrying rapidly along the passage, Cloud saw Red XIII turn his head tentatively towards the nearby sounds of snapping flesh and bone from inside a room labelled ‘Sample HO512’; unmistakably haunted by Hojo’s monster as it tore at its meaty feast inside the paddock.

Following the corridor east as it continued past the empty adjoining ‘Cobalt XIV’, ‘Indigo XV’ and ‘Cerise XVI’ cells then through a set of automatic doors, they came within minutes to the stairway. Like the level below, the card reader on the wall had failed, unable to stop the party effortlessly hauling the door aside and begin their descent of the Shinra Building. Rushing down the steps as fast as their legs would allow, they made their way swiftly through the special block tower, with Barret counting the floors as he retraced the route they had come. Bounding ahead, vaulting down each staircase with ease, Red XIII recoiled abruptly as he reached the lobby of the sixtieth floor, his snout twisted in a snarl.

“What is it?” called Cloud, helpless to stop himself stumble behind, realising at once why the beast had come to a halt.

“We have a problem.” he growled.

At the centre of the room by the barrier of the open shaft, there stood two SOLDIERS, their standard-issue Hardedge swords drawn, waiting patiently for the five. Cloud immediately recognised them as Third Class; the ashen turquoise uniforms differing from the majestic purple outfits of Second Class and the

dark blue of First. The men each bore silver shoulder pauldrons and chest guards over their sleeveless polonecks, their faces concealed beneath their armoured metal helmets. Nodding to his comrade, one began to pace the ground between the parties, his weapon held threateningly aloft.

Yanking the Buster Sword from across his back, Cloud strode forward without hesitation. As he approached the SOLDIER, his mind focused on clearing a path for the others, the doors on either side of the foyer burst open. Swarms of Shinra infantrymen invaded the hall, their rifles trained on him, forcing him to retreat slightly. The soldiers moved expertly in squads, taking only a few seconds to entirely surround the glass entrance to the stairwell. Waves of metallic blue were cast along the mirrored walls, turning the men into an illusionary army.

Pounding silence enveloped the lobby as Cloud's uncompromising stare swept over the enemy. He raised his sword before him once more, relishing the opportunity to test his skills properly for the first time since regaining consciousness in Midgar. His accomplished eyes counted twenty-four infantrymen as well as the SOLDIER duo. He could smell their doubt; taste their uncertainty; many of them would know exactly what an ex-First Class was capable of. His fingers tightened around the leather grip; his stance deliberate; his breathing slowed; his honed mind dictating to him the moves he would follow. *It's time...*

“Cloud!”

Tifa's anxious yell echoed around the foyer, breaking his concentration as he prepared to launch his assault on the combatants. He glanced back over his shoulder to see her waving her arms for him to stop. He frowned, angered by her interruption, but quickly realised that a number of the soldiers had turned their aim on Aerith. *If I were alone, this would be easy, but...the others.* Cursing through gritted teeth, Cloud let the Buster Sword fall noisily to the floor, lifting his arms irritably above his head in surrender.

“Well, well.” drifted a familiar voice from the shadows of the emergency stairwell. “What have we here?”

Cloud clenched his fists as Tseng emerged from the doorway and wandered casually between the soldiers before them, accompanied by two more male Turks, coming to rest at the head of the squadron. The man on Tseng’s left was tall and broad, standing almost a whole foot larger than him. He wore a thin black goatee on his tanned face, a contrast somewhat to his polished bald head, the image completed by a series of ear piercings and the stylish legless sunglasses he had clipped to his nose. The second man appeared a subordinate of the others, his tailored uniform tidy over his slim build. He was smaller in height than Tseng, with the thick locks of his wild blonde hair covering one side of his handsome young face, and carried a set of nunchaku, his knuckles white as he cracked the chain back and forth with hostility.

“Let us go.” begged Tifa.

“I’m afraid not.” Tseng shook his head without emotion. “The President has ordered your capture. He wants to make sure he rids the world of AVALANCHE once and for all.”

“Get rid o’ us?” spat Barret.

“Don’t you worry,” sneered the smaller of the Turks, “you’ll be given a fair trial.”

“That’s enough, Corin.” glowered Tseng, brushing the long strands of his silken black hair aside.

“How does it feel that a group like us got past your security?” derided Cloud. “Does it make you proud?”

“Got past our security?” chuckled Tseng. “Oh, I see. It must have been a real thrill for you, all that sneaking around. Did it never occur to you that we were using the girl as bait?”

“Fuck you.” barked Cloud, starting forward, but stalling as the stubborn clicks of two dozen rifle safety locks rang out around him.

“Indeed.” the Chief of the Turks snorted with a victorious grin. “But, you should feel privileged. If you’ll be so kind to come with

us, the President has asked to see you. Rude, Corin...take them away..."

* * *

President Shinra remained unmoving from his seat at the desk of the Great Hall, smiling wryly as he watched the last three members of AVALANCHE be marched up the western staircase. A sensation of finality and accomplishment had settled over him; aware that their arrest symbolised the end to a war on terrorism and rebellion that had encompassed his Company for almost two decades. It had been over six years since the assassination attempt on his life at Junon, but only now could he feel the lingering pain of the gunshot wound on his chest slowly begin to ebb away. *These bastards will pay for the sins of their predecessors...and the names Fuhito and Elfe will soon be erased from the memory of all. A new world order begins tonight, with me as its ruler...*

"Where would you like the prisoners, sir?" called the young Turk from behind the three as they made their way across the room, the iron rods of his nunchaku pressed hard against the spine of the enormous dark-skinned man.

"Line them up in front of me."

Ushering the trio to stand before the desk, the Turks took a step back. The group seemed greatly out of place in the magnificence of the Presidential Office, the bright lights of the marble pillars illuminating the dust and grime across their stern faces, each one with their arms bound at their back. Surveying the three, President Shinra recalled briefly their previous meeting at the Sector5 Reactor facility only two days before. As predicted, their attack at the Reactor had resulted in widespread insecurity and a global spike in support for the Company's strict policing. Although he secretly thanked them, his dislike for the trio at their first encounter had since grown to nothing less than hatred. Straightening his tie, he rose from his chair and strolled around his desk to where they waited.

“What have you done with Aerith?” snarled the blonde ex-SOLDIER as he approached, his blue Mako eyes flaring with rage.

“Don’t worry,” answered the President dismissively, “the girl’s in a safe place. I wouldn’t dream of harming something as precious as the last Ancient.”

“The *last* Ancient?” mumbled the girl, casting her thoughtful gaze to the floor as she absorbed the words.

“Didn’t you know?” said the President mockingly. “Her mother, Ifalna, was a test subject of Professor Hojo for years. She was a full-blood...the last of her kind. Unfortunately, she only gave birth to a single child. Ifalna and Aerith were very important to us. We treated them very well, but in the end they chose not to help us. After they disappeared, it took us years to find the girl, and even now we are still unable to locate the mother.

“Yes, Ifalna...she taught this Company many things. The people we call ‘Ancients’ were a race known as the Cetra, who inhabited this planet for thousands of years. They have for centuries been known for their strange and fascinating abilities, as well as their boundless knowledge. It is said that they were able to communicate with the Planet, and that they could wield the power of magic without Materia. For better or worse, the Cetra are now nothing more than a forgotten page in history.”

“So, if they’re just a forgotten race,” asked the large man angrily, “what the hell d’ya need Aerith for?”

“The Cetra are destined to lead us to the Promised Land.” replied President Shinra, folding his arms. “I’m expecting a lot from her.”

“The Promised Land?” laughed the large man spitefully. “Isn’t that just a legend?”

“Even so,” shrugged the President with a wry smile, “it’s just too appealing not to pursue. The Promised Land is said to be very fertile. One can only imagine; fields of green, lakes of sparkling water...”

“A land full of Mako.” understood the blonde mercenary.

“Exactly!” nodded President Shinra, his eyes glazing as he licked his lips. “In a place like that, a Reactor has only to be constructed,

and the abundant Mako will come out on its own. We will become rich beyond our imagination. That is where Neo-Midgar, Shinra, Inc.'s new glory, shall be built..."

"Quit dreamin', jackass!" scoffed the large man.

"These days, all it takes to make your dreams come true is money and power." sighed the President.

"You scummy bastard!" he roared, his biceps bulging as he vainly tried to break free of his cuffs. "Your dream was to destroy Sector7, was it? My friends died tonight 'cause of you! Don't you care how many people you killed? Is it all for money an' power? Don't you even care what you're doin' to the Planet...?"

"I'm afraid it's getting late." interrupted the President, his expression without concern. "I think it is time to draw this meeting to a close."

"Hey, I ain't finished with you yet!"

"I'm sure you'll have plenty to say at your trial." said President Shinra nonchalantly, turning from the prisoners. "Who knows, we may even get to see each other again there."

"You asshole...listen to me!"

"Rude, have you received any information yet as to the current whereabouts of Corneo?" the President asked, ignoring the slobbering ranting.

"We obtained reliable intelligence from our source in Wall Market less than an hour ago, sir." replied the bald Turk, showing great strength as he fought to take control of the large man. "It seems Don Corneo has already fled the city. Director Heidegger has ordered Luxiere to lead a team of SOLDIERS and support the Turks in capturing him."

"Excellent." nodded President Shinra. "Then, that will be all. If you'll excuse me, I still have some work to do. Boys, lock these three up with the others."

Beginning without haste towards the tall windows at the rear of the Great Hall, he listened with amusement to the obscenities screamed by the large man as the Turks tried to remove him and his comrades from the office. A light rain had begun to fall outside, sending small beads of trickling water down the glass,

marring the dry concrete of the helipad before him. Glancing to the west, he saw the waning smoke float lightly into the atmosphere above Sector7, and lowered his head.

“If you need anything else,” he called over his shoulder, “speak to my secretary...”



Breakout

‘Never thought you’d end up in a place like this. Not even after everything you’ve been through.’

“You again? Tell me...who are you?”

‘That’s what I wanted to ask you.’

“Huh?”

‘Should you really be fooling around here?’

“What do you mean?”

‘You seem to believe that all your problems will disappear by thinking about them, but they won’t go away by just sitting around. You can’t change anything by taking a step back and simply looking at it.’

“What are you talking about?”

‘It’s started moving...’

“What has?”

‘Wake up!’

* * *

Cloud sat up sharply in a cold sweat, panting heavily, feeling his heart pound within his heaving chest. He groaned as he let his body fall once again against the cool plastic wall of the cramped prison cell, his stiff joints rebelling against the uncomfortable position he had assumed. *How long was I out?* Stretching his arms and legs, the blood began to circulate in his limbs, slowly eradicating the throbbing numbness. Glancing up with tired eyes, he saw Tifa asleep on the thin moulding mattress opposite

him. She lay with her arms wrapped around her bare stomach for warmth, her shivering body curled in the corner.

Using the slimy toilet bowl as support, Cloud pulled himself uneasily to his feet. The single filament bulb atop the sealed doorway buzzed as he started to pace the room, its red light flickering as it traced his circular path. Peering through the barred grating on the door as he passed, he watched the armed sentry tap the butt of his rifle repetitively against an adjacent cell.

The situation seemed surreal to him; as if it were no less of a dream than the strange voice in his head. His tense mind began to filter the events of the previous weeks, trying desperately to form any pattern or meaning. The bombings; AVALANCHE; his very presence in the city. *Why am I here? How did I even get to this point?* With the pulsing thoughts and questions flooding his brain, it was almost a minute before he realised he was no longer upright. His arms swinging by his side, squatting so that his knees now touched his abdomen, he found that he had subconsciously returned to his old SOLDIER technique for dealing with stress. *What am I doing? Get a grip, Cloud...*

Rising slowly from his squats, shaking his head in disgust at his lack of control, he trudged towards Tifa and her makeshift bed. With a sense of defeat, Cloud slumped onto the foot of the mattress, leaning his head against the wall. After a few moments, the low reverberating sound of someone speaking reached his ears and, as he strained to listen, he could clearly make out the deep voice of Barret drifting from the cell next to him.

“...jus’ what the hell you doin’?”

“I’m cleaning myself.” replied Red XIII genteelly.

“But, d’ya have to do it like that?” moaned Barret.

“How else do you suppose I do it?” asked Red XIII. “Are you offering to help?”

“Don’t be gross, man!”

“There is no need to be so offended...I was only joking.”

“I’m sorry.” sighed Barret. “It’s just...I’m a bit on edge. So much’s happened tonight, y’know. I lost my friends ‘cause of President Shinra...an’ when I finally got my chance to let him

know exactly how I felt, I let it slip. Even after everythin' he'd done, all that asshole could speak 'bout was usin' Aerith to make his company richer."

"How do you mean?"

"Aerith's an Ancient."

"She...that girl is a survivor of the Cetra?" exclaimed Red XIII. "What does the President plan to do with her?"

"He told us the Ancients know the way to the Promised Land, an' that..."

"The Promised Land? That is not possible."

"That's what I said. I've only ever heard stories 'bout the Promised Land, so I don't even know if it exists."

"Grandpa told me that the Cetran Promised Land is something that has been misinterpreted for centuries."

"Grandpa...?" chuckled Barret.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothin'...just didn't expect someone like you to be sayin' 'Grandpa'."

"Yes, my grandfather, Bugenhagen."

"You know Bugenhagen?" spluttered Barret.

"*You* know Bugenhagen?"

"I learned 'bout the Study o' Planet Life on the Worldwide Network. His work's one o' the main reasons I became part of an anti-Shinra group. What 'bout you?"

"It is a long story." mumbled Red XIII. "I would rather not speak of it now."

"Fine, but we gotta do somethin', man. What if the Promised Land ain't just a legend? What if the Shinra're right? They believe it's a place full o' Mako energy, which means if they get their greasy hands on it first, they'll suck the life from the land until it withers and dies. If that happens, the Planet's gonna get weaker..."

"And what do you think you can do to stop them? Be realistic."

"Someone has to make a stand." said Barret with determination. "As long as Shinra are around, there's always gonna be an

AVALANCHE up their ass. I'll start by recruitin' new members. How 'bout you? You want in?"

"Supporting AVALANCHE is not exactly at the top of my agenda."

"Why not?"

"That is another long story."

"Don't you wanna help the Planet?"

"I'm all for preservation, but we are yet to even find a way out of this prison."

"Gods, you're so damn boring...!"

Growing impatient with the conversation, Cloud pushed himself away from the wall and again began to wander the short distance back and forth across the cell. He had become infuriated with his inability to conjure the faintest wisp of hope for the situation. He knew that their trial would be swift and would almost inevitably lead to execution, yet even with his superior strength, he was helpless to break from the enclosed confines. *How had it come to this? A once-loyal SOLDIER First Class waiting to be sentenced by his former employers.* Not since the whispered secrets he had heard many years before of the enigmatic mass SOLDIER defection had he thought of such an occurrence. His blood boiling, his anger taking control, Cloud lashed out at the wall, the powerful impact leaving a significant dent on the sturdy plastic.

"Who's there?" came a muffled voice from the other side.

"Aerith?" stammered Cloud, stumbling backwards. "Is that you?"

"Cloud?" she squeaked, the tone of confusion evident in her words. "Yeah, it's me. What are you doing?"

"Nothing...it...uh...it doesn't matter." he said quickly, catching the unimpressed glower of the guard at the doorway as he inspected the source of the disturbance. Tifa quickly unfurled on the bed, woken abruptly from her slumber by his outburst. "Aerith, are you alright?"

"I'm fine." she replied. "So...you came for me. I knew you would."

“Well, you asked me to be your bodyguard, didn’t you?”

“I guess that means I owe you a date. That was the deal, right?”

“Date...?” yawned Tifa, rubbing an eye as she joined Cloud at his side. “So you two...?”

“Tifa?” gasped Aerith. “What are you doing there?”

“Well, excuse me!” Tifa snapped defensively.

“Sorry, that’s not what I meant.” Aerith laughed. “I’m just so glad to hear your voice.”

“Me too.” Tifa smiled sincerely. “You did a brave thing for Marlene. You sure you’re okay after what happened with that Turk?”

“Don’t worry about Tseng. I’m honestly fine...” she insisted, pausing for a few moments before lowering her voice. “But...there was something he said that I have to ask you about...”

“Of course.” said Tifa, moving closer to the plastic partition.

“Tseng told me that you three are from AVALANCHE.” Aerith explained hesitantly. “Is that true?”

“Yes.” answered Tifa, glancing up at Cloud with an expression of slight concern. “But, Aerith, you have to understand...”

“He said that you were different,” she continued, “that you weren’t the same AVALANCHE from before.”

“That’s right.”

“I know he fought for a long time against the old AVALANCHE. I even met their leader once. Tseng told me to stay away from them because they thought I was special and wanted to use me as a weapon.”

“You mean because you’re an Ancient?” asked Cloud.

“So you know?” Aerith said quietly.

“President Shinra told us.” replied Tifa. “But, we’re not that AVALANCHE. They’re gone now. Our fight is against Shinra. We’ve made terrible mistakes, but we just want to do what’s right. You have to believe us.”

“I do believe you. It’s just...Tseng...”

“Do you trust him?” posed Cloud.

“I don’t know.” sighed Aerith. “I’ve known Tseng for years. It was always his duty as a Turk to keep me under surveillance and I

guess protecting me when he had to was part of the job description. I suppose I trusted him to keep me safe. The last thing he said to me tonight was that he still has so many things to tell me. I don't know what that meant..."

"The Turks are our enemy." said Tifa. "If you want to feel safe without depending on Shinra, we can help."

"I guess..."

"But, Aerith..." she faltered, "there's...uh...some things we have to ask you too."

"What do you need to know?"

"When we saw President Shinra," Tifa began, "he spoke about your past, and how you and your mother had escaped one of the Shinra research facilities. Aerith...what happened?"

"I thought this may come up." Aerith responded pensively. She fell silent for a number of seconds, as if taking care in her choice of words. "For years, Shinra have taken a great interest in Cetran history. It seems that the Cetra's generations of knowledge and wisdom about the Planet is something that the President desires in his quest for power. Although, for him, it's nothing more than a way to increase his company's profits."

"My earliest memories are of spending all my days locked in a room like this with my real mum. We would have regular visits from different strange scientists, especially Professor Hojo. Although he was always performing tests on us, I think he found a certain attachment to us...or to my mum, at least. I can remember he once told her about a fellow scientist he had loved and married a long time ago, but his arrogance and allegiance to his work had prevented him from ever telling her how he really felt. I suppose, deep down, he still regrets losing her, and grown bitter because of it."

"Anyway, there was one scientist called Professor Raijincho who often spent time with us. He was a nice man and had very strong views on the way of the world. He made no secret to us of his disapproval at what Shinra were doing to me and mum. He came to visit us one evening after mum had gone through a difficult

experiment and gave her something for the pain. I'll never know if it was deliberate or not, but he left the cell door unlocked.

"We escaped that night, my mum weaker than I'd ever seen her, and managed to get as far as the Slums. All I can remember is forever looking up at a distant black sky...well, what would have been the underside of the Plate, of course. I'm not sure if she had been ill, or whether the experiment had taken its toll on her, but mum never made it further than the train station. I believe her only aim was to make sure I was safe before she returned to the Planet."

"Did Hojo or Raijincho ever tell you why you were being experimented on?" asked Cloud.

"I was only seven, so I didn't really understand what was happening." said Aerith. "I guess it was all for the Promised Land."

"Is the Promised Land real?" said Tifa.

"I don't know." Aerith answered quietly. "All I know is..."

*Cetran children,
The Planet's from birth,
Speak with the Planet
And unlock its worth.
Cetran children,
The Promised Land waits,
With bliss never-ending
Beyond secret gates.*

"...my mother taught me that."

"What does it mean?" whispered Tifa, as if enchanted by the lyrics.

"Beyond words...I'm not sure."

"Speak with the Planet?" questioned Cloud.

"Planet reading was one of the Cetra's gifts." said Aerith.

"Can you speak with the Planet?" asked Tifa.

"Sometimes."

"What does it say?"

“The city’s really noisy and full of people.” Aerith sighed. “I find it hard to do because I can’t make out what the Planet is saying.”

“Can you hear it now?” said Cloud.

“I only ever heard it at the church in the Slums; the only place I’ve truly felt serenity. My real mum told me that because of what Shinra are doing to the Planet with their Mako Reactors, Midgar is no longer safe. She said that someday I’d leave Midgar, speak with the Planet, and find my Promised Land. I thought I would stop hearing her voice as I grew older, but...”

With the last of her words, Aerith’s voice trailed off. Only the guard could be heard in the silence that followed, again scraping his weapon against the cell doors as he patrolled the corridor. Eventually, the sound of broken sobs began to echo lightly around the prison. Tifa held her body against the wall in despair, longing to comfort her friend. Turning from her, Cloud returned to the bed and, exhaling deeply, he cradled his head in his hands, thinking only of what lay ahead.

* * *

“Cloud...”

“Jessie...what happened?”

“We weren’t warned fast enough...” she coughed, the words hurting her as she spoke. “Cloud...I thought...I thought you didn’t care about what happens...to AVALANCHE...”

“Jessie, try not to speak...”

“Because...of our actions...many people have died.” she wheezed. “This is our...our punishment...”

“Jessie, please...”

“We fought for...the Planet, but...all we did was murder...in the name...of justice. Are we...really any better...than Shinra...?”

* * *

Cloud awoke, the image of his final exchange with Jessie still vividly imprinted on his retina. Bringing his eyes back into focus,

he could make out Tifa on the mattress beside him, her face buried against his shoulder. She twitched in her sleep, stirring as he slipped his arm from beneath her. Sitting up, he sensed a chill on the air that had sifted in while he was unconscious, bringing with it a foul stench. Frowning, he raised his gaze towards the doorway, and felt his jaw drop immediately.

What the hell...?

“Tifa!” hissed Cloud, shaking her ferociously. “Tifa, wake up!”

“What?” she groaned groggily as she came to. “What is it?”

“The door’s open...”

“Huh?” she said alertly, spinning to face the gaping entrance. “When did this happen? And what’s that smell?”

“I don’t know.” Cloud shook his head, tentatively climbing to his feet. “Something’s not right...”

“Take a look outside.”

Edging forward, taking short, quiet steps, his pulse racing, Cloud peered slowly around the ingress, examining the corridor. The momentary blindness of a passage lit by fluorescent lamps of glowing white faded quickly to reveal a thick smear of dark blood across the silver linoleum floor. Following the trail with his eyes, he grimaced slightly as he saw the gruesome sight of the disfigured guard, his body twisted and dumped awkwardly at the end of the row. The infantryman’s helmeted head hung loosely over his blood-stained chest, with what remained of bone and flesh protruding from the oozing wound on his gut.

What happened here? Has there been another major security breach?

“What’s wrong?” Tifa whispered with concern, reading Cloud’s sullen expression.

“I...I don’t know...” he murmured, beckoning her towards the doorway. “See for yourself.”

“Oh my Gods!” she gasped as she joined him, holding a hand to her mouth. “Murdered...?”

“Well, he certainly didn’t do that to himself.” replied Cloud, starting cautiously along the passage, absorbing the scene as he strove to make sense of it all.

“Where are you going?” said Tifa, hurrying after him.

“He should have the keys to the other cells on him.”

Other than the faint squelching of Cloud’s boots against the ground as he stepped carefully over the trickle of red, the prison block was shrouded in deathly silence. The concept of such a brutal slaughter taking place merely feet from them without their knowledge was one that caused great restlessness in him. His agitation was not aided as he approached the corpse, observing the detail of the man’s demise. Uneasily shifting the rifle and a strand of exposed intestine from across the guard’s groin with his foot, Cloud tore the keycards marked ‘2’ and ‘6’ from his belt, handing the former to Tifa.

“You go get Aerith.” he instructed. “I’ll let the other two out.”

Nodding, she scurried the short distance to Aerith’s cell, swiping the keycard on the electronic panel and letting herself in. Cloud strode briskly past her as she did so, ignoring what had been his own cell as well as the trio opposite in his rush to release Barret and Red XIII from their dwelling, the last in the block. With a purposeful swipe through the lock, he entered, startling the two from their rest.

“What the...?” cried Barret, turning sharply from his position in the corner. “How’d you get in?”

“Come with me.” he responded urgently, tossing the keycard to the floor as he gestured for them to follow. Making his way back down the corridor, Cloud saw Tifa emerge from the first prison with a bewildered Aerith, both hesitant to look upon the dead guard.

“What the hell’s goin’ on?” Barret called after him.

“See for yourself.” invited Cloud, stopping before the crooked body.

“He must’ve been savagely attacked.” gulped Aerith, pulling herself closer to Tifa.

“But, by what?” Tifa said worriedly. “No human could have done this.”

“One of Hojo’s monsters?” suggested Barret.

“Actually,” corrected Red XIII, inspecting the man closely, “I believe this is a sword wound. A precise and fatal stroke; this was done by someone with great ability.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Cloud said gravely. “There aren’t many around who could perform a kill like this, and I don’t think we should stick around any longer to find out. We should get outta here while we still can.”

“Agreed.” nodded Red XIII.

Cloud led them warily from the Cell Block, their hastened steps reverberating along the narrow passage. The lamps of the corridor had been dimmed, causing the plastic walls to glimmer in the faint blue light cast by the bulb above a twin set of electronic doors at its end, deliberately rendering only the Shinra Diamond across them visible from the prison. Arriving at the doorway, they drew to a halt, Cloud raising an arm for the others to hold their positions. Reaching out, he grabbed the panel and slowly pulled, unsurprised that the door offered no resistance as it should to being parted.

The scene that awaited them on the other side was worse than he had anticipated. Streaks of deep red had been sprayed across the high windows that lined the junction to the main hallway, the reflection on the glass revealing the slain bodies of the researchers and technicians that lay around the corners, their severed limbs and mutilated figures coated in their own blood. The shadows of the dead danced hauntingly and without order in the trembling light of the Department of Biological and Biochemical Development, as if their souls were desperately trying in vain to leave the world of the living.

“What happened to them?” Aerith whimpered, her voice dry as she fought back tears.

“This is serious...” Cloud said, his own thoughts racing.

“We have to leave.” urged Tifa. “Now.”

“Our weapons...” Barret grunted, tapping the empty barrel of his gun-arm. “We can’t go nowhere ‘til we get ‘em back.”

“The surveillance room.” Cloud recalled, beginning towards the intersection. “I saw that blonde Turk leave them there before we were locked up.”

Turning right into the main hallway as he came to the end of the passage, he was met by many screaming expressions wrought with horror. The image of the burning townspeople flashed in his mind, the memory still fresh after five years, brought flooding back by the cruel and torturous way the scientists had been similarly massacred. Inhaling deeply, Cloud closed his eyes, feeling his way into the nearby control room they had passed earlier.

Ignoring the dead technician sprawled against the surveillance monitors, he quickly spotted his Buster Sword set against the steel cabinet at the far side of the room. Snatching it up, he felt a comfort as his eager fingers wrapped around the dark red leather of the handle. Slotting it onto the magnetic holder on his back, he glanced up to see Barret feverishly feeding one of his thirty-five millimetre bullet belts into the slot on his gatling gun, wrapping the other bandolier around his waist. Returning to the corridor, they found the others waiting outside. Cloud stopped in his tracks as he realised that their faces were etched with dread, each of their frightened gazes focused only on what lay beyond.

“Cloud...look...” mouthed Tifa, a quivering finger pointing over his shoulder.

He slowly turned, his eyes moving back and forth in what seemed like an age as he scanned each piece of his surroundings, processing them one by one to establish the cause of his comrades’ fear. Through the tall entrance to the Sample Storage Chamber, whose iron shutters now hung limp and twisted, he could see that the chilled mist of the vast room had all but dissipated, leaving a clear view of the expanse.

The numerous wild creatures and monsters confined in the transparent capsules that had earlier been gnawing and scraping at the glass were now shrinking with terror at the rear of their cages, their howls and cries reduced to nothing more than a low whine. The yellow ahrimans had wrapped themselves in their

wings, defensively blocking out their environment, while the crimson hounds lay flat on their stomachs in panicked obedience. Every one appeared to be cowering from a single location; the metallic domed container on the opposite side of the room.

“It...” he croaked, the words catching in his throat, “it’s gone...”

The abnormal pink radiance of the Jenova capsule had dispelled, with only a faint glow lingering inside the gaping tear on its surface. The thick doorway had been ripped completely from its hinges, thrown carelessly against a stack of smashed crates which now seeped a hazardous black chemical across the floor beneath them. The iron walls of the dome had been bent forcefully outwards in a bizarre manner, the jagged metal reaching out from the withering organic matter inside. From the mouth of the wound, there came a blotched path of blood, snaking across the room to the wide circular cage that Red XIII had inhabited. The substance was unnatural in colour, the dark red an anomalous stain on the cold floor.

“It seems that it was taken to the upper floor using the specimen elevator.” concluded Red XIII, ending the silence that had fallen over the group.

“This is bad.” muttered Cloud, unable to shake the disturbing realisation that was mounting.

“What is?” frowned Barret, not comprehending.

“The body of Jenova...it’s been stolen.”

“What do you think it means?” asked Tifa.

“I...I don’t know.” replied Cloud, pushing between her and Aerith as he strode determinedly into the Storage Chamber. “But, I have to follow this trail. I have to know where it leads...”

“Cloud!” roared Barret. “We have to get outta here!”

Dismissing the protests, Cloud began weaving his way amongst the maze of upturned crates and boxes, his mind set on the metal grate on the northwest corner of the space. A haze of unsettling thoughts obscured his vision as he marched swiftly towards the small elevator; pulsing recollections of the headless humanoid he had witnessed earlier that night filling his head, demanding that he learn the truth. *Jenova...the killings...why has this*

happened? Why tonight? Yanking the railing aside and stepping aboard the lift, he looked around to see the others sprinting after him, struggling to match his pace.

“Cloud!” called Tifa.

“I thought you wanted to get out of the building?” he said, hesitating.

“Not without you.” answered Aerith, panting.

Perplexed, he paused until each of them had boarded the cramped elevator before slamming the safety grid over to begin upwards. They were brought moments later to the sixty-eighth floor Fusion Chamber, the wires grinding nervously to a halt under the weight of the five. The area was as it had been, but for a continuation of the bloody trail extending from the large cell in which Aerith had been trapped. Unlike the winding motion it had taken on the floor below, the smear was a direct dissection of the room, its destination of the ‘Unstable Specimen’ corridor unmistakable.

Hurriedly making their way past the incinerator and alongside the raised walkway of the chamber, the group followed the blood into the broad passage. An eerie silence had fallen over the untamed monsters beyond the impenetrable laser doors of the hallway, the scent of fear evident as they passed their paddocks. A handful more corpses were strewn randomly across the floor, forcing the party around them as they retraced the steps they had taken only hours earlier to the main stairwell. The automatic door was jammed open by the body of a Shinra infantryman, his lifeless form slumped in a seated position against the frame. Climbing over the soldier, Cloud stopped as he entered the landing, exhaling deeply.

“Looks like it goes up.” stated Red XIII from behind him, his tone foreboding. “What do we do?”

“I have a really bad feeling about this.” insisted Aerith.

“I need to know...” Cloud maintained, glancing back at their worried faces. With a lasting breath, he drew the Buster Sword, and continued on.

Slowly ascending the stairs, he cautiously edged around the increasingly-irregular patches of the dark blood. Splattered lines of the strange substance marked the walls by their side, smudged across paintings of significant worth, dripping from the plaques beneath. At the height of the steps, the stairwell opened into a small hallway whose only exit was a severed door marked '69: Department of Presidential Administration'. A faint hum of rerouted electricity sounded from the card reader aside the door, useless now that all that remained were mere splinters of plastic and steel, and traces on the wall of the powerful sword strike that had cleaved it in two.

Through the doorway was a grand open-plan office space, made up of many workstations partitioned by long panels of pine and oak. At the northern wing of the level, beyond the administrative area, a row of board rooms and individual offices could be seen through large curtained windows, their luxurious interiors and lavish entrances boasting the elitism of the Shinra Executive. An employee lounge area complete with sofas and vending machines was situated in the southwest corner of the foyer, adjacent to which were two express elevators, whose ajar doors revealed an unreserved view of the blackened overcast skyline above Midgar.

Tracking the path of blood over the silver floor, Cloud saw the trail move west from the hallway, passing the foyer and along the wide aisle of the secretarial space before him. Pacing stealthily between the workstations, he felt the beating of his heart increase as he was led past the carved mahogany desks to the sweeping twin white marble staircases which grew towards the Presidential Office. The steps rose symmetrically in an arcing motion opposite one another; one towards the north, and one towards the south. They were each supported by tall pillars of magnificent artistry as they scaled the vast walls to the seventieth and final floor of Shinra Headquarters, and at the base of one such pillar were cast the broken bodies of two SOLDIER sentries, tossed from their post like weightless toys.

Studying the dark blood as it staggered up the marble and purple carpet of the southern staircase, Cloud's mind began to

break down, failing even to register the restraining pleas of the group as intense waves of apprehension washed over him. With an uncontrollable haste, he darted up the steps, clearing two at a time. His rapid ascent was brought to a sudden halt at their apex when his frantic gaze fell upon the centre of the Great Hall, but only as the others assembled around him did Cloud fully understand the enormity of the scene.

All was still amidst the bright office, the white light of the lamps atop the stone columns radiating with blissful ignorance. The bloody smear had vanished as it approached the top of the stairs, leaving no hint of residue, evaporating into an atmosphere that whispered only death. As it had always been, the focal point of the room was the enormous desk that stood before the gleaming windows of the Presidential Office, bearing now a more disturbing sight than they could have imagined. Silent and unmoving in his majestic throne, pinned by a long, slender sword to his desktop like a skewered animal, was President Shinra.



A New King

“He...he’s dead...” stammered Barret, his voice distant. “The leader of the Shinra, Inc. is...dead...”

Cloud stumbled forwards, summoned to the desk at the heart of the Great Hall by an invisible force. Unable to take his eyes from the unmoving figure of the President, he made no attempt to stop Tifa as she brushed past him, and began cautiously towards the centre of the vast room. Slowly encircling the polished marble face of the workspace, she loomed over his swollen body in a wary but assured manner, his face pressed against the desk. It was not the array of reports scattered across the ground at his feet, nor the pool of blood forming at the base of his spine where the sword wound had been so fatal, that had drawn Tifa. Her troubled eyes passed over the curving blade as it rose from his back, analysing its shape. Stretching almost six feet in length, the katana was as elegant in design as it was powerful, with a slim handle bound in black leather and decorated in gold studs.

“I...I know this sword...” she gasped, retreating with fear.

“It’s the Masamune.” confirmed Cloud, his worst nightmare becoming reality. “It belongs to Sephiroth.”

“Sephiroth is alive?” squeaked Tifa, holding a hand to her trembling lips.

“Looks like it.” Cloud said, breathing heavily, unable to take his stare from the weapon. “Only he can use that sword.”

“Who cares who did it?” boomed Barret triumphantly. “This could be the end of the Shinra.”

“That’s not what we should be concerned about right now...”

Cloud spun sharply to his left as he was snatched from his trance by a nearby noise, shifting his hold on the Buster Sword into an attacking stance in the same motion. It seemed Barret had also detected the faint scraping, his gun-arm jerkily starting to rotate as he targeted the grid of pillars along the western wall. Slipping without sound across the room, Cloud backed against the nearest column, listening intently. Peering out from his position, there came rash, hurried footsteps; a flash of brown scurrying parallel to where he waited. Lunging out, Cloud thrust his knee into the obese stomach of the man and, hauling him back to where the others gathered, he threw him to the ground.

“P...please don’t kill me.” whimpered Palmer as he wriggled with pain on the floor, holding his hands out in surrender. Beneath his wisps of thinning grey hair, the Director of Space Exploration’s head shimmered with trickling sweat, his frightened eyes filling with tears.

“What happened here?” demanded Cloud.

“Se...Sephiroth...” cried Palmer. “Sephiroth came...”

“You *saw* him?” exclaimed Cloud. “You saw Sephiroth?”

“With my own two eyes!”

“Are you sure?”

“Would I lie to you at a time like this?” blurted Palmer. “I heard his voice, too.”

“What did he say?” Cloud frowned.

“I’m not sure.” Palmer mumbled. “It was something about not letting Shinra get their hands on the Promised Land.”

“Does that mean the Promised Land really exists?” Tifa speculated, gazing questioningly at Cloud. “Is Sephiroth here to save it from the Shinra?”

“So he’s a good guy, then?” asked Barret.

“Save the Promised Land? A good guy?” answered Cloud, his voice lowered. “Not a chance. It won’t be that simple...not for Sephiroth. I know him; his mission will be different...”

As he spoke, a deafening flutter began to build from beyond the windows. His brows furrowing, Cloud glanced up to see a helicopter rapidly advancing on the tower, its nose rearing back

as it drew near. It circled the Presidential Office as it reduced its speed, finally coming to rest on the helipad extending from the northern side of the Headquarters. With the group momentarily mesmerised by the flight of the craft, Palmer scrambled to his feet, dashing across the hall towards the single doorway to the helipad. Outside, a young man in a long white coat stepped from the B1a helicopter onto the platform, his wavy hair blowing furiously in the gust, a bemused expression spreading over his leering face as he spotted Palmer.

“Shit!” swore Barret. “I forgot about him.”

“Who is it?” asked Aerith.

“Rufus Shinra,” Barret replied, “the President’s son. Vice President of Shinra and heir to its power.”

“I’ve never heard of him before.” said Aerith, puzzled. “I didn’t even know the President had a son.”

“Not many people do.” Barret shook his head. “I s’pose it’s for security reasons. He caused a lotta trouble for the company a few years back, an’ rumour had it he’d been assigned a secret task somewhere else for a long time. He’s a tough customer...heard nobody’s ever seen him bleed or cry.”

“I want to meet this guy.” Cloud declared, striding towards the helipad, slotting his greatsword back onto its holder.

“What?” spluttered Barret. “Why?”

“Maybe we ought to show him our respect.”

The sky was becoming slightly less overcast as Cloud stormed out onto the stone balcony, but the chilly winter air still penetrated his thin poloneck. The streets of the distressed city could be seen for miles over the low wall that led to the helipad, separated by the illuminated intersecting highways and railway lines. Few transport vehicles were in motion at this hour, many of Midgar’s inhabitants still mourning the loss of Sector7.

Looking ahead, Cloud saw Palmer had escaped to the rear of the helicopter, peeking timidly out from his seat as the party approached the Vice President. Rufus Shinra was a man in his late twenties, but his dark eyes bore wisdom beyond his age. His hair was golden in colour, seeming less synthetic than his father’s

had, and was combed to one side. He was slim in stature, his appearance broadened by the jacket he wore over his white suit, but was less than six feet in height. Casually slotting the shotgun he carried into its holster on his belt, he stared without intimidation as the five lined up before him, crossing his arms impatiently over his chest.

“And who are you?” he chuckled derisively.

“I’m formerly of SOLDIER.” Cloud answered sternly.

“Really?” Rufus offered a mock salute. “What rank?”

“First.”

“How very interesting.” Rufus nodded, rolling his eyes. “And what about the rest of you?”

“We’re from AVALANCHE.” growled Barret.

“AVALANCHE?” snorted Rufus. “You mean you’re that insignificant group that named yourselves after the rebel faction? Despite his eventual madness, you have quite a nerve comparing yourselves to the intellectual brilliance of Fuhito. How pathetic.”

“Just who the hell d’ya think you are?” bellowed Barret.

“Rufus Shinra,” he replied with a sly smile, brushing the hair from his face, “the President of Shinra, Inc.”

“You’re only President ‘cause o’ what Sephiroth did to your old man.” snarled Barret.

“True.” Rufus shrugged without remorse. “So, Sephiroth was actually here? What a pity.”

“Don’t you even care that your father has been murdered?” asked Tifa with disgust.

“After what he did to me?” laughed Rufus as he began to pace the platform before the party. “I don’t think so. ‘Old man’, as you so delightfully put it, has been keeping a few secrets from the public for many years now, and even certain members of the Executive. Especially when it came to my whereabouts...worried that I would undermine him. Daddy was very bad. He tried to control the world with lies and money, and it seems to have been working. The population thought Shinra would protect them. Work at Shinra, get your pay, and if terrorists attack, the Shinra

Army will help you. It was perfect on the outside...but, not for me.

“Ever since I was made Corporate Officer, I have been sickened by the naïve way in which my father ran things. I’ve longed for this day; the day where I get to do things differently. I’ll control the world with fear. A little fear will manipulate the minds of the common people. There is no need to waste money on them.”

“It appears he likes to make speeches.” Tifa sneered. “Just like his father.”

“Unfortunately, some things are hereditary,” Rufus responded, unfazed, “such as my hatred for Slum lowlifes like yourselves.”

“Why, you little punk!” spat Barret, aiming his gun-arm at him.

“Barret, wait!” shouted Cloud.

“You heard what he said! I’m gonna blow the piece o’ shit to hell!”

“Now’s not the time.” said Cloud, standing in front of the spinning barrels. “You have to get Aerith out of here.”

“Huh?” stammered Barret, startled by the command.

“I’ll explain later.” urged Cloud, gesturing towards the door.

“The Planet’s crisis is much more serious than you think.”

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“Don’t argue with me!” he said forcefully. “Just make sure you and the others get out of the building as quickly as possible.”

“But, what ‘bout you?”

“I’ll take care of Rufus. Now, go!”

Reluctantly, Barret began to retreat from the helipad, his arm still trained on the new President. Cloud ushered the others after him, his resolute glare pushing them through the entrance to the Great Hall. It took a number of seconds for the four to disappear from sight, their anxious voices diminishing as the door slammed shut behind them. Cloud turned to meet the cold gaze of Rufus Shinra, wrapping his fingers around the handle of the Buster Sword and heaving it from its slot, holding it out before him. Almost a minute elapsed before either of them spoke.

“Tell me, soldier,” asked Rufus eventually, “what is your name?”

“Cloud Strife.”

“Have we met before?”

“I doubt it.”

“Strange.” Rufus frowned. “Your face seems familiar to me...I’m sure I’ve seen it somewhere before.”

“What difference does it make?”

“None, I suppose.” Rufus gave an absent wave. “I was just trying to understand why you want to fight me.”

“Your company seeks the Promised Land.” explained Cloud. “I won’t let either you or Sephiroth have it.”

“Why not Sephiroth?”

“A lot has happened. I have my reasons.”

“Did you know he is an Ancient?”

“What’s your point?”

“Surely he’s entitled to the Promised Land?”

“It doesn’t matter.” growled Cloud, raising his sword higher. “He’ll never get his hands on it. And neither will you!”

“I guess this means you and I won’t become friends.” Rufus sighed.

“Don’t count on it.”

“Then, that’s enough for today.”

Time seemed to freeze as Rufus snatched the shotgun from his belt with the swiftest of movements, pointing its twin barrels at Cloud’s head. Reacting instinctively, Cloud blocked the shots as he pulled the trigger, hearing the sharp *twang* as the pellets ricocheted against the steel alloy blade of the Buster Sword. He glanced up as he heard the pounding of footsteps to see Rufus sprinting across the helipad, the tails of his coat flapping wildly behind him, determined to escape the former SOLDIER. Diving onto the floor of the helicopter, the President barked orders at the Turk pilot to begin her ascent. Cloud charged towards the rising helicopter, springing high into the air after it, slashing in vain at its underside as it soared beyond his reach, and watched in frustration while Rufus grinned at him from the open doorway of his flight as it disappeared over the tower.

Shouldering the Buster Sword as he listened to the hissing whir of the propellers fade into the distance, he started hastily back to

the Presidential Office. He passed through the single doorway and crossed the room without hesitation, pausing only as he reached the northern stairwell. With a fleeting glimpse, Cloud looked upon the body of President Shinra for the final time, wondering how a man of such power had been reduced to nothing more than a humble mortal. Thinking of it no more, he raced down the steps, and was surprised to find Tifa at their base.

“Are you alright?” she asked. “Where’s Rufus?”

“He got away.” replied Cloud as he stormed past her, grabbing her wrist. “Looks like this is going to get complicated...”

* * *

Aerith felt her stomach lurch as the external express elevator plummeted to the ground floor, filling her with the dread of nausea. Other than its linoleum floor, the cylindrical lift had been assembled entirely with square panels of spotless glass, designed to display to staff of the Executive levels a magnificent skyline that blinded them with ignorance from the squalid world below. Entering the internal shaft of the Building as it screamed past the sixtieth floor, the three were plunged into the pale white light of the bulb overhead. With a noiseless deceleration thirty seconds later, the elevator began to slow, grinding to a halt as it arrived in the main lobby of the Shinra Headquarters.

They had stopped a short way from a broad carpeted staircase that scaled the wall of the foyer to the spacious open balcony of the restaurant level on the first floor, and wasted no time in vacating the lift. Scanning the vast hall, Aerith could tell immediately that the lobby was void of personnel, its only sign of life the half-eaten burger sitting idly by the flashing monitor on the nearest reception desk. She frowned, her eyes moving from the glowing holographic screens at the centre of the foyer to the numerous displays of motorised vehicles situated on the podiums at its rear, her mind searching for an answer to the curious staff exodus.

“Barret, was there...?” she began, her words trailing off as she turned towards the entrance of the building, and gasped in horror.

Barret stood a few feet from her, his jaw firm, his chain-gun sweeping back and forth across the legions of the Shinra Army that had assembled in the plaza beyond the large windows. Their rifles drawn, several squadrons of infantrymen traced his every move, patiently biding their time before opening fire. Three helmeted Third Class SOLDIERS were stationed at the head of the battalion, two brandishing similar swords, the last wielding what seemed to be an elongated machine gun. All was silent but for the gentle click of the electronic billboard behind them, the sound of its continuous rotation of bulletins cutting through the tension.

“It would appear we are completely surrounded.” reported Red XIII.

“If I was alone, this wouldn’t be a problem.” grumbled Barret. “But, I got a reputation o’ protectin’ people, y’know.”

“You both should get out while you still can.” said Aerith, hanging her head. “It’s not you they’re after.”

“Yeah, well that ain’t happenin’.” responded Barret, his expression fixed on the static military. “You got caught up in all this ‘cause o’ Marlene. I owe you a damn lot for that. Now, I can start repayin’ by watchin’ out for you. Playtime’s over for these jackasses...”

“Might I suggest that we think of a way to get out of here rather than charging straight at half the Midgar Army?” offered Red XIII, his cool tone growing serious.

“Hey!” came Tifa’s voice suddenly from somewhere above them, startling all three.

They spun to see her bounding down the steps of the nearest staircase, her legs pumping with each stride. As she reached the final curve, she leapt from the railing, landing gracefully at the foot of a small hologram stand bearing the image of the Shinra Diamond. With a momentary assessment of her situation, she

galloped across the lobby to a blue pickup van advertised as the newest model of Shinra's sA-37 type motortricycle.

"Tifa, what the hell...?" called Barret.

"C'mon, hurry up!" she answered.

"Where's Cloud?"

"No time for questions!" she yelled, yanking open the driver's door on the cab. "Let's go, everyone!"

Scampering after her, their minds blurred with confusion, the three were able to join her within seconds. Sparks shot from the cab as she rushed to hotwire the vehicle, sending a crackle of current through the air. Jumping into the passenger side next to Tifa, Aerith hurriedly fastened her seatbelt, her face falling anxious. With a growl, the van buzzed into life, the dashboard becoming ablaze with flickering colours and lights and, as Barret banged the plastic screen behind their heads to signal that he and Red XIII were both secure at the back of the truck, there came a strange rumbling from somewhere overhead.

* * *

Cloud felt the monstrous V-DOH engine of the Hardy Daytona motorbike jolt beneath him, roaring thunderously as he slowly descended the stairwell. The bike was lengthier in size than he had imagined it to be, forcing him to lean forward as he fought to steer it down the steps. Its metallic black coating shimmered in the beaming lamps of the foyer, concealing within it the mechanics of the manufacturer's trademark design. As he rounded the corner at the foot of the stairs, he noticed the troops in the plaza begin to advance on the Headquarters, and knew that their race to escape would be tight.

Glancing up, he saw Tifa's focused expression from the driver's seat of the pickup, patiently awaiting his command. For a number of seconds he stalled, allowing the soldiers to draw near the main entrance, their weapons targeted on him. They moved ever closer; thirty feet; twenty feet; ten feet. Raising his fist, he reared the bike up on its back wheel and rocketed towards the

opposite staircase, barging into the steps. The van's motor screamed from behind as it followed him to the first floor balcony, groaning as it jerkily climbed the stairs.

Cloud brought the vehicle to a standstill at the height of the stairwell, facing the tall spread of windows at the building's northeast corner. For a brief moment he thought of the city that lay beyond his reflection in the glass; a city that he had once called home. He turned as the truck pulled alongside him, hearing the collective shouts as the SOLDIERS and infantrymen smashed through the main entrance below. With a nod to Tifa, he slammed his foot down on the accelerator as the first of the rifles were fired. The Hardy Daytona lurched forward, speeding towards the windows in a blinding haze, and crashed through them, launching the bike into the night.

It landed hard on the tarmac of Highway 23, the twin exhausts on either side of its rear wheel crunching against the road as the suspension buckled on impact. Bullets hailed from the street beneath him as the soldiers reacted desperately to prevent their flight from the Shinra Building, their weak shots recoiling against the underside of the motortricycle as it propelled through the air. There came a heavy sound of distorting metal as the van's nose collided with the freeway, its smoking tyres squealing as Tifa swerved to miss the concrete barrier. Regaining control of the pickup, she pressed down hard on the gas, grappling with the steering as she passed the stationary Cloud, and began to pick up pace.

Tearing along the deserted stretch of road as it made its way from Sector0, the group followed the highway east towards the city limits. On his right, Cloud could make out the innumerable skyscrapers of the ultramodern Sector3 downtown district, like metropolitan sentinels protecting Shinra, Inc.'s dictatorship over the world's economy base. The high buildings shone bright against the dark clouded sky, illuminated by scaling beams of unique colours and shrouded in the mist of Mako fumes.

Before long, the business landscape of office blocks and multiplex centres of shopping and entertainment had started to

fade, changing instead to the redbrick residential estates of the Shinra employees. Smaller roads began diverging from the motorway at spaced junctions, some leaving the strip to enter the pleasant façade of the Sectors 2 and 3 suburbs, while others formed a connection to the main southbound Highway 45.

As he tailed the fleeing van, his concentration set on his handling of the Hardy Daytona, Cloud saw Barret's face turn severe. Risking a quick glance over his shoulder, he spotted the inevitable pursuit of the Army rapidly looming. The deep reverberation of the motorbikes met his ears moments later, the shrill screech of their tyres an unwelcome warning of the rate at which they were progressing along the freeway.

Suddenly, the highway veered left, forcing Cloud into the outside lane as he negotiated the curve. As if injected with new energy, the first of the enemy drew inside him in an effort to overtake the Hardy Daytona, his attention fixed on the truck ahead. Wrenching the Buster Sword from its holder, Cloud swiped with all his might, the blade slicing with ease through the front of the bike. With a helpless cry, the soldier was thrown into the barrier as his ride separated beneath him, his thick helmet smashing against the low wall.

Hitting the accelerator, the Hardy Daytona powered forward, taking Cloud out of range of the determined riders. Above them, tall advertisement signposts flew past, illegible at that speed but for a few key words such as 'City Planning', 'Midgar Highway Project' and 'summer completion'. Squinting as the cold morning air rushed over his face, Cloud could make out a collection of hovering silhouettes on the road ahead. Pulling in front of the van as they neared a barricaded junction, his focus trained on the shadows, he felt a sinking sensation in his stomach, his brain finally registering the conical shape and spinning propellers of the Shinra weapons.

With a flailing arm, Cloud frantically motioned Tifa in the direction the off-ramp on their left, raising his sword in defence as the first wave of the heligunners' bullets ensued, accompanied by the rapid-fire bursts of dancing dragonfly-like panzer security

robots. He heard the shriek of the motortricycle's wheels as it swerved to avoid the onslaught, careering through the blockade of traffic cones and temporary plastic weights. As he slammed the brakes, causing sparks to erupt as he skidded across the tarmac, the heligunner at the centre of the unit lifted the cannon at its side, discharging an aerial missile.

Steadying his ride as the rocket soared directly at him, Cloud held his breath, his surroundings slowing almost to a standstill as his acute battle awareness took hold, patiently watching it sail nearer. Even with advanced training, the trick was difficult to execute. The missile was only three feet from him when he reacted, flicking his wrist slightly, the angle of the Buster Sword changing at the very instant the nose of the projectile made contact. The deflection caused it to scream past, colliding devastatingly with the onrushing troops, the blast wave of the explosion thrusting the Hardy Daytona forward. Escaping down the slip road, Cloud took off after his companions.

Continuing on a more northerly bearing, the road narrowed and straightened out once more, but began to descend towards the earth, indicating that the industrial outskirts of the Plate were upon them. An environment of grey warehouses and factories extended from the highway, overshadowed by the enormous fin of the Mako Reactor. Power stations and railway depots made up the landscape around the Sector3 Reactor facility, much like that of the Sector1 Reactor they had infiltrated only nine days before. The vast boundary of the Plate expanded out in front of them like an imprisoning perimeter, the high wall of concrete circling the circumference of the upper-city. The nearing entrance to a wide tunnel swallowed the decreasing highway from a single opening on the perimeter, providing the only direct access to the Plate from the outside world.

As the van raced into the tunnel, its pale blue exterior reflecting the beaming orange lamps, Cloud turned to see two more men closing in on him from either side. Their purple uniforms were SOLDIER Second Class, completed by the Hardedge sword they each bore. The first slashed at him with a great surge of strength.

Cloud blocked the strike, his triceps burning as he fought to parry the weight of the weapon from behind. Kicking hard at the tyre of the man's bike, the SOLDIER lost his grip on the steering, deviating dangerously towards the arcing tunnel walls as he ground to a stop.

Spinning in time to see the second SOLDIER thrust his blade at him, Cloud yanked the brake, the wheels of the Hardy Daytona smouldering as he skidded momentarily along the road. He ducked, feeling the sword swing harmlessly over his head, and grabbed the man's arm as it hit his back. Wrestling with him as they hurtled around a winding bend, Cloud stared powerlessly as a third SOLDIER tore past on the inside lane, its exhaust fumes spraying over the two. As it approached the truck, the explosive sound of gunfire rang out through the thick smog, shredding the red metallic paint of the pursuing bike. Cloud weaved right as he noticed the bloodied body of the SOLDIER tumbling on the road before them, releasing his hold on the rider as he rammed into his fallen comrade, hurling him to the ground.

Bursting from the blur of smoke, he saw Barret standing tall at the rear of the pickup, his gun-arm rotating furiously. In an instant, the rushing echo of the vehicles' motors around them vanished as the tunnel came to an abrupt end, exposing them again to the cold air. The outer extremities of the Midgar Slums emerged from beneath the base of the Plate, the crumbling remains of the derelict buildings overshadowed by the ever-declining highway suspended two-hundred feet above them.

Cloud felt the Hardy Daytona jerk violently under him as the first SOLDIER again caught up with the party, crashing purposefully against his back tyre. The bike lurched forward, swaying hard to maintain balance against the ruthless assault. The raw wail of scraping metal resonated as the SOLDIER dragged the steel blade of his sword along the bike's frame, sending sparks of flaming white over the two. Cloud deflected the slashes with the Buster Sword, twisting to meet the onslaught with rapid arm movements.

They duelled with untamed aggression, their techniques not dissimilar, hacking at each other's weapon in a concentrated fury. The SOLDIER was a talented swordsman, agile and strong, but was incapable of restraining Cloud's unfaltering attack. He began to struggle with the forceful offensive, covering on his bike in desperate defence, but suddenly lashed out. Quickly shifting his weight on the Hardy Daytona, Cloud dodged the attempt, showing no mercy in his swift retaliating strike.

The SOLDIER screamed in pain as his arm was severed from his shoulder, the limb bouncing flaccidly on the road. Training his aim on the enemy, an eruption of bullets hailed from Barret's chain-gun, ripping through the man's chest. With a final cry of anguish as his life passed from him, he was unable to prevent his bike accelerating into the edge of the freeway, leaping its barrier as he plummeted to his demise.

Turning, Cloud caught sight of the decelerating pursuit vehicles and security weapons, drawing from the chase in unison, merging with the distant colourless boundary of the Plate until they waned from visibility. Around him, high bars of iron scaffolding began to take shape, creating a fenced enclosure on both sides of the highway. Releasing his pressure on the accelerator, the bike's engine hummed softly, allowing him to glide without difficulty towards the nearing surface of the Planet. Ahead, Tifa had already reduced the van to no more than a crawl, snaking between the flashing roadwork signs that blazed with warnings of the unfinished layout. Gradually rumbling to a halt not far from the temporary termination of the freeway, a jutting ledge which still hung fifty feet from the earth, Cloud set the Hardy Daytona on its side, trudging wearily to end of the road.

The first traces of morning sunlight were creeping over the jagged bluffs of the Midgar Wastelands, absorbing the stars as it scaled the horizon. The arid plains of a terrain void of Mako spanned the boundless view; travelling north towards the coastline of the Eastern Continent, and south to meet the Midgar Mountains at their murky foundations. To the right of the highway, large cranes waited motionless in the vacant

construction yard, draping heavy rusting beams from their outstretched arms. A scaffolding platform protruded from the incomplete strip, from which descended the frame of a makeshift staircase.

“You alright?” called Barret as he lowered himself from the pickup. “D’ya think we outran them?”

“They let us go.” Cloud responded flatly, his darkened gaze drifting over the land.

“Well, what do we do now?” asked Barret, joining him at the ledge. “We have to get outta the city. We can’t stay here.”

“Sephiroth is alive.” Cloud murmured quietly. “I...I have to settle the score...”

“And that’ll save the Planet?”

“Seems like it.” he sighed, looking back as he heard Tifa’s footsteps approaching. Aerith and Red XIII followed. “We have to find him.”

“Then, I guess this is goodbye Midgar.” Tifa said with a forced smile, her eyes meeting his.

“There’s a long journey ahead.” Cloud frowned. “We might not get to see the city again for a while.”

“Awright, I’m goin’!” Barret declared with enthusiasm. “As long as I know Marlene’s safe with Elmyra, I ain’t gonna let nothin’ stand in my way of savin’ the Planet once an’ for all.”

“I want to go too.” added Aerith, her words laden with melancholy as they floated through the crisp air. “There are still things I need to discover for myself.”

“About the Cetra?” asked Tifa.

“About many things.” she replied softly, as if her mind had wandered. “I just hope the flowers at the church will be alright. Maybe the children will take care of them for a while...?”

“I will go with you as far as my hometown, Cosmo Canyon,” said Red XIII, peering thoughtfully into the distance, “but I have much to do when I return. That is where I will leave you on your journey.”

“Well, I don’t have anywhere else to go,” shrugged Tifa, “so I guess I’m in.”

“We should nominate a leader for the group.” Barret proposed, beaming proudly as he strolled towards the scaffolding, throwing aimless punches in a mock fight stance. “An’ as leader of AVALANCHE, I think it should be me.”

“What about Cloud?” posed Aerith.

“What *bout* Cloud?”

“He was the one that came to rescue me, right?”

“But, me an’ Tifa...”

“I think Aerith is right.” Tifa agreed, biting her lip as Barret’s expression turned sour. “He has a lot more experience with this sort of thing.”

“Then, its settled.” nodded Aerith, gesturing towards the silent Cloud.

“That’s bull...fine, whatever.” Barret growled dismissively, slamming his gun-arm against the metal framework in frustration. “But, we need to get away from the Shinra an’ regroup. The town of Kalm is two day’s walk from here, so we better get goin’. We can plan ahead once we arrive. That suit *you*, Spiky?”

“Let’s just get out of here.” ordered Cloud.

With a daze of thoughts shuffling through his mind, he acknowledged little of Barret’s grumblings as he led the party down the worn steps of the improvised structure. His legs felt heavy and weak, causing the tinny sound of scraping steel to resonate around them as he dragged his boots over the rungs. They came at last to the mounds of grainy soil of the construction site, swirls of dust dancing around them in the gentle breeze and, taking one final glance back at the sleepless city, the company began towards the dawn.



The Nibelheim Incident: The Silver SOLDIER

Dusk was setting over Kalm as the party arrived at the town's archaic fortress perimeter the following evening. Although appreciative that the stillness of night was upon them, they had been able to recognise Kalm as a place of peace and tranquillity. There had been little stir from the settlement with the coming of darkness but for the gradual illumination of lamps at the height of the bastion walls, its inhabitants offering their farewells to the day. Passing beneath one of the tall archway entrances of the town, Cloud had surveyed the thick chains of iron that secured the open gates to the stone columns on either side, and was grateful of their welcoming arrangement.

The group's trek across the barren Wastelands of Midgar had been long and arduous, tracking what few northeast roads and trails existed amid the wilderness. A wave of stifling heat bore down on them as they slogged through the endless plains of lifeless soil, forever under the watchful gaze of the scavenging crimson hounds atop the sloping cliffs of rock and dunes of dried mud and sand. Cloud was only too conscious of the foul creatures that dwelled in the Wastelands; his missions there as part of the Monster Investigation Program and round-up of the Science Department's escaped research specimens had taught him as much.

Red XIII had also seemed concerned about the existence of the monsters, muttering under his breath about the recent break-out of a trio of Hojo's more dangerous experiments from the

Unstable Specimens unit. His mind was soon put at ease by Barret, the distinct sounds of him loading the long bullets of his gun-arm made deliberate for all to hear. It was not only the ravenous fiends or even the bandits who roamed the land, however, that had kept the party wary.

Every so often, the group had been forced to seek shelter in the shaded bosom of the dunes as Shinra heligunner scouts buzzed overhead or clunky custom sweeper robots marched past, always searching for the fugitives. Avoiding their pursuers, the company had spent the evening in a dell overshadowed from a great distance by the ancient peaks of the Midgar Mountains, taking turns to guard the camp as the others slept in a natural hollow, safe from the faint sprinkles of rain and whistling clouds of dust that patrolled the plains.

They had come at last, late in the afternoon of the second day, to a verdant landscape that had outgrown the disfiguring reach of the Mako Reactors; grasslands of purest green marred only by the fleeting smell of far-off pollution. It was a sight Aerith had revelled in; silenced by awe in her first experience of a world beyond Midgar. Their path had continued east towards the coastline and, coming within fifteen miles of the sea and the mouth of the River Mandragora, it had eventually brought them to Kalm.

The cobbled pavement of the main street had been undisturbed but for an elderly couple as the party ventured inside the sanctuary of the citadel, the pair slowly walking hand-in-hand under the warm glow of golden light from the windows of the townspeople's homes. The buildings along the road had each been constructed in a similar antiquated style of dark pine over white walls of sandstone, roofed by slates of blue tiling, although a handful of the numerous pubs and taverns had elaborated by adding colourful advertisements to their otherwise indistinguishable faces. The party had stopped below the sign of one such Cromwell Inn as it swung gently in the cool breeze,

deciding that their journey for the day had taken them far enough.

Now, as he lay on one of the three beds in the room the group had rented for the night, tiredness finally began to sink over Cloud. He gazed absently at the ceiling, his eyes growing heavier with each flicker of candlelight that caressed the hypnotic floral patterns. There came a creak from the carpetless floorboards on his right as Red XIII completed his examination of an oil painting of Old Midgar that hung above the doorway, turning and casually crossing the room to the striped rug he had agreed to sleep on, the flames of his tail dancing behind him. Barret rested upon the bed aside Cloud, talking in hushed voices with the girls, both of whom had chosen to share the third and final bed under a window cast in radiant moonlight. Rolling on his mattress, Barret twisted to face Cloud, his expression inquisitive.

“What?” grunted Cloud, frowning as he glanced over at him.

“So, let’s hear *your* story.” he replied curiously. Aerith and Tifa had sat up in their bed, listening with interest.

“Huh?”

“After we found President Shinra murdered,” he said, “you told me the crisis concernin’ the Planet was more serious than I thought. What the hell could be more important than the Shinra drainin’ the Planet’s life?”

“Sephiroth...” Cloud answered quietly, lowering his eyes as he paused for a few seconds. “His being alive can only mean trouble for the Planet.”

“But, why?” pressed Barret. “What’s your connection with Sephiroth?”

“It’s a long story.”

“We got all night, ain’t we? Let’s hear it.”

“I don’t know...”

“Come on, Cloud.” pleaded Aerith, the pale green of her eyes glimmering in the dim light.

His stomach tightened and he swallowed hard; it was something he had avoided repeating since regaining consciousness in

Midgar; one which stirred so much pain and suffering inside. The wounds were still too fresh. Eventually, he looked up to see the eager faces of the group unflinching from their gawking stare as they awaited his account. Only Tifa remained unenthused, twirling locks of her smooth dark hair uncomfortably around her finger as her saddened gaze met his. He realised how hard the tale would also be for her. Although years had passed in reality, to Cloud, the events were still a recent memory. Sighing, he allowed himself to succumb to the pressure, pondering a suitable place to start the detailed retelling of his story.

“I used to want to be like Sephiroth.” he began at last. “Just like most of the boys my age at that time. Since as far back as I can remember, I’d watch the television reports and read the newspapers to keep track of the War in Wutai. The conflict had been ongoing since I was a young child, and my mother would tell me exciting stories about the Shinra heroes that had fought against Emperor Kisaragi and the Wusheng. As the years went by, Sephiroth became the most famous of them all. He had everything; style, class...and, of course, unmatched strength.

“My fascination with Sephiroth is what fuelled my ambition to join SOLDIER, and to become a hero like him. I thought about him all the time, even in my sleep. My mum had given up on me. Not long after my fourteenth birthday, I received a letter to say I’d been accepted into the Army, and soon exchanged school in Nibelheim for the Shinra Academy in Midgar. Unfortunately for me, the Wutai War ended a short time after and, although I was able to make my way through the ranks, it grew difficult to prove myself to my superiors.

“SOLDIER’s main duty after the War was to eradicate any resistance against Shinra, primarily the original AVALANCHE and the insurgence of the Wutai Army’s remnants led by the notorious Crescent Unit. I thought my opportunity to shine had passed with the coming of peace, so whenever an important mission came around, I’d always sign myself up. It was my way of justifying my worth as a SOLDIER and much more exciting

than the usual virtual reality training. Over time, I was involved in a number of assignments with Sephiroth, and the two of us became friends...”

“Sephiroth was...your friend?” stammered Barret.

“Well, it’s difficult to say.” shrugged Cloud. “Sephiroth was seven or eight years older than me, and much more experienced. He was someone that commanded great respect...not just as the Captain of SOLDIER, but as a person. When I first knew him, he would occasionally mention two men that had also held high positions in SOLDIER. He always gave the impression that they had betrayed him in some way, and whatever happened between them, I believe his personality changed because of it. He became colder as time went on and rarely talked about himself, but always maintained his professionalism. As I said, I worked with him on many assignments, so I guess you could have called us ‘colleagues’. We trusted one another, until one day...”

“One day...?” Aerith repeated as if entranced.

“As you’re probably aware,” continued Cloud, “Shinra, Inc. hasn’t always been known as an energy supplier. For the first decade of its existence, the business was called by its original title of Shinra Manufacturing Works. About fifty years ago, while studying the influences of Materia when combined with physical weapons, they developed a way to utilise the effects of Mako as an energy source, something that had been hypothesised for generations. Shinra were quick to monopolise Mako and its innovation saw them become the dominant provider of cheap and unlimited energy, thus Shinra Electric Power Company was established.

“Their method of extracting Mako from the rivers that ran beneath the Planet’s surface was through the use of complex Reactor systems, the prototype for which was built at the summit of Mount Nibel in [μ]-εγλ 1968. It was Shinra’s finest achievement, and for a long time was protected vigorously by legions of dedicated employees. The company received an urgent request one day for it to send SOLDIER out to investigate a

serious problem that had arisen at the Reactor. I had just turned sixteen at the time and had only been a First Class for a few months. As it turns out, I was hand-picked by Sephiroth for the assignment, so I agreed to go in the hope that I'd get the chance to further test my skills. That was five years ago..."

* * *

"Sure is raining hard..." Cloud muttered to himself, peering at the muddy road as it emerged from the rear of the military truck, disappearing amidst the silhouettes of the Nibel Forest's armies of evergreen.

The sky had been overcast for the duration of their journey across the Western Continent, showering the countryside in spurts of heavy downpour as their vehicle rumbled through fields and woodland alike. It seemed like an eternity since the squad had left Midgar only a few days previous, and Cloud was yet to fully recover from the weariness of their long flight across the ocean to a remote landing strip south of the Valley of the Fallen Star aboard one of the Junon Air Force's Gelnika airships. Now, lost in a haze of his own thoughts as he listened to the soothing patter of water on the tarpaulin roof of the truck, he turned suddenly as the young Shinra soldier beside him groaned.

"I hate motion sickness." grumbled the boy, his head buried between his knees.

"I wouldn't know." chuckled Cloud, slapping his friend on the back. "I've never had it."

"Then, you're lucky."

"I didn't pack anything for motion sickness."

"It's fine...it's my own fault for forgetting."

"If you're feeling bad," suggested Cloud, "try focussing on the horizon. Maybe it'll distract you. Or why don't you just take your helmet off?"

“I’ll be alright.” he said, breathing hard as the wagon bounced once more on a pothole, the thick tyres of the vehicle careering over the rough trail.

Cloud stood, clutching a hanging support ring, stretching his legs for the first time in hours. Around him, the hold shook, rattling under the weak suspension. At the head of the truck, the driving soldier could be seen beyond the glass partition of the cab, his concentration focused on the weaving road before him. A third infantryman rested on the floor below the panel, partially concealed in the shadows of the thin fluttering walls. Taking his gaze from the man, Cloud glanced down, quietly admiring the dark blue sleeveless poloneck and combat trousers of his uniform, feeling only pride as he had every day he had donned the outfit in the time since his promotion from Second Class. *I despised that stupid purple colour...*

He began to pace back and forth across the short length of the compartment, sporadically pausing to perform a handful of squats, unable to mask his excitement as he thought about his return to Nibelheim. Although he had been informed by the Company that the location of their operation was Mount Nibel, his superiors had been reluctant to disclose much more. As his imagination raced with possible explanations to the disturbance, each as absurd as the last, Cloud looked up to see the pale green Mako eyes of Sephiroth watching him.

The Captain of SOLDIER had remained silent for most of the trip as if his mind had been fixed on other matters, his sharp face hidden beneath the long strands of silver hair that grew without waver down his spine. As always, he was clad only in black, but for the metallic shoulder guards he bore on either side of his high collar; a uniqueness that mirrored his status in the Shinra Army. His leather jacket had been tightly buckled once at his waist to expose his bare chest and crested belt of SOLDIER beneath, its tails hanging limp around the polished ankles of his tall boots. The decorated scabbard of his personal sword, the Masamune,

lay by his side, the slender, curving katana entirely encased to preserve it from being unnecessarily defaced.

“Settle down.” he said coolly, crossing his arms as he leaned back on the weapons crate, his tone one of authority. “You’re acting like an anxious kid.”

“Sorry...I’m just...it’s gonna be my first time back, y’know...”

“Hometown, huh?”

“Yeah.” nodded Cloud. “So, are you gonna brief us fully on the assignment?”

“You haven’t been properly briefed yet?” asked Sephiroth.

“I only know what you’ve told me.” Cloud shook his head.

“I thought as much.” he sighed. “They’ve tried to keep this one quiet. But, you should at least know that it isn’t a typical mission?”

“What do you mean?”

“The distress call from the workers inside the Mount Nibel Reactor mentioned irregular malfunctions,” explained Sephiroth, “so the Executive’s immediate assumption was that there had been a breach of security at the facility.”

“Like AVALANCHE or something, right?” Cloud speculated. Sephiroth paused for a moment.

“They had only been shown the first part of the message.”

“Some of the transmission was kept from the Executive?” gasped Cloud. “But...why?”

“The President felt it would be best not to alarm anyone about the situation; the latter part of the message contained an incomplete communication about the Reactor itself producing brutal creatures.”

“Brutal creatures?”

“Sounds familiar, don’t you think?” said Sephiroth sullenly, reading Cloud’s pensive reaction. “And on top of that, there have been reports from the townspeople of strange dragons in the area, apparently inhabiting the caverns within the mountain. Our task is to locate the source of the problem and neutralise it, but all this is very unusual.”

“What do you think it means?”

“I’m not sure.” replied Sephiroth, frowning. “The briefing notes mention nothing of the G-Army, but General Heidegger has classified this assignment as top secret.”

“After all the other Reactor attacks recently, why would they place importance on this mission?”

“The SOLDIERs tracking Lazard last reported sightings of him in this region.” he responded thoughtfully. “That’s why I was brought in. We haven’t heard from them in weeks and the trail has gone cold. It suggests that the circumstances are more serious than were first imagined.”

“What about our contact?” Cloud asked. “Did they confirm any of this?”

“The Turks were sent to scout ahead, but they were unable to find anything new.”

“And the workers?”

“That’s just it...” Sephiroth said in a low voice, “we lost communication with them a number of days ago. It seems every last one of the Reactor’s employees is missing...”

“But...”

With a tremendous surge of power, the truck lurched unexpectedly sideways, throwing Cloud to the floor. His head smashed hard against the plated steel, taking him a few seconds to regain his bearings. The grinding whir of tyres rang out as the vehicle spun from the road, screeching to a halt against a cluster of thick elm trees. Sephiroth rose slowly to his feet, unflinching as the truck quaked violently a second time, his cold stare burning through the torn tarpaulin.

“Sir!” cried the driver, scrambling for the steering wheel. “Something big just crashed into us!”

“It would appear,” he snarled as he grasped the blue handle of the Masamune, drawing the sword from its sheath, “that we have found one of our dragons.”

Stepping casually over the fallen boxes that had been strewn across the trailer, Sephiroth leapt from the rear of the truck,

landing gracefully on the worn trail as his boots sank into the damp earth. Cloud pulled himself up and, snatching the Buster Sword from over his shoulder, hurried to join his Captain.

He felt his clothes become instantly heavier as he braved the torrent of rain, mopping the matted spikes of hair from his eyes as he waded through the troughs of sludge. Sephiroth had already circled the truck, luring the magnificent beast from the damaged vehicle. The dragon was almost twenty feet in size, its enormous clawed limbs causing the ground to tremble beneath them as it lumbered after him. Its scales were emerald green in colour, fading into a pallid shade of purple on its underbelly. A rigid spine of dark grey lined the monster's bulky form, separating its spanning wings, thinning to become two curling horns at the tip of its jagged snout.

As it approached Sephiroth, the creature bellowed, its thunderous roar reverberating throughout the forest. He waited without motion for it to close on him, the Masamune clutched before his elegant figure in an offensive stance, his jaw firm as he tracked the beast with his fierce glare. Its nostrils smoking, the dragon reared back on its hind legs and, with a mighty pulse, breathed a wave of powerful flames over its foe.

Cloud gasped as the intense blaze engulfed Sephiroth, submerging him within the inferno. Tongues of fire bounced harmlessly against the glowing spherical barrier around him, his arm held aloft as the Shield Materia created a solid wall of impenetrable magic. For a few seconds the monster continued its futile onslaught, the flames retreating at last to its gaping mouth. Sephiroth lowered his hand, the faint shine of the Materia in his forearm diminishing, completely unscathed by the blast.

The parted fringe of his silver hair clung to his cheeks as the downpour became ever-harder, his darkened gaze lowered to the muddy trail. With a flash of movement, he was upon the startled animal, his sword slicing effortlessly through its stomach, spilling its intestines across the ground. The beast howled in agony, flailing wildly in an attempt to protect itself. Leaping high into

the air, he lunged at its neck, dragging his blade across its throat. The dragon gargled as blood caught in its gullet and, as it fell to its knees, Sephiroth showed no compassion for the dying creature, the tails of his black coat fluttering ferociously in the gale as he returned without expression to the truck.

* * *

“...Sephiroth’s strength is unimaginable.” described Cloud, studying the faces of the group as they listened intently. “He is far more powerful in reality than in any story you may have heard about him. I was mesmerised by the way he fought.”

“So what happened?” Aerith whispered.

“Our assignment had taken us halfway across the Planet.” he continued. “For five days and five nights we travelled from Midgar until, eventually, we reached Nibelheim...”

* * *

“How does it feel?”

“How does what feel?” Cloud asked, surprised by the question.

“It’s your first time back here since you made SOLDIER, right?” said Sephiroth.

“Yeah.” he mumbled, his eyes passing beyond his Captain.

Sephiroth had led Cloud and two of the accompanying Shinra infantrymen from the now-departing truck to the entrance of the town, stopping beneath the frail, overhanging iron gateway. A silent path of paved granite ventured deeper into the boundaries of Nibelheim from where they stood, lined on both sides by broad houses of pale sandstone, a thin layer of moss protruding from the slabs. A dated pickup motortricycle lay rusting in a small garden at the edge of the road, its decrepit exterior sheltered from the world by a white picket fence. The shadow of Mount Nibel began to shape as the cool sun of late summer appeared in

the dissipating overcast sky, cautiously slithering over the red slated rooftops towards the party.

“So, how does it feel?” Sephiroth repeated, turning away from them. “I wouldn’t know...I have no hometown...”

“But...what about your parents?” asked the young soldier.

“I was told very little about them.” he answered, his voice cold. “My mother’s name was Jenova. She died right after she gave birth to me.”

“And your father?”

“He...” Sephiroth sighed, chuckling callously to himself as he clenched his fists. “Why am I even talking about this...?”

He started along the pathway, not once looking back. The three followed without sound, sharing brief glances of unease as they pondered what memories had caused such a reaction in their superior. Sephiroth certainly had not been himself since the untimely desertion of Director Lazard, leaving the SOLDIER hierarchy in disarray. *First he was considering quitting the Company and now this? What’s gotten into him...?*

The narrow street guided them north through the town, the ground gradually inclining as they walked between houses of limestone and timber. The old oak shutters of windows and doors had been bolted closed on many of the homes, their hinges clattering in the whispering wind, the resonance broken only by the eerie chimes of swaying bells. Had it not been for the ghostly chimney smoke drifting from each of the buildings, they may have considered Nibelheim abandoned.

They were brought after a while to the wide clearing of the town square, wispy mists of dust swirling nonchalantly at their feet as it was blown to and fro in the mild draught. The water tower at the centre of the square was as Cloud remembered it; the shanty wooden frame that encased the well’s pump holding solid despite decades of rot, the small turbine at its height rotating hesitantly. Various stores and traditional shops marked the circumference of the area, their signage grimy and tattered as if they had remained unkempt for a great length of time. To their immediate left, there

stood the grand building of Gramps' Inn. It had become a local legend in previous years for the splendour of the three-bedroom annex that extended out over the main doorway, somewhat spectacular amongst the duplication of the neighbouring structures.

"The place is oddly quiet." Cloud concluded, surveying the deserted square.

"Too quiet." agreed Sephiroth.

"Everyone must be staying in their houses, afraid to come out because of the monsters."

"Maybe it's us they're afraid of." muttered Sephiroth, his nose twitching. "The stench of Mako is pretty bad here."

Crossing the short distance to the inn, they came suddenly to a halt as the twin doors of the tavern swung open, both SOLDIERS hastily drawing their weapons. A female Turk strode from the entrance, her straight brown hair bouncing in a ponytail behind her as she approached the party. She was small in stature, the black suit jacket of her uniform taut around her petite figure. With a smile and flicker of her sparkling hazel eyes, she holstered the automatic shotgun she carried, and quickly saluted Sephiroth.

"Samantha?" Cloud laughed in astonishment.

"Hey, Cloud." beamed the girl. "How are you?"

"I'm good." he said. "And you? It's been a while."

"A long while." added the young soldier, his voice tinny through his mask.

"Huh?" stammered Cloud, gazing confusedly between his friend and the Turk. "You two know each other, too?"

"We've worked together once before." Samantha recalled. "Still using that rifle, I see?"

"Enough of this." snapped Sephiroth, angrily slamming the Masamune back into its scabbard. "Have you anything new to report?"

"No, sir." answered Samantha, unfazed by his impatience. "Nothing has changed in the last three days. Everything has been arranged as planned."

“Good.” nodded Sephiroth. “Then, we leave for the Reactor at dawn. We’ll be spending a lot of time on foot tomorrow, so make sure you get to sleep early.”

“What do you want us to do until then, sir?” asked the young Shinra soldier.

“We only need one lookout for the moment, so you can come with me just now.” he instructed.

“And me?” said Cloud.

“You have permission to visit your family and friends, if you so wish.” granted Sephiroth, turning and making a fleeting final inspection of his surroundings as he made his way towards the doorway of Gramps’ Inn. “The other is on guard duty for the next four hours.”

“Visit your family?” Samantha gaped in disbelief, watching as Sephiroth and the young soldier disappeared inside. “Cloud...*you’re* from Nibelheim?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Then it must be you.”

“Samantha, what are you talking about?” he frowned.

“I met a girl here named Tifa.” she said excitedly.

“You know Tifa?”

“I found her on the mountain after I got lost.” said Samantha. “She was up there chasing her cat. We helped each other out.”

“What did she say?”

“When I told her I was from Shinra, she mentioned that she had a childhood friend called Cloud who left this town two years ago to become a SOLDIER. She asked about you.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I said I didn’t know.” shrugged Samantha. “I couldn’t be sure just by the name if it was the same Cloud. It seems the Planet is a smaller place than I thought.”

“Not small enough for me to have seen her since I joined the Army.” grumbled Cloud.

“You’ll meet her again tomorrow.”

“Huh?”

“I asked her to be our guide for the Reactor investigation.”

“You did what?” spluttered Cloud. “So...she’ll be travelling with us on the mountain?”

“That’s generally what a guide does.” Samantha stuck her tongue out sarcastically. “I’m sorry, but I really can’t talk about it right now. Tseng is already breathing down my neck because I involved a civilian...”

“What did you expect?”

“Look, I...uh...I have to go.” she said hurriedly, failing to acknowledge the remark. “I...um...still have a lot of work to do. I’ll see you around.”

“Samantha, wait!” he called as she jogged off, pulling her cell phone from the breast pocket of her suit.

“What is it?”

“Can you do me a favour?”

“It depends what it is.” she folded her arms.

“If you see Tifa, don’t tell her I’m back.”

* * *

“...hold on a damn minute!” interrupted Barret. “What the hell was wrong with seein’ Tifa?”

“I guess I must have wanted it to be a surprise.” answered Cloud. “I was really proud of making it to First Class.”

“That don’t make no sense to me!” Barret snorted.

“It was a reunion of childhood sweethearts...these things have to be done right.” explained Aerith in a matter-of-fact tone. Tifa shifted uncomfortably as she said it, glancing quickly away from Cloud and blushing. “Why don’t you just listen to what Cloud has to say? You can ask questions later.”

“But, I was only...”

“Okay, Cloud,” winked Aerith, putting a stern finger to her lips to shush Barret, “you can continue.”

“Where was I?”

“You had been allowed to visit your family.” recapped Tifa, her voice growing dry.

“Did you see them?” asked Aerith.

“I don’t think you could call it a family.” he said quietly. “My father died when I was still very young. I was an only child so, after I moved to Midgar, my mum lived in that house alone. I saw her that day; she hadn’t changed at all. She was a vibrant woman...”

* * *

“Uh...is anybody home?”

Cloud pushed the old oak door slowly open and peered down the narrow hallway of the small bungalow, its rusted hinges creaking with resistance. The scent of cooking stew reached his nose as he entered, drifting in waves down the corridor, the aroma one that had been so acquainted with as a boy. Advancing unhurriedly along the passage, he saw a collection of ornamental vases resting upon the pinewood table on his left, laid out below the rectangular mirror that hung from the grey wall. At the end of the hall, the room opened into a spacious stone kitchen, where a woman with long, wavy blonde hair stood at the stove, humming gently to herself as she chopped vegetables. Looking up, her jaw dropped, her weary eyes filling with untold joy.

“Cloud?” she whispered, the knife falling clumsily to the worktop as she clasped her hands over her mouth.

“Hi, mum.” he smiled.

“Come.” she said as he crossed the room, her arms held out. She embraced him tightly, holding him close to her. Stepping back to admire his physique, her gaze passed studiously over him. “Let me take a look at you.”

“I’m fine.” he chuckled, strolling through the hollow to the sitting room, and throwing himself onto the couch.

“You look so handsome.” she chirped as she sat down beside him, beaming with pride. “So this is a SOLDIER uniform?”

“Yeah...”

“I can’t believe how much you’ve grown in just two years.” she grinned, brushing the spiky locks of hair from his face.

“Mum, stop it.” he moaned, rolling over on the sofa.

His body sank into thick blue cushions, reminding him of the comfort it had given him as a child. Everything about the house triggered a memory in his mind; whether it was the familiar smells of the furniture fabric, or the echo of the wooden floors around the stone walls with each step taken. There came a *hiss* from the next room as the stew gradually began to bubble in the boiling pot. With this, his mother stood and, taking one last look at him, she disappeared into the kitchen.

“The girls must never leave you alone.” she called over the clattering of pans.

“Not really.” he replied nonchalantly, kicking his boots to the floor.

“Cloud, I’m worried about you.” she sighed, emerging again from her cooking. He glanced up to see her expression had grown serious; a hint of genuine concern seeping into her tone.

“I’m alright.”

“There are a lot of temptations in the city.” she said, biting her lip. “I’d feel a lot better if you just settled down and had a nice girlfriend.”

“Mum, I’m only sixteen.”

“You should have an older girlfriend....one that’ll take care of you. I think that would be the perfect type for you.”

“Look, I’m not interested...”

“Are you eating right?” she asked.

“Yeah, the Company takes care of me.”

“Is that so?” she frowned, thoughtfully. “You can’t cook, right? I’ve been worried sick about how you were doing.”

“Really, I’m fine.” he insisted.

“Cloud...?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t ever forget that I’ll always be your mother...”

* * *

“...I don’t want to talk about this anymore...”

* * *

The air had grown cold as the sun set over the mountains in the west, absorbing the daylight from around Nibelheim as Cloud made his way back along the streets towards the town square. There had been little change since he had left, the dull resonance of archaic yellow lanterns lighting the silent pathways beneath the cautious stare of cowering homes, the residents of which he had never cared to meet. The crisp breeze felt bitter against his face, whistling softly as it passed between the darkening stone foundations of the houses.

He came eventually to the broad clearing at the centre of Nibelheim, illuminated only by the dim glow from the windows of the Nibel Accessories store and the inn. The lone infantryman remained under the waning shade of the water tower, wandering back and forth for warmth, his rifle clutched in his arms. He turned quickly as he heard Cloud’s footsteps approach, aiming the weapon in his direction.

“Who goes there?” called a shaking voice.

“It’s just me.” replied Cloud. “How are you holding up?”

“Not great.” answered the young soldier, lowering the gun.

“How come?”

“I was just thinking about the past...” he sighed, casting his gaze to the twinkling stars above as they materialised from the lingering strands of ebbing sunlight.

“The past, huh?” Cloud repeated, folding his arms, tilting his head to the side. “You wanna talk about it?”

“No thanks, my mind just started wandering a bit.”

“You’re probably tired.”

“I guess...it’s so boring being on watch, and I can’t help but feel nervous, y’know?” he said through chattering teeth. “You never know when a monster’s gonna show.

“All you have to do is raise the alarm.”

“That’s alright for you to say.” he snorted sarcastically. “You’re excited because you’re here to prove yourself as a hero. But, what about me? My job is to clean up your mess.”

“Don’t act like such a baby.” teased Cloud. “Why don’t you do some squats to keep yourself warm? Or practice the victory pose I taught you?”

“Again?” the boy rolled his eyes. “Why are you always going on about image? Do SOLDIERS always have to be careful about what other people think?”

“Why do you ask?”

“You know how badly I want to be in SOLDIER, don’t you?”

“Maybe I’ll tell you later.” Cloud joked, patting his friend playfully on the back. “But, for now, just sit tight. That’s your job, right? Besides, you’re almost finished for the night. I’ll see you when your shift ends.”

Nodding under his armoured helmet, the soldier again began to patrol the square, stopping every few paces to perform a handful of squats. Cloud jogged the remainder of the short distance to the entrance of Gramps’ Inn, and strode inside. He was met by a light haze of cigar smoke that hung in the air of the open-plan lounge, warming the room as it evaded the evening chill. To his left, there was a cosy sitting area, furnished with a few old armchairs and a pair of quaint dining tables. Through the fumes, he saw two men standing by the low reception desk across the lobby, chatting between themselves. They glanced up from their conversation as he crossed the pine floor to the staircase on the east wall, and gave him a wave.

“Hello there, young man.” called the elder of the two, a bald man clad in a green cardigan that Cloud recognised as the owner of the inn. “Aren’t you the Strife lad?”

“Yeah.”

“May I ask why you’re staying in the reserved rooms with the rest of your Shinra people?”

“What do you mean?”

“I just thought you would feel more comfortable staying at home with your mother.”

“Sephiroth’s orders.” grumbled Cloud, shrugging. “Has he questioned you about the situation with the town yet?”

“Briefly.” replied Gramps thoughtfully. “I just told him exactly what I told the lovely young woman the company sent; this town ain’t no stranger to weird happenings, but we have to get rid of those monsters.”

“And I suppose Shinra think they’re here to do just that.” chuckled the second man sardonically. He glared at Cloud with a dark, disapproving expression as he spoke, his deep eyes burning through him. He was a powerfully-built man, his strong jaw firm beneath his husky mane of grey hair and beard.

“Don’t listen to him.” chortled Gramps with a dismissive gesture. “He just has an old grudge.”

“My name is Zangan.” said the man, his face remaining hard but not threatening as he took a step towards Cloud. “I travel the world teaching children martial arts.”

“Martial arts, huh?”

“Yes, I have one-hundred-and-twenty-eight students across the Planet.” nodded the man, offering his hand.

“Including some now working with the Shinra.” Gramps added mischievously.

“What brings you to Nibelheim?” Cloud asked suspiciously, giving his hand a single hesitant shake.

“I train a young girl named Tifa Lockhart in this town...”

“Tifa?” spluttered Cloud. *Geez, does everybody know her...?*

“Yes.” Zangan grinned proudly. “A friend of yours? Tifa has an excellent sense. She will be a great fighter one day. Maybe she’ll be able to teach you a thing or two.”

“Don’t count on it.”

“Ah, the arrogance of the Shinra youth.” laughed Zangan, taking another draw from his cigar. “It never fails to amuse me.”

“Is that so?”

“Becoming a powerful warrior is always about learning new things; new methods and techniques. Never be afraid to incorporate something different into battle...it might just save your life.”

“Thanks for the advice, old man,” Cloud answered coldly, “but I think I’ll stick with my greatsword for now.”

“As you wish.” smiled Zangan, placing a palm on one of Cloud's shoulder pauldrons. “Now, I think Sephiroth is waiting for you upstairs. Good luck for tomorrow.”

“Yeah....” mumbled Cloud, turning from the duo, and marching across the foyer to the staircase.

At the height of the steps, he came to a long corridor whose pale walls and watercolour paintings had started to reflect the varying shades of dusk cast by the three bay windows lining the hallway. Sephiroth stood by the centre frame, hands clasped at his back, his expression melancholy as he surveyed the scenery. Joining him, Cloud followed his Captain's stare without sound, his eyes falling upon the distant Shinra Mansion.

A once-luxurious manor owned by the Shinra Executive, the grandeur façade of the mansion had become dark and haunting. It was located north beyond the town limits, barely visible amid a recess at the foot of Mount Nibel's slowly-increasing gradient, its overgrown gardens enclosed by a high and mossy redbrick wall. The building itself had always seemed a foreboding place to Cloud; its decaying stone face and lifeless windows as silent as a cemetery. Very few people had come and gone in the last decade, leaving Shinra Manor to wither and die in the long and sad passage of time.

“What are you looking at?” posed Cloud.

“This landscape...” Sephiroth said quietly, lowering his gaze as he turned towards Cloud. “That mansion...I feel like I know this place...”

“Maybe you were here as a child?” Cloud suggested.

“Unlikely.” he shook his head, frowning as if deep in thought. “No, it doesn’t matter....I must just be tired. Speaking of which, we have an early start tomorrow. You should try and get some sleep soon.”

“I’ll do my best.” Cloud mumbled under his breath, absently twisting the leaves of the herb in the windowsill plant pot. “As long as that creepy picture doesn't keep changing.”

“The Turks have hired a guide to take us up the mountain to the Mako Reactor.” said Sephiroth. “I’ve been informed that she’s young. I hope we can rely on her...”



The Nibelheim Incident: Secrets of Mount Nibel

The early morning breeze was crisp and fresh as it wound its way many miles from the sea in the south, to the black wrought-iron gateway of Shinra Mansion where the party waited on the outskirts of Nibelheim, a short distance from the alcove entrance to the mountains. Needlekiss birds of magnificent blue and purple sang merrily in the pine trees that branched chaotically from the gardens and hung over the pathway, their flirting music a joy in the brightness of day. Beneath the shadow of the cliff face, Sephiroth paced the trail irritably, a severe glower upon his brow, casting repeated glances back towards the sloping rooftops of the town.

“It’s about time.” he growled, hearing the faint patter of footsteps approaching.

Cloud looked up to see three figures emerge from beyond the rocky knolls, hurriedly making their way along the unkempt road. His heart caught in his throat for a moment as he saw her; Tifa as radiant and beautiful as he remembered her. She wore a short brown miniskirt and waistcoat over a cropped white blouse, her black hair long and straight beneath her Stetson. Two men accompanied her; one a few years Cloud’s senior, with scruffy dark hair, the other considerably older, his rugged features revealing he had not shaved in days. Their eyes were trained on Sephiroth and, as they drew nearer, Cloud recognised them as Tifa’s father and Rick Fergus, son of the Nibel Accessories store owner, who was carrying a large flashbulb camera.

“Sorry I’m late.” she called, panting as she arrived at the gate.

“Don’t let it happen again.” Sephiroth snarled impatiently.

“My name’s Tifa.” she smiled clumsily, her cheeks flushing.
“It’s...uh...nice to meet y’all.”

“So, you’re the guide, huh?” grinned Cloud, stepping out from behind his superior and the two infantrymen, watching Tifa’s jaw drop.

“That’s right.” she laughed, her big brown eyes wide with surprise. “At your service. I just happen to be number one in the town. How are you, Cloud?”

“I’m good,” he replied, pausing as his tone turned serious, “but, I don’t think you should be involved in something like this. It’s too dangerous.”

“Listen, Sephiroth,” interrupted her father, his voice firm as he took a step forward. He was a handsome man, broad in stature, and Cloud could see he shared a number of Tifa’s features. “If something happens to my daughter...”

“Trust me.” he answered flatly.

“I’ll be alright, papa.” insisted Tifa, as if they had already discussed the issue. “I have two men from SOLDIER with me.”

“Then, there will be no problem if Cloud here protects her.” Sephiroth said almost sarcastically as he brushed past Mr. Lockhart and began towards the mountain. His tolerance had clearly reached its limit. “Now, we’ve already wasted enough time. Let’s go...”

“Mr. Sephiroth?” gulped Rick, the young photographer, tapping his arm nervously. Sephiroth turned slowly, a fierce expression spreading across his face.

“What?”

“Um...could I please take a picture?” he asked feebly, pulling the camera from around his neck and holding it out for them all to see. Sephiroth clenched his jaw, his Mako eyes flaring, but said nothing. “I’m such a huge admirer of yours. I’m even part of your Silver Elite fan club. Just one picture...as a memento. Tifa, you too. Together with both SOLDIERS.”

With a giggle of excitement, Tifa grabbed Cloud's arm and playfully dragged him to a spot in front of the black gates. Sephiroth stalked after them, shaking his head in frustration. Tifa posed gleefully between the SOLDIERS, adjusting her hat to prevent it falling from her head, with a cross-armed, nonchalant Cloud on her right. Quickly adjusting the lens of his camera, Rick gave them a thumbs-up and, with a blinding flash, took the photograph.

"Great! Thank you." he beamed, unable to take his gaze from his hero. "I'll give each of you a copy once I get them developed."

"Take your time." Sephiroth muttered to himself.

* * *

"...we set off after that." continued Cloud, each detail of the tale unfolding in his memory as he spoke. "Although the town was situated at the bottom of the mountain range, we had to trek the five mile distance to the only passable incline. After the Reactor was built, the Shinra employees used a ropeway system to go between the facility and the town, but it had apparently been damaged at the time of the disappearances, and was completely out of commission."

"Yeah, that kinda happened while me and Samantha were riding it." added Tifa. "We had to jump out of the cable car before one of the dragons tore it down. It was pretty scary stuff...but, that's not important."

"It simply wasn't safe anymore." Cloud agreed. "We were forced to scale the jagged face of Mount Nibel, carefully following Tifa's navigation along old and withered trails. It was after midday before we neared the summit. The townspeople used to say the mountains were once covered in vast forests, but now it was just a desolate landscape. According to folklore, no-one could cross to the other side alive, but that was just a tale to keep kids from playing on it. The cold air was no different than I had remembered..."

* * *

Cloud felt a single bead of sweat trickle down his cheek as he walked, leaving a tingle on his skin as it quickly cooled in the low temperature. Tifa and Sephiroth marched a number of feet in front of him, hopping between the collection of grey rock and stone that rested across the weaving pebbled ridge. Above them, the deep amber glare of the sun beat down on the party, its unforgiving rays broken only by a faint mist that hung over the horned peaks of the dark mountains like the chilling breath of an ancient foe. There had been little conversation among the party during the ascent, even when passing the lone rambler, and when Tifa slowed to walk alongside Cloud for a few moments, her hushed voice seemed to echo through the air as she spoke.

“Cloud, can I ask you something?” she whispered out of earshot of the others.

“Uh...sure.” he replied, returning from his own wandering thoughts. “Fire away.”

“Are there a lot of SOLDIER First Classes?”

“Nope.” he answered with a cocky grin. “We’re a small, elite group. Not too many of us.”

“Oh...” Tifa trailed off. She glanced down, opening her mouth as if to continue, but no words came. As she met his gaze again, there came a terrible shriek from behind.

Cloud spun in time to see a death claw leap from a ridge above them, its bony pincers snapping wildly at its back. It hit the ground running, its powerful legs pounding towards the group. His reaction was instinctual, lightning-quick. As the death claw propelled itself forward, Cloud heaved the Buster Sword across his shoulder and swung, the thick edge of the weapon catching the monster's midriff, launching it into the cliff face. There was a sickening crunch as its body collided with the rock, twitching as it toppled to the ground.

Cloud turned back towards his colleagues with a shrug, paying no attention to Sephiroth's indifferent expression. He noticed that his young friend had managed to get himself between the creature and Tifa, his rifle raised, protecting her from the attack, and nodded in acknowledgement of his bravery. The soldier took a few nervous steps forward, his gun trained on the death claw, and gave the unmoving body an investigative kick.

“I wouldn't do that if I were you, buddy.” Cloud said. “It's just knocked out. It could wake up and start chowing down on you.”

“It's not dead?” Tifa gasped in surprise. “Why?”

“Use of my sword brings about wear, tear and rust.” he replied with a sigh, admiring the great blade before slotting it onto its holder, oblivious as Sephiroth rolled his eyes. “So I normally just hit with the blunt side. No need to kill if you don't have to, right?”

Slowly making their way around the side of a steep stretch of path over the next hour, the road marred by a number of small Mako swells like ghostly pale green springs, the silence of the lonely landscape was shattered by a sudden grunt from the SOLDIER Captain. Cloud glanced up, seeing him stop and take a moment to gaze towards the height of the adjacent mountain top, shielding his eyes from the sunlight. Tracing his stare, Cloud could make out a series of enormous pipes protruding from varying points on the opposite cliff, and what seemed to be the bulbous chimney of the Mako Reactor concealed within the walls of a vast isolated ledge. A large hollow had been cut from atop the twisting tentacles of treacherous rock that reached out malevolently around the natural boundary, from which an old rope bridge extended to the crest of the trail a short way from the group.

Taking their time to shuffle one by one along the ridge, the party came at last to the slender crossing. As the five gathered by the wooden posts that secured the bridge to the ground, Cloud felt a wave of unease pass over him, peering warily into the misty gorge that ran between the peaks. The chasm was approximately fifty

feet in depth, shaping the descent of the flowing waters that would become the River Stygian, but was lined on both sides by armies of sharp stalagmites. Smirking to herself as she read his expression, Tifa casually placed her hands on the frayed ropes.

“You better watch your footing,” she warned, “the path gets harder from here on in. We’ll need to cross in single file.”

The bridge groaned agedly as she stepped onto the first of the wooden boards, creaking as it swayed gently under her steady movement. Sephiroth went after her, his undeterred focus on the opening at the walkway’s summit, followed closely by Cloud and the infantrymen. Only the noise of heavy breathing surrounded them as they proceeded, anxious and quick, unnerving amidst the closing fog. Harriers circled overhead in a defensive formation, cautiously surveying the intruders rather than scavenging as they were best known to do.

As they approached the centre of the bridge, an unexpected shudder sent each of them scrambling for support. Cloud swallowed hard as the tension of the rope rapidly began to loosen, and froze as there came a great tearing sound from behind. Spinning in time to see the wires break free of their foundations, he suddenly felt himself grow weightless, hearing Tifa scream as they plunged into the ravine.

He hit the icy torrent at speed, gulping down a mouthful of water as he cried out in pain. He gasped for breath, kicking with all his might as he fought his way blindly to the surface. His lungs ready to explode, he burst from the river, snatching at air as his eyes stung with fizzing foam. The waters began to pick up speed and, as he strained to see, he could make out the shadow of Sephiroth clambering onto a rocky shore nearby. Dragging himself against the current, he grabbed an overhanging ledge, and yanked himself onto dry land. Wheezing, he rolled onto his back, looking up in time to see the young Shinra soldier pull Tifa to the safety of the embankment.

“You guys okay?” Cloud croaked, brushing the matted spikes from his face, watching the others gradually rise to their feet and

wring the water from their drenched clothes. Tifa and the soldier gestured to say they were fine. The second infantryman was nowhere in sight.

“Everyone seems to be alright.” replied Sephiroth after a few moments, frowning. His furrowed gaze was set towards a lone cave entrance at the base of a small decline further along the river, the murky hollow the only obvious outlet from the shore. “Can we get back to where we were?”

“I think so,” nodded Tifa, her teeth chattering, “these caves are all intertwined like an ant farm. It shouldn’t be a problem to get us to the Reactor, or even back down the mountain this way.”

“Good.” said Sephiroth. “We can’t afford to waste any more time. We must continue on.”

“But, Sephiroth,” paused Tifa, scanning the area around them, “isn’t there someone missing?”

“I know it sounds cold,” he exhaled, shaking his head, “but we really don’t have the time to search for him. We can only hope for the best. Now, come on. You’re the guide, so lead the way.”

Hesitant in her step as if she wanted to argue against Sephiroth’s order, Tifa trudged towards the underground passage, shivering as her dripping clothes absorbed the chilling bite of the air. The party were met by a low stone corridor as they passed beyond the opening, and began their ascent into the dark tunnels of the mountainside. Though thin strips of distant light pierced the cave walls through fissures etched in the ceiling, briefly illuminating the otherwise black pathways, Sephiroth chose to keep a flame of Fire magic burning so as to warm and dry the group. The climb was long and laborious, drawing them into the insect-infested labyrinth of Mount Nibel, the steep slope proving a challenge even to the trained legs of the soldiers and Tifa.

After a short while, the tunnels widened to form colossal caverns of shimmering rock, and their trail began twisting amongst the maze of granite sentinels that spanned the vast height of the caves. Waves of pale greens and yellows rippled on the smooth

faces of the stone as they were bathed in bursts of concentrated sunlight, the colours merging as if in harmonious motion. The soothing sound of trickling water reached their ears as they came to a small stretch of pointed stalagmites, their mossy bases dampened by a thin brook of slow current that crept down a natural elevated stairwell on the wall, laying a veil of serenity over the surroundings.

“What is this place?” Cloud asked Tifa, his voice hushed as he gazed upon the magnificence of the cavern. “I’ve never seen this part of the mountain.”

“I just know them as the mysteriously-coloured caves...” she whispered.

“It’s the Mako.” answered Sephiroth from behind, his voice breaking the tranquillity. “The coloured walls are part of the Mako energy’s effect. This mountain is particularly abundant in it because the Mako rivers run so close to its heart. That’s why the first Reactor was built here.”

“This is actually the deepest I’ve ever been from this side.” admitted Tifa. “I know the passages through here lead straight to the Reactor, but when I often used to come here with my cat, I would feel so at peace that...”

“Enough.” Sephiroth interrupted sternly. “This is no time for your useless reminiscing. We must carry on, and if you no longer have any additional knowledge to guide us, then I will.”

“But...” Tifa spluttered in protest, turning to Cloud to seek his support. Placing a hand on her shoulder for comfort, he shrugged, and lowered his eyes in silence.

Pushing briskly past them, Sephiroth took the head of the party, striding with determination along the path, his firm glare beckoning them to follow with haste. For almost an hour they trekked farther through the enriched tunnels and caves, too hurried to slow and admire their beauty, constantly forcing their way against the incline as they circled the inner boundaries of the mountain. Tifa cursed the Captain of SOLDIER under her breath

as she slogged aside Cloud, fleetingly mumbling her disdain for his ignorant attitude towards her.

Approaching the summit under Sephiroth's direction, the four could feel the temperature drop slightly, and the drifting clouds begin to penetrate the passages. Darkness had vacated the passageways, leaving only the lingering dew of golden daylight that spread from the distant mouth to the underground caverns. When at last they reached the pulsing swell of the sun's rays beating through the haze, the tunnels parted to shape an enchanting sight that none had expected, melting even their leader's hardened expression.

"I don't believe it..." breathed Sephiroth as he marvelled at the expanse, his words almost inaudible.

They had come to a secluded grotto that marked the gateway from the arid peaks of Mount Nibel to the gleaming catacombs within. The hollow was large in size, partitioned wholly by high curving walls of stone but for a slim channel on the northern face that revealed the grey landscape of the mountain range beyond. The decaying remains of a number of oak trees lined the perimeter of the cavern, unusual to be found at such an altitude. Bent and lifeless, their dried roots snaked across the floor like prying fingers towards the very location that had captured the fascination of the group.

At the centre of the grotto, sparkling beneath the beams of sunlight whose energy seemed to focus entirely on the spot, stood a rocky fountain amid a small pool of ethereal pale green liquid. Cloud could make out a crystallised object at the pinnacle of the structure, held in a deep cup of stone, glimmering intensely as it reflected the light that poured from the ceiling. Seeing the natural alter, Tifa gasped with excitement, her mood lifting immediately as she squeezed between the soldiers, scurrying over the brittle tree roots to the edge of the motionless pool.

"Where are we?" she called, shielding her eyes as she ogled the shining crystal.

“This is a Mako fountain.” replied Sephiroth, his gaze filling with wonder as he and the others crossed the cave to join her. Branches crunched underfoot as they walked, the sound a strange resonance in their isolation.

“It’s so pretty.” Tifa whispered, inspecting the spring.

“A miracle of nature.” agreed Sephiroth.

“But, if the Reactor continues to suck up Mako energy,” asked Tifa, her tone sinking as she nodded towards the withering oak, “won’t this dry up too?”

“Eventually.” he sighed grimly. “Fortunately for Shinra, most people on the Planet are willing to allow such things to fade from existence in order for them to lead the easy life that the Company’s electricity can provide. If it’s any consolation, the Mako fountain will be one of the last parts of the mountain to die.”

“Why is that?” said the young soldier.

“Although it seems relatively small, this crystal contains an enormous amount of Mako inside it.” explained Sephiroth. “You should know the name we give to it.”

“Name?” he muttered, staring hard at the crystal. A swirling mist of blue had formed beneath its glassy surface, gently throbbing inside. “I have no idea.”

“Materia.” Sephiroth revealed, a thin smile broadening on his lips as the infantryman looked at him with surprise.

“Huh?”

“When you condense Mako energy, the solid form produced is called Materia. You’ve seen it before, right?”

“Yeah, but not like this.” said the boy, leaning closer.

“Most of the Materia on the Planet has been manufactured in the laboratories at Shinra Headquarters using excavated Mako stones.” began Sephiroth. “The researchers of the Weapons Development Department have learned over the years how to produce and modify its properties using specialised compression capsules. This is where the huge arsenal of Materia with different

magic available to SOLDIER and the Security Department comes from.

“It’s very rare to see Materia in its natural state, so I can understand your confusion. In fact, this is the first time I’ve ever seen it with my own eyes. Materia has to be created synthetically because certain delicate conditions must be met in order for it to form, otherwise the Mako will take decades to crystallise on its own. There are a few known places around the world where this actually occurs, though. For example, in fertile areas of the Southern Continent such as Mideel or Banora, you can find small swells in the ground where the Mako rivers have breached the surface to form tiny pools. We passed some of these on our way up the mountain trail. These are the spots where, if left undisturbed, Materia will begin to crystallise over time.”

“C’mon, man,” Cloud teased, slapping his friend playfully on the back, “didn’t they teach you this stuff at the Academy?”

“I guess not...”

“But, Sephiroth, why is it that when you equip Materia, you can use magic?” asked Cloud, spinning sharply as Tifa let out a sudden burst of laughter. Sephiroth scoffed, brushing the long strands of his fringe from his face as he shook his head in mocking disgust. “What? What is it?”

“You are a SOLDIER and you didn’t even know that?” chuckled Tifa.

“The knowledge and wisdom of the Ancients is held in the Materia.” explained Sephiroth. “Anyone with this knowledge can freely interact with the land and the Planet and call upon its powers as they once did. Thus, when you equip a Materia orb, the knowledge contained within that orb will act as a conduit between you and the Planet, unleashing its magic...or so they say.”

“Magic...” Cloud murmured thoughtfully. “The mysterious power...”

“Someone once told me never to use such unscientific a term as ‘mysterious power’.” said Sephiroth, his grin diminishing slightly.

“It shouldn’t even be called ‘magic’. I still remember how angry he was.”

“Who?” asked Cloud. “I’ve never heard that.”

“Professor Hojo.” Sephiroth rolled his eyes with distaste. “He was an inexperienced man back then, assigned to take over the work of a great scientist. Forever a walking mass of complexes. But, no matter. Let’s just keep going. We’ve dwelled too long here...”

Gesturing with his hand towards the narrow exit of channelled rock a short way from them, he wordlessly bade his comrades to return to their ascent of the mountain. With an air of revitalised enthusiasm and a spring in her step, Tifa took charge of the party, the heels of her boots echoing between the high walls on either side as she led the group through the ingress.

The passage brought them to a cliffside walkway looking west across the dark twisting horns of the great shapes that grew like coiled spires in the mist, and the endless moors of the Rilfsak Plains beyond, whose lush greenery had already commenced the long journey towards the horizon. A thin trail of gravel made its way from the ledge along the north face of the mountain, rising as it continued on beneath a series of huge rusting pipes that arced from the cliff and disappeared into the gorge below. The four began to climb the rim, wary as they scaled the crumbling path, the throbbing warmth drying their damp clothing, moving in single file and without sound as they strove to reach their destination.

They arrived finally at the height of the trail, coming to a broad clearing overshadowed by the towering ridge of Mount Nibel’s tallest peak. Only the enormous cylindrical chimney of the Mako Reactor was visible at the centre of the space; the body of the facility buried deep within the confines of the mountain. It had been constructed decades before with slabs of grey brick, and little had changed of the exterior over the years but for the rot and rust of the steel piping that extended the length of its figure, and the erection of a supporting base shell that led to the secured

entrance of the Reactor. It was accompanied solely by a smaller containment structure at the far side of the clearing, connected by a single funnel whose colour had drained over time to leave a brown residue along its casing.

As they ventured towards the Reactor head, their attention was set on the nests of the scavenging harriers tucked high in the derelict fissures of the chimney's domed crown, and the blue-feathered birds themselves as they soared without purpose around their settlement. The pebbled terrain smoothed to flat rock as they neared the slender stairway of the support podium, the sudden sound of crunching all the more startling to the party as it resonated from under their boots. Above them, there came a shrill cry from the harriers, each of them swooping from their flight at speed and rising again in an alert formation. Sephiroth slowed as he watched the birds, and swiftly withdrew the Masamune from its sheath, his silver head jerking sharply as he scanned the area, waving the others back.

Cloud was quick to adopt a defensive stance as he and the young soldier moved immediately to protect Tifa, but was puzzled by his superior's apprehension. It had been more than a week since the mysterious disappearance of the Reactor workers, and it simply seemed that the presence of group had caused agitation among the harriers. Opening his mouth to question the command, Cloud felt his muscles tense instantly, the faint tremor of the earth unmistakable. Thin wisps of smoke began to float into the air from the darkened corner of the site as something stirred in the shaded region beyond the building, and released a roar that pierced their ears like a siren.

Sephiroth held his sword aloft as the emerald dragon emerged from the shadows, its beady stare trained on the black-clad SOLDIER. The creature was of the same species, but much larger than the dragon the Shinra party had encountered in Nibel Forest, its green scales tarred by the dust and grime of its resting place. The ground shook relentlessly with the beast's every step, the vibrations worsening as it rapidly began to pick up speed.

The dragon lowered its rigid neck like a battering ram as it careered towards Sephiroth, propelling itself forward with a great surge of power from its hind legs.

As it closed on him, Sephiroth leapt from its path, landing gracefully a number of feet from the mighty animal. Hurling past him, the dragon skidded to a halt, its momentum dragging it across the decline of the rock, beating its enormous wings in an attempt to recover its attack. Sephiroth lacked expression as he lifted his right arm towards the foe, the dim glow of his equipped Materia creating a green haze around it as he prepared to unleash the orb's magic.

Targeting the monster, Sephiroth spun abruptly, his concentration faltering and the magic haze diminishing as a second dragon charged without warning from the shadows. Its horned snout flaring, the beast snapped its foaming jaws wildly, bearing down on him with the untamed force of an enraged giant. Sephiroth parried the assault effortlessly with the Masamune, restraining the animal with incredible strength as it swung its claws violently at him. Glancing up as the first dragon reared back to emit another thunderous bellow, its nostrils smoking as it gathered the energy to exhale a wave of fire upon Sephiroth, Cloud burst from his position, advancing hastily upon the creature as it dropped to its feet.

Thinking fast as the dragon began to move again, Cloud pulled his Ice Materia from the pouch of his utility braces, hurriedly pressing the small orb against his forearm. The Materia merged with his flesh easily, melting beneath his skin. Seeing the image of a frozen lake in his mind, a green haze gathered around his arm and frosty sparks of Blizzara magic fired from his fingertips, forming a sheet of thick ice under the marching claws of the monster. Working against the minor slope of the clearing, the hulking animal shrieked in confusion as its legs kicked frantically, but its body slid backwards towards the cliff. The earth around them trembled fiercely as the dragon lost its footing

and collapsed, emitting a terrible howl as it sped helplessly down the decline, vanishing beyond the mountainside.

Turning, Cloud saw Sephiroth push the second dragon from him, ruthless as he skewered the beast's heart. There was a great quake as its body shuddered and tumbled limply to the ground, its corpse twitching as globules of thick blood began to ooze from the wound. His brows furrowed as if lost in thought, Sephiroth returned to the party, wiping the blood from the Masamune with a stained tissue as he walked.

"What is it?" asked Cloud as his superior strode past him, kneeling at the spot where the ground had crackled below their feet.

"Something's not right." he muttered, trailing his fingers through the crumbling dirt. "Those dragons...it's very strange to see them so high in the mountains. The Turks' report was right."

"About the dragons?"

"And the possible fate of the Reactor's workers..."

As he spoke, Sephiroth leant forward, and picked something from the grains of dust scattered across the rock. Exhaling deeply, he grew slowly to his feet, examining it in his hand. After a moment, he held out his palm, inviting the others to take a look at his find. The object was small and thin, like a tree branch, charred at the edges as if it had been exposed to a naked flame.

"What is it?" said Tifa.

"A human bone." answered Cloud solemnly, lowering his head. "It means that the workers didn't disappear...they were eaten..."

"But..." stammered Tifa, holding a hand to her mouth as her expression turned to grief. "That...that's awful..."

"We have to find out what's causing this." asserted Sephiroth, gazing up at the entrance of the Reactor. "Cloud, come with me."

"What about me?" exclaimed Tifa, grabbing Cloud's arm as he followed Sephiroth towards the grilled steps of the facility.

"You two wait here." Cloud instructed. "Don't worry, you'll be safe enough."

“But, I wanna go inside.” pleaded Tifa, gripping tighter, her large brown eyes burning into his. “I wanna see what’s going on.”

“I’m sorry...” Cloud shook his head, gently pulling away from her grasp.

“This is a restricted facility.” Sephiroth stated firmly. “Non-Shinra personnel are not permitted inside. This place is full of Shinra, Inc.’s industrial secrets. I can’t let you go any further.”

“But...”

“Stay here until we get back.” ordered Sephiroth, nodding to the soldier. “Take care of the young lady.”

“Yes, sir.” obeyed the boy, clicking his heels together as he raised his hand to his helmet in salute. Taking a single pace, he stood between Tifa and the SOLDIERS as they started up the stairway, blocking her from following.

“You better treat me real good, then!” moped Tifa, crossing her arms in a sulk as Cloud and Sephiroth reached the broad doorway to the facility.

The heavy security gates were lifeless and parted easily, scraping over the grated panels of the support platform. They opened into a wide corridor whose white plastic walls had become stained by the Mako fumes of the Reactor’s lower depths, leading them to a cold stone stairwell. The steps circled the circumference of the chimney’s inner walls, descending a great number of levels, the high ceiling of the slim passage echoing their footsteps in the near-silence. Only the distant rumble of machinery could be heard as they made their way into the buried heart of the building, their pathway lit by what few bulbs had survived the facility’s abandonment.

After a short time, they came to the base of the stairs, and to another corridor that took them farther into the confines of the Reactor. Cloud noted that it appeared far less modern than its Midgar counterparts, as if no attempt at restoration or redevelopment had been made. Rounding a corner, the two were enveloped by an intense heat, forced to screen their faces from the thick gases that had drifted from the cavernous core of the

Reactor. Before them, the hall ended to form a metal grid that stretched between their location and an adjacent doorway, overlooking the internal workings of the facility, and the pale green rivers of liquid Mako far below.

Outdated machines scaled the sweeping brick walls of the interior, coated with decay, their grinding cogs and greasy pistons creating the image of a world without Shinra's modern technology. Huge funnels came and went across the area, the largest of which plunged into the rivers, piping much of the extracted energy into a discrete room one floor beneath them. The entrance to the room was situated on a platform alongside the Reactor's core activation system, and seemed oddly out of place among the pressure valves and controls. A walkway extended from the head of the platform, accessible from their position by a lone ladder that stood against the railings of the grid.

Taking the first rung, Sephiroth began down the ladder, his leather coat clinging to him in the dense humidity. Mopping sweat from his eyes, Cloud came after, hurrying to keep up with his determined Captain as he hastened along the walkway. Coming at last to the platform, Sephiroth stopped before the long panel on the wall, caressing his chin as he examined the readings on the many pressure diodes. Four valves were placed above the panel, each one distinctly colour-coded in reference to which part of the Reactor system they were relevant.

"Can you see what's causing the failures?" asked Cloud, analysing Sephiroth's empty stare.

"The Reactors are being managed poorly nowadays," he responded in a low voice, "and the older plants are becoming increasingly damaged due to wear and tear from excessive Mako consumption. In this case, the pressure levels in the main Reactor are far too high. It seems to be making the Mako surge through the pipes and put extra strain on the compressors, causing them to malfunction."

"Can we reverse the effect?"

“I’m not sure.” said Sephiroth. “But, I think this explains why there has been a sudden increase in dragons around the mountain.”

“Huh?”

“Many creatures on the Planet are attracted to places were Mako is rich and plentiful. An increase in Mako would inevitably see an increase in these animals.”

“So, if we lower the pressure in the Reactor,” Cloud nodded in comprehension, “we should be able to halt the malfunctions and put an end to the dragons.”

“In theory, yes,” said Sephiroth thoughtfully, “but...there’s something else...”

“Something else?”

“You see these four gauges?” he asked, pointing to the small black screens beneath each of the valves.

“Yeah.”

“They represent the flow of Mako inside the Reactor. So, doesn’t it strike you as odd that there is very little flow to the three main generators, but maximum flow to a fourth location? The one marked ‘Control Room?’”

“What do you think it means?” pondered Cloud.

“It tells us that someone has decided the Mako has more use there,” Sephiroth replied, “and that this person has little regard for the consequences. It appears that the Mako flow to the control room can only be lowered from inside. Something’s not right about all this.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Mako rivers that permeate the earth of this Planet is no mere energy. Where do you think it comes from? Where does this substance, whose existence is unfathomable by our science, originate from? Does it just come from nothing? Or does the Planet make it? What is the purpose of this energy? Is it just electricity to power a light? No, it’s not; Mako energy is far more than that. These Reactors are just a means of making money, but Shinra learned the secrets of the Lifestream’s true potential long

ago. I expect some of the Company's most classified work went on down here, and I don't think we'll have to go very far to find out what it was."

"I don't get it..."

Straightening up, Sephiroth glanced over Cloud's shoulder to the partially-concealed entrance behind them, and again slipped the Masamune from its scabbard. Cloud turned, frowning as he too inspected the broken security gate. The thick metal door had been shifted unlawfully from its default standing, leaving its cleaved locks twisted and bent. An eerie red light from the room beyond filtered through a narrow gap, luring the SOLDIERS into the darkened unknown. Taking a deep breath, Sephiroth stepped forward.

"Watch out," he said as he hauled the door aside, "it appears this isn't just a Reactor..."

There was a great screech of metal on stone as the gate slammed against the wall, the chilling sound reverberating along the passage in front of them. Creeping down the short hallway, they found a concealed chamber, the misty air cool and damp inside. The control room was vast in size, submerged in an unnatural glow of deep red, its walls and ceiling covered by an entanglement of rubber tubing. A steel staircase climbed the centre of the inclined room, passing between four rows of egg-shaped capsules. The enormous pods rested noiselessly, but seemed strangely alive as Mako was pumped into them from the organic-like piping above, a blue light radiating from the small glass pane on each. At the height of the steps stood a single electronic doorway, marked by a series of biohazard warnings, with an engraved plaque nailed above the entrance.

"It can't be..." whispered Sephiroth as he read the name on the tablet aloud. "*Jenova?*"

Spellbound, he floated hastily up the stairs, quickly reaching the doorway. His gloved fingers silently traced the strange vertical markings on the door, somewhat resembling a genetic code, as if

searching for an answer to the encrypted lock. Suddenly, he snatched the hinges and rattled them with all his might.

“Sephiroth?” yelled Cloud from below. “What are you doing?”

“It won’t open!” he moaned, a hint of suppressed disappointment and frustration evident in his voice as he turned from the doorway.

Without sound, he slowly began to examine the individual capsules around him, his expression growing more sullen as he read each of the labelled plates. The panels bore nothing but a series of digits arranged into what seemed like dates and advanced chemical formulae, clearly designed to keep the secrets of their contents from being uncovered. Murmuring to himself as he trudged down the steps, his eyes glazed and his mind distant, Sephiroth gave the faintest of nods towards a small computer monitor on the wall behind Cloud.

“We should be able to reduce the Mako flow from there.” he concluded, coming to an abrupt halt at the first row of containers, focusing on those to his left. “Cloud, you release the valves.”

Striding across the grilled floor, Cloud found himself gazing at a display that showed a three-dimensional map of the control room. The screen flashed under a thin film of flaking white dust that seemed out of place in the sterile chamber, but he thought nothing of it. Aside the rows of capsules on the monitor were coloured pressure sensors, gauging the levels of energy pumping into each. Careful to follow the instructions, he systematically entered the commands on the keyboard, watching as the sensors gradually reduced to normal pressure. There was a droning mechanical hum from above, followed by a great hiss as the blue glow of the pods began to fade. With this, Sephiroth hoisted himself up onto the nearest capsule, and peered through the porthole. He dropped back seconds later, his face lowered and jaw set as he shook his head.

“What is it?” gasped Cloud, darting up the steps to join his superior. “What’s in there?”

“Now I see...Hojo...” whispered Sephiroth through gritted teeth, ignoring the question. “But, even by doing this, you will never achieve the same greatness as Professor Gast. Cloud, my suspicions were wrong; this isn’t Hollander’s equipment.”

“What are you talking about?” pressed Cloud, drawing back as Sephiroth glanced up at him through dark and brooding eyes.

“These pods are not like what we saw at the Reactor in Midgar. This is a system that condenses and freezes the Mako energy being extracted from the rivers...” he said, a wry smile flickering on his pursed lips, “that is, when working correctly. Now...what does Mako energy become when it’s further condensed?”

“You’re talking about Materia, right?”

“In truth, it’s not always the case.” he replied. “There are rare circumstances in which condensed Mako can become stagnant and develop different properties, but normally, yes...Mako energy becomes Materia when condensed. That was the original purpose of these machines; to manufacture Materia for use during the War. However, Professor Hojo has since modified them and put something else in there. Take a look...”

Stepping aside, Sephiroth motioned for Cloud to investigate the capsule. Hesitant, Cloud pulled himself up to the round pane, shifting his weight onto the rubber tubing for support. With the blue radiance of the streaming Mako all but gone, he strained to see into the stale and murky liquid inside. As his eyes began to focus, a humanoid creature took shape before him. The figure’s thin features had rotted to leave only a skeletal form, its crystallised skin shimmering in the dim light. Leaning closer, Cloud stared at the hollow eyes on the silvery face of the wild-haired being through the glass, losing his grip with a start as it suddenly grinned wickedly at him. He landed hard on the ground, quickly scrambling to his feet in a fearful daze.

“What the hell?” he spluttered. “What is that thing?”

“Most members of SOLDIER are humans that have been showered with Mako,” said Sephiroth quietly, his breathing thick and heavy, “using its power to enhance their abilities far beyond

normal capacity. The infusion process is what gives you the gleam in your eyes, your superior strength and agility, and your body's tolerance to pain. You are different from others, but still human. But, they...they have been exposed to an abnormally-high degree of Mako, much more than you..."

"You mean they're some kind of monster...?"

"Monsters are plants and animals that have absorbed too much Mako, deliberately or otherwise, and it has disrupted their genetics. Guard hounds, for example, are derived from the bandersnatch wolves that used to roam the Midgar Wastelands. Some were created in the Science Department's labs like so many other experiments, but others mutated because of the toxins in the soil. You've seen how aggressive those beasts can get. If such a physical and behavioural alteration can take place in an animal due to overexposure...imagine what it could do to humans..."

"So the things in the pods are...?"

"They are makonoids," Sephiroth answered, his words so low that they were barely distinguishable, "abominations spawned by Mako. These must be the "brutal creatures" mentioned in the distress call. I would guess that the Reactor workers discovered the link between the malfunctions and the increase in dragons, and came through here after someone had broken inside, aiming to shut down the flow...only to find something far more sinister."

"That Shinra were producing these creatures..." stammered Cloud, feeling suffocated by the growing realisation.

"Exactly." nodded Sephiroth. "And it is Professor Hojo that is responsible for it all. Mutated living organisms transformed by Mako energy...that's what these monsters really are. They're much less human than normal members of SOLDIER like you."

"Like *me*?" Cloud repeated, frowning. "You mean...*you're* different?"

"No!" Sephiroth roared in anguish, his scream an eruption of emotion. His lips trembling, his eyes filling with tears of rage, his fist clamped around the long blue handle of the Masamune as he began swinging it wildly through the air.

“Sephiroth!” cried Cloud, leaping from the platform to the safety of the ground below as his deranged Captain sliced away chunks from the surrounding capsules. With a deep mournful wail, he lowered the sword, his shoulders sagged, his back to Cloud.

“Jenova...these monsters...” he sobbed, “was I...was I created in this way too? Am I the same as these monsters? Am I the same as *them*? You saw it...all of them were human!”

“Human?” refuted Cloud sternly. “No way!”

“Ever since I was little, I’ve always felt that I was different from the others,” he said in a broken voice, “that I was special in some way; that I had a special purpose...even after I met Genesis and Angeal. But, not like this!”

Cloud opened his mouth to reply, but stopped, noticing the green haze gathering around Sephiroth’s right arm. In an instant, there was a great pulse of invisible energy, followed by the screech and groan as, all around Sephiroth, container metal crumpled and tubing was ripped from its base. Cloud was thrown backwards from his position against the control monitor with a surge of power, slumping to the floor. He looked up to see Sephiroth at the epicentre of the blast zone, the pods closest to him disfigured and leaking, his maddened stare locked on a now-shuddering capsule on the level above.

A deafening whistle of steam burst from the damaged seal of the pod, the compressed gas forcing its way out. With a snap, the door fell from the container, clattering noisily on the walkway before it. From the pale green cloud of rising vapour emerged another silvery figure, its naked body dripping with the substance it had been immersed in. The makonoid was over six feet in height, with powerful limbs and clawed hands, attached to the capsule by wires across its extraordinarily-strong physique.

Paralysed by muscular atrophy from its stasis, the monster toppled forward. Behind him, the cords tugged and were stripped from its flesh, each spurting a different liquid. It let out a high-pitched shriek that resonated disturbingly throughout the control room but, as the last wire was yanked from its body, the

makonoid's eyes rolled back inside its head, and it collapsed into a foetal position on the oval pod door. His heart racing, Cloud glanced anxiously back at Sephiroth as he closed his eyes, lowering his arm. There came a few moments of suspenseful silence, until at last the Captain of SOLDIER spoke, his words sending a chill down Cloud's spine.

“Am I even...human...?”



The Nibelheim Incident: The Jenova Project

“...Am I human?” Cloud repeated, sensing the captivation of the others. “I didn’t quite understand what Sephiroth was saying at the time. And I was even more shocked to learn that the Shinra had been producing these creatures...”

“Damn Shinra!” barked Barret, slamming his gun-arm against the headboard of his bed.

“Hey, keep the noise down.” scolded Aerith.

“Sorry...” he muttered sheepishly, “it’s just the more I hear, the more I hate ‘em. What Sephiroth said ‘bout the Mako...that explains why there’s been an increase in monsters in the last few decades. ‘Specially ‘round Midgar.”

“Who would’ve thought the Mako Reactor held a secret like that?” said Tifa softly, the long fringe of her silken hair hiding one side of her face.

“Weren’t you waiting outside at the time?” asked Aerith, confused.

“I was,” she replied quietly, “but they would never have told me what was being held down there. All this is new to me, too.”

“So, what happened next?” pressed Red XIII, his usual calm voice mingled with eagerness, still very much involved with the developing story. His fiery tail glowed like a candle in the dimness of the room, illuminating the dark corner in which he lay.

“We returned to Nibelheim.” continued Cloud, “Sephiroth was acting really strange; I obviously knew he was in distress, but he

was clearly restraining all feeling from surfacing. When we reached the town, he immediately confined himself in his room at the inn, leaving me to brief our Turk contact on what had happened at the Reactor. For days I tried to talk to him through his locked door, but he never answered me...never left his room. The Turks had no success locating our missing comrade, and had to report his assumed death. Then, Sephiroth suddenly vanished. We found him inside the largest building in Nibelheim..."

* * *

Cloud felt the rays of the late morning sunshine scorch his back as he jogged along the rocky path that led from the town, the dry weeds rustling underfoot with each heavy step taken. He passed the old orchard, what little fruit remained on the trees inside withering as autumn drew near, and remembered how Tifa and her annoying friends would often play there during their youth. Opposite the orchard, a thin trail turned west from the road, snaking its way over the hill towards the meadows in the west, lined on both sides by magnificently coloured flowers, and shaded in parts by low branches still laden with large leaves of green and gold. The path before him gradually became less steep, leading into an isolated mountainside recess, and the high rooftop of Shinra Mansion came into view, dark against the grey backdrop of the cliffs.

It had been less than ten minutes since Samantha had called to say there were rumours throughout Nibelheim of overnight disturbances from the supposedly-abandoned manor, and that he had been ordered to check it out by the President. Since Sephiroth's mysterious disappearance the previous afternoon, Cloud had grudgingly spent all of his time at Gramps' Inn, awaiting the return of his Captain. With an escalating concern among the Executive, it had come as no surprise to him that they had arrived at the conclusion to take action.

A small crowd of Zangan, the young photographer, Tifa, and her father had congregated at the foot of the mansion's wrought-iron

gate, parting as he hurriedly approached, their hushed discussions dying away with their separation. The men watched him with a mixture of curiosity and disdain; growing more intolerant with the continuing presence of Shinra, Inc., and wary of their business here. Tifa did not meet Cloud's eyes as he joined them, instead stroking the white fur of the pet cat she cradled. Only Zangan spoke.

"Your Shinra friends have already gone inside." he said, pointing at the black gateway which now stood slightly ajar. A rusted padlock lay cleaved in two on the earth beside it, the precision cut indicating the work of the Masamune.

"Good." said Cloud. "No-one else is authorised to enter."

"You know what Sephiroth's doing in there?" asked Mr. Lockhart, making no effort to mask the distaste in his voice.

"More importantly," added Zangan sincerely, "is there any reason to think he might harm this town?"

"Harm the town?" Cloud frowned. "Why would you think that?"

"I'm no stranger to some of the Shinra's shadier activities." he sighed, casting an anxious glance towards the building. "SOLDIER and the Turks showing up here means things are serious. And serious usually ends in an operation to erase anything that may cause the Company embarrassment."

"Is that so?" Cloud responded non-committedly.

"Take it from me, boy. You pick these things up when you travel as much as I do."

"Well, I have no idea what Sephiroth is doing," said Cloud, "but I can assure you, old man, he would never do anything to harm Nibelheim."

"Let's hope your faith in him isn't misplaced." retorted Tifa's father, folding his arms stubbornly. "But, until we know this town is safe, we're not moving from here."

With a faint nod to the group, Cloud stepped forward, and pushed the creaking gate open. A broad garden path of paved slabs wound amongst a healthy growth of unkempt grass and weeds from the gateway to the tall oak entrance of the manor.

The desolate walls of redbrick and ashen sandstone lined by dark pine rose up from the foundations like a silent apparition, weak and broken with decay, seemingly concealing within their domain an eerie and cursed past. Many blackened windows peered down at him from both wings of the enormous house, their leering faces marking the eyes of the many forbidden rooms. Cloud recalled Company employees had lived and worked there when he was young, but the children of the town had always shared stories of how the manor was haunted. He tried to close his mind to the unnatural aura of despair that surrounded even the grounds of the estate, an unwelcome sensation of apprehension falling over him as he gripped the thick handle of the front door and pushed.

The old door juddered, but opened without much fuss into the foyer of the mansion. A haze of dust met him, making him gag slightly as he inhaled a lungful of musty air, his eyes scanning the magnificent entrance hall for traces of movement in the dimness. The once-white walls around him were yellow and peeling, the frail sheets of fallen decorative paper curling over a worn brown crest-patterned carpet that had seen better days. Open doorways on either side of him revealed two large store cupboards and a billiard room, as well as an enchanting lounge which would have hosted many guests with its grand piano and private bar. All were neighboured by empty, lightless corridors that ventured farther into the building.

A shuffling of feet could be heard from a room above, echoing through the floorboards, stirring as he took a single step towards the great sweeping staircase that climbed the east wall before him. It led to the landing of the second floor, overlooked by three long, grimy bay windows, from which all light in the hall came. What little sunlight burst through the veil of dirt and flowing designs of the glass was reflected on the extravagant crystal chandelier that hung from the lofty ceiling, blinding him temporarily as he moved, forcing him to instinctively draw the

Buster Sword as the silhouette of a woman appeared against the windows.

“Cloud?” called a familiar voice. “Cloud, it’s alright. It’s me.”

“Got something?” he asked, slotting the weapon back over his shoulder, and shielding his eyes as he looked up at the Turk.

“I’ve just been in the archives. It’s in quite a state.” reported Samantha, holding up the file she still clutched in her hand.

“Looks like Sephiroth found what he was searching for.”

“What is it?”

“There’s a laboratory hidden in the basement of the mansion.” she explained. “But...some terrible things went on down there. I only peeked at a couple of the documents, then I had to get outta the room. This place creeps me out. I keep hearing this manic laughter but, when I turn round, there’s no-one there. I think that’s maybe why the research was shut down here.”

“It’s just your imagination.” he chuckled, ambling up the steps to meet her. Behind them, there came a scraping sound, causing Samantha to jump with fright, reaching for her shotgun. Looking up, Cloud watched the young soldier scurry down the narrow corridor of the east wing, skidding to a halt on the landing in front of them and standing to attention.

“Did you find the entrance to the laboratory?” asked Samantha.

“I think you should come take a look at this.”

Wary of the groaning rot of the staircase beneath his boots, Cloud mentally noted his surroundings as they began after the infantryman. The hallway at the height of the foyer extended through both wings of the mansion; the west passage proving much less dim as it trailed past many rooms towards what appeared to be a small botanic area bathed in dry daylight. The corridor to the east bore a more ominous facade; shaded and cobwebbed, and evidently untouched for years but for the faint smear of recent footprints on the moulding floorboards. Allowing the pair to catch up to him, the soldier gestured towards a doorway near the end of the hall, urging Cloud and Samantha to proceed forward.

Puzzled, Cloud drew a sharp breath but did not hesitate, slipping down the passage with curiosity. Old oil lamps drooped from the pale walls, each as lifeless as the next, placed between worn picture frames of countryside landscapes depicting moors and lakes. Of the trio of doors that bordered the left side of the corridor, only one remained open, the floral wallpaper and large magenta poster bed within representing a female guest room. Coming to the final door on the right, Cloud slowed, cautious as he peered inside.

Like the rest of the manor's interior, the study was cast in shadow, thick curtains of pallid green drawn across the windows to block the view of the Nibel Mountains. A single bookshelf garnished the far wall, peculiarly laden with ornaments of varying sizes, but only a handful of leather-bound books. Other than a small reading sofa adjacent to the shelf, and the tartan rug at the centre of the space, the study was bare of furniture.

Following the footprints left in the dust, Cloud's eyes moved to the rear of the room, falling upon a segmented curving wall of grey brick. Gathering his bearings, he realised the section belonged to the exterior of the mansion's east tower, seeming oddly out of place in the corner of the study. The footsteps had come to a halt before the wall, vanishing completely without trace.

"Weird, isn't it?" said the soldier from behind Cloud, squeezing into the room as Cloud started towards the section. "The tracks just end here. There's no sign of recent movement anywhere else in this part of the house, so he must have somehow gone through here. I thought I should wait on you before going any further."

"Good call." agreed Cloud, running his fingertips over the wall as he carefully studied the brickwork. "Aha!"

With a gentle push against the thin, concealed hinge, there came a grinding of cogs and scraping of stone, and a square division of the wall began to slide backwards and aside, exposing a dark chasm within. The deep hollow was enclosed by the same grey slabs of the tower's external wall, draped in parts with rusted

chains, the unstable planks of a secret makeshift stairwell winding their way into the depths of the strange abyss. Cloud choked as a pungent stench like decomposed fruit reached his nostrils, forcing him to turn his head from the doorway.

“What the hell is that?” coughed the young infantryman, gasping under his mask.

“Whatever it is, it’s been down there a while.” moaned Samantha. “I hope for its sake, it’s dead. I better go call this in.”

“You goin’ down?” asked the soldier.

“Yeah.” nodded Cloud. “I have to find Sephiroth. Don’t move until I get back, okay? And don’t let anyone else down here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I told you not to call me “sir”.” he grumbled, ducking under the low gap, alert as he carefully began down the broken strips of wood.

The air grew alarmingly cold as Cloud descended into the unknown, the trail taking him below the ground floor of the manor by his estimations. The faint light of a burning flame flickered from the base of the tower pit, illuminating the slender entrance to an underground passage. Coming to the ragged foot of the staircase, stopping briefly to absorb the warmth of the lamp, he could make out the wiry tunnel as it twisted north beneath the gardens of the estate. Another flame shone weakly from around a widening bend a number of feet along the chilling stone corridor, sending shadows dancing around the grim walls of carved granite.

The muffled *thump* of Cloud’s army boots resonated down the tunnel as he walked, his steps quick and determined. The passage brought him after a short trek to a small cavern of dark jagged rock, its domed ceiling inhabited by a few sleeping bloodbats, their twitching bodies stirring above him. Similar to the tower, iron chains with handcuffs hung from the cave walls, not unlike those of medieval torture devices, while other unusual objects lay scattered amongst the faded crates that sat idly along his path. The distant sound of gargling water echoed slightly

about him, the stale aroma of the underground air seeming to mingle with that of sewage.

A green light emanated from beyond the doorway of a basement room at the opposite end of the cavern, wavering as someone passed back and forth inside. A sense of relief fell over Cloud as he strode towards the room; Sephiroth's muted voice drifting down the tunnel towards him. As he moved, his eyes caught the distinct form of a second door in the darkness of the cave, its entrance hidden somewhat by the surrounding rock. The chamber seemed without life or use, and he immediately discarded it from thought in his impatience to join his Captain.

Cloud blinked hard as he gently pushed the creaking wooden door of the basement room open, the brilliant green glow of the overhead lamps enveloping him. As his eyes came to focus, the outlines of high shelves took shape before him, climbing the broad walls around the space, each loaded to the brim with beakers and jars containing different substances. A large stone experiment table rested at the centre of the laboratory, its blood-stained surface littered with surgical tools and frayed parchment, the electrodes at either end connected by loose wires to a series of dated computer systems that lingered silently in the corner.

On both sides of the work stations stood two different enormous glass capsules, the cylinders easily tall enough to hold a man, with heavy tubing running from the four pedestals across the floor to what appeared to be a miniature Mako compressor. Cloud recognised a pair of these as obsolete versions of the Mako Recovery Units used to treat and heal wounded SOLDIERS.

A small passageway led from the research area to a cosy library study deeper still within the underground caves, lined by scaling bookshelves of hardback volumes and innumerable filed reports. The golden light emitted from the study was shallow but warming, welcoming amid the bizarre furnishings of the basement. Piles of discarded books lay stacked on the floor of the corridor, noticeably arranged neatly by order.

“...the organism,” Sephiroth read aloud from the bound file he carried as he paced the passage, his back to Cloud, ignoring the intrusion, “apparently dead, was found in suspended animation in a two-thousand-year-old geological stratum, imprisoned in the cliffside of the newly-chartered Northern Crater...”

“Sephiroth?” called Cloud, suddenly made uneasy by the detached tone of the words.

“Professor Gast Faremis,” Sephiroth continued without falter, “leader of the expedition and Head of Biological and Biochemical Development, having succeeded Professor Grimoire Valentine after his tragic and untimely death some years before, ordered the organism to be taken to Gast Laboratory of Shinra, Inc....”

March 17th, [μ]-εγλ 1976:

Professor Gast names organism ‘Jenova’

April 8th, [μ]-εγλ 1976:

Testing on organism approved

July 31st, [μ]-εγλ 1976:

Gast Laboratory verifies organism is an Ancient

August 30th, [μ]-εγλ 1976:

Ancients Project initiated

October 15th, [μ]-εγλ 1976:

Cells extracted from organism used to initiate Project Jenova G

July 2nd, [μ]-εγλ 1977:

Mount Nibel Mako Reactor approved for organism storage

August 9th, [μ]-εγλ 1977:

Project Jenova G yields imperfect specimen ‘G’

*November 26th, [μ]-εγλ 1977:
Project Jenova G yields imperfect specimen 'A'*

*February 12th, [μ]-εγλ 1978:
Project Jenova S approved*

“...the Jenova Project?”

“Sephiroth?”

“My...my mother’s name was Jenova...” he whispered, the paper falling from his hand as his elegant body seemed to sink with weighted thoughts. “Is this...it must just be a coincidence. It must be! Professor...why didn’t you tell me anything? Why did you disappear? Why did you die? Genesis...is he right...?”

“Sephiroth...?” repeated Cloud, hushing his voice to one hinting of empathy.

The silver hair of the Captain of SOLDIER shimmered slightly in the illuminating green lamp light as his body trembled with torment, the lengthy strands swaying below his waist. As his fists tightened at his side, his shoulders appeared to broaden and rise, casting his long shadow across the cold stone floor. With a sharp turn, he glared at Cloud through fiery red eyes, and let out a menacing growl.

“Let me be alone...”

* * *

“...after that, we simply respected his wishes, taking turns to keep watch over the basement laboratory without entering or communicating with him. The Shinra Executive deemed the situation particularly serious; they believed Sephiroth had uncovered something in the archives that had never been intended for his eyes. A special team of scientists were sent from Midgar to clean up the mess at the Reactor, but their orders were classified. Nothing changed for almost a week. Sephiroth shut

himself in there and continued to review the library's decades of reports like a man possessed, never eating, never sleeping...and not once did the light of the study go out..."

* * *

Cloud grudgingly watched the ghostly silhouette of the Turk vanish into the tunnel from which he had just come, for the first time with the fluttering sensation of irritation in his duty to relieve her of her post. As Samantha's footsteps died away into the darkness, the subterranean cavern was again consumed by only the remote murmur of the town's sewage system and the occasional shrieks of its resident sahagins. There was little left to explore of the estate, be it the countless hidden passages of the mansion or the secured rooms that could be found even deeper underground. He glanced over the dusty, unmarked crates and barrels against the wall to the familiar green outline of the laboratory's entrance, and resisted the pulsating urge to unleash his stored frustration with the Buster Sword.

Scraping his boots along the dry floor, Cloud ritually wandered the span of the cave, weaving among the rock formations, eventually pressing a prying ear to the ancient door. All was still inside, silent but for the low hum of overhead electricity. In the days that he had been coming and going from the basement, there had always been some form of movement or sound from within the room, and lack thereof struck him as unusual, even in the late evening hour. *Something's different...*

Knocking once, there came no answer. Pausing to gather his puzzled thoughts, he slowly nudged the door open, shading his eyes from the burning light. The area was as it had been on his previous visit, the outdated machines remaining as deathly serene as ever, but an unexpected sight met him as he turned towards the library corridor. Cloud gasped as his stunned stare passed over the bare pinewood bookshelves, traces of slow decay evident on their lofty ledges, their bases cluttered with heaps of

discarded books and documents. Sephiroth, it seemed, had left none untouched.

A cruel cackle came from the study as Cloud stumbled into the room, floating through the arid air like an old record. It sent a chill down his spine; reminding him of the wicked faces of past foes. Cautiously, he edged down the passage towards the golden lamplight and the source of the laughter, careful not to tread on the sprawled pages beneath him, coming at last to the small library.

The space was more cramped than the laboratory, its square walls furnished on all sides by recently-emptied shelves. A mahogany reading desk was situated atop a large warm-coloured rug at the centre of the study, at which sat Sephiroth in the grand armchair, his head bowed in his hands. He did not stir as Cloud approached, waiting instead until his inferior stood over him at the table before lifting his gaze. His lean face had become grey and twisted, an unforgiving blackness surrounding his deep eyes.

“Ah, if it isn’t the traitor?” sneered Sephiroth, his pallid features laden with disgust.

“*Traitor?*” stammered Cloud, stepping warily back from the desk as Sephiroth rose dauntingly from his seat, his impressive physique distinguishing his immeasurable presence. “What are you talking about?”

“You ignorant traitor!” spat Sephiroth, pointing accusingly at him. “I’ll tell you exactly what I’m talking about. Millennia ago, this Planet belonged to a people known as the Cetra. The Cetra were a nomadic race; wandering across mountains, through valleys, to every corner of the Planet...as was their calling. They would migrate in, speak with and settle the Planet, then move on. As stated in the Chronicles of Yore, at the end of their long, harsh journey, the Cetran people would find the Promised Land, and supreme happiness.

“But, those who disliked the journey appeared. The ones who stopped the migrations, built shelters, and elected to lead an easier life. They ceased their communication with the Planet,

turning their back on their calling. They took all which the Planet and the Cetra had created and nurtured, unwilling to give anything in return. They...they are *your* ancestors!”

“Sephiroth, I don’t understand...”

“Long ago, disaster struck this world.” he persisted, his snarling voice encasing the frozen Cloud. “A meteorite collided with the Planet, wounding it so much that it required a mass of energy to heal itself. The Planet reached out, summoned the lives of its people to return to it. Your ancestors escaped; they survived because they hid in fear from the ferocious storms and earthquakes that ensued. Eventually, the Planet was saved from certain doom by sacrificing the Cetra, and your ancestors began to grow in numbers. They bred, multiplied, and assumed control of the Planet as if nothing had happened. Now, after many centuries, all that remains of the Cetra is what is written in the pages of history.”

“But, what does this have to do with you?” croaked Cloud.

“Don’t you get it?” scorned Sephiroth, a fleeting smile forming sardonically at the corner of his lips. “The body of an Ancient was found trapped in the cliffside of the Northern Crater, and eventually brought to Nibelheim for studying. Professor Gast named the Ancient ‘Jenova’. When I was old enough, he secretly told me that my mother’s name was Jenova, but that she had died in childbirth. He strictly warned me never to ask questions about her. As a result, nobody at the Company knew that I was aware of the name. That’s why they let me come here. That’s why they allowed me to stand before her storage chamber at the Mako Reactor without a flicker of worry. Those ignorant fools.

“Upon learning the results of the testing on the Ancient, President Shinra ordered the Ancients Project. The Company wanted to mass produce a race of humans with abilities comparable to the Cetra. The primary objective of this research was to utilise these people to significantly reduce costs and boost the efficiency of Mako extraction. Project Jenova was just one

part of the overall plan. It's all here in these reports. I am the one that was produced.”

“P...produced...?” gulped Cloud, his head spinning as he absorbed the words.

“Yes.” Sephiroth replied coldly. “Professor Gast, scientific genius and leader of the Jenova Project, produced me. I was the perfect creation after so many failures. Just look at what those two became...but, not me. Now I understand why Genesis accused me of stealing the fame that he believed was rightfully his. In my veins courses the blood of the Ancients. I am one of the rightful heirs to this Planet.”

“Sephiroth...that's crazy!” argued Cloud, blocking his path as he drifted almost weightlessly around the table, snatching the Masamune without expression from its place against the mantel. “How did he...how did...?”

Sephiroth was on him with the swiftest of movements, reducing the gap between them with a single motion. Cloud felt his head smash hard against the stone wall, thrust back by the violent strength of Sephiroth's arm, and his world became a slow rotation as his body sank to the floor. The setting of the study began to wane before his dizzying eyes, the darkness swallowing him as the tall figure eclipsed the golden lamplight above him.

“Out of my way, traitor.” jeered Sephiroth, his voice distant, stepping callously over him. “I'm going to see my mother...”



The Nibelheim Incident: Those Chosen by the Planet

The blood on the crown of his head was still warm as his fingers caressed thick lumps of matted hair; he could not have been unconscious for long. His legs had knotted as he fell, numbed now by the distorted circulation, aching as he dragged himself to his feet in the quiet library. He inhaled lastingly, hoping the oxygen would help lessen the pain of his throbbing head, and gripped the corner of the desk for support as his thoughts steadily began to return. As his blurred vision settled on the maroon leather armchair, Cloud's eyes shot open with a start, and he was overwhelmed by the sudden horrific comprehension.

Sephiroth...

The following moments seemed to race past without his full awareness, as if he were watching himself in a dream. He felt strangely removed from his pounding muscles as he limped down the passage, into the cavern, and up the tower stairwell, his thumping head ready to explode. The second floor corridor of the mansion reached without end into a darkened forever as he stumbled hurriedly towards the main foyer, its haunting walls closing in around him. Abruptly, he came to the staircase, descended, scurried across the hallway, and wrapped his hand around the worn handle of the old oak door, pulling as hard as he could.

Cloud's heart stopped as the furious blast of crisp warm air assaulted his skin, a muffled cry escaping his lips as he saw the inferno of orange flames climbing into the night sky above the

town. He staggered down the garden path of the manor's grounds towards the mangled gate of hewed iron that clung despairingly to the redbrick wall, at last breaking onto to the rocky dirt trail. The hurt of his injuries vanished instantly as the agony of the sight sent adrenaline streaming through his blood, driving him forward towards the burning Nibelheim.

Terrible...Sephiroth, this is too terrible...

Past the orchard and cottages of the town's border he scrambled, coughing and gasping for air, feeling the searing heat of the fires inside each home as he fought his way through the dense smoke that billowed from windows and doorways. His thoughts were a whirlwind as he witnessed the flames creeping over the slated rooftops of the houses, charring their sandstone walls, and melting the hanging wind-chimes. The image of his mother's face flashed in his mind, forcing him to run faster, panicked by the fear of a fate she may already have met.

The trail had already broadened to form the declining paved street before an eerie realisation seized Cloud. *Where the hell are the villagers? Where are the screams? Where is the help?* He charged on through the blaze, almost losing his balance as he came to the wide concrete stairs at the edge of the town square. Through the black clouds, he could make out the smouldering shops on the square's circumference, and the crumbling and futile water tower at its centre. The bedroom annex of Gramps' Inn had completely collapsed around the building's entrance, exposing its disintegrated interior. Darting down the steps, he reeled to a halt, faced by a scene he had hoped not to find.

More than a dozen townspeople lay slaughtered across the ground, dark blood oozing from the multiple sword wounds. They had been shown no mercy; their corpses left in the same sadistic positions as they had fallen. Dread enveloped him again, and he started towards the eastern road of the town, his legs heavy and unwilling to carry him to his old home. Swaying drunkenly as he moved, intoxicated by his inability to compute what was happening, he weaved through the silent bodies,

yanking the Buster Sword from across his shoulder as a figure burst from the smog of the street before him.

“Cloud!” whimpered the young soldier, his quivering voice filling with sorrow as he saw his friend. “I tried to save her...I tried...but she...”

“Who?” Cloud asked desolately, but closed his eyes, for he already knew the answer.

“Your mother...”

The words hit him like a train wreck. The intensity of the flames; the anger of betrayal; all of it; everything was gone in that moment. A void of hopelessness opened beneath him. He was on his knees. Tears plunged down his cheeks. There was no sound; nothing. His stomach churned, his mouth was dry; her radiant beauty was all that he could see. Guilt swallowed him. He had abandoned her. It was Cloud’s fault she had died. His and his alone.

No...it is another’s. There will be a time to grieve. There will be a time to mourn my mother’s passing. But, it is not now. Now is the time to seek revenge for these atrocities. Get up! Get up, Cloud! Sephiroth must pay for what he has done...

“Hey!”

The booming voice cut through the thick air like a fog horn. It awoke Cloud from his misery, returning him to the awfulness of the present. He sprang to his feet, his heart roaring, grabbing the Buster Sword from beside him. Across the square, Zangan was bent over the young photographer outside the Nibel Accessories store, trying hastily to exert pressure on Rick’s bleeding chest. Motivated only by seething hatred as his eyes fell upon the dying boy, Cloud dashed towards them, the soldier at his heels.

“You’re still sane, right?” Zangan called vindictively as they approached, brushing loose strands of bushy grey hair from his sweaty face as he frantically struggled to save Rick’s life. His red cape was torn, and his beard was singed; evidence of a battle for his own survival amidst the chaos.

“How can anyone stay sane in a situation like this?” replied Cloud bitterly, summoning all his mental strength to block out images of his mother.

“Everyone called him a hero!” snarled Zangan, “Tonight, Sephiroth has proven himself nothing more than a murderer. He used Firaga magic more powerful than any I’ve ever seen. All of Nibelheim was engulfed in seconds. The villagers didn’t stand a chance.”

“Why did...he do this...?” strained Rick, his features frail as he lay propped against the wall of the shop.

“Hey, hang in there, lad.” comforted Zangan. “We’ll get you some help...”

“Are there any more survivors?” asked Cloud.

“A few.” he answered, dabbing the young man’s forehead as he emitted a faint moan. “I checked most of the houses that were still standing, but there is little hope. Your Turk friend has already set off up the mountain in search of Sephiroth...as has Tifa...”

“Tifa went after Sephiroth?” stammered Cloud, his chest heaving in alarm.

“Her father is at the Reactor.” sighed Zangan, shaking his head. “I tried to stop her. She thinks she can protect him...but she is no match for Sephiroth. Only a SOLDIER like you can challenge him.”

“Then, we have to go!” Cloud ordered, nodding once at his comrade. “Now! Before anyone else is hurt.”

“Take care of Tifa.” pleaded Zangan, his strong gaze burning into Cloud’s. “You’re the only one who can...”

The final words were dulled out as there came an explosion of glass from behind them. Cloud spun quickly, his sword aloft, only to witness the shards of the old lampposts’ light blast in the soaring temperatures across the street leading from the square’s steps. Oil spurted from the lamps, dousing the raised pathway in a flaming hellfire. At the centre of the blaze lingered an unflinching Sephiroth, his Masamune drawn, his maddened eyes watching Cloud. Tongues of fire licked his coat, slithering over

his body like scorching tentacles. With no sign of remorse for the massacre he had committed, Sephiroth turned, and began through the flames towards the Mount Nibel Mako Reactor.

* * *

“...I didn’t really know what I was doing at the time.” admitted Cloud, feeling the soundless stares of the group on him. A cold breeze swept through the inn bedroom, rattling the floorboards, and fluttering the cloth curtains over the girls’ bed. Aerith, Barret, and Red XIII waited with complete absorption as the tale neared its climax, ignorant of the grief that had befallen the distracted Tifa. “I was in a blind rage. I don’t know how I made it up the mountain or how I became separated from my friend. All I remember is reaching the Reactor...”

* * *

The white plastic walls rushed by as Cloud careered along the entrance passage of the facility, his wheezing lungs set to rupture, grateful to already be detecting a lighter concentration of Mako gas in the atmosphere than the previous week. Pounding down the cold stairwell to the foot of the steps, he sped through the corridors at the Reactor’s humid interior, his legs pumping harder as he saw Samantha sprawled across the floor. The hallway around her was torn and bent, as if struck by an intense shockwave.

“*Samantha?*” he gasped, skidding to his knees by her side, shaking her forcefully by the shoulders. “Hey! Samantha, tell me you’re alive!”

“Huh...?” she groaned, wincing in pain as she came to. Cloud helped the Turk sit up, her long hair pasted to her bruised forehead with dirt and sweat.

“What happened?”

“Sephiroth...” she said groggily. “He...he was talkin’ funny. Didn’t make any sense. I tried to stop him...but he...he’s too strong...”

“Can you get up?” he asked, studying her for a concussion.

“Just a little longer...”

“Okay, stay here.” Cloud instructed. “I’m gonna go find Tifa, then I’ll come back for you.”

Not waiting as Samantha gave him a sloppy wave, he galloped farther along the corridor, soon coming to the gaping bowel of the Reactor. An anxious glance saw Tifa beneath him on the platform to the control room, and he slid down the greasy ladders with urgency, sensing that something was terribly wrong as he leapt the final few rungs.

He stopped, the soft sobbing reaching his ears for the first time. Tifa knelt by the body of her father, cradling his head in her hands. Even from the walkway, Cloud could see the pool of dark blood forming on the man’s back. The wound had been fatal. The Masamune lay by his side, the long blade stained in red. *How many had it slain that night?* Tifa began stroking her father’s face, running her fingers through his brown hair with great tenderness.

“Papa?” she whispered, her trembling voice floating over the air like a ghost. “It was Sephiroth. Sephiroth did this to you, didn’t he?”

“Tifa...?”

She turned to Cloud, gazing up at him from saddened eyes. A single tear rolled down her cheek, marking a path through the grime on her face. She wiped it away, her expression filling with wrath. Cloud stared at her, unable to speak; to comfort her in some way. Silence fell between them, the presence of death too much for words. Tifa embraced her father dearly, eventually lowering his head gently to the floor. Standing, she snatched up the Masamune, her eyes fixed on the arched entrance of the control room.

“You came to this village just to investigate the disappearances, didn’t you?” she wept. “All I wanted was to help. How did it turn out like this?”

“Tifa...”

“Sephiroth...SOLDIER...Mako Reactors...Shinra...everything...” she said through clenched teeth, darting through the doorway. “I hate you all...”

“Tifa, no!” yelled Cloud, sprinting after her, knowing he was almost out of time. *No more...please, no more...*

Sephiroth’s unnatural voice resounded down the short passage as he ran, his vision rapidly growing accustomed to the deep red. The room seemed much less alive than it had the week before, but no less eerie; the pods apparently emptied of the makonoids by the Company’s scientists and relocated. Sephiroth stood at the height of the staircase, his arms outstretched as if in prayer, his echoing words directed at the plaque above the doorway to Jenova’s chamber.

“...Mother, I’ve come.” he beamed, lost in his own inspired delusion. “I’m here to see you.”

“Sephiroth!” screamed Tifa, the Masamune drawn behind her head, racing purposefully up the steps. “How could you do that to papa?”

Though only a few feet behind her at the base of the stairs, Cloud stalled as Tifa reached Sephiroth, realising in that instant that he had lost. *It’s over...I’m too late.* His entire world slowed almost to a standstill, leaving him powerless to stop the unfolding events. As Tifa brought the enormous blade thundering down on Sephiroth, the SOLDIER twisted swiftly on the spot. Without effort, he caught the handle in his palm, lifting it and the horrified girl into the air.

Their gazes locked; Tifa’s one of loathing, Sephiroth’s of pure amusement. For a moment, his maniacal expression ridiculed her for her vain attempt to attack him, but suddenly fell into contempt, breaking her grip from the sword. Tifa landed on the grilled walkway, barely able to regain her poise before Sephiroth

struck. Cloud could do little but cry out in anguish as the Masamune sliced across Tifa's chest, the brutality of the blow launching her backwards.

Her limp body crashed against the rigid steps, bouncing once, and tumbled awkwardly down the remaining few. Cloud scrambled to catch her, to save her from more pain, but felt her fragile figure unmoving in his shaking arms. The gash on her chest was grave, her shirt soaked with seeping blood. The sparkle had left her eyes; draining with it the vitality and exuberance he had always known in her. Anger welled inside him, more resolute than any he had ever experienced. Glancing up, there came a *bleep* from the electronic lock, and the doorway to Jenova's chamber momentarily parted, shrouding the eager Sephiroth with a cloud of icy gas as he entered.

'I hate you all', Cloud thought as he set Tifa's still body against the nearest pod, *that's what you said. I won't ask you to forgive me for what has happened...just allow me to put an end to this...*

Fury infected his mind once more as he took a final heart-breaking look at his childhood friend, and began boldly up the staircase. The climb seemed to last forever; begging him until the last seconds not to oppose his Captain. *He's not my Captain any longer.* The faces of the dead marched alongside him as he ascended the steps, laying their vengeance upon his shoulders. He recalled his time in the Shinra Army, his missions as a SOLDIER. He had been charged with maintaining peace in Shinra, Inc.'s empire. *Tifa was right; how had it come to this?*

With a mighty swing of the Buster Sword, Cloud cleaved the engraved doorway into a dozen shards. The ethereal fingers of the chilled mist bade him beyond the entrance and into the chamber, where he came to a broad platform overlooking the swirling rivers deep within the mountain. The scaling walls of the secret hollow were plated by long panels of immaculate aluminium, encircling the tall elevated podium at the room's core, lit only by the pale green Mako and what little spotlights targeted the centrepiece. The pedestal was kept aloft by thick

steel framework, passing to and fro across the cavernous pit below.

Sephiroth strode almost gleefully along the rubbery extension that bridged the space between the room's ingress and the podium, the tails of his cloak bounding gracefully behind him. He stopped at the pinnacle of the extension, gazing attentively at the metallic effigy before him. The masked angel statuette rested upon the base of the darkened capsule that had been erected atop the pedestal, not unlike a headstone, rising up with spanning wings as if willing to break free. It appeared to be some sort of elaborate filtration system, feeding the purified Mako into the tank behind. Again, Sephiroth held his arms out, welcoming himself into her presence.

"Mother..." he said enthusiastically, "it is I, your son. I have come for you, Mother. I have come for you so that we may take this Planet back for ourselves. I...I've had an epiphany; let's go to the Promised Land..."

"Sephiroth!" bellowed Cloud, the mere sight of his foe instilling newfound strength through his hatred for the man. "My mum...my hometown...how could you do this to them? Answer me!"

"They've come again, Mother." chuckled Sephiroth, lowering his arms to his side, not taking his eyes from the bosom of the angel. His tone was one of revulsion, choosing to address the sculpture rather than his subordinate. "Mother, with your superior knowledge, power, and magic, you were destined to rule this Planet. But, they...those worthless fools...those wretched beings...they stole the Planet from you. Though, don't worry, Mother. I am here. I am with you now..."

Suddenly, Sephiroth grabbed the abdomen of the statuette with both hands and heaved with the force of a behemoth. The excruciating grinding of metal reverberated around the chamber as he tore the body of the angel from its foundation, sending sparks fizzing between the disconnected livewires as the wings detached and fell away. A strange brown liquid bubbled from

inside the open mouth of the effigy, trickling down its masked face, spraying across the podium as Sephiroth tossed it dismissively into the depths.

With a hiss of energy, the great capsule came to life. Brilliant lights awoke to illuminate the naked humanoid figure of Jenova, fully immersed in a transparent blue chemical. Her silver hair and lean face frighteningly resembled Sephiroth's, though her left eye shone with an unnerving red glow, concealed to an extent by a chrome helmet bearing her name and the date of her discovery. Her sinewy flesh was worn and frayed in places, wrapped by an unusual growth of organic matter, and pierced throughout by wires designed to preserve her ancient body. Sephiroth gasped with joy as he saw her, placing a hand on the cold glass in an attempt to become closer to her.

"We meet at last, Mother," he said contentedly, "so you won't have to feel sadness anymore..."

"Sadness?" roared Cloud, his grip tightening on the leather handle of the Buster Sword as he slowly began across the tube extension towards the podium. "Is that what this is all about? *Sadness*? What about *my* sadness? What about the sadness of all those who lost their friends and family tonight? Isn't that the same as your sadness?"

"*My* sadness?" laughed Sephiroth, engrossed in his study of the woman suspended in the tank, carelessly ignorant as Cloud drew nearer. "What do *I* have to be sad about? I am the Chosen One. I have been chosen to be the leader of this Planet. I have orders to take back this Planet from your foolish race and return it to the hands of the Cetra. That is why I was born. That is my calling. And I am doing all this for Mother. What am I supposed to be sad about?"

"Sephiroth, have you completely lost your mind?" growled Cloud from behind him, pressing the thick blade of the Buster Sword against his neck. Sephiroth's hands slipped from the glass, his breathing long and hard. He contemptuously turned his face to meet Cloud's uncompromising stare, his lips again

forming a menacing smile. “I...I trusted you. No...you’re not the Sephiroth I used to know...”

“You traitor!” snarled Sephiroth, slipping the Masamune from its sheath before Cloud could react, the *screech* of metal ringing out around them as the swords clashed.

* * *

“...and that’s the end of my story.”

“Wait a damn minute!” spluttered Barret, hastily rolling over on his mattress, a confused expression written across his bristly features. “Ain’t there more?”

“I don’t know...” sighed Cloud with a shrug, unwilling to take his eyes from his duvet. “The next thing I remember is meeting Tifa at the Train Graveyard...five years later...”

“Amnesia, huh?” grunted Barret. “You don’t remember nothin’?”

“Nothing.” repeated Cloud. “The whole thing feels like it only happened last week.”

“Then, your mum...” Aerith gasped, holding a hand to her mouth. “I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah...I, uh...I’d rather not talk about it...”

“Maybe we can help you find the pieces of the puzzle during our journey?” she offered, her sweet voice floating through the room.

“Y’know...solve the mystery of your past.”

“I doubt it.” said Cloud. “I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Well, you have to start somewhere.” she insisted. “For example, what happened to Sephiroth?”

“Official reports state Sephiroth is dead.” answered Tifa, her voice quiet.

Although participating in the conversation, she seemed withdrawn. Her reddened cheeks suggested she had shed a tear for her father as Cloud recounted the tragedy of Nibelheim, but something was amiss. She appeared troubled by the story, but

not in a manner that Cloud had expected, and it stirred some uneasy questions in his mind. *Was she hiding something?*

“How d’you know that?” said Barret.

“I read it in the newspaper while I was recovering at the hospital in Midgar.”

“You were in a hospital in Midgar?” asked Aerith with surprise. “How did you get *there*?”

“I don’t know.” murmured Tifa. “The staff said that a man had checked me in, but left soon after. They couldn’t even give me a description of him because he kept his face hidden. He never gave them a name and never returned, so I didn’t get a chance to thank him. I was in a bad way back then, and spent a few months in intensive care. It was during my rehab that I heard about Sephiroth.”

“Well, Shinra own the media,” Aerith shook her head, “so we can’t really rely on that information.”

“I want to know the truth.” said Cloud, pensively. “I want to know what really happened. I challenged Sephiroth and lived. In terms of skill, I couldn’t have defeated him. Why didn’t he kill me? What happened to him after that?”

“It seems like a lot of this doesn’t add up.” moaned Aerith. “What about Jenova? Didn’t you say her body was in Hojo’s lab when you came to rescue me?”

“Hojo must have shipped it from the Reactor to Midgar sometime after Nibelheim was destroyed.” concluded Cloud. “That means Sephiroth didn’t get away. But, when we saw Jenova, she was missing her head. I still don’t know what to make of that.”

“Or why someone stole the body from the Shinra Building.” agreed Aerith. “Somebody must have seen them carrying it out?”

“Someone did.” Cloud reminded her. “The blood trail from her containment led straight to the Great Hall where Palmer said he witnessed Sephiroth murder President Shinra.”

“So, Sephiroth has definitely returned?” gulped Tifa, pulling the blanket tighter over herself and Aerith as she curled up for

warmth. A shrill wind howled as she spoke, as if the Planet recognised the severity of the situation.

“Yeah.” Cloud nodded, his muscles tensing with abhorrence. *He’s back...*

“Damn, man!” grumbled Barret, gazing distantly at the ceiling as he lay his head on his pillow. “Don’t none o’ this make any sense? I dunno ‘bout you folks, but I ain’t lettin’ Sephiroth or Shinra get to no Promised Land. If they do, then we’re all screwed. An’ on that note, I’ve done enough thinkin’ for one night. I’m gonna get some rest. I suggest y’all do the same...we got a long day ahead o’ us tomorrow.”

“The Cetra...Jenova...Sephiroth...and myself...” whispered Aerith as she leaned over to extinguish the bedside candle, mumbling absent-mindedly to herself. “We are all connected somehow...”

Having almost succumbed to the veil of weariness that had ensnared him before his retelling of the Nibelheim incident, Cloud was now wide awake. The nearby hollers of pub-dwellers and shuffling footsteps of midnight ramblers on the street below were all that broke the tranquillity of Kalm until at last the gentle snoring of his comrades reached his ears. His thoughts were overcast by Sephiroth, whose leering face was all that he could see as he closed his eyes.

What had really happened that night? Sephiroth was alive...and he had reclaimed the body of Jenova. But, why? Why did he need her? Why was he in search of the Promised Land? The questions continued to haunt him until not even he could fight the shadow of sleep. As he drifted from consciousness, he barely heard Red XIII yawn and speak with hushed words into the darkness.

“What a fascinating story...”



No Rest for the Wicked

Reno stared at the blank white ceiling of the infirmary with frustration, numbed by boredom and the painkilling chemicals that coursed through his lean body. All was silent but for the light snoring of the ward's only other occupant, an overweight female manager who had apparently suffered heart palpitations while jogging on one of the gym's exercise machines. He groaned as he turned his head on the pillow, the long untied strands of his red locks falling into his eyes. Having spent the previous three evenings on his back, unable to move with his injured right leg suspended in a wire stirrup, he would have given anything to get back to work. *Even clerical work...*

It had been a tough few weeks for the Department of General Affairs' Investigation Division. Only ten days had passed since the disciplinary hearing that President Shinra had put in place to decide the fate of the Turks. Tseng had explained that the original verdict was a unanimous vote from the committee of Director Heidegger, Director Scarlet and the President himself to disband the Turks on the grounds that they had not acted loyally to the Company throughout the AVALANCHE ordeal. It was Rufus Shinra who had saved them in the end, returning from his apparent exile to provide evidence to the contrary. The Turks owed the Vice President that much, even if it meant they were now under the rule of the Department of Public Safety Maintenance.

He's not the Vice President anymore, thought Reno with a sardonic smile as he recalled the short visit Tseng had paid him

two days before, briefing him on the situation. Everything had happened so quickly; the Mako Reactor₁ bombing only hours after the disciplinary hearing; the orders to take out Sector₇ and destroy what remained of AVALANCHE; the murder of President Shinra by a man believed to have been dead for five years. The Company could be on the brink of crumbling into chaos, and it needed the Turks' help to regain order. Exhaling deeply, Reno closed his eyes in irritation. *Chief Tseng will deal with it, with or without me...*

A moaning creak from the swing door at the ward's entrance alerted him immediately to the presence of another. He pulled himself up slightly on the bed, brushing his spiked hair from his face, cursing that he had been instructed by the nurse to leave his goggles on the bedside table, preventing him from holding his haphazard fringe in place. Through the curtain that hung around his bed, Reno could make out the shadow of a tall man as he appeared in the doorway, his features hidden by the thin yellow partition. The man strode purposefully towards him, the soles of his shoes clicking on the polished linoleum floor. Reno knew the sound all too well, and was unable to prevent the grin widening across his weary face.

"Yo, partner." he welcomed the man, offering a mocking salute.

"How are you feeling?" Rude's low voice reverberated around them as he unclipped his legless sunglasses from his nose. Slipping the glasses into the pocket of his suit jacket, he folded his arms across his broad chest, patiently awaiting Reno's answer.

"Been better." snorted Reno, gesturing towards his leg. "And you?"

"Same." Rude frowned. "Heidegger has us working like slaves. We've been following up leads on Sephiroth. According to the reports from Kalm and Cliff Resort, he's already travelled south. AVALANCHE also made it out of Midgar. We're tracking them now."

“What about Corneo?” asked Reno, his lips narrowing as he pondered the information. “If it wasn’t for that slimy weasel, AVALANCHE would’ve been where they were supposed to be. We tore down Sector 7 for nothing, yo.”

“Orders are orders.” replied Rude, sullenly.

“Yeah...well you gotta wonder sometimes...” he muttered, glancing up at the window, the question once more surfacing in his mind about whether or not President Shinra’s unprecedented commands were simply a test of the Turks’ allegiance. A light rain had begun to patter against the glass, causing beads of water to trickle slowly down its face. He cast the thoughts aside. “So, any news on him?”

“SOLDIER is in pursuit. It’s expected that he’s headed to one of his holiday spots.”

“He probably thinks he’ll be safe there.” Reno chuckled scornfully, his attention shifting as the ward door swung open again, and Violet and Corin entered.

Reno was still undecided on his impressions of the two after the amalgamation of the Junon and Midgar branches of the Turks. They had been with the Company only a few years, working with the Secondary Division from their Headquarters at the Junon Naval Base. Reno had only met them a handful of times prior to their arrival in Midgar a fortnight before, finding Violet to be a skilled fighter but extremely introverted while the younger Corin, although deadly with nunchaku, was considerably more passionate about his opportunities after a strict upbringing in the Bone region. Given that the Turks had been greatly reduced in numbers in wake of the Zirconiade incident, their presence was uncomfortable for Reno, but not unwanted.

“Hey, guys,” he said as they approached, suddenly very conscious that the visit was unexpected, “what brings you here?”

“We...” Corin opened his mouth.

“I told them to.” Rude interrupted, staring at Reno. He paused for a moment, evidently struggling to find his words. “We...we have something we need to tell you.”

“Yeah...uh, what he said...” shrugged Corin, ruffling his wavy blonde locks awkwardly.

“What’s goin’ on, yo?” Reno questioned, his gaze darting between the trio of Turks. Violet turned away, her dark bobbed hair hiding her sharp face as she was unable to look at him, putting her hands on the petite waist of her blouse. Rude sighed, drawing Reno’s focus from their subordinates. “Rude?”

“We didn’t know how you would take it.” he said quietly.

“Take what?” he asked desperately. “C’mon, man, speak to me.”

“You’re being replaced.” he replied.

“Replaced?” Reno spluttered, sitting up. Searing pain ripped through his leg as he felt the stitches of the bullet wounds stretch, forcing him back down again. “You mean I’m done?”

“No, just until your injuries heal.” said Rude.

“Gods!” gasped Reno, almost erupting with relieved giggles. “You really put the frighteners on me there, old pal.”

“You mean you’re not angry?” Rude scratched his goatee, perplexed.

“Angry?” laughed Reno. “I thought you were telling me I was no longer with the department. Why would I be angry if I was only being temporarily replaced?”

“I know what you’re like when you miss out on the big assignments. I just thought...”

“You brought us up here for this?” Corin shook his head, rolling his eyes.

“Shut up, Slick.” Reno commanded, reading the confused expression on Rude’s face. “Rude was just doin’ what he thought was best for me. I’ll be back in action soon anyway.”

“Not soon enough.” Violet responded, her tone cold. “We need to be prepared. This is a Priority S.”

“Geez, c’mon.” Reno chuckled. “It’ll take a few weeks in rehab, but I’ll be back before you know it. Better than ever. So...who’s the replacement?”

“Someone young.” said Rude. “Top of her class in martial arts, and someone who has already proven herself against the

Epilogue

Company's enemies. Her father is a firearms instructor at the Military Academy."

"You don't mean...?" Reno frowned, his jaw dropping.

"Yes, Elena." nodded Rude, acknowledging his partner's response. "Rosalind's sister. Tseng gave the go-ahead an hour ago."

"And Director Heidegger was okay with it?"

"What he doesn't know can't hurt him."

"Has she been told about...y'know...the others?" he asked, lowering his voice to a whisper.

"No." Rude shook his head. "Tseng requested that it remains that way for now."

"Well, at least they're keeping it in the family." Reno conceded. He closed his eyes, images of his former comrade flashing in his mind. Rosalind had always said she and Elena were very different, but spoke of her with a sense of pride. *Let's just hope she can live up to her sister's standards.*

"Reno?" came Corin's thick northern accent, cutting mercilessly through his thoughts.

"I'm still here." Reno answered, making no effort to reopen his eyes as the others waited by his bedside. He decided it was time to raise the question that had been plaguing him since his visit to the church in Sector 5. "So, this guy Cloud...he is who I think he is, right?"

"That's correct." Rude replied with conviction.

"Man, this is gonna get interesting..."

To be continued...



FINAL FANTASY VII[®]

Glossary of Terms

Ancients:

A nomadic race from the past which is believed to have all but died out. They were known for their ability to communicate with the Planet, nurture it, and to draw on its power.

Ancients Project:

A top-secret research project of the Shinra, Inc. Science Department to develop individuals with the powers of the Ancients. The overall purpose was to reduce the costs of Mako extraction. Project Jenova is a branch of this.

AVALANCHE (New):

An anti-Shinra activist group based in Midgar which has turned to terrorism. Named after its larger and more-militant predecessor, the group is commanded by Barret Wallace. Its purpose is to stop Shinra, Inc. from further destroying the Planet by consuming its Mako energy.

AVALANCHE (Original):

Established by Elder Mon Mos, also founder and scholar of the Study of Planet Life, as an organisation to protest Shinra, Inc.'s misuse of Mako energy and the harmful effects this caused on the Planet. When peaceful opposition failed, a strong militant wing broke away under the leadership of Fuhito, and later Elfe. This army soon began terrorist activities around the Planet and, for many years, were at war with Shinra, Inc. Their leaders have been declared dead.

Buster Sword:

An enormous greatsword with a blade measuring four and a half feet in length. The weapon belongs to Cloud Strife.

Central Complex:

The vast support structure located at the heart of Midgar used, with the aid of the Pillars and the Reactor facilities, to hold the Plate aloft. The railway tunnels of the Midgar Transit encircle the Central Complex. Sector0 and the Shinra Building sit directly above it.

Cetra:

The historical name for the Ancients.

Chocobo:

A tall, flightless bird with golden feathers. Chocobos of varying pedigrees can be found in the wild, but they are also known to be farmed and put to work as beasts of burden. Chocobo racing is a popular sport.

Chronicles of Yore:

Early scripture detailing the lives and beliefs of the Ancients.

Department of Biological and Biochemical Development:

The section within Shinra, Inc. tasked with scientific research. More widely known as the Science Department, it addresses a vast array of subjects with the sole aim of advancing the Company's knowledge and potential. Included in this are the physical enhancement and maintenance of SOLDIERS, learning about various species of monsters and animals, containment of harmful organisms, study of the effects of Mako properties, and much more. However, the division has also undertaken several dark and unethical experiments and projects over the years. The Head of the Department is Professor Hojo.

Department of General Affairs:

The section within Shinra, Inc. tasked with the everyday management and administration of the Executive. While the majority of the department is legitimate and unexceptional, the Investigation Division, commonly referred to as the Turks, is notorious for its shady activities.

Department of Public Safety Maintenance:

The section within Shinra, Inc. tasked with the peaceful upkeep of global citizenry. It is an amalgamation of the former Security and SOLDIER Departments, and is sometimes known as the Armed Forces. The Head of the Department is Director Heidegger.

Department of Space Exploration:

The section within Shinra, Inc. tasked with the development of potential means of launching a manned rocket into space. Though nowadays considered a trivial department only maintained to support arms development, it was at one stage the foremost focus of the Company. The Head of the Department is Director Palmer.

Department of Urban Development:

The section within Shinra, Inc. tasked with the growth and maintenance of Midgar's civil construction. Protecting heritage architecture, harmonising the residential, industrial and financial districts, landscaping and more are included in this. The department also incorporates the City Planning Division. The Head of the Department is Director Reeve.

Department of Weapons Development:

The section within Shinra, Inc. tasked with keeping the military supplied with modern armaments and Materia. In addition, a large part of their work is the design and creation of the robotic Shinra weapons. The Head of the Department is Director Scarlet.

Gil:

The worldwide currency.

Gods:

Powerful and magical prehistoric entities which, according to lore, once dominated the Planet. It is believed that these mighty beings were the ones who taught the first Ancients how to interact with the Planet and wield magic. Legend has it that their consciousness still dwells in the Lifestream, and that they can be summoned when the need is great. Many churches and places of worship exist to honour the Gods.

Jenova:

A preserved humanoid female that was discovered in a two-thousand-year-old geological prison. The body was believed by the scientists of Shinra, Inc. to be an Ancient. Research on the figure as part of the Ancients Project is known as Project Jenova.

Kalm:

An old fort town east of Midgar. Once the site of a terrible explosion that saw many townspeople lose their lives.

Lifestream:

The historical term used to describe Mako rivers as a single or collective.

Mako:

A limited natural resource utilised by Shinra, Inc. to produce affordable electricity. It is said to contain the knowledge and wisdom of the Ancients.

Mako capsules:

Synthetic pods used by the Science Department. to enhance or treat wounded SOLDIERS. These containers, however, have also been put to use for more unethical experiments on animals and humans. Sometimes known as Mako Recovery Units.

Mako Reactor:

Shinra, Inc.'s vast power plants which absorb the energy from the Mako rivers to convert it to electricity.

Mako river:

The ethereal waterways of Mako energy that run beneath the surface of the Planet.

Masamune:

A long, slender specialised katana. The sword belongs to Sephiroth.

Materia:

A crystalised form of condensed Mako. Because the knowledge and wisdom of the Cetra is contained within the Mako, the Materia can be used to produce various magic. It is rare to encounter natural Materia, and most is created synthetically by Shinra, Inc.

Midgar:

A metropolis on the Eastern Continent at which the Headquarters of Shinra, Inc. is located. The largest city on the Planet, it is made up of eight Sectors, numbered 1 to 8, each divided into residential, industrial and business districts. An upper-city and lower-city also exist, the former constructed upon an enormous disk known as the Plate which has blocked the sun and created impoverishment in the Slums below.

Midgar Mountains:

The mountain range which passes around the city to the north and west.

Midgar Transit:

The railway system that links the Slums and the Plate, providing the only legal means of public access between the two. It is operated and monitored by Shinra, Inc.

Midgar Wastelands:

The barren plains that surround Midgar, drained of their fertility by city's Mako Reactors. Monsters and Shinra weapons regularly roam the Wastelands.

Monsters:

Animals or plants which, through experimentation or natural causes, have mutated as a result of overexposure to Mako. This mutation has resulted in physical change and an increased level of aggression.

The Moogles:

A flourishing Midgar rock band with music hits such as 'Parochial Town' and 'Ahead On Our Way'.

Mount Nibel:

A desolate mountain on the south of the Western Continent. Once abundant in life, it was selected by Shinra, Inc. as the site of the world's first Mako Reactor. Parts of the facility are considered top-secret.

Nibelheim:

A rural settlement located at the foot of Mount Nibel on the Western Continent. Cloud and Tifa's hometown.

Planet:

The world in which the story is set, known as Gaia. Many believe the Planet to be an entity which possesses a consciousness, thus referring to it as a person.

Plate:

Midgar's upper-city, and home to wealthier citizens and the higher echelon of Shinra, Inc.'s employees. Held aloft by eight Pillars and the Central Complex support structure, the Plate is a thriving metropolis of culture and industry. It can now only be accessed from the Slums via the Shinra-controlled railway.

Sector Wall:

The individual borders between sectors of the Slums. Standing fifty feet high, they are generally passable only via gateways manned by Shinra, Inc. personnel.

Seventh Heaven:

Barret and Tifa's bar in the Sector7 Slums. Popular with the locals, it is powered by a coal generator, and contains AVALANCHE's underground hideout.

Shinra Building:

The seventy-storey headquarters of Shinra, Inc., located in Sector0 at the centre of Midgar's Plate.

Shinra Corporation:

The foremost political, economic and military entity on the Planet. An electric power provider which began as a weapons manufacturing company, Shinra, Inc. governs the world by way of monopolising the energy industry, and controlling its own private and unmatched Army. The business consists of many different departments ranging from urban development to technological enhancement to scientific experimentation. The Company is run by President Shinra and the Executive.

Shinra Diamond:

The logo of the Corporation. A red diamond bearing the words 'Shinra Electric Power Company'.

Shinra Executive:

The collective assembly of the Heads of Department within the Company. The Executive is chaired by President Shinra.

Shinra Manor:

An old mansion located on the outskirts of Nibelheim that has long been owned by the Company. For many years, it was used by scientists as part of their research, with a number of secret laboratories hidden within the estate. The children of the town claim that the building is haunted.

Shinra soldiers:

The infantry and police force of Shinra, Inc.'s empire. They now belong to the Security Division of the Public Safety Maintenance Department and are ranked by private, captain, officer and colonel respectively. The General of the Armed Forces is Director Heidegger.

Shinra weapons:

Armed robots and techno-soldiers created by the Weapons Development Department for varying uses.

Slums:

The original towns of Midgar. Since the construction of the Plate, it has been without sunlight, and much of it has become a wasteland of poverty and crime.

SOLDIER:

The Shinra Army's elite force. Having completed rigorous training and biochemical enhancement, they are considered 'super-soldiers', possessing incredible strength, agility, and tolerance to pain. The main role of the SOLDIER Division is to quash any violent or aggressive anti-Shinra activity. SOLDIERS are ranked by three classes, First to Third. They can be identified by a gleam in their eyes, caused by Mako infusion.

Support Pillar:

A hulking column of granite constructed around the centre of each Slum sector to hold its corresponding Plate sector aloft. The weight of the Plate is distributed between these Pillars, the Central Complex, and the Reactor facilities on the edge of the city.

Turks:

The Investigation Division of the General Affairs Department. The secret police of Shinra, Inc. who are involved in most of the shady activities deemed necessary by the Company including espionage, assassinations, kidnapping and scouting potential members of SOLDIER. They can be identified by their black suit uniforms. They are led by Chief Tseng who answers to Director Heidegger.

Wall Market:

A seedy district in Sector6 where gambling, drugs and prostitution is rife. The area is run by mafia boss Don Corneo.

Worldwide Network:

A global system of interconnected computer networks used for storing and sharing digital information.

Wusheng:

People who hail from Wutai, particularly militants.

Wutai:

An historical town and capital of the oriental Wutai Continent. Once a wealthy and prominent realm, but now little more than a tourist destination.

Wutai War:

A global conflict that erupted when the Wutai Empire declared war on Shinra, Inc. for unlawfully attempting to construct a Mako Reactor on sacred grounds. It was during this time that the Captain of SOLDIER, Sephiroth, became idolised as a hero. After much bloodshed, Emperor Kisaragi surrendered, though underground militant remnants continued to operate for many years to disrupt the Company.

[μ]-εγλ:

The name of the historical two-thousand year era which was officially declared over by President Shinra to coincide with the end of the Wutai War.

[v]-εγλ:

The name of the modern era beginning in year 0001, that which followed the end of the Wutai War.