

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.1-3

By Zahra

The busy cars packed the streets as the snow fell gently one cold February afternoon in Midgar. With the platforms that used to block the slums from the sky destroyed by Meteor, the people below could enjoy, or suffer, from the weather as never before. The truth was, snow wasn't the only thing new to the slums of Midgar. What with ShinRa wiped out, a new mayor was elected to start the period of "Rebuilding". Whatever was left of the ShinRa Headquarters was torn down, and new buildings began springing out of the cold ground; there was a greater emphasis on freedom of expression and choice; but probably most importantly, old, decaying slums were being exterminated while new, cleaner neighborhoods were created. As a result, Midgar rapidly transformed: from shops to TV to business organizations to economic policies, literally, everything changed.

As Tifa skipped across the street, she tightened her shawl around her neck. Yes, it's very cold today, she remarked to herself, I hope Cloud can do without me for a while. She made her way along the alley and emerged into a little, cobble-stoned square with a broken fountain marking its center.

"Hm..this must be it," she murmured while producing a small note from her pocket. The note simply had "Meet me at the Rosa Cafe in Tally Square at 5 o'clock. It's urgent" scribbled on it. Tifa could not guess who wrote her this message. She thought perhaps Barret sent it, but Cloud, who now lived with her, discredited that idea. Barret lived so far away. Besides, argued Cloud, since when did Barret have such nice hand-writing?

She sighed in annoyance when she found the Cafe. It was an extremely small, snug-looking place, with a fancy, green neon sign reading "Rosa Cafe". She couldn't explain why, but she had an ominous feeling about this "meeting". But she came this far, and may as well continue. So, she entered it, determined to finish quickly.

Pushing the glass door, Tifa immediately noticed that barely anyone was in the cafe. Only an old man reading his newspaper over a cup of coffee. When Tifa met his eye, the old man made no sign of recognition, but took a sip of his coffee and flipped the page. Not him, deduced Tifa. She looked around again, in case her eyes had deceived her, but nobody else was there. Hmph, just a practical joke, she frowned.

"Miss Lockhart, yes?"

Tifa jumped at the mention of her name, and turned around quickly in surprise. A man around thirty years old stood towering over her, with a polite smile to greet her.

"Y..yes. That's me," she stammered, taken aback.

"I'm glad you decided to come," commented the man, "would you like something to drink?"

He ordered a plain coffee, but Tifa declined the offer out of mistrust. As they sat in a booth at the corner of the cafe, Tifa thought there was something strangely striking about the man in front of her. He was dressed in a smart, black business suit and an obviously expensive trench coat. But Tifa didn't find that aspect too peculiar. It was probably his face, she reasoned. The man had a good-looking face with gentle, almost aristocratic, features. But he had pure, snow-white hair that struck her as almost unnatural. It was thick, soft, and some locks of hair hung graciously in front of his face, but the color wasn't right. Then she noticed the bizarre color of his eyes: they were dark pink. Tifa couldn't remember ever seeing such a unique color.

"Well then," began the man, interrupting Tifa's thoughts, "I suppose you want to know why I asked for you."

"Yes," replied Tifa, uneasily, "You send me a message, invite me to coffee, and I don't even know your name!"

"Eh well," smiled the man as he sipped some of his coffee, "I'm not worth knowing."

Tifa frowned discontently at his reply, "Very well, Sir, what do you want from me?"

"I won't waste your time, Miss Lockhart," said the man as he placed the cup in the saucer. He reached for a pocket inside his trench coat and tossed a picture in front of Tifa.

"Do you know this man, Miss Lockhart?"

Tifa picked up the picture and examined the face...it looked *so* familiar. The young man in the picture wore a navy blue suit...a Turks suit, Tifa noticed. He had thick, jet black hair cut short, and bright, blue eyes. Tifa scrutinized the face for a minute...that face..is it..

"Is it Vincent Valentine??" asked Tifa in surprise. she knew Vincent was a Turk, but she never imagined him to look like that.

"Yes, indeed. It is Vincent Valentine, confirmed the man, "I apologize..the picture is very old, but I hear he didn't change that much, so he's still recognizable."

That was true, reflected Tifa, Vincent never grew old externally. he always looked as old as he always did when Hojo..."altered" his body.

"But," began Tifa cautiously, "Why are you showing me his picture?"

"I'd like to ask you, Miss Lockhart, do you know where I could find Mr. Valentine?"

Tifa stared at him in surprise, "Excuse me..? You..you're asking me where Vincent is?"

"Yes."

There was something very cold in the man's curt reply, almost malicious, as his gaze pierced Tifa's eyes. it was as if he were trying to extract the information by force. Tifa fingered her shawl nervously and dodged his eyes by looking down.

"Sir, to be honest, I don't know where he is," she replied deliberately.

"Are you sure?" asked the man, as he lighted a cigarette he produced from his side pocket, " I know you made contact with him about a year ago, and that Mr. Valentine joined your Avalanche group shortly afterwards. Are you sure he didn't hint at where he was going after you all separated?"

How the Hell does this man know all this, wondered Tifa with rising suspicion.

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Valentine never mentioned where he was going. I last saw him in Midgar, but we all separated, and he went his own way."

"Not even a guess, miss Lockhart?" asked the man, puffing his cigarette casually, "can you guess where I may find him?"

Tifa picked up the picture again, this time focusing on Vincent's eyes. They were beautiful, but expressionless, just as they always were, and betrayed nothing. That's what always struck Tifa about Vincent; he only spoke when spoken to, he avoided any type of attention, and always, always stood aloof. Tifa put down the picture, and took a deep breath.

"Listen," started Tifa resolutely, "when avalanche disbanded, all the members took a different route. Mr. Valentine never, ever mentioned what he planned to do. In fact, he simply walked away, without a goodbye, and disappeared. That's all I know, Sir."

He looked at her quietly as she finished, and then an awkward silence ensued between them. he puffed his cigarette one last time as he languidly replied, "I see."

The man extinguished his cigarette, took some money out of his wallet to pay for the coffee, and finally retracted the picture to his pocket.

"Then, I thank you for you time, miss Lockhart. Good day."

he rose up to leave, but Tifa halted him, "Wait! Why do you want to find Vincent so badly??"

The man, however, ignored her and hurriedly walked out of the restaurant. Tifa looked through the restaurant window as he plodded away until he disappeared from her sight.

Why Vincent, of all people? wondered Tifa. does he know him?

Tifa walked sullenly back to her restaurant, which was also her home. The meeting had obviously no good effect on her. In fact, she felt grumpy and totally discontent with it. Nevertheless, she couldn't stop thinking about what happened between her and that strange man. By the time she reached her destination, the streets had emptied a little and the snow had ceased falling. She ascended a flight of stairs to a porch of a small, clean building, marked with a clear sign above the door reading "Tifa's Seventh Heaven".

"I'm home," said Tifa, absent-mindedly as she entered and shut the door behind her.

"Hey, Tifa!" greeted Cloud, kissing her cheek quickly then returning to mopping the floor, "Whew! Glad you're back! washing these floors just isn't my thing. My Back's killing me!"

Tifa sat at one of the of the tables, and stared downwards at her boots. Why did the man seem so bent on finding Vincent? In fact, how'd he know Vincent was a member of Avalanche? or for that matter, how did he even know Vincent never aged?

"Yo! Tifa!!" interrupted Cloud, placing his hand on her shoulder firmly.

"Ah! W...what??" stammered Tifa, surprised.

"You okay? I asked you if anyone showed up for that message?" Cloud bent over her, examining her face in concern, "Are you alright? You looked as if you were logged on to another dimension."

"Oh, I'm fine, Cloud!" answered Tifa, cheerfully.

"Well, who sent it?"

"Sent what?"

"Sent the message, silly!"

It just then occurred to Tifa that she didn't even know the man's name.

"Hey..Cloud?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you know where Vincent went after we killed Sephiroth?"

Cloud looked at her oddly, "Vincent?? Um..no, he never mentioned where he was going."

Tifa got up, and as she made herself a drink at the bar, asked curiously, "Well, can you guess?"

"Tifa, asked cloud as he walked up to her, "why are you asking me about Vincent?"

"No.. I was just wondering," replied Tifa, in an attempt to dispel Cloud's suspicions.

"Well, I dunno!" answered Cloud, scratching his head, "It's not like Vincent was the most talkative guy I met! All I know is his name and that he used to be a Turk in ShinRa."

"Yeah, but...where do you think he went?"

"How should I know?" smiled Cloud, uncomfortable with Tifa's persistence, " He could have gone back to his coffin in Nibelheim...or maybe he went to Junon City. Who knows?" continued Cloud as he turned away from Tifa and shrugged his shoulders, "he could be living here in Midgar, for all I know."

Tifa was silent as she gulped down her drink. Yes, she reflected, Vincent could be anywhere in the world. no wonder that man was so annoyed.

"So, Tifa," began Cloud, resuming his mopping of the floor, "did anyone show up for that message?"

"Hm? oh no," muttered Tifa, " no, it was just some idiot's idea of a practical joke." She saw no reason in telling him what happened, so she kept silent.

"Well, we'd better start opening up. Our coffee break's almost over, y'know."

"Okay," agreed Tifa. cloud was such a help to her in running this restaurant. After the meteor incident, they decided to live together and run a new restaurant together as a business. Cloud sometimes got uneasy with this settled life, but Tifa thought it only natural. after all, everyone in Avalanche had got used to life on the road.

Tifa tossed the message in the thrash basket as she set the chairs neatly on the floor. Whoever that weird man was, he seemed almost obsessed with finding Vincent.

Well, good luck to him, she mused. Vincent could be anywhere...even here in busy Midgar. And with that, Tifa forgot the matter, and thought no more of it.

The bell in the City Tower tolled eleven times as the train noisily made its way along the endless tracks. The passengers inside began gathering their belongings and getting up as the train halted with a loud whistle and opened its doors at the station. Many people flocked out, leaving the train almost empty. Before the doors shut again, a loud voice announced over the intercom, "Last destination: Sector 3, west of Midgar. Time of arrival: 11:32 P.M.". Then, after a slight jolt, the train resumed its journey to the final station.

Vincent dropped into a seat by the window, placing his hand under his chin. He gazed at the dark skyline and the lonely moon that decorated the sky as the train emerged from the tunnel, on its way to Sector 3.

The monotonous rumbling of the train on the tracks beat against his tired head, but he responded by tightening his long, black coat around him, and shutting his eyes firmly. Two other passengers across the car glanced at him apprehensively and whispered between themselves. Vincent knew they were discussing his metal claw and frightful appearance; they probably thought him a criminal or some kind of psychopath. But he could care less what others thought of him. Their opinion never mattered.

Vincent then felt a dull pain slowly forming in his chest. He gripped his chest firmly and tightened his eyes in an attempt to soothe the agony. The pain, however, steadily became sharper, but Vincent continued to clutch his chest, trying to master the attack. suddenly, he bent over sharply and, with one hand over his mouth, began coughing violently. Although he tried to control the fit, he could feel his chest throbbing with intense pain as the seizure grew unbearable. He sensed some warm liquid sprinkle on his hand that covered his mouth, but the seizure felt as though it were squeezing the very life out of him.

The two passengers gawked at him stupidly, as if they'd never seen a man cough, then quickly retreated to the next car, grumbling about weirdoes and disgusting disease.

After a minute of agonizing struggle, the coughing fit eased, and the pain quickly disappeared. Vincent, gasping for breath, rubbed his forehead and wiped away some beads of sweat from his pale face. He then noticed that the palm of his hand which had covered his mouth during the fit had tiny splashes of blood bespattering it. He examined his hand curiously, then wiped his mouth with the back of it. As he suspected, there was some blood on his mouth. The liquid he had felt was his blood.

"Damn," he whispered to himself, "this is getting bad."

The booming voice announced that the final destination was reached and that all citizens were kindly requested to step off the train. Vincent immediately dismounted. He looked around once, as if suspicious of some invisible enemy, and then wrapped his black coat firmly around himself to avoid the chill air that blew through the empty station.

With quick steps, he made his way out of the train station, and followed a dingy alleyway into another narrow street. the cold air mercilessly stung his face, but he felt slightly feverish because of that last coughing fit. After clearing that street, Vincent reached the main square, which was bustling with people eager to enjoy their weekends. Many bars had their doors wide open to welcome customers. Young people weren't afraid to laugh out loud. Some couples walked hand in hand along the shops as they whispered affectionately.

Vincent, however, felt the fever growing worse as he staggered along the square among all the merry-makers. Lights and colors flashed around his head; strange faces and figures danced in front of his eyes; unfamiliar sounds and voices only threw him into more confusion. he stumbled over a stone, but luckily gripped a low fence before falling to the ground. Feeling the same, familiar ache beginning to form again, he grit his teeth resolutely.

Okay, decided Vincent, I am obviously in no condition to go any further... I must get a hold on myself....

He collapsed with a tired sigh into a bench placed near a tree, and bending over, covered his face with one hand. A young woman seated near him noticed his sharp claw and immediately rose, then ran away in fear. Vincent, however, was oblivious to anything save the dull pain that cruelly gnawed at his chest and the fever that plagued him. He felt another seizure coming up, but struggled vigorously to repress it. Fortunately, the attack wasn't that acute, so the pain soon vanished and Vincent breathed easily again.

He thought it best to get up and go home, but, much to his surprise, fatigue had paralyzed both his legs.

So, after some deliberation, he decided to rest on the bench for a while before moving. He leaned back to stare at the starless sky, ignoring the odd glances people gave him. The big, round moon that hung in the pitch black sky struck him as strangely soothing and relaxing.

It's almost as if a person had placed a single pearl against a black cloth of silk, mused Vincent, feeling his eyelids grow heavy. He shut his eyes slowly, ready to fall asleep any moment.

A sharp cry, however, pierced the air, dispersing all sleep from his eyes. Vincent jumped out of his seat and turned around in alarm. Many people, in fact, turned their heads confusedly to see what caused the commotion.

Vincent saw a young, slender girl rushing among the people in a panic. The girl was wet and miraculously kept on her feet, but she still persisted to run frantically as though possessed by a demon.

People dodged the girl as best as they could, but she savagely knocked down an unsuspecting man and shoved another passer-by to the side.

"OUT OF MY WAY!!!!" she shouted

Before he knew what happened, Vincent felt something crash into him with a great force. Despite the magnitude of the crash, it barely had an impact on him, as he was only pushed back slightly; but the young girl, who had collided into him, bounced back and fell to the ground. People gathered around the two, and amidst loud murmurs, wondered who the delirious girl was.

Vincent, on realizing that he had knocked the girl down, bent over her and touched her shoulder gently, "Miss? Are you alright?"

Up close, the girl looked about 20 and very pretty, in spite of her disarrayed hair that covered her face and filthy, drenched rags. She looked up at Vincent as if she didn't understand him.

Vincent, however, gaped at her in sudden astonishment. He could have sworn he'd seen her somewhere before. Neither spoke as they stared at each other; one in confusion, the other in surprise.

Vincent cautiously reached for the girl's pale face, and pushing some of her hair away from her face, met her bright, green eyes that he recognized at once.

"Aeris?!!!" Vincent blurted out.

The girl blinked in deeper confusion, "W..what?"

"A..Aeris....how..what are.." stammered Vincent in absolute bewilderment as he narrowed his eyes to confirm his eyesight.

The girl, however, pushed Vincent aggressively away from her with a shriek, "Get away from me!! GET AWAY!!!"

This time, the push knocked Vincent off his feet, and he landed on his bottom. The girl quickly jumped to her feet and pushed her way through the crowd in a frenzy.

I'm sure that was Aeris, thought Vincent. Yes, I'm sure!!

"Hey, Aeris!!" He shouted, springing to his feet and rushing after her, "Aeris! Wait!!"

He caught sight of her dodging into a dark alley around a corner, and ran as hard as he could after her.

There's no mistake, he repeated, that was Aeris!! But how could she be alive?!! She..she died about a year ago!!

The end of the alley was a dead end, as he soon discovered. He slowly looked around as he gasped for air, then glanced back at the alley's sole exit to make sure he didn't miss some hidden side street. No trace of her.

His ears, however, discerned a stifled sob near by. He turned his head to the source. Creeping softly to an overturned car, he peeked behind it to find the girl huddled by the vehicle, knees drawn in and head bent over. The cold had obviously greatly deteriorated her health; she shivered piteously and seemed to be suffering from fever.

"Aeris?" whispered Vincent, coming near her.

The girl looked up in alarm, with tears in her eyes. She immediately sprang to her feet, ready to flee again, but Vincent quickly grabbed her wrist firmly to prevent her from escaping.

"Let me go! Let me go!" screamed the girl, scratching his hand with her nails to loosen his grip.

"Okay..okay..listen to me for a minute," commanded Vincent, muffling her mouth with his iron claw as he pushed her against the wall. The girl, on seeing his claw so near, froze solid and made no sign of resistance. She just stared, petrified, at his bizarre hand then his blood-red eyes. She probably thought Vincent intended to murder her.

When Vincent decided she was calm enough, he resumed his talk with the girl, but didn't remove his claw from her mouth, "Now listen. I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to help you. Do you understand, Aeris?"

"Why do you call me that??" cried the girl, removing Vincent's iron claw from her mouth, "I don't know you! You have me confused with another person! I don't know you!"

Vincent looked at her oddly as he gradually loosened his grip on her. She rubbed her wrist while looking down at the ground. She shivered when she noticed the red mark Vincent left on her wrist.

"You...don't even remember me vaguely?" asked Vincent.

"I..I don't know you..." she whispered harshly, avoiding his eyes, "I don't know anything..."

Vincent studied her haggard face silently. Did she lose her memory? How, when she was supposed to be dead? Damn it, cursed Vincent internally, what's going on here?

"You...you hurt my wrist..." sobbed the girl miserably.

Vincent had no idea how to respond to her complaint, and blinked in embarrassment while she chafed her wrist and sniffled. He placed her injured wrist in the palm of his claw and gently rubbed it with his other hand to mollify her.

"Sorry.." he muttered, "I didn't mean to grab you so hard.."

A sudden echo of rushing footsteps through the alley forced Vincent to turn around. The girl stared at the alley's entrance with a shiver.

A group of tall, dark figures finally appeared, completely blocking the alley's only exit. They were shrouded in darkness, but judging from the slight glitter each figure's hand gave off, Vincent guessed they all carried guns. Automatic pistols, none the less, added Vincent reflectively.

He pushed the girl behind him forcefully.

"Who's there?" he asked in a calm, icy tone.

"We want the girl behind you."

Vincent felt the girl clutch his coat from behind, but she refused to stare at anything but the dark figures up ahead.

"I'm sorry, but she obviously doesn't want your company," retorted Vincent in the same cold, contemptuous tone.

There was another brief silence, then one dark figure came a step closer. Vincent heard the loud click of a gun as the man warned, "Just step aside from that girl, and no one will get hurt."

"Don't believe them," whispered the girl to Vincent viciously, "When they get me...they'll just shoot you.."

"I'm warning you!" boomed the voice of the figure, "One wrong move, and you'll have more holes in you than Swiss Cheese!"

"Please...don't believe them.." pleaded the girl.

"Well?" shouted the figure menacingly.

Vincent looked around at the pitiful girl, then at the group of mysterious figures blocking the alley. They probably have all their guns aimed at my head, thought Vincent. If I say no, they'll definitely blast my head clean off.

"Alright," replied Vincent finally, "Don't shoot me. I'll get out of the way."

The girl looked at him in disbelief, but didn't utter a word. She reluctantly let go of his coat as he made way for her to go to the figures. Vincent could hear their fingers easing on their triggers, but looked sternly at the girl.

"Okay, A-25, come over here nice and easy!" ordered the dark figure authoritatively.

The wretched girl felt her heart pound violently as she began heading towards the dark men. Every limb in her body trembled and she felt that she'd faint any second. Vincent, however, only narrowed his red eyes while concentrating on the dark group, as though waiting for some signal.

"That's a good girl," remarked one voice, quite amused.

"Be an obedient girl, and you won't get hurt," commented another voice, causing the others to burst out laughing.

The girl shut her eyes to suppress a sob, but before she could reopen them, she felt someone suddenly encircle her waist and pull her back. She saw a swift arm extend over her shoulder and fire seven consecutive shots with amazing rapidity.

The surprise move only lasted about ten seconds. When the last shot sounded off, all the figures were lying face down in the gutter, dead.

"Sorry about that," whispered Vincent from behind her, "but I figured they were stupid enough to be distracted by you..I needed to put them off guard somehow."

"You...killed them?" asked the girl meekly.

"Yes. I shot their heads."

"I.." stammered the girl, "I think I'm going to faint.."

With that last feeble remark, the girl lost conscious and her head dropped against Vincent's shoulder. He wondered what he should do now; he had seven dead bodies in the alley and a sick girl who should be dead lying unconscious on his shoulder.

He slowly placed the girl on the ground momentarily to reload his gun. After throwing away the empty gun shells and holstering his weapon, Vincent wrapped the girl in his coat. He picked her up as gently as he could, careful not to hurt her with his sharp claw. He walked over the corpses he had brutally shot, kicking one body out his way contemptuously, and then ducked in a dark, narrow pathway across the street.

The bell in the Tower tolled twelve times, signaling the arrival of midnight. And then all was silent.

-End of Chp.3

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.4

When she opened her eyes, the girl realized that she was in a very warm bed. Aeris (she *did* look like Aeris) blinked slowly for a few moments.

It's so quiet, she thought, and so warm.

She slowly sat up in bed, wondering where she was. Two thick blankets and a quilt covered her. She saw on the table next to the bed a white basin of cool water and a folded towel.

The room was dimly lit, but she could see that it was very small. A desk and a bookcase humbly occupied one corner, while the closet stood in front of the bed. Near the desk was a closed window overlooking the street below. It was getting dark outside and the snow fell quietly.

"Wh..where am I??" she whispered.

She immediately jumped out of bed, but froze on the spot when noticing something peculiar: someone had changed her clothes while she was asleep! She was dressed only in a black, long-sleeved wooly shirt that barely managed to cover her thighs. Also, the shirt was too big for her slender body; one side constantly fell off her shoulder because the collar was too wide.

She fingered it suspiciously. Even the sleeves were too long for her arms.

"Why, this is a MAN's shirt!!" she cried aloud.

Aeris turned red at the thought that perhaps a *man* had undressed her and clothed her in his shirt. Looking around the room again, she hoped to discover an answer, but found nothing.

Sighing in annoyance, she walked to the door. Aeris cautiously opened it, then peeked to see what was there.

"An apartment," she thought.

She was, indeed, in an apartment, but the silence weighed on the place so heavily, Aeris dared not make a sound. Nevertheless, she stepped forward, determined to explore this strange place.

The apartment, as she soon discovered, consisted of only four rooms, all connected by a hallway stretched in the middle. Judging from the size of the apartment, Aeris guessed that only one person lived here, two at most.

She was particularly struck by the amount of books in the living room. The two bookcases that covered an entire wall were absolutely crammed with books of all sorts. Some were even placed on the table in front of the couch.

When she reached the entrance of the kitchen, Aeris stood at it, but did not enter. It was small, with a wooden table and two chairs placed in the center. Perceiving something on the table, Aeris walked up to check it, not without some uneasiness.

A disassembled gun lay on a white handkerchief, with several of its pieces surrounding it neatly. A bottle full of a yellow liquid stood near the gun.

Aeris picked up the gun, then examined it with extreme curiosity. She wondered who could own such a cold, grim weapon.

As if answering her question, a sound of approaching footsteps reached her ears. A sudden panic gripped her heart. She couldn't quite explain why, but this unreasonable terror made her listen intently as the footsteps grew closer and louder.

When the footsteps stopped, Aeris heard a slight rattle at the doorknob, as though a key was being placed in it. She dropped the gun and rushed to the hall, clasping both her hands over her heart in anticipation.

Vincent swung the door open and staggered in with a bag full of groceries. After removing the key, he shut the door again. Coughing a bit, he stomped his feet and brushed some snow off his black overcoat while still holding the bag.

On noticing Aeris standing in the hallway, he finally turned around. But Aeris jumped back in alarm when she met his eyes. It never occurred to her that *this* man who had perused her in the alley was the one who brought her here. What struck her more strange was the fright she felt the minute that man noticed her.

"Oh, so you woke up, huh?" he asked calmly.

She wanted to answer, but her voice failed her. When she realized that Vincent had walked up to her and was touching her forehead with his hand, she sprang back apprehensively.

"Who..who are you?!!" she finally cried.

Vincent looked at her very thoughtfully, but did not advance towards her. She glared back at him with mistrust and confusion.

"Do you remember me?" he inquired.

"Y..yes..you're that man who shot those men in the alley."

"No, I mean do you remember me from before?"

She fidgeted at her big shirt nervously before making any reply.

"No..I've never seen you before..I don't remember.."

Vincent narrowed his eyes as he studied her face, which made Aeris blush in embarrassment. But he soon brushed past her and stepped into the kitchen. He dumped the burdensome bag on the counter and began unloading it.

Though she wouldn't dare come near him, Aeris curiously examined Vincent from the door. She remembered him fully now, but didn't recall his face clearly because it was so dark when they met.

He struck her as very handsome, but extremely cold. Furthermore, though his facial features were quite dignified, he seemed strangely out of place; almost as if he didn't belong here. His thick, long black hair contrasted sharply with his pale skin and bloody-red eyes.

He's like a monster..or some demon, Aeris noted as she observed him from the door.

She spotted his iron claw glitter as he threw a roll of French bread into the bread basket, and shivered in spite of herself. She instantly remembered how cold it felt on her mouth.

I wonder why he bothered saving me, she thought.

"Hey," he said, turning to her from the counter, "You want something to eat?"

Aeris blinked at him in surprise, but remained silent by the door. Vincent gave her an odd look, as if wondering whether she understood him or not, then turned his back to her again.

She didn't know what he was doing, as he began pouring water into a pot and turning some dial. He then ripped some packet open and poured its contents into the pot.

Not once did Vincent turn around, but Aeris knew he didn't need to; he could still see her behind him.

When he finally finished, Vincent placed a small, steaming bowl of soup on the table. He took off his coat, tossed it on the counter carelessly, then sank into the chair in front of the disassembled gun. Aeris looked at him mistrustfully.

"If you're hungry, you can drink that," he said coolly, indicating the soup. He picked up the gun and examined it carefully.

She remained near the door for a few moments, then stepped cautiously into the kitchen. Vincent, however, ignored her and squirted some of the bottle's liquid on a piece of cotton. He began rubbing the muzzle of the gun.

She stood facing Vincent, in front of the bowl of the soup. Despite the suspicious look she gave him, he continued to clean the gun. Sitting down, Aeris slowly picked up the bowl. Vincent glanced at her as he squirted more of the liquid on the cotton; but otherwise, he paid no attention to her.

"Mm! This is delicious!!" she exclaimed after she took a sip. She gulped the whole soup at once, and smiled delightedly. Vincent picked up another gun part and cleaned it silently.

"You're an excellent cook!" she praised.

"I only boiled the water," he replied, not looking at her, " anybody can make soup if it comes from a packet."

Aeris smiled at him more trustfully. He did appear frightening, but she felt sure he meant her no harm.

"What's your name?" she asked timidly.

"Vincent. Vincent Valentine."

"Vincent Valentine.." she repeated in a whisper.

He looked up at her significantly, and she felt her face turn crimson: she did not feel comfortable when he scrutinized her so intently.

"And...you called me 'Aeris'...right?"

"Yes," he answered, fitting a tight spring into the top of the gun.

"Hm.."

"What's your name?"

"I don't have a name, really. Um...they sometimes call me 'girl' or 'A-25'."

"Who are 'they'?"

Aeris was silent for some minutes. As she bent her head thoughtfully, some of her loose, thick curls fell on her face and bare shoulder. Vincent was surprised he never noticed before how pretty Aeris was.

"The guards..and the Professor. They call me that.."

"What Professor?" he asked, assembling his gun indifferently. Aeris was impressed how easily and quickly he fitted the gun parts together; he wasn't even looking at what he was doing. She realized that Vincent was no amateur, but had complete mastery over that gun.

Vincent loaded the gun with a loud click, which startled Aeris. He looked her straight in the face, expecting an answer.

"I..I don't know him. I never saw him," she stammered, "but he does all these ...things to me. Things that hurt me. So, I just ran away last night.."

"Three days ago."

"Huh?" she looked up quizzically.

"It's been three days since you've escaped. You've had a severe fever for the last three days because you weren't dressed warmly, and went running around in the cold."

"Oh," she said quietly. she felt her cheeks flush red as she lowered her eyes bashfully, "then, I suppose *you* undressed me and put this shirt on me."

Vincent understood why she blushed, and turned his head away.

"Ah.." he answered, with a slight cough, "you must understand, Aeris, your clothes were drenched, so I had to remove them."

She looked up at him, and thought she saw him blushing slightly too; but she couldn't be too sure.

"Sorry the shirt's too big for you," he apologized, "It was the only clean one I had at the time."

"It's alright," she smiled kindly, "I still have to thank you for saving me and taking care of me. Thank you, Vincent."

She bowed her head gratefully. Vincent seemed slightly embarrassed as he scratched the back of his head nervously.

"No problem," he muttered.

"Now," she began after a slight pause, "can you tell me why you keep on calling me 'Aeris'?"

"Yes. About a year ago, I knew a young girl named Aeris. We weren't intimate, mind you. In fact, she barely knew my name."

"Hm..and this Aeris..she looked exactly like me?"

"Yes. However, she died about a year ago."

For some reason, Aeris kept her eyes downcast, even though she knew Vincent's eyes were fixed on her. She began feeling very uneasy.

"Maybe...," she faltered, "maybe she never died.."

"Impossible. A man stabbed her with a sword right through her chest. She couldn't have survived."

Suddenly, Aeris jumped out of her chair and stared at Vincent sharply. Something immediately struck her.

"I have a scar on my back and chest..is that where I got them?! Some man stabbed me with a sword?! You saw the scar when you were dressing me, didn't you?!!"

"Yes, I did," he replied calmly.

"Then..how come I'm standing here, when I should be dead? You..you say I'm dead..but I...."

Vincent got up and moved towards her, but she ran away to the far corner of the kitchen, giving him a dirty look.

"And how do I know you're not lying? How do I know you're not just trying to confuse me?" she glared at him. Vincent listened to her, but did not advance towards her.

"Heh!" she laughed nervously, "You could be with that Professor!! he's always saying things like that. 'Girl,' he'd say, 'it's such a shame you died..but never mind!' or he'd say, 'You're perfect..just like Aeris!..I..I..'"

She gasped for breath, but still fixed her eyes on Vincent with increasing suspicion. He had remained silently rooted to his spot by the chair, staring intensely at her face.

"I don't remember anything," she continued, "I don't remember having friends like you..I don't remember my parents..or what I did last year..Vincent, I couldn't even remember my name!"

"Aeris..listen to.."

"I'M NOT AERIS, DAMN YOU!!" she screamed.

"Yes, yes you are," he replied, "just listen to me.."

"Let me out!! I don't want to go back to that Professor!!!"

Sweat broke out on her forehead as she yelled. Despite the burning sensation on her face, her body felt very cold. She began shivering involuntarily and grew unsteady on her feet. Vincent looked at her in alarm.

"Let me go...let me go..." she whispered tiredly.

But Vincent was by her side in two steps and picked her up quickly. He carried her back to the bed then covered her with the blankets. Aeris steadily regained self-control, but her face still felt so unbearably hot.

"Aeris," he whispered, sitting near her on the bed, "you should sleep a bit now. The fever's worn off, but you could have a relapse." He soaked the towel into the basin and wiped it gently on her forehead and cheeks.

"I know you're feeling confused now, but you should realize that I'm not connected with this 'Professor', do you understand?"

Aeris looked at him wearily, but understood him.

"You hardly know me, so it would be unfair to ask you trust me," he continued, "but two of your friends will come here in a little while. Maybe they can help you find an answer. Now, go to sleep."

Aeris turned her back to him and shut her eyes. Picking up the basin and towel, Vincent walked out of the room. He closed the door quietly.

As she lay in bed, Aeris drifted into deep thought. She recalled that she ran away from the Laboratory...was perused...and then this strange man claims he knows her...and that she died, or should've died, a year ago. But she couldn't remember any of that! Not one single memory from the past. It seemed to her she had always lived in the lab...but how when...

She threw the covers over her head, trying to stop all those thoughts from bombarding her brain. In one minute, she was fast asleep.

-End of Chp.4

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.5

It was quiet, and very dark.

"You, my dear," echoed a haunting voice, "are just part of a test.."

"What?" Aeris whispered, turning around in alarm.

Aeris found herself standing in utter darkness. The silence ruthlessly crushed her, but she felt sure there was somebody with her, watching her closely; only she couldn't see anything.

"Why, girl, what's wrong?" hissed the voice suddenly.

"Who..who are you?!" she cried as she tried to see the speaker.

"Fah! Look at you!" the voice scoffed, "You're just an image of another person! You're not real at all!"

The voice broke into wild, hysterical laughter, but it seemed to surround Aeris from all directions. She covered her ears and began rushing through the darkness in hopes of escape; all in vain. The laughter cruelly perused her.

Noticing that the cackling had ceased, Aeris stopped to catch her breath. Her heart pounded loudly. Nevertheless, she was frightfully alarmed at the sudden stillness of the place. She thought perhaps the speaker had vanished.

"You are such a pathetic creature!" the voice boomed again, startling her, "Did you think you could escape me?"

"Wh..what do you ..want with me?!!" she faltered angrily.

"You are part of a test.."

"What test?!"

"But, you are just an image.."

"What test?! What image?!"

Aeris screamed desperately in all directions, but no answer came. Another deathly silence filled the darkness, almost suffocating her.

"This..is some nightmare!!" she sobbed.

Suddenly, a firm hand gripped her shoulder and forcefully swung her around. Much to her astonishment, Aeris found herself standing in front of a full length mirror.

How that mirror had been produced, she could not guess. But, more importantly, she could not see her reflection, only a blurry image dancing playfully on the other side. Aeris tried hopelessly to distinguish the image, as if her life depended on it; as if she *should* know what it was.

When the image settled down, it gradually began to form a distinct picture..of a young girl..

Aeris froze solid as she stared at the image on the other side. All thoughts, emotions, and sensations abandoned her immediately. Her breath quickly shortened and her legs trembled with fear.

A young girl with grey eyes blankly returned Aeris' stare. A peaceful, though rather stoic, expression

shrouded her beautiful face. Her hallow eyes didn't gleam or glitter; her lips, slightly parted, were white. But the paleness of the girl's skin frightened Aeris the most; the girl was as white as snow.

"Dear God..," Aeris muttered, finding her voice at last, "She's dead..and yet..she's me! She looks like me!"

"Or rather, *you* look like her," corrected the same malicious voice, "You are the image, she is the reality."

In an instant, the image melted away, leaving the mirror empty again.

"Who are you?" Aeris asked.

There was a stiffened hush for a few minutes. Aeris stared sternly at the mirror, as if expecting to find an answer there.

"Who are you?!" she cried out, "SHOW YOURSELF!"

No sooner had she uttered those words, than a most horrific image popped up on the mirror. A thin, sickly man in a tattered lab coat stared straight at her mockingly. Aeris was dumbfounded by his flaring yellow eyes and slimy-green skin that twitched incessantly. He greedily licked his lips, as if wanting to devour her. Though his dull black hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail, several strands literally sprang out and dangled defiantly in front of his gaunt face.

Slowly, his thin lips curled upwards, displaying all his sharp, rotten teeth. Aeris thought he was trying to smile.

She sat up in bed with a start and gasped for air. Clutching her chest, she attempted to calm her throbbing heart, but to no avail; that nightmare had frightened her out of her wits. It seemed so real to her..to real..

"Hey, you okay?" asked a gentle voice.

Despite the dimness of the room, Aeris noticed a young woman by her bedside, bending over her with genuine concern. This woman had long, beautiful dark brown hair and gazed kindly at Aeris with her bright honey-colored eyes. Aeris was certainly surprised; she had thought she was alone in the room.

"Who..are you?" she asked confusedly.

"It's alright," replied the woman, sitting by her on the bed and holding her hand coaxingly. She was eager to dispense any fear or mistrust Aeris had, "I'm a friend...um..that is, I'm a friend of Vincent. My name's Tifa."

Tifa smiled good-humouredly, but Aeris merely stared with unconcealed puzzlement.

When she realized that Aeris made no sign of recognizing her, Tifa stood up and studied Aeris' face intently.

Yes, guessed Aeris tiredly, I know. She's like that man; she'll say that I'm her friend...and that she knows me..but I can't remember anything! I don't remember her either.

"This is so strange!" exclaimed Tifa, studying Aeris' with interest, "Um..Vincent..he told you that you.."

"I..," interrupted Aeris indignantly, "..that Vincent says the strangest things! And he won't explain anything to me, either! he's just stupid!! He says that I should know him, but I don't! He says I died, but I'm alive! He says I should remember everything, but I don't remember anything!!"

By the time Aeris finished, her eyes had welled up with frustrated tears. She felt strangely angry at Vincent, as though he were somehow responsible for this misfortune. Tifa quickly embraced her, trying to soothe her wrecked nerves with gentle words.

"Shh...don't be too hard on Vincent, Aeris," she pleaded, "You should have heard him when he phoned me. He was just as confused as you are now. Vincent doesn't mean any harm. He..well..all of us are so shocked! See, you were a very close friend of mine and Cloud. And all of a sudden, you just.."

"Cloud?"

"Yeah, Cloud," Tifa repeated with slight uneasiness. She immediately recalled how both girls had been undeclared rivals for Cloud's affections in the past. Some strange feeling pricked Tifa's heart as she looked into Aeris' green eyes. She couldn't quite explain what the sensation was.

"Is Cloud...another friend of mine?" Aeris inquired.

"Yes. Cloud, Vincent, me..we all want to help you."

Aeris looked down in silence.

"I'm sorry. I've been losing my temper a lot lately," she finally said.

"It's okay. You're only human."

That remark left a bitter tinge in Aeris' heart. She instantly recalled that nightmare, and shuddered with disgust.

"You must be cold," commented Tifa, "here. I got you some clothes. I hope they fit you."

"Clothes?"

"Well, yeah. You don't wanna go on wearing Vincent's shirt, do you? It's way too big! And besides, what'll the poor guy wear?"

So, after some hesitation, Aeris at last agreed to wear the clothes Tifa had brought her. As she quickly undressed, Tifa handed her a warm, long winter dress. It fit her perfectly, although the sleeves were slightly too long for Aeris' slender arms.

"Ah! That can be fixed!" smiled Tifa, folding the sleeves once. Now the dress was flawless. Nevertheless, Aeris frowned with discomfort as she felt her new clothes.

At least they're more decent than the one *he* gave me, she thought.

"Right," said Tifa with a brush in her hand, "do you want me brush your hair now?"

"No, no, it's okay," replied Aeris, immediately edging away, "I can do that by myself. Thank you."

Tifa discerned some uneasiness in Aeris' face and tone, so wisely decided to "give the girl some breathing space". She nodded her head quietly, then walked out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Aeris was left alone. She slowly picked up the brush Tifa had placed on the bed, and searched the room until she discovered a small mirror hanging in a corner. She walked up to it, but stopped short when spotting her reflection. strange to say, she did not brush her thick, long hair. Instead, she gazed intently at her face in the mirror.

Suddenly, Aeris spotted the same horrifying man behind her reflection in the mirror. His eyes glowed brightly and a wicked grin spread across his hideous face.

She turned around sharply in alarm, but there was nothing behind her. She looked again suspiciously at her reflection: nothing there either.

"I must be going mad," she murmured.

Tossing the brush on the bed, she marched to the door and opened it to a tiny crack. The corridor was deserted, but Aeris could hear two voices discussing something in the living room down the hall. One spoke with obvious excitement; she didn't know his voice. The other answered with a surprisingly subdued calmness; that voice she immediately recognized.

That must be Vincent, she deduced. A cold shudder tickled her spine.

"Well?" asked the unfamiliar voice with agitation, "what do you think?"

"I can make no definite conclusions about her for the time being," replied Vincent coolly.

"She couldn't have survived! Impossible!" he cried, "you were there with me, Vincent! You saw it when that bastard stabbed her!"

"Yes, and when I told her about that, she went into hysterics."

"And?"

"I had to carry her back to bed and calm her. She was very upset because she couldn't remember anything."

"Forget that!" shouted the irritated voice, cutting Vincent short, "How the Hell could she be *alive* in the first place?!!"

"Cloud, please calm down," pleaded Tifa, who was also in the room, but had remained silent.

"All three of us were present when she was killed, Cloud," continued Vincent, not at all offended with Cloud's outburst, "and we all saw you place her body in that lake. But.."

"But now, after a whole year, she just runs out of nowhere, and can't even remember her name?! Damn it, it doesn't make sense!!"

"As I said, I cannot offer any logical explanation, but.."

Vincent stopped short when noticing that Aeris had been standing at the doorway with a deeply troubled look. Both men were standing near the bookcases while Tifa sat nervously on the couch, trying to appear calm.

Vincent suddenly cut the conversation by gruffly turning his back to Cloud. He obviously did not want Aeris to hear this discussion. Cloud, who had his back to her, turned around quizzically.

The silence lasted one full minute, during which Cloud stared at Aeris as if struck by lightning.

Aeris ventured one step into the room, glancing timidly at Cloud, her so-called "friend". He was a tall, slim young man, with a shock of spiky blond hair. She instantly noticed his bright blue eyes which actually gleamed at her. Scratching the back of his head, he looked at Tifa helplessly.

Tifa understood Cloud's meaningful look, and got up from the couch.

"Aeris," she began, clearing her throat, "this is Cloud."

During the awkward silence that followed, Vincent walked to the window with apparent irritation. Keeping his back to all the others, he gazed out the window panes, and did not flinch a muscle. No one noticed him.

Cloud finally extended his hand to Aeris amicably.

"Hi," he greeted with a warm, though nervous smile.

"Hello," answered Aeris, but she didn't extend her hand. She had a foreboding feeling about this meeting.

"Okay," said Tifa, breaking the silence, "Aeris, I bet you're all confused and lost in this mess. So, here's what we'll do..why are you standing? Sit down, please."

Aeris obediently sat down next to Tifa on the couch, while Cloud drew up a chair and leant forward on its back. His eyes betrayed extreme curiosity in what Aeris would say. Vincent, however, mutely refused to budge from his spot by the window, as if this affair bore no significance whatsoever.

"Some things never change," sighed Tifa, indicating Vincent. She suddenly recalled that strange man who had insisted on knowing Vincent's whereabouts. She thought she should mention it to him later.

"Aeris, now take it nice and easy," said Cloud gently, "First of all, tell us what you remember."

Both Cloud and Tifa stared at Aeris attentively, waiting for her to speak.

"Well," she faltered, "I..I remember the laboratory, and the cell I was locked in, and the Professor."

"Professor?" asked Tifa. Cloud seemed slightly perplexed.

"I don't know how he looks like," continued Aeris, addressing Tifa, "I've never seen him. But, when he drugs me and I'm half-conscious, I can hear his voice...actually, it's more like a hiss."

"And you've never seen him? Never?" demanded Cloud.

"No..it's always dark when he speaks."

"You mentioned that he used to say strange things," added Vincent suddenly, without turning around.

"Yes..," she muttered with downcast eyes, "He said that I'm ' perfect'...and that I'm 'just like Aeris'. I don't understand anything he says."

Her face darkened as she sunk into deep thought. Cloud glanced significantly at Tifa. Vincent remained stubbornly by the window, oblivious to the heavy silence in the room.

"Go on," Tifa encouraged, "You can tell us."

"I don't remember anymore," Aeris concluded sadly, "That's all I can remember. the Professor wanted to do something to me...something that really hurts me..but, I managed to run away."

"Do you know where you ran from?" asked Cloud.

"Of course not! But, I ran for a very long time, and ran through so many streets, because I was being followed by some men."

"Yes, we know," interrupted Tifa, "Vincent told us how he 'disposed' of them"

Several haunting memories cluttered Aeris' brain at the mention of Vincent's name: the ice-cold sensation she felt when he muffled her mouth with his claw; the ear-splitting gunshots she heard when he ruthlessly killed those men. Even she could not explain why Vincent aroused such fear in her heart. She just did not feel comfortable with him near her.

"Perhaps now," she asked meekly, fidgeting in her seat, "you could tell me about myself?"

Cloud and Tifa exchanged another look. Tifa nodded resolutely to Cloud.

"Very well," he consented firmly.

So, he began telling Aeris all he knew about her. He mentioned her mother, both real and foster, and then how they had met and what was said. He talked of ShinRa; what they had hoped to gain out of her, because she was the last "Cetra".

"Now..um..about you death.." continued Cloud uneasily.

"Yes, I want to know about that the most!" Aeris exclaimed.

He carefully explained about Sephiroth, and Jenova, even a bit about his personal past and how he became involved. Finally, he described vividly how Sephiroth stabbed her as she prayed, and how they left her body at the bottom of that clear, blue lake in the Forgotten City.

A heavy silence lingered in the room for a long time; no one dared to break it. Aeris, overwhelmed with this torrent of history about herself, sat very still on the couch. Cloud searched intently in Aeris' face for something; some hint that perhaps she vaguely recalled anything. But Aeris merely returned his look with confused eyes: she obviously could not remember any of this.

"It's okay," comforted Tifa kindly, "Just give it time to sink in."

Cloud shuffled out of his chair and walked up to Aeris, crossing his arms solemnly. His face showed a curious mixture of dismay and concern. He bent over Aeris.

While gazing into his glittering eyes, she struggled to remember this man who seemed closer to her than Vincent, Tifa, and everybody else in the world, but nothing! She could not recall ever seeing him before.

"If you're walking among us, Aeris, then how could you not remember any of what I told you? Better yet, how could you be *alive* in the first place?"

Aeris blinked at him with surprise, but did not utter a word.

"We saw you die, understand? Die! How could you be alive now, but can't even remember our faces? You either came back to life somehow, or you're just some dream..some image."

Aeris fixed her eyes on the floor, ashamed she could not provide any explanation to Cloud. However, Vincent suddenly turned around to face the others, with his bloody-red eyes narrowed sharply in grave contemplation.

"I don't know..," whispered Aeris dejectedly, "all I know is that I will never, ever go back to that laboratory or that Professor."

Everyone was silent. Tifa gently put her arm around Aeris.

"It's a blessing from God I met friends like you," Aeris went on, "You've done so much for me, and are very kind, even though I can't remember any of you. I..I'm sorry I can't help you in return..I just don't remember any of what you've told me."

"Aeris, don't be sorry," Tifa answered, "What matters is that you're safe and well. Believe me, none of us would allow anyone to take you back to that lab. Me, Cloud..," she paused momentarily as she glanced at Vincent, "..and Vincent too. We're all your friends!"

Vincent scoffed noiselessly, as if contemptuous of the title "friend".

"Yeah!" added Cloud warmly, "Just relax, Aeris. You're not alone anymore. You've got us now."

Aeris looked up with a cheerful smile. A feeling of genuine safety swelled in her heart; with these two trustworthy friends, she could finally live peacefully, far away from the Professor!

And Vincent? Could she trust him like the others?

Although Tifa had assured her Vincent meant no harm, he never failed to arouse intense feelings of anxiety, even fear, in her heart. He seemed too detached, too dispassionate, to even care for Aeris or her "friendship". In fact, Aeris could not erase the notion that perhaps Vincent despised her.

"Well, anyway," began Tifa, "we have to decide where Aeris is gonna stay until this blows over. Aeris, would you rather stay here with Vincent, or come with us?"

"I think she'd better come with us," voiced Cloud confidently, "We run a restaurant, but there's plenty of room on the second floor. We even have an extra bed for her."

Aeris twiddled her thumbs nervously, as if letting Cloud decide for her.

"I..I don't want to trouble anyone..," she muttered.

"Oh, it's no problem at all!" replied Cloud with a laugh, "It would probably be better for Vincent too. he doesn't like people that much."

"Cloud!" whispered Tifa harshly, kicking his shins.

Cloud tried to stifle a cry of pain. Vincent, however, only glanced at him, unruffled by the impudent remark. Turning to Aeris, he skimmed her face, then gave Tifa a meaningful look. Tifa seemed to instantly grasp what he wanted to say.

"Cloud," she said, "I think Aeris should stay here with Vincent."

"Huh? Why?"

Aeris stared at Tifa, greatly distressed.

"Those men that were perusing her are probably combing every inch of Midgar in search of her," explained Tifa sternly, "and we run a restaurant. They could just walk in, dressed in civilian clothes, and recognize her. And we wouldn't even know it!!"

"I realize that," protested Cloud, "but, I was going to protect her."

"No, she's right," interrupted Aeris, standing up, "I don't want to endanger anybody. Those men may harm you just to catch me...but they won't know where to find me if I stay here...with Vincent.."

Cloud evidently understood her meaning; he reluctantly nodded his head in agreement. Tifa turned

uneasily to Vincent. She felt she was forcing all this trouble on him, without even asking his consent! But Vincent made no response to her quizzical look.

"I'm sorry...", Aeris apologized meekly, addressing no one in particular.

Vincent silently brushed past her, and left the room.

All three followed him with their eyes until he walked out, then fidgeted awkwardly. Aeris in particular felt most upset at this turn of events.

"I shouldn't stay here...", she faltered, "I have no right to.."

"Hey, he didn't say anything, right?" smiled Cloud, trying to calm her, "If he doesn't speak, it means he doesn't mind."

Cloud hurriedly ran after Vincent, leaving the two girls alone.

"Tifa...", whispered Aeris very softly, "Vincent scares me a bit.."

"Wha?! Why??" cried Tifa with surprise.

"He has such strange eyes...and he's so pale..like a ghost! And..well, he has a claw!! I don't think he likes me at all.."

"Hey, easy!" interrupted Tifa, placing both hands on Aeris' shoulders, "Listen:Vincent may be a bit on the dark side, and can be cold sometimes, but I know you can trust him. Don't let his appearance fool ya!"

Aeris said nothing, but those words greatly comforted her.

"I'll come visit you again very soon," continued Tifa, "but now, I really have to go home."

When she stepped into the hall, Tifa spotted both men by the main door, discussing something with apparent seriousness. As she picked up her coat from the table, she caught some of their conversation.

"So...",said Cloud in a low voice, "if she needs anything, you be sure to call me and *tell* me. And fer God's sake, don't scare her with your moody attitude! She's only a girl!"

"I understand," replied Vincent.

"And, if you need anything, like money or.."

"I have money, thank you," answered Vincent gruffly.

"Really?!" exclaimed Cloud, quite astonished, "How? Did you scare a bank or something?"

Vincent turned away in annoyance, trying to suppress a violent outburst.

"I have a job," he muttered forcefully.

"A job?!!" cried Tifa, walking up to them as she put on her coat. The idea obviously never struck either of them that Vincent would actually get a job.

"What do you work as?" she asked, very much interested.

"A gunsmith. I work for a small company in Sector 1"

"Wow," blinked Cloud with unfeigned bewilderment, "Y'know, I always thought you'd go back to that coffin and rot in there. I never would have dreamed you'd get a job, and live here in Midgar.."

Tifa kicked his shins again, which silenced him effectively. She cleared her throat in a business-like air, then faced Vincent.

"So, you'll take care of her for the time being?"

"Yes."

"And don't upset her like you did last time."

Vincent merely scoffed scornfully.

"Okay," concluded Tifa resolutely, "I'll visit her again. You make sure she's safe. Vincent, please guard her."

Though he nodded dismissively, Tifa knew from his eyes that he would protect Aeris. Dragging Cloud by the arm, she bade goodbye to Vincent, and left.

Vincent mechanically shut the door. As he leant back on the door tiredly, his breath rapidly turned to short gasps. Sweat broke out on his pale face.

Suddenly, his head jerked forward, but he covered his mouth firmly and squeezed his eyes shut. His shoulders and back throbbed continuously, as if ready to burst any second. He dropped to the ground, but would not remove his hand from his mouth. The throbbing turned to violent shaking; still, he refused to utter a sound.

Aeris peered out from the living room, and started on seeing Vincent shivering by the door. At first, she thought he was crying, but then noticed red droplets trickle through his fingers and stain the floor. He was, literally, fighting a coughing seizure.

He struggled like that for a long time. Still, some ominous feeling prevented Aeris from going to him. She lingered by the doorway, too afraid to approach him, yet too concerned to leave him.

-End of Chp.5

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.6

A whole week flew by since Aeris had first agreed to stay with Vincent. Tifa, as promised, dutifully visited her as often as possible, always bringing Cloud with her. Cloud's eyes gleamed with genuine delight whenever he saw Aeris, and the two would talk for an hour or so, laughing all the time. However, Tifa discerned some restrained emotion, some hasty glance, some discomfort, in Aeris' movements. Though Aeris quickly reassured her that she "was perfectly well", Tifa internally doubted the sincerity of Aeris. She felt Aeris was hiding something behind her laughter, stubbornly refusing to release it.

"Don't you think Aeris seems kind of...uncomfortable?" Tifa asked Cloud one cold afternoon in late February. They were slowly making their way to Vincent's apartment.

"Hm? No, I think she's quite happy," Cloud replied, "Why? Did Vincent bother her?"

"What are you saying, Cloud?!" cried Tifa, "Vincent's a perfect gentleman! He'd never do something like that!"

Which was absolutely correct, according to Aeris. She herself testified that Vincent was "anything but rude". He never entered the bedroom without her permission, even though it was *his* room to begin with. He bluntly insisted sleeping on the couch so that Aeris could have the bed. He even emptied parts of his closet for Aeris' clothes and belongings, which Tifa generously provided. At exactly six o'clock for in the morning, he'd leave Aeris alone in the apartment, and return around five o'clock in the evening; ten o'clock if he had a nightshift.

Despite his chivalrous conduct, he rarely spoke to Aeris. Whenever she chanced upon him, he was either engrossed in some book or repairing a gun. His face expressed such coldness and thoughtfulness, Aeris failed to muster enough courage to even sit with him in the same room. In short, she tried her hardest to avoid him out of some ambiguous fear; and he ignored her out of cold-heartedness, or so Aeris guessed.

Therefore, by the end of the week, Aeris had learned a great deal about Tifa and Cloud; they loved to talk to her about anything. Often times, Cloud would speak of past adventures, strange creatures, and distant lands. Tifa would describe the Avalanche members with lively animation. All three would burst out laughing whenever she imitated Cait Sith's voice, or Cid's "unique" expressions.

Not surprisingly, Aeris grew extremely close to her two new friends. Sometimes, she'd forget that she had "amnesia" or "had been dead", and acted as though she had known them for a long time.

On the other hand, Aeris did not know much about Vincent. Cloud had once whispered to her that "he was a Turk", expecting her to instantly grasp the significance. She did not understand what he meant, so she turned to Tifa. However, Tifa merely shrugged her shoulders, as if to say "who knew?". Aeris thought it strange how both Cloud and Tifa claimed to be Vincent's friends, when neither knew one definite fact about his past.

She wanted to ask Vincent directly, but, of course, apprehension gripped her heart, and she promptly abandoned her idea. Eventually, Aeris lost interest, and simply forgot.

However, Aeris could not help but wonder at him whenever Cloud and Tifa came to visit. He would retreat to some inconspicuous corner and read a book, showing no interest in Cloud's anecdotes or Tifa's amusing impressions. The two guests seemed quite used to his attitude; they talked and laughed freely in his presence, as if he weren't there at all.

But Aeris glanced at him uneasily from time to time. The contrast between him and her vivacious friends stung her heart to the core.

I wonder why he's always so gloomy..so preoccupied! Aeris wondered.

"What's wrong, Aeris?" laughed Cloud, "Didn't you like the joke?"

"Huh? Oh no!" she immediately answered, though she didn't listen when the joke was said. She had been too busy with her reflections.

"Oh, Cloud!" scolded Tifa amusedly, "you're jokes are all so lame! No wonder she didn't laugh!"

At around three o'clock, one week since Aeris had agreed to live with Vincent, the merry threesome were comfortably seated around a coffee table in the living room. Vincent, as usual, occupied his corner by the window, and read indifferently. A tray with four mugs and a plate of pastries were neatly placed on the coffee table. Tifa had bought the cakes from a nearby bakery as "a little treat for everyone".

Actually, she had bought them for Vincent in particular; she wanted to pay him back somehow for taking care of Aeris. Much to her dismay, Vincent didn't express much delight with the pastries.

"Hey, Vincent man!" called Cloud, stuffing his mouth with another cake, "You sure you don't want one? They're really good!"

Vincent silently flipped the page of his book without even raising his eyes.

"Okay, suit yourself," answered Cloud, as if Vincent had replied. He greedily ate another cake with good humour.

"Cloud, you're such a glutton!" giggled Aeris.

"Hey, Cloud!" frowned Tifa, snatching the plate of pastries away, "You'll spoil your dinner! Save some for later".

"Oh, sorry..." apologized Cloud as he scratched the back of his head, "I forgot you were cooking dinner tonight, Tifa".

Indeed, Tifa, after many entreaties, had persuaded Vincent into allowing her to make dinner that night for everyone. As mentioned before, Tifa had harshly accepted the full responsibility of Vincent's "situation". Forgetting that it was *he* who had indirectly suggested the idea in the first place, Tifa felt she had forced Vincent to care for Aeris, and was determined to repay his kindness somehow, whether he liked it or not.

Therefore, she had insisted on cooking the dinner, and still more forcefully, insisted Vincent eat with them.

"As you wish," he had sighed.

"Speaking of dinner, we should get going," commented Cloud, getting up lazily from his seat, "We still have to buy all the ingredients".

"Right," agreed Tifa, rising as well, "Aeris, go get your coat."

"Okay, don't leave without me," she beamed delightedly. She sprang out of her seat and ran to fetch her coat.

"Um...Tifa," whispered Cloud after she left, "are you sure we should take her with us?"

"Why not?" she asked in puzzlement, almost in alarm.

"Well, what if those men find her?"

Tifa was thoughtful for a couple of moments. She glanced suspiciously at Vincent, but he seemed oblivious to their conversation.

"It'll be all right," reassured Tifa, "I'll watch her closely. Besides, those goons have probably given up by now. And poor Aeris could use some fresh air."

"Heh, and if they do show up, you'll probably whoop their butts before they have a chance to attack."

"Huh!" she snorted, delighted with the remark, "You know how I feel about people who push me around..especially men!"

Cloud smiled lovingly at her, then both began sniggering like little children.

Their amusement was abruptly cut short when Vincent slammed his book shut and stood up. Both turned to him, expecting him to speak. As he silently placed the book on the shelf, he happened to catch Tifa's eyes. She immediately detected a flash in his eyes; he had obviously been pondering something.

Does he think Aeris' shopping with us a bad idea? wondered Tifa.

Instead of speaking, Vincent sullenly walked towards the door. He nearly knocked Aeris down as she came rushing through excitedly, but he grabbed her firmly before she could fall.

"Oh..thank you, Vincent," Aeris mumbled in embarrassment.

After he left the living room, the three stood for a moment, lost in thought.

"What's wrong with him?" inquired Cloud.

"I don't know..he seems irritated," answered Tifa.

Aeris silently tied her scarf around her neck. She wondered if Vincent had this feeling..this presentiment about her going out. Aeris had felt similarly too at first, but had shrugged it off, assuming she was just nervous about leaving the apartment.

"He's thinking about something," Tifa scowled, "but he's not telling us."

"I'm sure it's nothing your delicious dinner can't fix," laughed Cloud, trying to restore the liveliness of the girls, "You know him! He's always moody like this. Nothing to worry about. Right Aeris?"

"Uh..yes!" she instantly agreed, attempting to conceal her anxiety.

"There, see?" said Cloud, looking at Tifa.

"I guess so," she faintly muttered.

"So, let's go already!" cried Cloud, playfully pulling Tifa to the door.

"Ah! Careful!" she giggled.

Aeris, however, plunged into deep thoughtfulness. She remained standing in the room, lost in an ocean of meditation, but could not formulate one thought.

"Aeris!" called Cloud, "C'mon! we're leaving!"

"Oh, I'm coming!" she answered, and ran after them.

Though the air was crisp that afternoon, Midgar apparently braced itself for rain. The grey clouds gradually blanketed the sky, barring the sunlight from entry. Nevertheless, the streets brimmed with people hurrying to and fro. The shops and boutiques eagerly flung their doors wide open to welcome any customer. The cafes were teeming with people enjoying their coffee break.

All sorts of sounds filled the air: from the hushed murmur of passing businessmen to the delightful squeal of children; the incoherent mumbles of a senile beggar, and the shouts of teenagers calling each other. The city throbbed with life.

Aeris, quite fascinated with the city, constantly turned her head from side to side so as to catch every detail. Tifa and Cloud looked at her amusedly and answered whatever questions she had about Midgar.

"Cloud, what's that building?" she asked.

"Oh, that's a branch of the new government. The Department of Foreign Affairs, I think."

"It's so big!" she marveled.

"She's like a little kid," winked Cloud as he nudged Tifa.

When they turned around a corner, an old, wan-faced woman with a beaten flower basket staggered up to them.

"Would the pretty lass like a flower?" she asked, holding a bright pink flower to Aeris.

"Oh! How beautiful!" cried Aeris, taking the flower instantly. Her entire face beamed with delight as she studied the flower. She looked at Cloud imploringly.

"Yeah, sure," mumbled Cloud, fumbling for his wallet, "Give the other girl a flower too."

"Heh heh, Cloud, you're so sweet," snickered Tifa at his embarrassment.

"Y'know it's funny," exclaimed Cloud as they resumed their way.

"What's funny?" asked Aeris, looking up at him.

"Before..um..before you had amnesia, you used to adore flowers. In fact, you were a flower girl yourself."

"Was I?" she smiled in wonder.

"Yup. And it's funny how you don't remember anything about your past, but remember that you love flowers."

"Flowers carry so many meanings," she answered mysteriously, "They symbolize life, and love, and beauty."

"Hard things to find in the dead of winter," commented Tifa.

"Oh, you can find them in the winter, if you look hard enough."

"Yeah, whatever," mumbled Cloud, completely baffled by Aeris' meaning. Tifa smiled faintly as she took his strong arm and leaned her head on his shoulder as they strolled along.

"Well, this is where I bid you girls a temporary adieu," Cloud said after a few steps.

"Where are you going?" asked Aeris curiously.

"Cloud has to go to Sector 4 and buy us some special spices for tonight's dinner," Tifa explained, "It'll save us time if we split up. We girls will shop here, and Cloud will go get the spices."

"Heh heh...can he be trusted?" snickered Aeris.

"Oh ho! So, little Miss Aeris doubts Cloud Strife's abilities, eh?" he retorted with a laugh, "You forget, I run a restaurant."

"No, Cloud," corrected Tifa, "You clean it. I run it."

The two girls burst out laughing while Cloud flushed crimson with anger. But after a moment, he joined them in good humour, as if nothing had happened.

"Okay, Cloud," interrupted Tifa, "You'd better go now, before it starts to rain."

"Sure thing. Meet you two back at Vincent's place."

They quickly exchanged a kiss, and Cloud rushed across the street before the traffic light turned green again. Soon, he disappeared.

"C'mon," said Tifa to Aeris, "Let's go."

The two girls quietly walked along the boulevard. A strange silence sprung up between them. Tifa, it was true, had sent Cloud away to fetch the spices, but more importantly, she wanted to speak to Aeris alone; woman to woman. She knew some problem oppressed Aeris' heart, and was determined to discover it.

They finally reached a gigantic building which languidly stretched itself along the entire street. Aeris read the large sign "Midgar Supermarket" erected neatly on top of the automatic doors.

"Big place!" exclaimed Aeris, completely in awe.

"Hm.." muttered Tifa, half-listening.

As she grabbed a shopping cart, Tifa glanced uneasily at Aeris, unsure how to start the conversation. She pushed the cart along the orderly aisles. When she made sure nobody was within hearing distance, she stopped short.

"Aeris," she began, "Are you..okay?"

"Yes, Tifa, I'm fine," Aeris looked at her oddly.

"No, I mean...do you feel..uncomfortable?"

Aeris shook her head, but obviously did not understand Tifa's meaning.

"Aeris," whispered Tifa for some reason, "Do you feel...uncomfortable with Vincent around you?"

Aeris looked away to avoid Tifa's searching eyes.

"C'mon, you can tell me," persisted Tifa gently, "I can tell some problem is weighing you down. I don't want to intrude on you like this, but I'm just so worried about you. Is Vincent..."

She broke off with a vague gesture of her hand, not knowing how to finish her sentence. Aeris still looked away, but Tifa could tell she was on the brink of revealing something.

"Tifa," she blurted out quietly, "I think Vincent..really..hates me."

"Aeris, we've been through this before, and I told you.."

"No, no, you don't understand," Aeris cut her short as she turned around suddenly, "He's very polite, and probably the best mannered man I'll ever meet. I won't deny that. But..but.."

"But?" Tifa asked, extremely alarmed.

"I don't think he looks after me out of kindness..It doesn't come from his heart. It's like, he feels it's his *duty* to care for me."

"But..how does he hate you?"

"I don't know..I don't know. But I just feel as if he sees something through me..and hates me for it...like I'm inferior somehow.."

Tifa studied Aeris' pitiful face. This had obviously been causing her a great deal of stress.

"Aeris," she finally replied with some sternness, "I think you're just paranoid!"

Aeris blinked at her in astonishment.

"If Vincent 'hated' you, then why did he shoot those men to save you? Isn't that what he did when he first met you?"

"Tifa..you don't understand me.."

"Then explain, for God's sake!"

"He..he's not like Cloud..," Aeris muttered dreamily.

This time, Tifa was astonished.

"What do you mean 'not like Cloud'?" she demanded. A strange yet familiar feeling pricked her heart again.

"Cloud..well..," Aeris faltered, "Cloud is simple to see through. You can tell when he's happy, or angry; and it's easy to guess what he's thinking."

"And Vincent?"

"Vincent is cold-hearted..stoic..and unresponsive. I feel very awkward..and frightened when he comes near me. He sees something in me that he hates...and it's the way he hates me that scares me so much, Tifa."

As Aeris finished, Tifa softened her look and was silent for some minutes. She understood, at least partially, Aeris' fear : She believed Vincent discerned something horrible in her, and deplored her for it.

Tifa gently patted her friend's shoulder and, smiling reassuringly, said "We'd better finish quickly before it rains."

The tower bell tolled four times when both girls emerged from the supermarket, each carrying a brown grocery bag. The streets had emptied slightly, but still retained a great deal of liveliness. By the time they had reached the city square, the lamp posts along the pathway had already lighted up; it was getting dark quickly. Occasionally, a faint rumble of thunder echoed across the city, warning everyone of heavy rain. Tifa, however, seemed unconcerned with the weather. She wanted to tell Aeris something.

"Aeris," she started, grabbing her shoulder to stop her, "I think you misunderstand Vincent."

Aeris turned to face Tifa, expecting her to say more.

"Vincent..well..," Tifa faltered, "Vincent has been through a lot. He never mentioned this, but I think he feels guilty about something, and it tends to weigh him down at times."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know..Vincent's a master when it comes to hiding his emotions..but when we first met him about a year ago, he was obsessed with this woman called 'Lucrecia'"

"'Lucrecia'?"

"And you could just feel the bitterness and guilt gnaw at his heart, even though he never mentioned her again. I..I'm telling you this, Aeris, so you can see that Vincent carries a lot of sorrow in his heart.."

Aeris was silent.

"And..," continued Tifa nervously, "I don't think he hates you. I just think he sees something in you that...that he sees in himself too..like you both share the same burden somehow. Aw, Geez! I can't explain this very well!"

Tifa stamped her foot in irritation; even she wasn't sure she understood Vincent. Aeris silently stared at the cobblestones on the ground, completely oblivious to the people around her.

"Tifa," she suddenly asked, "Is Vincent sick because of his claw?"

"What? Is he sick of his claw?" Tifa looked at he oddly.

"No..does the claw make him sick?"

"Um..it shouldn't. At least, not when I met him. Why? What's the matter?!"

"I..," stammered Aeris, "I think Vincent is very sick. At first I thought his claw perhaps made him sick. But now, perhaps this 'guilt'.."

"What do you mean by 'sick'?" interrupted Tifa in alarm, "Sick as in ill?"

Aeris wanted to tell her about his coughing fits that constantly plagued him. During the past week, she had caught him fighting at least five seizures, and that was just at home!

She wanted to describe how violently his whole body shook with pain; how much blood trickled through his hand when he struggled to cover his mouth. All that and so much more!

But she had read in his cold eyes that he *knew* she had seen him in a coughing fit. And though he never talked to her, Aeris understood he did not want the others to know of his seizures. But now it felt as if the words poured out of her mouth involuntarily.

"He's..he's..." Aeris finally faltered.

But a foreboding feeling suddenly pierced her heart so violently, she actually sprang away from Tifa in alarm. All sound around her disintegrated into oblivion; she could not even hear Tifa calling her name; but the loud pounding of her heart mercilessly beat against her ears.

Her grocery bag fell out of her numb hands, crashing onto the pavement and scattering all its contents about. However, Aeris seemed totally unaware of her surroundings. She detected some evil presence near her..some "thing" that reeked with malice.

"Aeris! Aeris!" called Tifa anxiously. She shook the girl's shoulders.

Aeris turned aggressively to Tifa, as if she had never seen her before. Tifa started on seeing the wild, frenzied flash in Aeris' eyes. Her gasps became quite loud and perspiration broke out on her pale face. Some passers-by glanced at her oddly, then hurried away, thinking she was mad.

"Aeris! what's wrong?!" cried Tifa.

"T..Tifa...", she struggled confusedly, "..the..they're here..they've found me!"

"What? What are you saying?!"

Faceless people rushed past Aeris. So many incoherent sounds drummed against her ears. Bright colors and irregular shapes swirled about her like whirlpool. She felt faint and nauseated, as if someone were wringing her soul. But her eyes suddenly caught sight of someone, and everything froze in its place.

She stared at a tall man with pure snow-white hair and gleaming pink eyes. He gazed mockingly at her from across the street. He held a lighted cigarette to his mouth in such a way that only his eyes peered over his hand. Aeris felt his cold eyes drill straight into her heart.

When he finally removed his cigarette from his mouth, he blew out a puff of smoke, then smiled affably at Aeris, as though he were a close friend of hers.

Aeris' feet turned cold and heavy at the smile. Her thoughts chased each other around in her brain, refusing to settle down, until something inside her screamed: escape!

Before she realized it, Aeris found herself frantically tearing through the crowds of people, desperately trying to run away.

"AERIS!! AERIS!!" screamed Tifa. She ran after her as fast as she could, but Aeris vanished in the crowd without a trace.

Completely thunderstruck, Tifa stood in the middle of the street. Her muddled thoughts overwhelmed her and clouded her mind. She had, literally, no idea what to do.

Then, as if possessed by a demon, Tifa suddenly dashed across the busy street. Several cars screeched to a halt and rudely honked at her.

"Hey! Watch it! shouted one man from his car.

But she only doubled her speed as she rushed down the pavement, savagely yelling "excuse me!" or "make way!". She raced past shops, people, streets with one thought: she must reach Vincent's apartment! She did not understand why Aeris ran off so suddenly, as if she had seen a ghost, but she must have run back to Vincent's place! Where else could she possibly go?

Thus argued Tifa, until she realized she was flying up the stairs of the apartment.

On reaching Vincent's door, she tried to open it, but the knob only gave a stiff rattle. It was locked.

"Vincent!!" she shouted, pounding the door furiously with her fist, "VINCENT!"

No reply.

"Aw, shit!" she swore. She retreated two steps then rammed the door down with her shoulder. The door instantly broke open and she staggered in, breathless with irritation.

"VINCENT!!!" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

But only an echo answered her cry. Apparently, no one was home. The silence suffocated Tifa beyond endurance. Not only was Aeris not there, but Vincent was missing as well!

"Damn it!!" she cursed aloud.

She heard a faint scuffle of boots behind her, so she turned around sharply. Much to her relief, Vincent stood in the doorway with a package in one hand. He blinked incredulously at Tifa, then at the broken door that hung piteously by one hinge in the hall.

"Where the Hell were you?!" Tifa cried in anger.

"I..I went to the post office to get the book I ordered," he faltered, taken aback by her viciousness, "Tifa..what's wrong?"

"Vincent," she gasped, "A..Aeris ran off!!"

He narrowed his keen eyes, but said nothing.

"I don't know what happened!" she continued, "We were walking along, and she was fine! Cloud even bought her a flower! And then..then.."

"Easy, take it easy," He said calmly.

"Then she goes ballistic!! She looks around like someone's gonna kill her..and she mutters something, then runs off!"

"What did she say?"

"I dunno!!" she snapped back, irritated with his coolness, "She said something like 'they've found me'. She looked around, then lost her mind!"

"Where did this happen?"

"At the City Square."

"Which direction did she run in?"

"Ah? I think she ran to the North side of the sector."

Vincent plunged into gloomy silence for some moments, knitting his brows in deep contemplation. He seemed to be debating something in his brain.

"I ran after her," Tifa went on, "but she disappeared! I thought perhaps she came back.."

But Vincent suddenly flung his package away and rushed out of the door, not waiting a moment longer.

"Vincent!" Tifa cried after him, "Where are you going?!!"

She after him anxiously, but he had already cleared the stairs and left the building.

Tifa was silent for some minutes before she returned to the apartment. She examined her "handiwork" on the wretched door, then blushed slightly.

"Great," she grumbled, "I get excited, and Vincent's door gets the heat!"

Tifa rubbed her temples to soothe her aching head, but the last few events had left her in complete shock. A sudden clap of thunder outside startled her. She dragged her tired feet to the window in the living room, and gazed dejectedly at the rain patter against the glass panes.

"It's really coming down now," she mumbled softly.

-End of Chp.6

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.7

I must get away, Aeris screamed internally, I must!

The rain poured down like a waterfall, beating pitilessly on the ground, but she only rushed through the wet streets to escape. Escape...to where? She had no clear idea; she only wanted to run away from that "evil man".

The streets twisted and wound around like an endless maze. What was just moments ago a fascinating city to the poor girl became an insufferable cage, and she longed to hide somewhere.

Somewhere away, she gasped, far away from the Professor.

People scurried about the streets, hoping to dodge the torrential rain. With every crack of thunder, the sky lit up brilliantly to display the chaos it had so cruelly created on the ground.

Aeris, however, raced past those people, heedless of thunder or rain. She did not notice that her hair and face were drenched with water. But her soaked clothes greatly annoyed her. They seemed to hinder her speed with their heavy weight.

Several passers-by actually sprang out of the way as she zoomed past them in a frenzy. She accidentally knocked down an old woman, but did not even look back to apologize. Indeed, she seemed oblivious to her surroundings.

"Hey! Watch it, brat!!" shouted one pedestrian as he helped the poor, distraught lady to her feet.

But Aeris did not, could not, hear anything. Her muddled senses wrapped her in utter confusion: sounds had no meaning to her; objects failed to take a familiar shape. And the faster she ran past them, the more they cluttered her brain.

She did not know how long she had been running. So many alleys and unfamiliar streets rushed past her, that by then, she did not care where she went. Her feet ran of their own accord, turning in any direction they pleased.

She raced down some narrow street in a dingy, unfamiliar neighborhood. Gasping for breath, she wanted to stop and rest her feet. But the terrible thought of being caught by that man not only discouraged her, but caused her to increase her speed to a mad rush.

She didn't stop until she suddenly felt herself stumble against someone and crash into the ground. Her whole body skidded forward on the pavement. When finally stopping, she lay on the ground lifelessly, as though unconscious.

"Oh, shit!" cursed a voice in alarm, "Hey! Missy! Are you okay?!"

"Alex, what the Hell's going on?" boomed another voice.

"This crazy girl just ran into me, Mr. Darcy! And then tripped! I swear!" replied the voice defensively.

"My God! She's absolutely drenched! Hey, Sweetheart! Are you hurt?"

Aeris, lying with her back to the two men, finally came around. She struggled to get up, but her shoulder throbbed with such unbearable pain, tears welled up in her eyes. Apparently, she had crashed on her side, and now her shoulder was paying the full price of the fall.

With a faint cry, she finally managed to sit up from the ground. Much to her surprise, she found herself by

some obscure cafe in a totally strange street. She blinked confusedly at the two men who looked over her with a mixture of curiosity and concern.

She also noticed that the thunder had ceased, and the heavy rain had turned into a dull drizzle.

"Thank God! She's all right!" sighed Alex in relief.

He was young fresh-faced man. Judging from his attire, Aeris guessed him to be a waiter in the cafe. Indeed, he had been stacking some chairs outside the cafe for closing time when Aeris had crashed into him.

"That was a nasty fall you took there, Honey. Are you sure you're not hurt?" asked Mr. Darcy, a fat, short man of fifty. he was obviously the cafe's manager and the waiter's boss.

Aeris strained every nerve to understand the two men, yet could not grasp a word of what they said, as if they spoke a foreign language.

Mr. Darcy noticed her puzzlement. Stepping closer to her, he studied her haggard face. Aeris stared at him hallow-eyed.

"I think she's mad," he muttered to the young waiter, who immediately felt pity for the hapless girl.

"Are you lost, Miss?" Alex, the waiter, asked compassionately.

"Where do you live, darling?" inquired Mr. Darcy with a gentle, fatherly smile, "Do you have someone who looks after you?"

The words "after you" echoed in Aeris' distressed mind, until she finally remembered why she was running :yes! That man is after me! I must escape!!

She scuffled to her feet as though Mr. Darcy had just threatened her life. Before either man could react, Aeris suddenly darted away from them and ducked into a dismal alley.

A car nearly hit Vincent as he rushed across the busy street, but he dodged it indifferently and continued to run. This was the third time he had searched the main street, but could not find one trace of Aeris. he had spent the last hour and a half searching for her in the pouring rain, so his long, thick hair dripped with water. His heavy, unbuttoned overcoat flapped with every gust of cold wind. It was drenched as well.

Some people thought him a sort of criminal or fugitive, judging from the way he ran about, turning his head from side to side in search of something.

He thought perhaps he should examine the northern boulevard again, but realized he had already searched that part at least twice in the last half hour. So, he decided to take any random alley instead.

He trotted aimlessly through the filthy streets, hoping to perhaps find the girl hiding in some corner. He soon emerged into the northern slums of Sector 3, notorious for its crime and poverty.

Though some ragged beggars glared at Vincent suspiciously because he was an "outsider", no one dared confront him. They too guessed him to be some criminal on the run.

Vincent suddenly felt his chest heave slightly as perspiration broke out on his face, but he angrily refused to have a coughing fit; he gritted his teeth determinately to suppress it.

Not here, he growled, not now!

He wandered around the slums, scrutinizing every face he met. Though he managed to somehow soothe

his chest, a dull ache pinched his lungs with every breath he took.

The drizzle from the sky quickly changed to icy-cold sleet which eagerly washed the pavement of its impurities. Vincent, stopping short, looked up at the grey sky, as if it would tell him where to find Aeris.

He sighed tiredly. Confident that the girl wasn't there, Vincent cleared the slums and drifted dejectedly into a less dirty alley.

Two and a half hours of searching, and not one single trace of that girl! Where did she go? he wondered.

As if answering his question, Vincent felt a soft object under his boot. On lifting his foot, he noticed a pink flower horribly crushed on the wet ground.

Strange to say, the flower greatly interested Vincent. He cautiously picked it up and examined it: the petals were dirty and torn, thanks to his boot; its slender stem was cruelly broken as well

As he twisted the delicate flower with his fingers, he suddenly recalled something Tifa had told him before he left:

"Cloud even bought her a *flower*," she had said.

Vincent looked around once, then spotted a small cafe humbly standing a few yards away. It was the same cafe Aeris had passed an hour ago.

Alex, the young waiter, whistled as he emerged from the cafe and began dutifully locking the door behind him.

"You!" called Vincent, startling the waiter.

"Ah!!!! Y..yes?" stammered Alex fearfully. Vincent's tall, menacing appearance and glaring eyes greatly frightened the poor waiter. He thought he might be a killer of some sort.

"Did a young girl pass by here? She had long, brown hair...and was wearing a blue coat with a scarf."

"Um...yeah..she did, Sir," replied Alex nervously but quite respectfully. he had a feeling that Vincent wasn't the type of person he'd want to irritate.

"Which way did she go?"

"Th..that way, Sir," he answered, pointing down the street, "She dodged into that alley over there. We tried talking to her, but she seemed a bit nuts, and ran off."

"I see. Thank you."

Vincent quickly ran in that direction and turned in the specified alley, leaving Alex completely bewildered and confused.

Aeris collapsed onto the muddy ground, totally breathless. She had grown so weary with running, her lungs felt as if they would burst any minute. Her body shuddered as the sleet mercilessly pierced her face like sharp daggers. Though she wanted to continue running, her whole body would not budge an inch more. Her injured shoulder ached horribly, and her eyes burned with fatigue.

When she finally caught her breath, she slowly stood up and looked around herself, wondering where she was.

Despite the darkness, Aeris could see she had reached some abandoned site. a colossal building proudly

stood towering against the sky, ruined and in utter desolation. Its windows were all ruthlessly shattered; scraps of rusty metal stubbornly clung to the remains of the framework. It was a miracle this corroded building stood at all.

The building itself seemed to have been brutally torn out of its foundations and hurled against the ground. Debris and rubble littered the entire site; some even formed mountains of metal, stone, and other pieces of garbage.

Aeris discerned, besides all the obscene graffiti, a giant red sign painted impressively on the facade of this pathetic building. However, it was so worn and whether beaten, she only managed to make out the word "Shin.." before giving up.

Aeris trudged over to this building, staring with peculiar interest at the huge pipes that were emitted out of it and sunk into the muddy ground. She touched the crumbling wall gently, then suddenly burst into bitter tears.

She cried because she knew she could never escape. No matter where she ran or hid, the Professor would always find her and capture her. Yes, she knew that man with white hair worked for him; she understood that from his dreadful smile. He'd hunt her down, like some animal, and return her to the Professor.

She pressed her forehead against the cold wall, biting her lower lip to stop crying, but the hot tears streamed down her cheeks, and her shoulders shook with agitation.

Aeris felt a hand gently touch her arm.

With a scream, she instantly smacked it away and turned around in alarm.

"Whoa! Whoa! It's me!" said Vincent, trying to calm her.

She stared at him wild-eyed for a full minute. It occurred to Vincent that maybe Aeris had really lost her mind. She did not appear to remember him at all.

"V...Vincent..," she whispered, finally recognizing him.

There was another awkward silence in which Aeris gazed at him amazedly, as if he had dropped out of the sky. The truth was, Vincent had simply followed the path of the alley, down the main avenue, and reached the old ShinRa Headquarters, or the "ShinRa Haunt" as everyone called it. He had found Aeris sobbing against the wall of the building, and had approached her from behind.

"W..what are you doing here?!" she cried with inexplicable anger. His very presence vexed her beyond endurance.

"I've been looking everywhere for you," he replied softly, "Where do you think you're going?"

She started at the question, but avoided his eyes by turning her head away. She was obstinately silent.

"Aeris," he repeated insistently, "where are you going?"

"Vincent, please...leave me alone," she begged piteously, "Just go away."

"I'm not leaving unless you come with me."

"I don't want to go with you!! I have to keep on running!!"

"Run' Aeris?" he asked sarcastically, "Run where?"

"I don't know!" she sobbed distressfully, "I don't know! But I must escape! Don't you understand?! he's found me! If he catches me now, he'll torture me again! I'd rather die than go back to that damn Professor!! Can't you see that?!!!"

She glared at him contemptuously. Some strange hatred swelled in her heart.

"I understand," he answered gently, "but I don't see how running away will help you."

Aeris did not utter a word.

"Aeris, I know you're scared," he continued, "but you can't just run away and expect this Professor to disappear. you know that if you run away, he'll only catch you."

Aeris felt her heart pound frantically as he took one step closer to her. his eyes were fixed on her face, but she dared not look at him.

"Now, Aeris, please. Give me your hand."

He extended his hand out to her and stared at her solemnly.

"Just trust me," he added imploringly.

She gazed at his gloved hand as if it were a poisonous snake. She suddenly sprang away from him, wringing her hands in anguish.

"You don't..you can't understand me!" she shouted angrily, "You're just a cold-hearted bastard!! you're no better than that Professor!!!"

Vincent gazed at her thoughtfully, not at all ruffled by the insults, but his eyes seemed to grow sterner with every word she uttered.

"You know damn well," she raved, "that if I stay, he'll catch me! You know it! But you don't care, do you?! No, of course not Vincent! How could you care? How could you understand?!"

She covered her face with both her hands and tried desperately to control her agitated nerves. Vincent made no movement towards her and said nothing. For a full minute, only the patter of rain against the deserted ShinRa building filled the air. Neither spoke a word.

"Do you know..," she began with a quivering voice, "do you know how it feels like to be in pain? Not that petty pain you feel for an hour..not a day..no. It's this horrible agony that tugs at your body non-stop."

She clasped both her hands over her breast and shut her eyes tight. she seemed to be addressing herself more than Vincent.

"Everyday, every hour, to have to lie on a cold dissection table..with wires and needles pricking at you. And all these bleeping machines watching over you like some security guards."

She suddenly opened her eyes and looked at Vincent, but she didn't seem to see really see him. Her sorrowful eyes fixed their gaze on some invisible object beyond him.

"And the pain you feel in your body!" Aeris exclaimed fervently, "It seems to tear your whole body to shreds from inside. So much that you'd gladly sell your soul to the devil just to stop it."

Aeris hung her head shamefully, but kept her hands clasped. Vincent was silent for some minutes before

he took a step near her. She instantly became aware of him, and glared at him mockingly.

"You don't know that pain, Vincent," she scoffed as she slowly edged away from him, "You don't know what it feels like to be treated like that..like some pathetic laboratory animal. Don't pretend you understand what I'm saying, liar!"

She turned to run away, but Vincent suddenly pounced on her and gripped both her arms so forcefully, Aeris cried out in pain. He swung her around to face him, then roughly slammed her back against the wall, still holding her firmly.

Aeris thought he intended to strike or shout at her, but he only peered at her face with a stern look.

"Now you listen to me, little girl," he muttered in a surprisingly calm voice, "Don't you **dare** claim to know what I understand and what I don't."

Aeris struggled to break out of his iron grip, but to no avail. his metal claw felt like it would crush her bones any second; and he held her so closely against the wall, she could not hope to escape.

"Aeris," he continued coolly, "I know how you feel. Believe me, I understand. probably even better than you do."

Aeris stubbornly turned her face away from him, refusing to even listen.

"Look me in the eye when I'm talking to you!" he demanded sternly. He gripped her chin with his hand and forced her to look up at him.

She stared at his glowing ruby-red eyes. Several strands of his black, wet hair dangled in front of his pale face, but failed to obscure the brilliance of his eyes. Though he kept his hand under her chin, he loosened his hold on her arm slightly.

"I **know** how it feels like to be an experiment. When you say you feel tormented and in pain, believe me, I know what kind of pain you're talking about. I've been on a dissection table too; I've had needles and wires hooked onto me. Aeris, I've even had a professor torment me in my nightmares."

She made no response.

"How do you suppose I got this claw?" he asked, flashing his claw in front of her face, "How do you suppose I have red eyes and look like this?"

Aeris held her breath as he brought his face closer to hers and gazed solemnly into her eyes.

"You may not accept this," he said in a low voice, "but I understand you better than Tifa and Cloud. I understand why you want to escape from that Professor, because once I tried the same thing too. I understand why you hate that professor, Aeris, and why you feel so frustrated and frightened. I felt those same emotions too, and even worse ones. Do you hear me?"

She could feel her breath quicken. her heart pounded so loudly, it numbed her ears.

"And I know that running away won't save you," he concluded, "I know because I tried it once. He'll haunt your days and nights, until you'll become obsessed with him, or even worse: you'll become obsessed with the pain and bitterness he caused you."

Aeris looked up at him. His eyes seemed strangely feverish as he stared at her. Though the rain came pouring down, she could see he was struggling internally with something.

"Why should you care for me, Vincent?" she scowled finally, "I'm not even worth a finger nail in your eyes. You hate me."

"I don't hate you, Aeris."

"Yes, you do! You see something inside of me, and despise me! You think I'm blind? You think I can't see all that hate in your eyes?"

"That's not hate," he answered with restraint, "That's concern. I see that you'll end up as mentally shattered as I am if you don't face your fears instead of running away. I was very much like you, but I ran away and hid in a coffin. A coffin, Aeris, a coffin for 30 long, torturous years! I don't want to see you end up like I did."

"Liar! Liar! Liar!" she cried in anger, "Let me go!!"

Breaking away from him, Aeris rushed to escape. he called her name, but suddenly felt that repressed seizure savagely dig its claws into his lungs.

Vincent fell against the wall and covered his mouth with both hand and claw, breaking into a most intense bout of coughing. His chest heaved violently as blood streamed through his fingers. The coughing turned into an outright struggle for breath. At times, Vincent thought he may choke out his lungs with the amount of coughing and gasping he was doing.

His chest did not calm down until five minutes had past. He breathed deeply and tiredly until five minutes had past. Though the cold rain washed his face, he felt very feverish.

Much to his surprise, he noticed Aeris walk up to him and stand in front of him. He had thought she had ran off while he was coughing.

Aeris, indeed, would have ran away, but when she heard Vincent choking on his blood, stopped short and turned to look at him. Although her mind had vigorously urged her to take advantage of Vincent's coughing and escape, her heart had begged her to look at the suffering man.

She had silently gazed at him as he struggled with the deplorable seizure. His words had slowly echoed in her ears, and her heart had beseeched her to "go to him". Therefore, before she realized it, Aeris stood in front of Vincent, looking very guilty and ashamed.

"I..I'm sorry, Vincent," she faltered, on the verge of tears, "I..didn't mean to call you all those awful names. You must think me the most spiteful, ungrateful wretch on Earth, especially after all the trouble you went through just to find me. It's just that I'm so..so tired of living like some animal on the run."

Vincent stood upright, looking at the poor girl wipe away her tears with her wet sleeve.

"I wish..I could be like Tifa," she said dreamily, "She has Cloud, and her own restaurant, and her own life. She..she doesn't have to look over her shoulder and wonder if some monster will grab her from behind."

She stared straight up at Vincent, and smiled. But it was a sad, bitter smile of inconsolable grief.

"Me? Look at what I'm doing.I'm running around Midgar in the rain, with you on my tail."

She fixed her sorrowful eyes on the muddy ground, waiting for Vincent to reply. An oppressive silence fell on them for a few minutes. She wished he would say something, even if it were rebuke.

Vincent, however, slowly lifted his hand and gently touched her cheek.

She looked up at him in astonishment as he caressed her cheek with his warm hand. His eyes weren't stern, but gleamed softly and kindly at her. For some reason, Aeris felt her entire face grow unbearably hot.

Suddenly, Vincent's eyes darted to the side in alarm.

"LOOK OUT!!!" he shouted, thrusting his whole metallic arm forward to protect Aeris.

An ear-splitting gunshot rang out of the darkness and blasted against Vincent's arm so violently, it sent him sprawling onto his side against the sludgy ground.

"VINCENT!!!" Aeris shrieked, flying to his side at once.

Vincent struggled to rise from the ground, but the pain tore at his arm so savagely, he only managed to writhe on his back with a grunt. The bullet had so accurately hit the very base of his arm, where the metal connected to the flesh. That was the only weak point of his entire arm.

And whoever shot me, Vincent thought painfully, *knew* damn well I'd take the shot. Whoever did this, aimed for her head so he could shoot my arm...he *knew* exactly where to shoot!

"Vincent!! Vincent, get up!!" begged Aeris hysterically. He gnashed his teeth as she helped him sit up. Holding his dirty, distraught face between her trembling hands, she stared frantically at him in anguish.

"Are you okay?! Are you okay?!" she cried.

Before he could answer, Vincent heard the distinct click of a gun being cocked.

He instantly sprang to his feet and grabbed Aeris, just as a wild spray of bullets broke out from the darkness.

The bullets showered the two incessantly, but Vincent miraculously dodged them with abnormal speed. He dashed towards the corner of the demolished building, carrying Aeris under his armpit as though she were a precious parcel.

He ducked around the corner just as a mad bullet whizzed through the hem of his coat.

The bullets blasted angrily against the corner Vincent hid behind. They bombarded the whole barrier so furiously, several chips and scraps of loose metal flew off the building and crashed loudly around the two.

Vincent immediately embraced Aeris and huddled against the wall, completely shielding the girl with his body. Some wild pieces of falling metal lashed his back as the bullets pelted the wall, but he only tightened his grip on Aeris and held her closer to himself.

Aeris, scarcely understanding what was happening, buried her full face into his chest and clung to his sleeve frantically. Her shoulders trembled. She shut her eyes, trying to stop the cruel shower of gunfire from battering her weary ears. It felt as though they would never stop.

Suddenly, the bullets ceased their attack. All was quiet.

Vincent, after a few moments, raised his head cautiously, but still kept a tight grasp around the girl. The whole building looked more wretched now that the rain had stopped. Numerous fragments of shattered iron scraps and dirty rubble lay piteously in the mud around the two.

The haunting silence seemed surprisingly out of place. Vincent felt sure it was only a forced stillness.

"Well, Mr. Valentine," laughed a voice from the depths of the darkness, "I'm glad to see you've improved

your hearing senses like I advised you."

Vincent gave a little start on hearing the voice. It sounded very familiar to his ear.

"Come out," ordered the voice authoritatively, "I know you're hiding around that corner."

There was another silence for a few moments before Vincent decided to face the gunman. He slowly made a movement to get up, but Aeris clung to him firmly and would not let him go, as though letting go meant death.

Vincent did not struggle to loosen her grip. Instead, he gently stroked her hair and whispered hurriedly into her ear. Aeris only shook her head vigorously as an answer and dug her face into his coat, refusing to release him.

Vincent then tenderly cradled her as he murmured inaudibly into her ear again. He whispered patiently and coaxingly to her, without showing the least bit of annoyance with her persistence.

When she finally nodded her head meekly, he kissed her hair and slowly tore himself away from her to get up.

Aeris leaned against the wall with both hands covering her mouth. She could not even find enough strength to speak. Her heart pounded terribly; her shoulders would not stop shaking.

Vincent calmly pulled out his gun from its holster as he left Aeris and turned around the corner. Although his damaged arm ached horribly and grew burdensome, he seemed utterly oblivious to the pain. He gazed sternly at the darkness in front of him, knowing the assailant, whoever he was, stood there facing him.

"Ah, Mr. Valentine," greeted the composed voice, "Or should I call you Vincent?"

Vincent knitted his brows in contempt, but made no reply.

"I bet you're just dying to know who I am, eh, my friend?"

Vincent silently cocked his gun with a sharp click.

"Oh ho," chuckled the voice, "actions speak louder than words, huh?"

Vincent suddenly pointed his gun at the source of the voice, glaring furiously at the dark void in front of him, even though he could not see the gunman.

"Are you the bastard who's been hounding this girl down?" he asked, feeling anger bubble in his heart.

"Why call me a bastard, Vincent?" reproached the voice, "I'm only doing my job. Didn't you use to do the same thing I'm doing now?"

Vincent blinked at the strangeness of the question, but quickly recovered himself and pointed the gun with even more firmness.

"I don't know what kind of bullshit you're trying to pull off, Sir," he replied quietly, "but you can rest assured: this girl is **not** going anywhere with you."

"Don't tell me, Vincent, that you've forgotten you were a blood-thirsty Turk 31 years ago?"

Saying this, the voice emerged from the darkness in the form of a tall shadow. He stood directly in front of Vincent, but Vincent still could not distinguish his facial features. The darkness shrouded the man's entire

face except for his bright pink eyes, which gleamed straight at him, daring him to shoot.

"Huh!" scoffed the figure venomously, "I'm not surprised. After all, 31 years is a pretty long time."

The figure slowly advanced one more step, just as the moonlight broke through the clouds and fell on his face. The light made his hair appear whiter than before, but added a menacing glitter to his eyes. It was, indeed, the same man who had scared poor Aeris at the city square.

He pushed a strand of stray white hair out of his face as he twisted his lips into a wry smile.

Vincent was thunderstruck.

"..Davoren..," he whispered, immediately lowering his gun.

-End of Chp.7

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.8

At first, Vincent thought he was perhaps hallucinating, but a second look dispersed that hope: Davoren *was* standing in front of him, smiling mockingly at his confusion.

"Davoren," muttered Vincent audibly this time.

"Why, you remember my name! I'm flattered, Vincent," laughed Davoren good-humourously, "Do you usually remember the names of the people you kill?"

Vincent's eyes gave an involuntary twitch at the strange remark. His muscles stiffened as he gazed at Davoren's face, hoping to find some answers to all the burning questions that crowded his brain.

Although Davoren's countenance had dramatically shifted from jeering to affable, Vincent discerned an unmistakable gleam of immense hatred in that man's eyes. It was so spiteful and bitter, Vincent felt it sting his heart to the core.

What's wrong, Vincent?" Davoren smiled, "You'd think I was a ghost the way you're staring at me"

Vincent's face darkened with contempt and unfeigned hatred. A cold sensation rapidly engulfed his heart as his eyes scanned this man. He tightened his grip on his gun, but did not raise it.

I don't care what my eyes are seeing, he argued inside his stunned brain, I don't care! This cannot be Davoren!

And yet, answered another voice within him, he's standing right there in front of you.

Both men stared at each other, as though measuring their strengths. Neither said a word.

Aeris, who had finally managed to compose her shattered nerves, struggled to her feet with great difficulty. She leaned against the wall, gasping for breath and shaking pitifully.

"V..Vincent!" she started, "Ah! Where is he?!"

Intense anxiety over him suddenly gripped her heart. She looked around confusedly, wondering how he had disappeared, then remembered he had left her safely behind the corner and went to face the gunman.

Though obviously still in shock after escaping the previous gunfire, she managed to stagger around the battered corner. Much to her relief, Aeris found Vincent a few steps ahead of her, with his back facing her.

She also noticed Davoren standing a few yards away, grinning coldly at Vincent. She immediately recognized him, and recoiled with fear in spite of herself.

Vincent apparently discerned her presence behind him; he turned his head around slightly to glance at her. Davoren perceived her as well. His mocking smile instantly disappeared. replaced by a frightening, stoic expression.

Both fixed their eyes on her, yet remained grudgingly silent, each waiting for the other to speak.

Poor Aeris was overwhelmed by the strange looks in the two men: Vincent's eyes shone with such malice and unmasked hostility; totally contrary to the warm, gentle gleam when he had touched her cheek just minutes ago.

As for Davoren, that dreadful gunman, he gazed at her with such frigidity, his face might have been chiseled of marble.

"Hm..," sneered Davoren suddenly, breaking the oppressive silence, "She's very pretty, Mr. Valentine. I don't blame you for sacrificing your arm to protect her."

Vincent gave him a most cutting, dirty look. He felt his muscles stiffen with an intense desire to kill Davoren, to tear his hateful smile off his face. His wrathful eyes shone with such fire, as though they would reduce that man to ashes.

Davoren, on the other hand, seemed delighted to have enraged Vincent. He grinned as innocently as a child.

"V..Vincent," faltered Aeris, walking up to him uneasily, "Do you.. know this man?"

Vincent narrowed his eyes contemptuously at Davoren. He seemed to be debating some issue in his brain before granting the girl an answer.

"Yes," he replied without looking at her, "I know him."

Aeris stopped exactly one step from him, still facing his back. She had one hand clasped over her heart as she looked concernedly at Vincent, wondering why he used such a dispassionate, icy tone.

His whole countenance, in fact, seemed to have grown alarmingly cold and emotionless. So much, that Aeris dared not ask him any further questions.

"We were 'friends' 31 years ago, my dear. That's why he's so cross," added Davoren with evident humour.

Vincent knitted his brows at the word "friend". His fingers twitched on the trigger of his gun, and yet he refused to use it, and still more stubbornly, refused to comment aloud.

Aeris, however, did not understand the gunman's strange meaning at all. She turned her head to Davoren, and found his eyes lingering thoughtfully on her; he obviously yearned to tell her something.

As if obeying his command, Aeris took a few steps past Vincent, and stood between the two men. Her hands trembled slightly, but her heart felt strongly determined. For a few minutes, only the continuous creaks of the crumbling ShinRa building filled the air, as though complaining of all the brutal damage inflicted on it. Nevertheless, none of the three would consent to talk first.

"The Professor tells me," began Davoren, "that you've been a very naughty girl by running away from the Laboratory."

Despite the involuntary shiver she felt at the mention of the despised Professor, Aeris looked straight at his calm face. Vincent remained rooted to his spot, a few steps behind her. He was resentfully silent.

"He's been in a perfect state of hysterics," Davoren continued, "Just blubbering about you, and wondering where you were hiding."

"You work for him, don't you?" Aeris asked apprehensively, "He sent you to capture me." Her head grew dizzy. she found the air unbearably suffocating.

"I didn't even need to speak, girl. You knew that the minute you saw me. That's why you ran off, correct?"

Aeris nodded her head slowly, as if guilty of some heinous crime. Davoren glanced at Vincent, then smirked amusedly at the girl in a totally self-satisfied way.

"But I must say, girl," he commented slyly, "you look exceptionally well. Looks like Vincent has been taking *good* care of you. You must mean a great deal to him, eh? Heh heh."

Aeris blinked in surprise at Davoren. a hectic flush quickly colored her whole face. But Vincent did not even flinch from his position.

"I'm sure the Professor will be very pleased to know you're safe and well-protected," he added as he slowly walked towards her with a mocking expression on his face.

Aeris jumped back two steps in alarm. Suddenly, she felt Vincent firmly grip her arm and yank her behind him. He immediately pointed his gun straight at Davoren, his eyes glaring fiercely.

Davoren stopped indifferently, and returned Vincent's gaze with a cool smile, obviously happy to have won a response out of his "friend".

"I don't know how the Hell you could be standing there, Davoren," he growled in a low voice, "You may as well be a ghost, for all I know."

Vincent pushed Aeris as far behind him as possible while still pointing his gun at Davoren. She wanted to protest; but before she could open her mouth, Vincent took one firm step forward to confront the gunman, ignoring her completely.

"And I don't understand how you managed to survive," Vincent continued maliciously, "but that doesn't change a thing: Aeris will not be going back to that Professor. Not while there's breath in my body."

Davoren looked at Vincent defiantly, who had his gun rigidly fixed on him, then burst out into a fit of maniacal laughter.

Aeris leaned against the wall but absolutely refused to hide. Her heart grew uneasy as Davoren's hysterical outburst filled the gloomy air. Vincent, however, did not waver, and kept his weapon aimed on its mark.

"That was very kind of you to take the bullet for the girl, Vincent," said Davoren, digressing onto a completely new topic, "I must admit, I was quite surprised to see you sacrifice your arm for her. Very chivalrous indeed."

Vincent's arm twitched slightly, reminding him of his injury. He finally noticed the gnawing pain in his arm and the uncomfortable heat which burned its base. He could hear tiny, barely audible sparks fizzling inside his metallic arm.

Damn, he cursed, my arm's in even worse shape than I thought. That was no random shot, the cunning bastard.

"You knew I'd take the shot for her," Vincent muttered vehemently, "In fact, you made sure I'd hear you load your gun so I could protect her. That shot was for *me*, not her."

"Heh heh," chuckled the happy gunman, "You don't miss a thing, Mr. Valentine. Sharp and shrewd, as always."

The sarcastic smile on Davoren's face instantly disintegrated. He quickly pulled out a cold machine-gun from the depths of his trench coat, and jammed a full cartridge of bullets into its hollow chamber.

Aeris gave a violent start on seeing the gun. Her voice immediately failed her as the pounding of her heart drowned her ears, and sickening nausea choked her.

However, Davoren didn't even use his gun. He did not even raise it, and seemed to regard his weapon as a mere toy. Vincent would lower his gun, instead gazed hatefully at Davoren.

"I admire your youthful courage, Vincent," he muttered monotonously, "even though you're..what..55 years old?"

"58."

"Fair enough. An old man, all the same."

Aeris turned her eyes rapidly from one man to the other as she listened to their bizarre, nonsensical conversation. She thought her senses were leaving her.

"You didn't even hesitate to sacrifice your arm for the girl. Only the young possess such unselfish courage."

Vincent was morosely silent, but felt a bitter anger raging in his heart. Davoren hung his gun by his side, tapping it carelessly with one finger.

"Why," continued Davoren calmly, "Surely you knew I'd hit your weak point, Vincent. But that didn't seem to stop you either."

A totally new thought occurred to Vincent so suddenly, he lowered his gun in alarm.

"How'd you know the weak point in the first place?" asked Vincent suspiciously.

Davoren gazed stoically at him, expecting him to grasp the answer from his eyes. Aeris cautiously stepped near Vincent, but did not know what to say. Her mind was completely baffled.

"ANSWER ME!" he demanded, "HOW?"

"Guess."

There's no way he could've known my weak point, frowned Vincent thoughtfully, the only person who could possibly know it, besides me, would be...

He was literally struck dumb with the sudden conclusion.

Davoren smiled faintly, glad to see that his "friend" had finally understood.

"D..Davoren," he whispered hoarsely, "is Hojo behind this? Is *he* the same Professor you work for?"

Aeris, discerning his anxiety, crept up to Vincent from behind and gently touched his arm. She looked up at him concernedly, but he seemed oblivious to her existence. He focused his burning eyes on Davoren's face, waiting for an immediate answer.

"You're in luck, Vincent," replied Davoren with a mocking glitter in his eyes, "the Professor has ordered me to catch *you* as well as the little girl. You'll find out when you see him..that is, if you live to see him."

The two men glared at each other viciously. Aeris felt the stillness weigh her down like a rock, yet she kept her hand on Vincent's arm. She simply did not know what else to do.

Vincent suddenly shoved her away from him, just as Davoren shot up his arm and opened fire on the two.

The push sent Aeris flying onto her side behind the safe corner. The mad bullets tore savagely at anything that opposed them: the wall, the ground, even the air. Aeris hugged the wall, covering her head with both hands, as the gunfire blasted away. She shut her eyes to suppress crying out, but could not stop shaking.

Davoren, however, seemed more interested in shooting Vincent. Vincent bolted across the desolate Haunt, vaulting over heaps of rubble or ducking under contorted scraps of metal, as Davoren sent a torrent of bullets after him.

The bullets chased him relentlessly, overturning stones and pieces of rotting wood in their hot pursuit, but Vincent only tripled his speed to dodge them. Perceiving a rusty car some distance away, he made a frenzied dash towards it. It was his only hope for shelter.

The gunman abruptly altered the course of the bullets, blasting a massive pile of debris instead. The violent gunshot sent the whole mountain of rubble tumbling down like an avalanche onto the muddy ground, which effectively blocked Vincent's path to the car.

Vincent skidded to a halt in alarm, but immediately backtracked his steps, just as some wild bullets whizzed past his face. On spotting the ShinRa pumping pipes a few yards away, he shot forward as fast as his feet would carry him. That was his last hope.

Vincent leapt over one of the giant pipes, and tumbled onto his back, but Davoren obstinately refused to halt the deadly shower of bullets. Vincent scuffled on all four to huddle by the corroded, sturdy, metallic pipe. The whole structure vibrated with every "ping" and "pang" of the gunfire. Though he squeezed his eyes to shut out the deafening gunshots, Vincent managed to pull out his gun and hold it near his feverish face.

His thoughts drifted back...back into the depths of his memories, some of which he had forgotten, or at least believed he had. Yes..he found Davoren buried there..31 long years ago...

The bombardment suddenly halted, awakening Vincent from his reverie.

"Ha ha!" laughed Davoren delightedly, "Well, my aiming is certainly not as good as yours, Vincent. I just wasted an entire cartridge without even scratching you."

"Don't insult my intelligence, Davoren!" retorted Vincent from behind the pipe, "You know as well as I do you didn't aim to kill. You're just playing with me."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "What fun would the hunt be without a little struggle?"

Vincent gritted his teeth to restrain a curse.

In a flash, he sprang on top of the thick pipe and opened fire on Davoren, aiming directly at his head. But the ruthless gunman instantly flew behind a miserable heap of garbage, barely avoiding the bullets.

Vincent, using this opportunity, darted away from the pipe to a nearby shattered wall which slumped against another pipe.

On reaching this flimsy barrier, Vincent quickly crouched behind it, cautiously keeping his head low and his back double bent. He gasped for air as he strained every nerve to sense Davoren's movements, but failed to discern any sound.

"I always knew you were a sharp-shooter, Vincent," commented Davoren from behind his own shelter, "unfortunately, open-air tactics just isn't your specialty."

Vincent heard the unmistakable chink of another cartridge being stuffed into the machine-gun. He gripped his own gun tightly, wrangling his brains to find a way out of this dilemma.

He admitted to himself that Davoren spoke the truth: out of the two, Vincent was the better marksman. But when it came to battle tactics with firearms, Davoren was the better schemer by far. He definitely had the experience to back him up.

Suddenly, a thick shower of gunshots ruthlessly battered the weak wall, heedless to its silent entreaties. Vincent, with his metallic arm protecting his head, thrust out his other arm and fired randomly at Davoren's direction.

They exchanged several shots, but the groaning barrier, evidently unable to withstand the brutal cross-fire, swayed heavily to the side, much to Vincent's alarm. He instantly rolled out into the open, barely escaping the collapsing wall.

Davoren embraced his chance, and doubled the amount of bullets. The unprotected Vincent buried his face into the wet ground as he implanted his metallic arm in front of his face. Using this arm as a shield, he continued to fire at his enemy without seeing him.

Bits of dirt and rubble flew up around Vincent as the battle raged on. Four bullets had already grazed his both of his shoulders, and one nearly pierced his thigh, but he stubbornly refused to yield to his enemy.

Davoren promptly abandoned his shelter, because it obstructed his view of Vincent, and began shooting at him in the open. He cursed incessantly.

Catching sight of him, Vincent scurried to his feet as he fired one shot at Davoren's arm; but the gunman narrowly escaped it with a grazed shoulder instead.

However, that shot was only a distraction. Before Davoren could blink, Vincent darted straight at him in full speed with his gun flashing in front of his pale face. The gunman raised his weapon to shoot.

All was still.

Aeris, noticing the unnatural silence, lifted her head in wonder. As she looked around herself, she staggered up to her feet. She limped to the corner, and peered around it cautiously.

To her speechless horror, she saw Davoren and Vincent standing face to face some distance away; the former with his machine-gun pointed at Vincent's throat; the latter with his gun aimed at Davoren's forehead.

Each man seemed to read the other's thoughts. but would not speak.

"Vincent!!" cried Aeris, finding her voice at last. She immediately deserted her corner and ran towards them.

"Stay back!" warned Vincent sternly, without flinching a muscle or taking his eyes off Davoren.

"But.."

"I said STAY BACK!!"

Something in his icy tone advised Aeris not to advance any further, but she obstinately refused to go back. Her terror left a lump in her throat as she anticipated a double carnage: *both* men have their guns straight at each other!! Neither can escape!! Can't he see that?!

But Vincent saw it only too well. He felt the cold muzzle of the machine-gun near his throat. His finger twitched ceaselessly on the trigger, yet he knew the instant he's pull it, Davoren would shoot his throat.

Davoren gazed stoically at Vincent, not at all disturbed by Vincent's gun. In fact, he seemed totally oblivious to the weapon pointed at his forehead.

"Well?" asked Davoren affably, "Pull the trigger already."

Vincent's eyes narrowed in violent disgust. His hands trembled slightly as sweat streamed down his face.

"You've killed me once, Vincent," he sneered, "Go on. Kill me again."

Different thoughts and sensations raged inside his head, but Vincent kept his eyes keenly fixed on Davoren's face, expecting some trick.

"Don't tell me you're going soft on me, Mr. Valentine!" shouted Davoren impatiently, "PULL THE TRIGGER !!!"

Vincent shut his eyes, and pulled the trigger.

The gun gave a stiff "click"; it was empty, or rather, Vincent had completely forgotten to reload it.

Aeris, dumbfounded with horror, pressed her hands over her mouth. Vincent blinked incredulously at Davoren, his mind stunned beyond measure. Though he did not lower his empty gun, he felt bitter defeat laugh and jeer at his face.

Davoren, with a sympathetic look, chuckled quietly, as a parent may laugh lovingly at his inexperienced child.

"Didn't I always tell you 'reload your gun every time you find a shelter?'" he scolded gently.

The minute he uttered that reproof, Davoren shot up his leg and gave Vincent a powerful kick directly under his chin, sending him flying a few yards away. Vincent crashed into a hill of iron scraps and other useless debris, his head ramming against a jagged, rusty old pole that lay in the rubbish.

He tumbled three or four times down the heap of debris, until finally coming to rest at the bottom.

He lay face down in the mud, with one arm pitifully stretched out in front of him. Filth and muddy water dirtied his tattered overcoat. His metallic arm, dented with bullets, sparked occasionally with various injuries.

Vincent did not move.

Davoren, after a few silent minutes, trotted towards Vincent triumphantly. On reaching the unconscious man, he let his eyes skim "the prey" and gloat evilly over his success.

He slowly aimed his cold-hearted gun straight at Vincent's head, getting ready to finish him off.

"STOP IT!!" shrieked Aeris, suddenly grabbing his gun to divert its direction.

The poor girl, who had been in shock up to that point, had lunged forward at Davoren to save Vincent. She herself scarcely understood what she was doing.

"Out of my way!!" roared Davoren as he ruthlessly flung her to the side. Aeris stumbled to the ground, but immediately jumped back to her feet again. She glared maliciously at the gunman, not at all afraid of him.

"Bastard!!" she shouted, "Only a bastard like *YOU* would shoot an unconscious man in the head!!"

Davoren narrowed his evil, pink eyes as he studied her furious face. He slowly took a step away from Vincent, turning his whole body to face her. He frowned disapprovingly at her.

"You surprise me, girl," he said dryly, "I would have expected you to run off while your 'guardian' was distracting me."

Aeris clenched her fists, wishing she had enough strength to hurt him.

"Now, if you're smart," he continued, "you'd run away while I blast his head off."

"I may be a weakling compared to you, you white-haired puppet!" she snapped at him, "But I will not abandon my friends! Especially NOT him!!"

Davoren smirked at the feeble insult, then coolly pushed a strand of his white hair out of his face with obvious amusement.

"Not like it would've mattered," he replied, "I would have found you eventually. If not now, then later"

Aeris' heart pounded loudly in her chest and perspiration broke out on her face. She looked upon this hateful man as some horrible monster.

"You must think me some brutal monster, my dear," commented Davoren, breaking into her thoughts, "or some ruthless devil from Hell, eh?"

Aeris was silent.

"And you must think Vincent is some divine saint from Heaven, all pure and innocent."

Vincent twitched his shoulder and slowly lifted his heavy head out of the mud, much to Aeris' relief. He could not distinguish any clear thoughts until a sharp pain ripped through his skull. He instantly covered the back of his head with a faint moan, then felt a warm liquid quickly soak his hand. His head was bleeding.

Davoren, who had noticed him unsteadily regain conscious, suddenly kicked the man's side savagely. Vincent unresistingly rolled onto his back, gasping loudly for breath. Davoren firmly implanted his foot on Vincent's heaving chest, and laughed scornfully at the horrified Aeris.

"He's the angel, I'm the devil, right?" he sneered, "but the truth is he has as much blood on his hands as I do, if not more."

"You lie!!" she cried in anguish, "Vincent isn't ANYTHING like you!!"

"He's a Turk, my dear," he grinned, turning to his injured victim slowly, "We're both blood-thirsty Turks."

Her eyes flooded with tears as Davoren aimed his gun at Vincent's head again. Vincent, still dazed from his painful injuries, stared blankly at the muzzle of the weapon. He could not even find enough strength to raise his bleeding head from the mud.

"You don't know what a Turk is, do you?" Davoren asked her, but still gazed directly at Vincent, "It's a person who openly gives up his humanity to become a cold-hearted, killing-machine. He kills, lies, destroys, anything to please the Devil. A Turk is a monster in human form."

Vincent squeezed his eyes shut, trying to concentrate on something, then slowly reopened them. the confused, hazy look had disappeared, replaced by a cold, steady glare.

"That's a Turk, girl," Davoren concluded, "And your precious angel here was one of the *best* Turks I've ever seen. To him, the job came naturally."

A heavy silence lingered for a few minutes, in which each man stared daringly at the other. Finally, Davoren decided to break the stillness.

"I warned you, Mr. Valentine, that open-air tactics wasn't your strong point. I could've beaten a whole army of you with all the mistakes you were making."

Vincent did not reply.

"Oh well," sighed Davoren in dismay, "The Professor only wants the girl alive. He doesn't care if you die or live, just as long as he gets you."

Vincent turned his head away sullenly, but his shoulders shook. as though he were desperately trying to suppress some emotion. Davoren thought he was crying; Aeris thought he was in pain.

Much to their astonishment, Vincent burst out laughing. Aeris was certainly stunned: She had never, *ever* seen Vincent smile, let alone laugh.

But his laughter, far from normal, sounded as if a demon had possessed his body and squeezed it out by force. It rang out of him violently. Tears formed in his eyes as his aching chest heaved up and down, despite Davoren's foot. He seemed out of control.

Aeris clasped both her hands in anxiety.

"Oh God!" she muttered to herself, "He's delirious!"

Davoren reluctantly removed his foot from Vincent's chest, allowing him to sit up on his elbows. Studying his dirty, contorted face with its blood-shot and tearful eyes, Davoren believed Vincent had somehow lost his mind.

A thin stream of blood trickled down Vincent's forehead as he gradually calmed down. He then looked straight up at Davoren with a contemptuous, scornful smile.

"I'm not as skilled as you in battle tactics, Davoren, but I've learned a strategy or two in 30 years!"

Saying that, Vincent suddenly jerked up his bloody hand, producing a small revolver concealed in his sleeve.

The astonished Davoren instantly opened fire on him, but Vincent miraculously rolled out of the way. In a flash, Vincent shot up his arm and fired three times.

But he didn't shoot the gunman. Instead, he had shot straight up at the ShinRa building directly behind him.

This sudden movement had obviously exhausted Vincent; he dropped the revolver and fell back upon the ground as he gasped loudly for air. Davoren stared at him blankly, completely baffled by his action: he had another gun, why didn't he shoot me then? What kind of "strategy" is that?

But a thunderous creak from above effectively interrupted his reflections. Davoren looked up at the groaning building in alarm, not understanding why it creaked so loudly. Vincent opened one eye tiredly, but was too weak to lift his head.

Suddenly, the whole upper wall of this majestic building collapsed and plunged towards the two men, its crumbling stones and iron bars aiming straight for them.

When Vincent had shot upwards, he had intentionally shattered a weak pipe, which happened to be the only support the upper wall possessed. With this pipe eliminated, the entire wall burst forward, dropping its whole weight towards the two men.

Vincent instantly aroused himself and scurried to his feet with a grunt. In a last effort, he sprang forward, just as the destructive wall crashed into the muddy ground with all its might.

The crash sent dust and all types of rubble flying around the desolate Haunt. Vincent, who had tumbled onto his side, coughed as his chest throbbed painfully. He knew his metallic arm had long ceased to function, and the terrible ache in his head reminded him he was bleeding. He felt himself losing consciousness again.

Someone grabbed his two arms and pulled him away with great difficulty from the crash site. At first, he thought Davoren had somehow managed to escape the falling wall, but Aeris' voice proved him wrong: the gunman had definitely perished under all the wreckage.

"Vincent!!" she cried, "C'mon! Say something!"

His whole head spun around. The girl stretched him fully on the ground and looked over him in anguish. She wiped his dirty face with her wet sleeve, patting his cheeks every so often to awaken him.

"You can't die on me now, Vincent!! Wake up! Please!!"

Her pleading voice sounded terribly muffled to his ears. His eyes grew cloudy as his senses failed him. His consciousness slowly faded..faded into oblivion..

But he suddenly sat up in alarm, as though Aeris had just splashed cold water in his face. But it wasn't her cries that had aroused him, it was a distinct smell that permeated the dank air: gas.

Without a moment's hesitation, Vincent jumped to his feet and grabbed Aeris around the waist.

"Ah!! W..what are you doing?!!" she cried in astonishment.

He immediately bolted straight out of the devastated Haunt, leaping over the iron pipes and skipping over the rubble. He flew over the rusty fence in one leap, and doubled his speed to reach the alley down the street.

Aeris squirmed uncomfortably in his tight grip, but held onto his tattered coat as he ducked into the alley in a frenzy.

The instant they turned in that alley, an earth-shaking explosion ripped through the air. Vincent nearly stumbled as the violent vibrations rocked the ground, but he refused to slow down.

He skidded out of the alley and dashed down the main street, still carrying Aeris around the waist.

Several people, with exclamations of wonder, pointed in the direction of the ShinRa Haunt.

"Look!" shouted a man.

"My God!" gasped another.

"Heavens mercy!" a woman exclaimed, "It's the ShinRa Haunt!!"

Passers-by began flocking about, calling to each other in confusion. Several shop owners peered out of their shops quizzically, while the customers crowded behind them to see as well. Many cars actually pulled over and their drivers pushed their heads out of the windows in disbelief.

Vincent rushed down the street heedlessly, but Aeris glanced in the direction everyone marveled at. A brilliant orange light illuminated the sky as a huge trail of black smoke danced its way up from the ShinRa Haunt. The place was on fire.

She finally understood why Vincent was so eager to escape. He had foreseen the explosion.

Vincent ruthlessly tore his way through the confused crowds of spectators with such unnatural strength, as though he derived his power from some external force. He managed to quickly evade several people and darted forward, not even paying attention to his surroundings. Indeed, escape seemed to be his only thought.

Much to the girl's alarm, he dashed across a busy street, unconcerned with an approaching van that sped towards them.

"AH!! LOOK OUT!!!" screamed Aeris, tugging his coat madly. The vehicle blared angrily at them, but could not stop in time.

Vincent, however, hopped onto the top of the speedy van and leapt over it effortlessly. He flipped to the sidewalk, to the astonishment of all who saw him, then dodged into another street.

The van skidded to a halt. Its driver shot out his head with a most and petrified look on his face.

"Mother of God!!! I nearly ran over a demon!!!!" he blurted out, crossing himself several times.

Aeris felt her eyelids grow heavy as they flew past streets and buildings. All the previous running; all the different emotions she had experienced in the last hour slowly caught up with her. She nestled her head against Vincent's body, and fell unconscious.

Aeris woke up when Vincent suddenly slowed down. She did not know how long he had been running, but guessed it to be a long time. His breaths came in short, coarse gasps as he dragged his feet across the frozen ground of some deserted park.

He dropped the girl, and collapsed on all four, trying to cough and breath at the same time. Aeris immediately rubbed his back soothingly and encouraged him to hold on.

Aeris looked around herself, until she recognized the place: it was the park near Vincent's apartment. In fact, she spotted his home some distance away. He had ran all the way from the Haunt to the apartment.

She instantly turned her attentions to Vincent, who meekly begged her to help him lean against the tree behind him.

"Here, just take a deep breath," she whispered, reclining his back on the dead, frozen tree. Unbearable pain tore at his head and chest with every agonizing breath. He squeezed his eyes, trying to ease his suffering.

Aeris eagerly tried to relieve. She chafed his frozen hand, oblivious to the moist blood that smeared it. When she noticed his battered claw twisted uncomfortably by his side, she reached out to lift it.

"DON'T TOUCH IT!!" he warned, startling her, "You'll get electrocuted!!"

Aeris stared at his angry face, then cast her eyes down at the ground, feeling her cheeks flush with shame. He sullenly turned his head away as he bit his lower lip to control his ordeal. Neither spoke a word until Vincent's breathing grew steady again.

"V..Vincent?" she asked timidly.

"What?" he answered in a weary tone. He was still leaning against the tree, eyes shut tight.

"Vincent..I'm so sorry. This is all my fault."

Vincent slowly turned his head to her. She was looking distressfully at his face, her beautiful green eyes welling up with guilty tears.

"If..I hadn't run away..I wouldn't have endangered your life..I'm so..sorry.."

He gazed thoughtfully at her, then suddenly became aware of something. He fumbled inside his tattered coat, much to Aeris' puzzlement, then pulled out the broken flower he had found on the street.

"I think..this belongs to you," he muttered, holding the pink flower out to her. His eyes showed unmistakable fatigue, but they gleamed kindly, almost tenderly, at Aeris.

Aeris stared blankly at the crushed flower, as if she had never seen such an object before.

So many emotions and sensations swelled inside her heart: she could not believe that this man whom she had hated, feared, and openly insulted; this *same* man had rushed out in the rain to find her, help her, and when danger threatened, protected her with his life.

She looked tearfully at Vincent, who blinked in surprise on seeing her troubled face. Aeris suddenly flung her arms around his neck, bursting into bitter tears.

Vincent scarcely understood why she cried, but let her sob to her heart's content on his shoulder. He rested his head against hers, and tiredly shut his eyes again.

They sat that way for a long time.

-End of Chp.8

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.9

When Aeris had finally calmed down, she slowly lifted her head from Vincent's shoulder and rubbed her swollen eyes. Vincent still sat hunched up against her, his battered head comfortably nestled by hers. He seemed to be asleep.

Aeris, slightly embarrassed with his intimate posture, cautiously edged away from him. Vincent opened his weary eyes at the movement, and lifted his head. He instantly fell back against the tree again, heaving a deep sigh of exhaustion.

Aeris studied his haggard, dirty face. A thin stream of blood trickled through his bandanna and down his soiled cheek. Several strands of his wet hair dangled loosely in front of his face. His eyes were gently sealed, as though they would never reopen again.

But she found his deathly calmness most alarming. Indeed, Vincent's whole appearance, with his slightly tilted head and careworn face, expressed such unnatural peacefulness, any passer-by may have thought him dead.

"Vincent?" called Aeris hesitantly.

No reply.

"Vincent!!"

"Not so loud..," he whispered feebly, "I can still hear you."

Aeris was reduced to a nervous silence. He kept his eyes closed, evidently trying to gather his strength. Except for the occasional bark of some stray dog, nothing dared break the haunting tranquility of the park.

"Aeris?" he asked in a low voice, but did not open his eyes.

"Y..yes?"

"Could you please help me up? I can't move my shoulders."

Aeris gave a start as he slowly forced his eyes open. His bloodshot eyes blazed feverishly with a deep crimson glow. Every word, every breath, was an obvious agony to him.

She instantly sprang up and began helping, or rather pulling, Vincent off the ground. After many failed attempts, Aeris finally managed to haul him to his feet. He staggered uneasily against her with a sharp grunt, but gritted his teeth to stifle any further cries.

The girl could feel his heartbeat thumping loudly, and saw the sweat drip down his distraught face.

God, she thought anxiously, if I don't get him home soon, he'll faint out here in the cold!

She gently drew his arm around her neck and leaned his whole body against hers to support him.

"Okay, Vincent, you're on your feet," she encouraged kindly, "Let's try taking a step forward."

"You can't support me, Aeris," Vincent gasped out, "I'm too heavy for you. I can manage..by..myself.."

"But you can't even stand up!"

"Ah!" he moaned suddenly, "Ah..I think.. I can walk somehow..just..let me.."

But he immediately crumbled to his knees in pain. Aeris pulled him back to his feet before he could fall, and tried desperately to support his unsteady body. He was right: his weight was far greater than she could bear, but Aeris would not give up.

"We're almost home, Vincent. Look!" she said eagerly, "The apartment's just a few steps away! Don't quit yet!"

She tightened her grip on his cold hand, as if that could give him new strength. He leaned with his full weight on her, unable to even balance his shoulders properly.

"Please, Vincent," she begged, "let me help you."

Though the pain tore at his entire body, especially his arms, he managed to nod his head submissively. he knew that if Aeris stopped supporting him, he'd lose conscious on the spot.

They plodded slowly out of the frozen park, emerging into the empty, brightly-lit street. Their awkward footsteps broke the suffocating silence of the air. Aeris felt Vincent grow increasingly heavy as he dragged his weary feet behind him. He bit his lower lip with each step, and squeezed his eyes in pain.

She continuously whispered some gentle words of encouragement into his ear, pressed his lifeless hand, anything to keep his conscious. At times, he completely lost balance, nearly crushing the poor girl under his weight, but instantly steadied himself again with an effort.

"Aeris..," he muttered weakly, "Please..I..lean me against that wall.."

"But we're nearly.."

"Please," he begged with restraint, "I..I think I'm going to have another seizure.."

She looked at his face in alarm, then cautiously rested his body against the brick wall, still keeping his arm around her neck. Aeris dared not utter a word for fear of upsetting him, yet could not take her eyes off him. The anxiety sickened her heart beyond endurance.

Vincent shut his eyes in profound concentration, as if engaged in some grueling mental battle with the fit. Sweat broke out on his ghastly face. The seizure angrily rattled his chest, demanding its release. Vincent knitted his brows and gnashed his teeth to repress it. He would not surrender without a fight.

Occasionally his resistance would falter, and he'd splutter out some blood with a sudden cough. But his persistence finally prevailed: the seizure reluctantly retreated into the depths of his chest, and he breathed easy again.

Aeris steadied his anguished face; she felt his chest heave up and down with each gasp. Sometimes he uttered a faint moan and slumped to one side in exhaustion, but Aeris steadied him every time. Whatever remained of his strength was rapidly dwindling.

"You're very sick, Vincent," she whispered compassionately, wiping away the sweat from his feverish face.

"Y..yes," he agreed mechanically, "These fits have been ravaging my chest for the past five months.."

He swallowed a deep breath of air, but suddenly burst out coughing, his throat gurgling with blood. Aeris frantically rubbed his chest, begging him to relax his muscles and breathe slowly.

"Ah..," Vincent continued when he finally recovered himself, "At first, the fits were very small and infrequent. But lately..lately they've been attacking me quite often..and some of them are so violent..I..I.."

He broke off his sentence with a pitiful sigh. Aeris nodded her head solemnly; she understood his meaning.

When Vincent had gathered enough strength to move again, the two continued their agonizing journey to the apartment. Aeris felt her back might snap any moment with Vincent's weight, but immediately scoffed at her weakness: Vincent had just risked his life to save her, the very *least* she could do was help him home!

"You should see a doctor, Vincent." she commented as they staggered into the reception hall of the building. Pressing the elevator button, she glanced up at Vincent in concern.

"If I see a doctor," he mused dreamily, "he'd probably be more interested in my claw or my genetic makeup. I don't want a bunch of scientists examining me..once was enough."

A loud chime interrupted the conversation, signaling the arrival of the long-awaited elevator. Aeris pulled Vincent inside, then pressed the appropriate button. When the doors closed, the elevator gave a slight jolt, and began its journey upwards.

During this time, a heavy silence fell on the two, on Vincent in particular. He seemed to be brooding about some serious matter. Aeris occasionally glanced at his haggard, morose face, and decided it best not to pester him with meaningless questions.

The elevator finally halted. Its doors quickly admitted them into the familiar corridor of apartment doors. Aeris' heart swelled with joy on spotting Vincent's door. It was only a few steps away.

"Just hang on, Vincent," she encouraged cheerfully, "See? There's your door!"

She turned excitedly to Vincent, but his serious face greatly disturbed her. He stared thoughtfully at the door, as though it hid some mysterious secret behind it.

"Vincent?" asked Aeris apprehensively, "What's wrong?"

He shifted his eyes to her, studying every feature of her anxious face. His arm, which Aeris still held around her neck, tensed with discomfort. He slowly brought his face near her ear, and began whispering in a most alarmingly low voice. His icy, dispassionate tone chilled her heart to the core; she felt his very breath tickle her ear.

"Listen," he began gently, "when Tifa and Cloud ask what happened, let me do the talking."

Aeris started on hearing the strange request. After some hesitation, she reluctantly nodded her head.

"And..," he murmured more softly, "whatever I say, just agree with me. I know it sounds strange, Aeris, but please, do it for me."

She looked at him in concern. Vincent wearily hung his head near her face, anticipating a reply.

"Alright, Vincent," she whispered deliberately.

"Thank you," he sighed, pressing her hand warmly.

Aeris was silent, but felt her cheeks flush slightly at the pressure of his hand.

Taking a deep breath, she knocked the door three times. there was an awkward pause. Suddenly, cloud flung the door open, and stared at the two with a large gaping mouth.

"SHIT!!!" he exclaimed finally, "Vincent!! What the Hell happened to YOU?!!"

Aeris handed the weary man over to Cloud, who immediately wrapped Vincent's arm around his neck and dragged him inside. The girl, relieved of the heavy load, followed them into the hallway.

Cloud slammed the door behind her, then leaned Vincent against the door, shouting at the top of his lungs, "TIFA!! TIFA, C'MERE QUICK!!!"

Tifa, with an empty plate in her hand, rushed out of the kitchen, as if a demon had been chasing her.

"GOOD GRIEF!!" she screamed, dropping the plate in unmistakable horror, "VINCENT!!! ARE YOU ALRIGHT??!!!"

They all crowded around him, loudly demanding an immediate explanation. Vincent could not distinguish their faces, hear their words, or even understand their anxiety. Indeed, he felt his whole mind slipping away like water between his fingers.

He clumsily slumped to one side, but both Aeris and Cloud grabbed him before he could collapse.

"Vincent! Please, wake up!" sobbed Aeris. She supported him against her body, frantically squeezing his lifeless hand and pushing his hair out of his face.

"Vincent! Hey!!" called Cloud, patting the man's cheeks repeatedly, "C'mon man! Snap out of it!!"

"Oh God!" exclaimed Tifa, "We need to get him a doctor!"

"Ah..no..," Vincent muttered as he finally steadied himself. Aeris still clung to him, afraid he may lose conscious again if she let go.

"Whadd'ya mean 'no'?! have you lost your senses?!!" cried Tifa in anguish.

"I..I'm alright..really.."

"Alright?!" retorted Cloud amazedly, "Have you looked in the mirror lately?!"

"It's not..as bad as it looks," Vincent forced out weakly.

Leaning his head back against the door, he shut his tired eyes, as if gathering all his remaining strength in one last effort. All attention was riveted on him.

"I just got into a street fight, that's all."

Tifa gasped out loud, but covered her mouth to ease the shock. Cloud gripped Vincent's shoulders firmly and studied his haggard face, thinking he had perhaps misheard him. Aeris stared timidly at the ground. She was very quiet.

"Excuse me," faltered Cloud, "did you just say you got into a street fight?"

"Yes, I did."

Cloud turned his head incredulously to Tifa; her face showed utter horror and distress at the news.

"So..what happened?" asked Cloud after a brief silence.

"Well," began Vincent calmly, "I went to search for Aeris, and eventually, I found her..in the Northern Slums."

"Okay. And?"

"When I found her there, I saw some thugs trying to mug her, and..other atrocities I won't mention."

Cloud and Tifa nodded their heads solemnly, understanding his full meaning. Aeris fidgeted uncomfortably, her face growing hot with the fictitious story.

"And, that's all really. I got into a fight with them."

Cloud still held onto him, afraid he may somehow escape his grasp. Tifa looked from Vincent to Aeris, then back to Vincent, completely dumbfounded.

"But, Vincent," asked Cloud in surprise, "I've seen you fight before, and I know no common thug from the streets could do *this* to you."

Vincent turned his head away with a frown. Heaving a deep sigh, he mumbled, "Well of course, Cloud. But even I can't handle a whole gang of thugs without getting thrashed a bit. Besides, they had guns..and knives.."

"Oh God!" whispered the horror-stricken Tifa.

A heavy silence followed, in which no one dared break it. Vincent looked at everyone wearily, then shut his eyes again; the talking had totally drained him.

"Aeris..is..is this true?" inquired Cloud softly. Both he and Tifa fixed their searching eyes on her, as if her answer alone would settle everything. Aeris felt her heart pound nervously, but slowly nodded her head.

"I'm sorry," she apologized shamefully, "I..I wanted to run back here, but I got lost and..accidentally wandered into those slums.."

Cloud stared blankly at her; her simple excuse for running into that dangerous area astounded him. He exchanged a meaningful glance with Tifa, who quickly nodded her head in reply.

"And, you're absolutely sure you're okay, Vincent?" insisted Cloud.

"Yes..," he muttered, "but..my arm is slightly damaged. I can't move it." "

"Shit man!!" exclaimed Cloud on seeing the horribly disfigured claw, "It's in even worse shape than you!"

With that remark, Cloud placed the man's arm around his neck again. Both girls helped Vincent steady himself on his wobbly feet, begging him to move slowly.

"Careful. Don't touch my arm," warned Vincent, "A couple of wires short circuited inside. You could get an electric shock."

"Easy! Easy!" replied Cloud as the man staggered against him, "Okay, I got you. Sheesh, you're really heavy, you know that?"

"Th..there's a metal tool box in one of the kitchen cupboards," Vincent instructed patiently, "Could you please get it for me, Cloud?"

"Sure, sure! you just take it nice and slow!"

Cloud dragged Vincent away from the anxious girls, grunting under the burdensome weight but trying to appear unconcerned. Aeris wanted beyond anything to go after them, but guessed she'd only get in the way. She remained behind.

Her distressed eyes followed the two men until they disappeared into the living room. heaving a sigh, she rubbed her weary temples; all her strength had finally evaporated.

Suddenly, Tifa gripped her arm and swung the girl around. She peered into Aeris' frightened face, feeling immense rage boiling in her heart. She compressed her lips tightly; her eyes flashed fire. Indeed, Aeris could foresee an imminent rebuke.

"Aeris!! You silly, silly girl!!" Tifa burst out, "Why'd you run away like that, huh?!"

"Tifa..!.."

"I nearly got a heart attack!! Do you know how WORRIED I was?! how worried we all were?!!"

Aeris, overwhelmed with guilt, hung her head and could not answer. Tifa stared intently at her, her eyes welling up with angry tears.

"Do you know that Vincent spent THREE hours in the rain looking for you?! And Cloud went berserk when I told him what happened!!"

Aeris dared not breathe a word of protest. An awkward silence fell on the two girls. Tifa still glared accusingly at Aeris, who felt her heart flood with shame. She could not bear her friend's anger.

Aeris opened her mouth to reply, but Tifa suddenly threw her arms around her and embraced her with all her might, as if she could shield her from all danger. She buried her face into the girl's neck, trembling whenever a sob escaped her. Aeris, at a complete loss, stood perfectly still.

"Damn it, Aeris!" cursed Tifa with a quivering voice, "What if those thugs killed you? What if Vincent hadn't found you in time? What then?!"

Aeris cringed in fear as the image of that horrible gunman floated into her mind: yes, what if Vincent hadn't found her in time? What *then*?

"I'm sorry, Tifa," faltered Aeris pitifully, "I..I guess.. I just got so scared..I could only think about running away.."

Tifa lifted her head and looked searchingly at Aeris' sad face. though her eyes glittered with tears, she had somehow managed to check her emotions.

"You thought that professor had found you?" she asked gently.

"Y..yes..I thought..that he would catch me again..and he'd.."

"Sh! Sh! You little scardey-cat," whispered Tifa compassionately as she hugged the girl again, "no one's gonna get you. You're safe now. You're safe."

Aeris rested her head on Tifa's shoulder, feeling all her previous fears melt away with a new sense of security. the Professor, the gunman, the danger, they all faded away into oblivion; only her safety, her friends remained behind, and they warmed her heart to the very core.

"Heh heh," chuckled Tifa after a moment. She held Aeris at arm's length, smiling delightedly at her.

"Wh..what's so funny?" asked Aeris nervously.

"Oh, I remembered what you were telling me just hours ago. Y'know, about how much you thought Vincent hated you."

Aeris blinked in confusion; that conversation seemed years ago. She recalled shouting at Vincent all those nasty insults; that he couldn't understand anything; and that he hated her beyond anything.

But he wasn't angry when she insulted him. He said he understood her better than anyone else.

And he didn't hate her at all. Far from it, he said he felt "concern" for her.

"I told you he didn't hate you," sad Tifa, interrupting her thoughts, "When I told what happened, he rushed out in the freezing rain to find you. He didn't even hesitate!"

Yes, continued Aeris internally, and saved my life too. He didn't hesitate that time either.

"I'm curious," remarked Tifa, "Was he angry when he found you? What did he say?"

All of Vincent's words instantly cluttered Aeris' brain: from the moment he touched her arm at the Haunt, to the minute the staggered into the apartment.

But Aeris held his words firmly to her bosom, refusing to share them. She felt they were meant for her ears alone. They provided a strange comfort that only Vincent and she could understand.

"Nothing," muttered Aeris in a low voice, "He said nothing." Tifa looked strangely at the girl. Perhaps she detected a tone of slight irritation in her voice; or maybe because Aeris had turned her head away uncomfortably.

"Well, anyway," Tifa replied at length, "What matters now is you're here and safe."

Aeris nodded her head slowly.

"You go take a shower, and change your wet clothes. We don't want you catching a cold. Go on."

Tifa, with a warm smile, escorted her to the bathroom. She promised to fetch Aeris her towel and dry clothes when she would finish; Aeris thanked her for her kindness.

"Dinner should be ready in an hour," said Tifa as she closed the door, "It'll make us all feel much better"

-End of Chp.9

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.10

The fresh, clean water had literally revived Aeris' mind. She stepped out of the bathroom, clothed in a warm dress, and took a deep breath of air. Her whole body seemed rejuvenated; the water had washed away all her worries down the drain.

She flapped her towel twice, then wrapped it around her shoulders. Her long brown hair fell in wet, loose coils all around her head. Pushing a strand of hair out of her face, she wondered where everyone was.

The clear sound of the TV in the living room instantly caught her attention. After some hesitation, she wandered down the hall, and turned nervously into the living room.

Everyone was there. Cloud, with both hands in his pockets, followed the words of the TV very carefully. Tifa stood near him; she was completely absorbed as well.

Vincent, on the other hand, sat gloomily on the couch, paying no heed to the troublesome television. He had washed his dirty face and changed his tattered clothes while Aeris had been bathing. She could see him bent over his damaged arm with grave interest, but could not guess what he was doing.

The TV suddenly blared out some incoherent jabber as it flashed a few times. Vincent squeezed his eyes in annoyance, but managed to control himself in time.

"Cloud!" he ordered with restraint, "Turn that down! I can't concentrate!"

"Oh, sorry man," apologized Cloud, "Hey, Aeris! Sit down! Sit down! Something BIG just happened!"

Indeed, both Cloud and Tifa seemed excitedly glued to the TV. Tifa occasionally gasped in surprise, but Cloud hushed her to listen.

Sitting next to Vincent, Aeris' eyes wandered to his metallic arm. Much to her horror, she noticed the top cover of his arm propped open, displaying all sorts of coloured wires, circuits, and other strange "gadgets" inside.

Vincent fumbled in a small tool box near his feet, pulling out a pair of pliers. He dug them deep into his arm, twisted them around, then ruthlessly yanked a sparkling wire out of his claw. He flung it away contemptuously.

With a muffled curse, Vincent picked up a slender black pin from the tool box, and began fiddling inside his metallic arm. His face expressed deep solemnity mixed with vexation. Yet he continued to repair his arm, oblivious to the bothersome television.

He glanced askance at Aeris, who gave an involuntary start on meeting his bloody-red eyes. However, Vincent instantly reverted his attention on his arm again, taking no more notice of her.

"Oh!" exclaimed Tifa loudly, "Here it comes!"

Aeris shifted her eyes to the television, still not understanding the cause of all the excitement. A young woman appeared on the screen with a slightly nervous face.

"And now for breaking news," began the announcer importantly, "A most violent explosion ripped through the former ShinRa headquarters. It occurred in Sector 1 of Midgar, at around 6:30 this evening."

Aeris nearly fell off the couch in alarm. She stared incredulously as images of the devastated building flickered across the screen. Her head suddenly darted back to Vincent, but he seemed more interested in shoving a fuse inside his arm. He did not even raise his eyes to look.

"The whole friggin' building's blown apart!" commented Cloud amazedly, "Look! Even the base is wiped out!"

"That must've been one Hell of an explosion!" added Tifa in awe.

"The police at first believed this was a terrorist attack," resumed the young announcer, "however, many people are reporting they heard heavy gunshots shortly before the explosion. Now police believe that a fight between two rival street gangs caused the explosion."

Aeris sat perfectly still, not daring to lift her eyes. Vincent gracefully twisted a wire around his fingers, and began hooking it inside his arm, scarcely paying attention to the disturbing news.

The announcer explained that a pipe in the upper wall had accidentally been blasted away, causing the entire wall to collapse. However, this pipe also served as some gasket full of an extremely reactive, pungent gas.

"Police add that this gas reacted with the air, and caused the explosion and fire," she concluded.

Tifa and Cloud exchanged more brief comments about the incident before the announcer continued.

"Police have anxiously searched the entire blast site for survivors, even under the wall debris. They assure everyone that, luckily, nobody was present when the actual explosion occurred."

Vincent's hand stopped abruptly, as struck by lightning. Aeris looked apprehensively at the screen, then at Vincent's face. He stared blankly at the television, obviously not believing his ears: he was *sure* Davoren had perished under the wall.

"Yeesh!" said Cloud in disgust, "These gangsters are getting pretty nasty...not to mention dangerous!"

He began flicking through the other channels in search of some comedy show. Tifa suddenly remembered the dinner, and skipped out of the room to set the table.

Aeris still gazed at Vincent, her heart growing sick with worry. He sat broodingly over his metallic arm for a minute, completely lost in thought, but quickly resumed repairing his arm. He said nothing.

"ShinRa Headquarters'?" remarked Cloud, turning to Vincent, "say, isn't that near the place where you got into a fight?"

"Yes," answered Vincent mechanically.

"Well, it's a good thing Vincent found you, Aeris," smiled Cloud at the girl, "You could've wandered into that dangerous place without even knowing it!"

She fidgeted uncomfortably, muttering a faint "yes" in reply.

"I wanted to go look for you too," he continued, "but Tifa said I'd be better off fixing the door she busted."

Aeris nodded her head slowly to acknowledge his kindness.

"So, how's your arm, Vincent?" Cloud asked light-heartedly.

"I can move my thumb and index finger now," replied Vincent dryly. Though he obviously had no interest in talking to Cloud, he twitched his two iron fingers to show his success.

"Hey, you're a pretty good mechanic!" praised Cloud, "Wait..I thought you were a gunsmith."

"I am."

"Then how do you know what all those little gizmos and diddly-bops do?"

"Well, obviously," Vincent answered sarcastically, "I'd know how to handle and repair my own arm, Cloud. It *is* a part of my body, after all."

"You any good with motorbikes? See, mine got busted last week, and I.."

Vincent glared menacingly at him, as though he would murder him on the spot if he continued to annoy him. Cloud, perceiving that his friend wasn't in his best mood, wisely decided to retreat.

"Um..right," he laughed nervously, "I'd better go..help Tifa..Yeah!"

Cloud scurried out of the living room. Vincent and Aeris were left alone.

The two were very silent. Aeris stared vacantly at Vincent's metallic arm as he resumed the repairs. He pulled out damaged wires, fiddled with control mechanisms, tested the movement of his fingers, yet would not look at anything else except his battered claw.

Digging a slender, thin file into his arm, he began to carefully pick at some device embedded inside. Suddenly, a wild spark zapped his meddling hand, angry at the rude intrusion. Vincent jerked his hand away in pain, and flung the file to the ground.

"Ah..shit..," he growled in an undertone. He licked his burnt fingers with obvious impatience.

"Here, let me help you," suggested Aeris kindly. She picked up the forsaken file, then placed it back in his hand.

Vincent gazed at her for a full minute with a most thoughtful, serious expression on his face. Though she grew increasingly uncomfortable under his scrutinizing eyes, Aeris refused to shrink away from him as before.

"How..how are you now?" she inquired softly, looking directly into his eyes to show her courage.

"I'm fine," he replied, "..and you?"

"Much better."

His musing eyes lingered on her for another moment before he restarted the tedious repairs. An uneasy silence fell on them again.

Aeris glanced quickly all around her, then suddenly reached for Vincent's hand, which froze solid at her warm touch.

"Tell me," she whispered beseechingly, "what that man said back there..about that 'Turk' bit. Was it..true?"

Vincent's whole face darkened mournfully as she pressed his hand for an honest reply. After a brief silence, he reluctantly closed his eyes, and took a deep breath, preparing himself for a long explanation.

"Do you know that place we were at today?" he began solemnly.

"The 'ShinRa Headquarters'?"

He nodded his head, then continued, "ShinRa used to be an extremely powerful company, controlled by a president. This president had this 'special task force', bodyguards called 'the Turks'."

"And you..?"

"Yes. I was a Turk in ShinRa."

The statement sounded very blunt, if not emotionless, to Aeris, as if to say "so what if it's true?". She stole another glance at the door, then drew his hand near her body, looking intently into his face. Vincent did not pull his hand away, but persistently held onto the slender file, and would not return her anxious gaze.

"What about that man..Davoren?" she asked nervously. The very recollection of his face filled her heart with unimaginable dread.

"Oh, him," Vincent muttered, "He was the leader of the Turks when I joined ShinRa."

"He was..a friend of yours?"

"In a way, yes. He was..but.."

He suddenly shifted his keen eyes to her, speaking in an extremely subdued voice.

"Davoren died, or at least I thought he had died, a long time ago. I..I shot him in the head..with a gun."

Aeris stared blankly at his face for a long time, trying to grasp his strange meaning. Vincent turned his head away slowly, and plunged into silent, moody meditation.

"But..how?!" she wondered, interrupting his thoughts, "If you're so sure he died, then how could he.."

"I don't know Aeris, but what worries me is that..this Davoren..he hasn't aged at all, even though it's been thirty-one years since I last saw him."

Aeris fixed her green eyes on his face to make sure she didn't miss a single syllable, even though she hardly understood any of his "confusing riddles". Vincent twiddled with the file as he narrowed his eyes in profound contemplation.

"His hair and his eye colour have changed dramatically, I'll grant him that," he murmured to himself, "but his face, Aeris, his actual face hasn't even changed a wrinkle. it's exactly as young as it was thirty-one years ago."

He focused his eyes on his half-fixed arm, twirling the hapless tool between his fingers all the time. The girl squirmed nervously next to him. She could not think of any answer; his musings simply made no sense to her.

"I have only one explanation," Vincent concluded "he must've underwent the same experiment I did."

Vincent knitted his brows, then attacked his metallic arm with the file, as if stabbing some invisible enemy. He vigorously resumed repairing it, preferring to wallow privately in his own thoughts, but a gentle touch on his arm halted him again.

"What..what experiment?" whispered Aeris. she stared anxiously into his face, with her hand clinging to his arm.

"When I worked in ShinRa, there was this professor in the science department, named Hojo," he explained patiently, "I didn't exactly understand his reasons, but Hojo performed some experiment on my body..'corporal alterations', shall we say."

"Is that how you got.."

"My claw?" he said, finishing her hesitant sentence, "Heh, believe me, this arm is the *best* thing I got out of the experiment."

He suddenly shifted his whole body towards her, and stared feverishly into her wondering eyes. Aeris would've moved back, except that she was already cornered at the end of the sofa.

"But, it's been thirty-one years since I underwent that experiment, Aeris," he muttered mysteriously.

Aeris blinked in confusion, but dared not take her eyes off him for a second. She tightened the towel around her shoulders to stop shaking; his strange tone frightened her beyond anything else she had experienced that day.

"How..is that possible?" she faltered, "I don't understand.."

"The experiment inhibited all the growth factors in my body, and readjusted their chemical balance to adapt to the new, various alterations," Vincent answered automatically, as if reciting some lesson.

Aeris stared at him with a most confused, distressed look troubling her beautiful face. She hadn't understood a single word he had said.

"What does..that mean?" she stammered.

"It means I stopped aging thirty-one years ago, just like Davoren."

Aeris sat upright, thus bringing her face very close to his. She frantically studied every feature of his pale face, finally resting on his gleaming, ruby-red eyes. neither uttered a word.

"But..your face!" she forced out in disbelief, "You don't.."

"It's just an illusion, Aeris," he whispered softly, "This face, this body, it's all an illusion."

Yes, Vincent, he reflected sarcastically, you're nothing but a monster in human form. An illusion to fool everyone..

They stared at each other for a few seconds until Aeris finally turned her head away from him, completely overwhelmed with her emotions. Vincent, who still face her, cast his eyes down. Different thoughts crammed his mind all at once and rudely pushed each other to the side; he could not settle on any particular one.

"Then..is Davoren working for Hojo?" Aeris asked weakly. Her heart felt sick with worry, "Is Hojo the same professor who's after me?"

"I don't know about that either, Aeris.."

She grew extremely silent.

"Hojo..injected himself with some bio-chemical mutagen that completely changed his body," Vincent continued deliberately, "We killed him a year ago, but I wouldn't be surprised if somehow managed to survive."

He noticed her hands tremble under the towel. Though he looked intently at her again, Aeris seemed to stare at something visible to her alone.

"And if he's really after you," he finished, "then he'll stop at nothing to get you."

The sentence was passed, and her fate sealed. Davoren had somehow survived the explosion, she knew, and would undoubtedly find her again. Then what? He'd just drag her away..back to the Professor.

I don't want to go back there, her mind cried in disgust, I don't want to!! I don't want to!!

So many foreboding feeling, emotions, and thoughts bombarded the poor girl's head from all directions. Her eyes constantly shot from one end of the room to the other, expecting to find both Davoren and the Professor hiding in some obscure corner. The deathly stillness only annoyed her further.

Vincent looked significantly at the troubled girl, yet she did not seem to notice his presence anymore; her fears had entirely engrossed her. He slowly drew his arm around her and leaned her body against himself. Although Aeris submissively nestled her head against his shoulder, she shook with sickening agitation.

His arm enveloped her securely, as though it would protect her from the eyes of the hateful Professor.

But even Vincent knew he could not totally shield her from that invisible creature. It seemed to lurk in every shadow, ready to pounce on her at the mention of its mane. Wherever she turned, it laughed silently at her pathetic helplessness. It simply reveled in her misery.

Vincent knew every emotion Aeris felt at that moment only too well: how many times had himself trudged through them, over a period of thirty years?

Yet it pained him to the girl suffer from the same agonizing fears, and even more that he could not erase any of them.

"Aeris! Vincent!" called Tifa from the kitchen, "Dinnertime!!"

Aeris instantly pulled herself away from Vincent, hesitating to look up at him for a few seconds. But soon, a warm smile crept to her lips, and she found herself giggling softly as she turned to Vincent.

"Heh heh..are you sure we shouldn't tell them about any of this?" she whispered slyly.

"I don't want to get either of them involved," he answered with a calm voice, "It would only complicate matters."

Aeris nodded her head understandingly, then bounced onto her feet vigorously. She stood in front of him, her entire face beaming with delight. Vincent was quite surprised: he hadn't expected to be so successful at comforting her.

But, in truth, he done so much more to Aeris. He didn't know that when he had embraced her, he had embraced her fears and sadness as well.

And as long as he remained by her side, that burden did not feel so heavy on her heart anymore.

"Vincent," Aeris smiled kindly, "I..I owe you more than my life..after all that happened today. Thank you"

He gazed directly into her face, but before he could open his mouth, Tifa poked her head through the door.

"Hey, you two!" she cried playfully, "Better come 'n get your share! Before Cloud gobbles it all up!"

"Ha ha!" shouted Cloud from the hallway, "Very funny!"

"Alright, alright! I'm coming," laughed Aeris, skipping out of the living room.

"You too, Mr. Valentine!" demanded Tifa. She yanked him to his feet, "I cooked this stuff for YOU, and you're gonna eat it!"

So with that final order, Tifa dragged the unresisting Vincent out of the room, barely giving him time to close the top cover of his metallic arm.

-End of Chp.10

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.11

The darkness suffocated Vincent's entire body, yet he didn't really care. He only felt slightly annoyed because he couldn't see anything.

"Strange, isn't it?" chirped a soft voice near him.

"What is?" he wondered.

"How you could go on living with that young face, even though it should have withered away years ago."

"Yes..it should have," he agreed.

There was an eerie silence that seemed to stretch on forever.

"But still more strange," commented another voice suddenly, "that you could live among normal people as though you yourself were normal."

"I never claimed to be normal." "

Why not?"

He scoffed at the stupid question. "Because I'm a monster," he answered simply.

"A monster!" A monster!" chimed several voices out of nowhere, "You are a monster!"

So many cruel voices burst into chaos: they cackled, wailed, jeered, and screamed into ears all at once. His head throbbed painfully as the deranged voices squeezed into his mind, each demanding his full attention.

"A MONSTER!" they shrieked as they strangled him, "A MONSTER! A MONSTER!"

Vincent suddenly woke up from his nightmare. Much to his amazement, he found himself seated by a window in some crowded train. He stared blankly all around himself, scrutinizing every detail his eyes stumbled across. He heard two young women gossiping behind him; several passengers lingered near the iron doors, murmuring softly amongst themselves. There was a drunkard snoring loudly two seats ahead of Vincent, and a little urchin stealthily picking that man's pocket.

Yet, try as hard as he may, Vincent could not remember how or why he had boarded this train. Indeed, his whole mind felt so muddled, he simply fell back against his seat in exhaustion. He did not care anymore.

"I say, Sir," asked a kind voice, "Are you alright?"

Vincent opened his eyes to find an old man comfortably seated in front of him. The man appeared to be very concerned.

"You look very tired," smiled the old gentleman, "Hard day at work?"

Vincent's memory slowly floated back to him: he remembered feeling very sick that morning, but had insisted on going to work at the gun shop anyway. The day had drifted away like any other, and now he was returning home on the usual train.

I must have dozed off without even realizing it, Vincent thought tiredly.

"I myself had a most exhausting day," continued the good-natured old man, "I had to baby-sit my grand-daughter at my son's house. They live way over in Sector 6."

Vincent nodded his head thoughtfully.

"Ah! Kids," chuckled the man, tapping his cane knowledgeably, "What a handful they are, especially for us old folk."

Vincent studied every feature of the old man: from his wrinkled face to his trembling hands. He noted the tufts of grey hair that clung to the man's head. He traced his hunched up figure with his weary eyes until he reached his spotty, wrinkled forehead.

He must be very old, mused Vincent.

"But I must declare, young man," prattled on the friendly gentleman, "I never saw such.."

Vincent did not hear the rest of the complaint. The words "young man" set his mind adrift in spite of himself. He stared absent-mindedly at the old man's moving mouth, his brain revolving those two strange words over and over again; they disgusted his heart beyond endurance.

Maybe this is how I *should* have been, Vincent wondered bitterly: baby-sit my grand-daughter on some lazy afternoon; walk around with a cane in my hands; wake up every morning to look at my wrinkled, old face in the mirror..

But no...instead, I'm a "young man"...

"You're so lucky, Vincent," whispered a mocking voice into his ears, "nobody can see what's really behind that mask you wear.."

Vincent gave a start on hearing that familiar voice. He sat upright, looking all around himself to find the speaker. The train had emptied significantly during his reverie, but otherwise, nothing else had changed. He had imagined the voice.

"..that's what I said," concluded the old man, startling Vincent with his booming voice, "What do you think of that?"

"Uh..yes..," he agreed, even though he hadn't listened at all.

"Ha ha!" laughed the old man delightedly, "Not many young people agree with me on that point."

The man chattered away about some miscellaneous topic. Vincent leaned his head against the foggy window as he stared vacantly at the talkative companion. He could not understand any of his words, nor did he care to.

"Well, here's my stop," smiled the kind-hearted gentleman, "Good-bye, son."

The train screeched to a halt. Its large doors lazily withdrew to release the passengers trapped within. Vincent helped the shaking old man to his feet, and handed him his inseparable cane. The gentleman thanked him warmly, declaring that "the young still respected the old", then tottered away with a smile.

Vincent sunk against his seat again when the train finally resumed its journey. Silence dominated the entire place, except for the rude snores of the drunkard at the end of the cart.

Vincent mechanically rubbed the misty window next to him, and stared gloomily through the glass. The sun had disappeared long ago, yet some of its golden rays still lingered over the grey city, very reluctant to abandon it.

Black, sooty buildings and banal offices rolled past Vincent's hollow eyes, interrupted occasionally by a colourful billboard or some gaudy poster. So many bright lights flashed across his pale face, crying for his attention.

However, he merely passed them by in an almost trance-like state. Though he tried to busy himself with any useless subject, his mind always returned to the same melancholy thoughts.

I wonder, Vincent asked himself, I wonder if that old man..is what I should've been like..

But no voice answered him that time.

At around 6 o'clock in the evening, Vincent staggered into his apartment, then slammed the door behind him. As he tossed his burdensome overcoat on a hanger, he felt his whole face and eyes blaze furiously with fever. Vincent slumped against the door, rubbing his forehead to relieve a throbbing headache. His breath quickened; his head swam around.

Damn it, he growled, am I that sick?!

"Vincent?" called a gentle voice near him.

He gave a violent start when Aeris touched his arm, as if caught in the middle of a crime. The girl instantly yanked her hand away, and stared oddly into his pallid face, wondering what troubled him.

"Are you okay?" she asked softly. Her eyes tensed with concern.

"Yes," mumbled Vincent, "Yes..I'm fine."

And to prove it, he straightened himself in front of her. Small droplets of sweat trickled down his face, but he contemptuously wiped them away. His eyes strained every nerve to avoid her anxious look. Indeed, Vincent's entire countenance betrayed such agitation and annoyance, Aeris hesitated to speak a word.

"Yo, Vincent!" greeted another friendly voice. It was Cloud, who had been visiting Aeris that particular afternoon. Tifa, unfortunately, could not come with him; she had to work at the restaurant.

"Hello, Cloud," muttered Vincent under his breath.

"Aeris was getting pretty worried about you," laughed Cloud with a pat on his friend's shoulder, "but I told her not to freak out if you're late a bit. Trains can be a bit sluggish, especially around rush-hour."

It took Vincent all his strength, patience, and self-control to force out a "yes" instead of a horrible oath. Luckily, Cloud did not notice his friend's discomfort, but perceived that he was withdrawn more than usual.

"Say, Vincent, are you alright?" he inquired; he felt very uneasy with the man's moroseness.

"Yes."

"Well, it's just that you look kinda pale."

"Are you making fun of me, Cloud?" asked Vincent, glaring suspiciously at him.

"Huh? Oh no!" he cried, ".I..I didn't mean it like that! I meant to say you look *paler* than usual."

Vincent frowned, not at all amused. Cloud scratched the back of his head in genuine embarrassment; he immediately realized that his friend was "in another one of his weird mood swings", so decided to retreat.

"Right, it's getting late," he smiled good-humouredly at Aeris, who had been lingering behind him, "I'd better get going."

Vincent mumbled something like a farewell, then brushed past the two friends in a most abrupt manner.

"Take care, Aeris," Cloud warned when Vincent had disappeared into the kitchen, "He's in a really rotten mood. He must've had a bad day."

Aeris nodded her head feebly. An extremely ominous feeling crept up her heart.

"We ordered a pizza, Vincent!" shouted Cloud as he grabbed his heavy coat, "It's in the over. We saved you three slices! Hope you like pepperoni!"

No reply came, nor did Cloud expect any.

He wrapped the coat around himself hurriedly. Aeris handed him his scarf, reminding him not to forget it like last time.

"Oh yeah. Thanks," he laughed, "Well, see ya later. G'night."

"Good night," she smiled in return. Aeris shut the door gently after Cloud left.

An unnatural, deathly silence slithered through the apartment the instant the door closed. Aeris stood nervously in the dim hallway, not daring to disturb the stillness. But her concern for Vincent swelled to such an unbearable pitch, she immediately tottered down the hallway to find him.

She found him seated in the kitchen. He had both elbows firmly rooted to the table top while his ashen face sought refuge in his hand and claw. He had torn off his red bandanna, so his long, jet black hair fell all around his head in thick strands.

Vincent sat perfectly still; he seemed almost oblivious to his surroundings. Aeris paused by the door, wondering should she interrupt him or leave him in peace.

Vincent slowly lifted his head to glance at the anxious girl, but soon plunged back into his own gloomy thoughts.

An icy silence followed.

"Aeris?" he called in a hoarse whisper. He did not look at her.

"Wh..what is it?" Aeris answered gently.

"I'm very tired. I'm going to take a nap in the living room."

Vincent mechanically stood up. He pushed his lustrous hair with a flick of his hand, then staggered out of the kitchen. Aeris instantly made room for him to pass.

"V..Vincent?" she asked timidly.

He stopped and turned his careworn face to her.

"Don't sleep on the couch," she pleaded in a low voice, "please, sleep on the bed."

"Aeris, I can't do that," he protested weakly, "That's where you sleep."

"No, no, it's okay! Really," she insisted, "You take your nap on the bed. It's only for a short time, right?"

After further protests and entreaties, Vincent finally accepted the kind offer. Therefore, without another word, he dragged his dead feet into the bedroom, then gently closed the door behind him.

Aeris' eyes followed him all the way until he had shut himself inside. She wandered back to the kitchen, trying to gather all her scattered thoughts. A red cloth on the table immediately grabbed her attention: it was Vincent's bandanna. Picking it up, Aeris examined it with a mixture of curiosity and concern. A week had already passed since that harrowing fight with Davoren. Aeris woke up every morning, anticipating a sudden attack any minute. But the days calmly rolled by, and still no sign of the gunman.

Although the girl constantly worried herself about Davoren, Vincent had resumed his daily routine with such indifference, she wondered whether he had completely forgotten Davoren. He either read a book, repaired some gun, or did both at the same time.

He was morose, as always, but sometimes invited the timid Aeris to sit by him and tell him about her afternoon with her friends. Aeris knew for a fact he did not care a fig about those trivial matters. Nevertheless, he made an effort to listen, which greatly pleased her heart. She guessed he was just trying to make her more easy around his presence.

Yet during the last three days, she had noticed alarming changes in Vincent: he scarcely ate at all; his disturbed eyes burned feverishly; he seemed to detect some invisible force about the room. He grew strangely distant and aloof, even more than before.

"Oh, he's just being himself, Aeris," Tifa had assured the girl.

"Yeah, Vincent can get pretty crabby at times," Cloud had agreed, "Just stay outta his way."

But they couldn't see, like she could, the turmoil raging in his mind. And every day, every hour, it grew more intense.

-End of Chp. 11

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chapter 12

Vincent, finally alone in the bedroom, flung himself on the soft bed. fatigue had completely overpowered him; he did not even bother removing his muddy boots off his feet.

As he gradually sunk into unconsciousness, he set his mind sailing away in a chaotic, wild sea of thoughts. At times, he found himself arguing fiercely about some abstract idea; other times, he thought of nothing at all.

Time dragged on. Vincent shifted to his side, burying his sickly face into the pillow. Though he felt incredibly suffocated and hot, his whole body never stopped shivering. His restless mind drifted in all directions until it finally settled on the image of the old gentleman on the train. Vincent lingered over that memory with strange, almost absurd, fascination.

"That man was so old!" he whispered to himself in wonder, "his face looked like a crumpled piece of paper."

Whether he expected some response, or simply had grown tired of the dreary silence, Vincent gently peeked out of his pillow. Sweat broke out all over his body as bouts of violent shivering seized him.

His ears discerned an unnatural buzz behind the door, as if several people were whispering and humming cautiously. His bloodshot eyes darted all over the dark room, then fixed themselves rigorously on the door.

"He couldn't even stand up without his cane," Vincent continued archly, "And he trembled so much..poor man.."

The faint murmurings behind the door grew louder, but still, Vincent could not distinguish one voice. He buried his face into the pillow again, greatly agitated.

"I wonder..," he muttered, "..I wonder if that's how I should look like..."

He suddenly rolled onto his back, and stared wild-eyed at the black ceiling.

"No..," he answered with a cold grin, "No..I should have black wings sprouting out of my back..yes..and fangs dripping with blood too.."

"A monster! A monster!" squealed the disorderly voices behind the door, "Oh! A monster!"

"A monster..yes..," Vincent agreed, smiling more coldly, "..yes..nothing but a monster in human form..just like Davoren said.."

The tumultuous voices gabbled away behind the door. Vincent's chest heaved up and down in sharp pain; he could feel his blood burbling inside. The rowdy sounds not only drowned his ears, they seemed to strangle his very life.

"Heh heh..," he chuckled amidst the deranged voices, "Y'know, Davoren saved my life once..strange how I never thought of him until now.."

The voices cackled and cawed rudely: some even screamed through the keyhole. As the heat became unbearable, Vincent finally tore open his stiff collar, but still gazed at the plain ceiling. his breaths grew short.

"But then again," he gasped out, "why is it so strange? I was a monster then..I'm a monster still. What difference would it make if I hide behind this mask?"

The voices suddenly fell back to a hushed, faint murmur.

"So what if..it's just..an..illusion..?"

His eyelids steadily grew heavy; his head sunk deeper into the warm pillow. Everything swirled around his weary head in utter chaos, not sure where to go.

"He's so angry," hissed a malicious voice into his ears, "He must finish! He must!"

But Vincent lost conscious before the voice finished.

Though Vincent was semi-aware of his surroundings as he lay on the bed, he could not induce any of his muscles to move an inch.

He heard someone cautiously slip into the room. He knew that stranger was peering over him, but his eyes stubbornly refused to open. After a minute, Vincent felt somebody gently pulling off his heavy boots. The same person pulled the blankets from underneath him with great care, then covered him.

Whoever that was soon left, shutting the door softly. Vincent was alone again.

But his interest in his surroundings gradually faded. He floated as gently as a feather through some grim dream world, fluttering with puff of wind. He passed so many forgotten memories, details, and faces; but whenever he reached for them, they instantly vanished into this air.

"Do you remember what happened in the apple orchard?" laughed a sweet voice out of the darkness.

"Yes," Vincent replied monotonously, "I killed Davoren there.."

"And do you remember what happened in the library?" "

Yes..I was shot there...by the professor.."

He felt two soft hands caress his cheeks tenderly. They were exceedingly cold.

"Ah," whispered the gentle voice, " but he preserved your life, didn't he?"

Vincent let out a short, wooden laugh.

"I never had a 'life'," Vincent corrected, "I was just a cold-hearted killing-machine, made of flesh instead of steel."

The soothing hands withdrew from his bloodless cheeks.

"He never preserved my 'life'," Vincent raved on, "He only preserved my body.."

There was an eerie silence.

"And sometimes..," Vincent sighed bitterly, "..sometimes I wish he hadn't.."

"Yes! Yes!" shrieked another voice, mad with excitement, "Yes! Your life bears no significance! Even you confess it!!"

The insane voice swirled around Vincent, screamed shrilly into his ears, "it's your body!! Your body was preserved for a purpose!!"

"Was it?" Vincent commented calmly, somewhat bored with the wild voice.

"It's for an experiment," ranted the impatient voice, "An experiment where all the little pieces fuse together!"

"What 'experiment'?! " asked Vincent in alarm.

An invisible hand suddenly cut him short. It gripped his throat and squeezed his windpipe with all its might. Another hand dug its sharp claw deep into his lungs, tearing it to shreds.

Vincent fought in vain for his life. Despite his vigorous struggle to break free, the iron grip only tightened and tightened until he could breath no more.

Vincent suddenly woke up from the nightmare.

As he sat up in bed, he could hear someone roaring with laughter from behind the bedroom door. He stared deliriously at the door, expecting the person to storm into his room. But the voice only doubled its hysterical laughter, and began blubbing to a group of dissentient voices.

Vincent did not know how long he listened to the bustling voices. He sat perfectly still, allowing his disheveled hair to tumble around his haggard face. His crimson eyes shone brilliantly; sweat streamed down to soak his neck and shirt.

"Hurry! Oh hurry!" shrieked a voice over all the commotion, "The Professor must finish his experiment! He's done yet!!"

Vincent's eyes wandered all over the dark room, examining every obscure, black corner. He wanted to see this voice. His whole body shook with intense disgust.

"He cannot finish!" gabbled the angry voice, "He wants you for the experiment...and that girl!! HE MUST HAVE HER!! HE MUST!!"

Vincent thought he heard Aeris sobbing pitifully amidst all the yammering voices. she continuously begged someone to stop hurting her, but the booming laughter soon drowned her cries.

"Poor little girl..," Vincent muttered as the voices babbled away, "He must be going mad about her..just itching to stuff needles into her body..and carve her to bits.."

"Precious little darling..," hissed the voice near Vincent's ears, "He must..he WILL have her.."

A cold, most grotesque smile distorted Vincent's lips.

"..and she's such a sweet, innocent dove..,"he whispered, beside himself with delirium, "..so much like Lucrecia.."

"Oh, she cannot hide from him!" thundered the malicious voice. It seemed to grope around the darkness, stumble over objects, even squirm under the bed, just to find the girl.

Vincent fell back onto his pillow, and gazed dreamily at the ceiling. He placed one hand on his trembling chest as the voice rambled on. It amused him greatly to hear this voice splutter curses or mutter to itself in anger.

"He can find her no matter where she hides!" the voice snarled, agitated with its dismal failure.

"I'm sure he can," agreed Vincent weakly, "He simply wallows in her fear, doesn't he? If she trembles, he laughs; and if she runs, he follows."

Vincent remained on his back, but slowly turned his head to look at the edge of the bed. Despite his painful headache and throbbing chest, he smiled insolently, almost defiantly, at the darkness. He seemed to detect some invisible creature peeking over the bed.

"She reminds me of myself," he said, "..when *you* changed my body so many years ago.."

There was an awkward silence for a few minutes, or maybe several hours; Vincent had simply lost track of time.

"Heh heh," sniggered the voice finally, "Is that way you try so hard to protect her from me?"

"Yes..," replied Vincent, his smile fading away, "but there's another reason why I want to shield her away from you..a reason even I wouldn't admit to myself until now.."

The voice seemed to linger around the bed, awaiting his mysterious "reason" with certain impatience.

"It's because I felt that whenever I protected that girl..I was somehow protecting Lucrecia too.."

The voice let out an impudent guffaw, then scoffed mockingly at the madman. Nevertheless, it sounded highly amused.

"Yes, I'm cursed, Professor," Vincent raved bitterly, "Cursed with this odious mask I wear, but even more cursed with her..her and her unbearable reproaches!!"

Vincent squeezed his eyes shut, then clutched his hair in agony; the headache was boring straight through his skull. He thought he heard the voice chuckle quietly at his suffering.

"I hoped that if..," Vincent forced out, "..if I protected someone else as helpless as Lucrecia was.. maybe then, she'd forgive me for abandoning her.."

The voice could no longer restrain itself; it burst out into a coarse, insulting laugh. The other discordant voices readily joined in.

Vincent tiredly threw one arm over his eyes. The cruel voices only intensified his headache with their senseless screaming. They pierced his head, trampled all over his battered brain, then stormed away, only to return again. His chest writhed in sharp pain; he could feel it gurgling with hot blood.

"What a sentimental fool you are!" exclaimed the voice contemptuously, "You think you can be forgiven! You left her to suffer alone, and now you grovel, like the pathetic wretch you are, and cry for her forgiveness?!"

Vincent kept his arm over his face. He did not flinch a muscle. All the other voices were silent too, afraid to interrupt their leader.

"Answer me!" demanded the loud voice, "Do you think you DESERVE to be forgiven?!"

Vincent deliberately removed his arm, and fixed his ruby-red eyes on the ceiling.

"No," he replied composedly, "No matter what sufferings or pains I take, I know it cannot satisfy her...nor could it hope to erase the agony she bore..I don't deserve her forgiveness.."

Vincent sat up in bed again, letting all the little voices whiz around his numb head. His corroded lungs howled in pain, as though they might explode any moment. He thought he heard Aeris wailing behind the door again. Absolute insanity glared at him from the foot of the bed, just waiting for the right moment to attack.

"You could not protect her from me, Sir!" bellowed the voice hoarsely, "You can not protect this girl from me either! She's beyond your feeble reach!!"

Vincent cast his eyes down in utter dejection. The voices sang jeeringly in his ears.

"Why look at your hands," commanded the booming voice, "Look! What do you see?"

He mechanically looked into the palm of his hand and claw. They were smeared with a dark red colour.

"..blood..," Vincent whispered stoically, "..I see blood.."

"Whose blood?"

"..mine..and hers..and Davoren's..and everyone else I've killed.."

All the voices instantly screamed triumphantly, then dispersed to a wild murmur around him.

"Oh yes! You're good at murdering, Vincent!!" praised the voice, "It comes so naturally to you! A monster AND a murderer!!"

Vincent stared in wonder at his bloody hands, then covered his face again. He felt very cold all of a sudden.

"It's your fault Lucrecia is dead!!" shouted several voices at once, "YOURS AND YOUR ALONE!"

"I know..I know..," he cried, extremely agitated, "that's what I've been telling myself for the last thirty-one years.."

"And you think you can protect that little girl?" jeered all the voices in a unanimous shout, "You, a monster, a murderer, and a hypocrite?! You, a thousand sins to deform you?! YOU protect her from me?!!"

All the voices swarmed around Vincent's head, screaming "monster! monster!" into his numb ears. He clutched his aching head as they forcefully squeezed themselves into his brain. He heard someone laughing hysterically; Aeris still sobbed behind the door; another babbled about going somewhere. Each voice tried its best to drown the other, none took pity on him.

They drilled into his head until Vincent felt his throat suddenly gargle up some hot liquid: it was his own blood.

With his hand over his mouth, he bolted out of the bedroom, and stormed into the bathroom across the hall. Kicking the toilet seat up, he bent over it, just as the rotten blood exploded out of his mouth.

The dark, fuming liquid splashed indiscriminately all over the toilet, even dripped onto the floor. Vincent struggled vainly for air; two invisible claws seemed to mangle his lungs to force all the life out.

He began to choke and hack violently on his own blood. His corroded lungs screamed for air, causing his entire body to writhe around the hapless toilet.

Some maddening force tried to overpower his senses. Though Vincent fought wildly against it, his feeble strength drained away with his blood. Huge, purple wings ripped through his shaking back and spread clumsily over the bathroom. His hands, already half-deformed, twitched horribly as the skin darkened into a sickening, coarse purple colour. He could feel his whole face contort into a hideous shape.

He was warping into the hateful Chaos Form against his own will. The evil monster growled for its freedom, and seemed on the brink of eruption.

"NO! NO! NO!!" screamed Vincent, squirming madly on the floor. He kicked his legs; stifled his breath; chewed his lower lip; anything to stop it! He would NOT transform into the creature!!

He hurled all his strength, force, and determination against the beast to repress it. He somehow managed to withdraw the grotesque wings into his back. His skin returned to its normal pale colour. The monster reluctantly retreated back into the darkness, and Vincent triumphed.

When the attack had finally ceased, Vincent found himself on the bathroom floor, gasping loudly for air. His whole body burned with fever.

Vincent stared all around the bathroom, completely dumbfounded: the toilet next to him dripped in his rotten, black blood. Much to his amazement, he noticed himself sitting in a pool of hot blood. His shirt was drenched in sweat and blood as well.

The entire bathroom reeked of sickness and vomit. He still could not understand any of what had passed. After a silent moment, he scuffled up to his feet, then fell against the sink, almost slipping in the sticky blood.

He gawked blankly at his image in the mirror above the sink. Large, red blots of blood smeared his pallid cheeks. His crimson eyes shone with insane delirium. His hair, tangled and disheveled beyond hope, hung in thick clusters all around his face.

He looked like a perfect madman.

Disgusted with his whole sickly appearance, especially his bloody mouth, Vincent gargled up the blood in his throat, then spat it out contemptuously.

He mechanically turned open the faucet. The cold, soothing water flowed through his trembling fingers as he tried to cup his hand. Vincent scrubbed his mouth once or twice, but stopped short on noticing something else in the mirror: he finally noticed Aeris standing behind him, completely scared out of her wits.

He did not feel guilty, troubled, or even angry. He stared calmly at her image in the mirror, then turned around to face the horrified girl. Leaning himself against the sink in an unnaturally composed manner, Vincent fixed his burning eyes on her. He said nothing.

Aeris fidgeted by the doorway, too afraid to enter yet too alarmed to leave. Her hair looked terribly distorted, her face pale and distressed. She had obviously been sleeping.

Perhaps she saw him vomit his blood all over the toilet; or caught him convulsing on the cold floor. Maybe she even saw him fight that loathsome transformation. Vincent's mouth twisted into a wry smile: he did not care what she had seen.

"Ah, Aeris," he greeted in a terribly cracked, hoarse whisper. Aeris gave a violent start on hearing her name.

"Heh heh..don't be frightened," he chuckled, "It's only blood." He touched his cold face in wonder, then added archly, "Blood suits my face better, don't you think?"

Though she could not tear her anxious eyes away from him, she dared not answer the madman. His eyes sparkled with alarming insanity, and his bloody face only added to their brilliance.

Vincent suddenly took a step forward, but froze when he noticed the girl recoil in fear. He stood in the middle of the bathroom, still gazing at her. His eyes slowly softened.

"Poor little girl..," he muttered compassionately, "Why were you crying behind the door? Were you afraid I'd be angry if you came in?"

Aeris blinked in confusion at him. She did not understand his meaning.

"I..I wasn't crying behind the door, Vincent," she stammered in a low voice, " You've been having a nightmare..."

"You were crying..," he repeated to himself, taking no more notice of her, "I must have frightened you..you're always afraid of me..."

Aeris was silent. Vincent turned his head in many directions while constantly rubbing his forehead. He seemed greatly perplexed with his chaotic ideas.

"You're probably more afraid of me than Hojo..," he raved on good-humouredly, "..not..not that I mind, really...you should be afraid of me.."

He staggered out of the bathroom, scarcely seeing anything. His body shivered with fever and delirium. Aeris immediately made way for him to pass, not having enough courage to interrupt him.

"Ha ha!" Vincent laughed as he dragged himself back to the bedroom, "..so much like her..she was always afraid of me too...so afraid of the monster..and blood..red blood..yes..."

His mind floundered in a strange sea of mayhem. He could not remember where he was, or why his body felt so heavy. The air suffocated him. He could hear his heart thumping in his aching chest.

Vincent stumbled over something, and seemed to be falling..falling...falling...

Then suddenly, everything went black.

-End of Chp.12

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.13

The telephone rang into Tifa's ears, dispersing all sweet sleep from her eyes.

She mechanically pulled the blankets over her face in hopes the ringing may cease. Cloud snored soundly by her side, with one leg dangling outside the bed. He scratched his nose once at the rude disturbance, then shifted lazily to his side.

The ringing persisted.

"Tifa," he mumbled, "Answer that, will ya..?"

Tifa rolled onto her back, grumbling under her breath about the laziness of the male gender (and not so politely, either). As she reached for the troublesome phone, she forced herself to sit up. It took her a great deal of strength just to keep her eyes open.

"Hello...?" she yawned, "...Aeris?!"

Tifa's face instantly grew alarmed. She tore off the warm blankets, and sprang out of bed.

"Whoa! Whoa! Slow down!" she cried with increasing anxiety, "What's wrong with Vincent??"

Cloud had fallen back to sleep, only half listening. But Tifa shook his shoulder so forcefully, he woke up with a sharp snort. Judging from her tense voice and shining eyes, Cloud immediately guessed something bad had happened. He sat up.

"Oh, my God!!" Tifa exclaimed, "Okay! Okay! Um..don't panic!"

She fidgeted anxiously, shushing Cloud whenever he tried to ask a question. She pressed her forehead to gather all her fluttering thoughts.

"Now, Aeris! Aeris!" Tifa cried as she pushed back her messy hair, "Just calm down! Can he breathe??...okay... all right...yeah, I'll be there in fifteen minutes!"

She slammed the phone shut, looked around, then flew to the closet at once. Cloud stared blankly at her fumble for her clothes, completely in a panic. He still could not understand any of the commotion.

"What's the matter? What's going on?" he asked apprehensively. He hopped out of the bed and walked over to her.

"Vincent's really sick," Tifa answered as she turned to face him. Her eyes showed great alarm. She looked very pale.

"Aeris rang us at two a.m in the morning to tell us that?"

Tifa frowned at his slightly mocking tone, but replied with restraint, "Aeris says she heard him raving all night long..and then he threw up..blood in the bathroom. He's unconscious now."

Cloud stared blankly at her face, not sure whether he had heard her correctly. Tifa did not wait for him to recover. She grabbed any pair of jeans from the closet, a sweater, and rushed out of the room to change.

Cloud scratched the back of his head in confusion, then cried after her, "But I was with him just yesterday! He didn't look THAT sick to me! Oh sure, he looked a tad paler than usual, but.."

"I think he has a fever," she shouted as a reply.

"Hell of a fever," he mumbled to himself, then answered determinately, "Hang on! I'm coming too"

The black night shrouded all of Midgar in the darkness, grudging it any form of light. It held the city in the palm of its hand, and stared sternly down at it. The hapless city, not wishing to disobey, had immediately succumbed to night's decree: the streets were deserted; every sound hushed; and all the lights effectively killed.

Silence crept through every alley, peeked through every window in search of anyone brave enough to defy its authority. None dared, except for a sudden roar zooming through the night.

Cloud, with Tifa perched behind him on the motorbike, rudely ignored the stillness. Instead, he blasted through the dark streets at full throttle.

He occasionally ran over the sidewalk to take a short-cut, or skidded around a curb so sharply, Tifa nearly lost her balance. He had great difficulty seeing, even with the headlight turned on, but he drove on regardless. They passed so many endless streets and alleyways, Tifa thought they'd never make it. Her heart grew unbearably sick with worry. Hundreds of anxious questions streamed into her head at once. She just wanted to reach the apartment...

The motorbike suddenly skidded to a halt. When Tifa realized they had reached the apartment buildings, she sprang off the motorbike and rushed inside without even waiting for Cloud. He propped up the heavy vehicle, then followed her as fast as his feet could carry him.

Tifa flew up the stairs, skipping over several steps at a time. Her heart pounded loudly in her ears. The staircase seemed to stretch on forever no matter how fast she ran. Much to her relief, she finally reached the landing.

She raced down the familiar corridor until she stopped at Vincent's door. But before she could knock, the door suddenly swung open and Aeris emerged.

Tifa stared mutely at the petrified girl: her messy hair was carelessly heaped into a tight bun, with several curly strands dangling about her head. Aeris' pale face expressed unmistakable fear, if not utter horror. Her body trembled constantly, but her green, bright eyes shone with strange composure. She could not speak a word.

"Aeris, sweetheart, it's okay," Tifa whispered, gripping the girl's shoulders, "Now, where is he?"

Cloud had reached the two girls by this time, but stood hesitantly a few steps away; he did not want to interrupt them.

Aeris took Tifa's hand and pulled her into the apartment, beckoning for Cloud to enter as well. She silently pointed her shaking finger at something in the dark hallway. It was Vincent's body.

He lay outstretched on his stomach, his face buried in the ground. One hand rested in front of his head, but his magnificent black hair greedily covered it. He appeared to be dead.

"Aw, crap!!" exclaimed Cloud in alarm. He immediately bolted towards the unconscious man. Tifa rushed to him too, leaving Aeris to linger by the doorway. Though the girl fully understood what had happened, she could not form one single thought in her stunned mind.

"Vincent!! Hey! Vincent!!" Tifa called, rolling him onto his back. His sickly, bloody face shocked her at once. Cloud crouched by the man, and stared intently at him. Vincent did not wince a muscle.

"Damn, he's out cold," Cloud muttered to her. He pressed his hand against the man's forehead, the added, "Geez, Tifa! He's burning up!"

Tifa looked all around herself in despair. Aeris clasped both hands over her chest to control her wild emotions.

"Right! Right!" Tifa decided nervously, "Let's just get him back to bed."

The order was immediately carried out. Cloud, with certain difficulty, managed to drag Vincent all the way back to the bedroom while Tifa raced ahead of them. She tore off the blankets, begging Cloud to be careful. Cloud gently placed the lifeless man on the bed; at the same time, he patted Vincent's cheeks and called his name several times. Vincent did not respond.

Tifa sat on the bed as she tried to loosen his collar. Blood soon smeared her fumbling fingertips. Nevertheless, she stubbornly persisted to unbutton the bloody shirt.

"Cloud, get me a clean shirt. Quick!" she ordered when she had taken off the shirt.

Cloud skipped over to the closet in a flash. He savagely rummaged through the neat stacks of clothes, swearing whenever he tossed some article on the floor.

"Here!" he cried. Cloud flung a black, sleeveless shirt to Tifa. No sooner had she caught it than she began to dress the unconscious man. Cloud helped too: leaning Vincent against his strong shoulder, he pulled the shirt over his head with the greatest care.

"Careful! His claw!" Tifa warned.

"Yeah, yeah, I got it," he answered, "Okay...there."

Tifa leaned the man back against the pillow again when the task was completed. They both stared at the man's face in silence, hoping he may somehow wake up. He did not.

Tifa gently flicked a stray hair strand out of his face. Her heart sunk in anguish; she had never seen Vincent look so pitiful.

"We need to wash his face," she suggested after a pause, "That's the best way to beat the fever"

Cloud nodded his head in agreement. So without another word, he darted out of the bedroom to fetch some water. Meanwhile, Tifa stroked Vincent's burning forehead, even called his name once or twice. Nothing. His eyes seemed to be sealed forever.

Hearing a faint scuffle near by, Tifa turned her head to the source. She wasn't surprised to find Aeris lingering at the foot of the bed, with her anxious eyes riveted on Vincent's ghastly face. Her hands trembled though they gripped the end of the bed firmly. She tried to say something.

"Tifa..," she whispered finally, "Is he..is he going to die?"

Tifa fidgeted uncomfortably at the blunt question.

"Of course not, Aeris," she replied, trying to appear calm, "Vincent's a strong man. He'll be back on his feet soon enough."

However, Aeris merely shook her head in disbelief.

"I know he's very ill, Tifa," she cried angrily, "I heard him raving all night long, like he was talking to someone he knew, but I..I was too scared to go near him."

Aeris buried her face in both hands, obviously much agitated with her feebleness. She fought vigorously to restrain her tears. Tifa touched the girl's shoulder very gently.

She did not interrupt Aeris as she recounted the whole episode amidst stifled sobs and broken sentences. She described every detail, omitting nothing. Tifa's eyes tensed in alarm when Aeris mentioned Vincent's transformation, and all his strange questions before he lost conscious.

Cloud suddenly walked in with a basin of water, but stopped short on seeing the two girls together. he made some meaningful signal to Tifa, who immediately nodded her head.

Tifa took the basin from Cloud, and turned to Aeris.

"Aeris," she smiled kindly, "would you please wash Vincent's face? I'll be back in a minute."

Without another word, Tifa handed the basin over to Aeris. After one solemn nod of the head, the girl began her task, only too glad busy herself. Tifa glanced at her for a minute, then slipped out of the bedroom quietly. Cloud, who had retreated again into the hallway, shut the bedroom door behind Tifa.

Both stood in the dark hallway, completely engrossed in silence. Cloud seemed particularly pale, but his eyes gleamed excitedly. He obviously had some important news.

"Tifa," he began finally, "the whole bathroom's dripping in Vincent's blood. He must've spewed out at least a liter of blood."

Tifa was silent.

"He's gonna die unless we get him to a hospital," Cloud continued, "it's a miracle he's still alive at all."

"He's too weak for us to move him," Tifa protested. Her voice sounded very dry.

"Then we'll call an ambulance. Anything! He needs a doctor!"

Much to his astonishment, Tifa shook her head in disagreement.

"If he needed a doctor, he would've went to one by himself," she stated composedly.

Cloud blinked at her in surprise, then scowled, "Tifa, go look at the toilet he puked in, then tell me if still doesn't need a doctor!"

"Yes, yes..but I..think I know why he has avoided going all this time."

He crossed his arms sullenly, waiting for an explanation to the mystery.

"You know he's... 'different' from other people," she began after a brief pause, "What would happen if they become too interested in him? Or maybe even make a study-case out of him? Cloud, he'd hate that!"

Cloud made no reply.

"And there's something else," Tifa muttered cautiously, "I think Vincent's having some kind of mental breakdown. He may..lose control, and harm himself, not to mention other people."

Both remained silent for a moment until Cloud suddenly broke away, rubbing his forehead in annoyance. Tifa had won the argument.

"All right," he sighed, "You're the nurse here."

Tifa smiled lovingly at him, then said, "Listen. I need to go to the pharmacy. Maybe they have something for Vincent's fever."

"Wha?! No way!!" Cloud exclaimed in alarm, "I won't have you wandering around Midgar THIS late!! It's too dangerous! I'll go!"

Tifa gave him her "don't-act-macho-with-me-buster" look, but did not reply. Nevertheless, Cloud could see she *would* have it her way.

"Well, you have to stay here with Aeris," he explained, feeling very uncomfortable, "I don't think it's a good idea to leave her alone..with Vincent unconscious.."

Tifa looked at him fidget nervously and try to argue his point more effectively. Suddenly, a thought occurred to her.

"Cloud," she asked slyly, "are you jealous of Vincent?"

"What?!" he cried indignantly, "Now why would I be jealous of HIM?!!"

"Oh..maybe because Aeris seems to care a *great* deal about him.."

His cheeks flushed with outrage, much to Tifa's amusement.

"Fah! Women!" Cloud spluttered without restraint, "Think you know everything there is to know! Of course it's only natural she'd care for him so much."

Tifa only raised one eyebrow suspiciously.

"Well, he has been taking care of her for about a month now," Cloud scoffed at her impertinent look, "And I suppose he likes her too..in his own weird way. but I don't think it's like *that*...Vincent's too much on the 'doom and gloom' side.."

"Then again, Cloud," she murmured to herself, "you tend to be a bit blind at times.."

Luckily, Cloud did not hear the comment, but insisted Tifa at least let him accompany her. Too fatigued to argue any further, she finally consented.

At that moment, Aeris stepped out of the bedroom, flicking the lights off as she emerged. She left the door slightly ajar.

"I..I cleaned his face," she muttered softly.

Aeris, in fact, held the basin and towel between her hands. The towel floated pitifully in the red, murky water, with patches of blood staining it.

"We're going to get some medicine for Vincent's fever," Cloud answered in a low voice, "We'll only be gone for half an hour."

Aeris nodded her head.

"You take care of him, okay?" added Tifa, "Keep on soaking his forehead until we come back."

So, without further argument, Tifa and Cloud hastily prepared to leave. Aeris saw them to the door, waving feebly and trying to appear comforted.

Tifa, with a kind pat on her friend's shoulder, promised to back soon. They were gone.

-End of Chp.13

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.14

The instant she shut the door after her friend left, Aeris plunged into a sea of confused thoughts; so many cluttered her mind at once, she could not concentrate on any one in particular. She squeezed her eyes shut. Her head ached terribly.

It was very quiet.

Aeris slowly became aware of the deathly silence that had invaded the whole apartment. It crept around every dark room, lurked in the shadows, just to peer amusedly at her pain. Its burning eyes bore right into her soul; it seemed to call her name several times.

She turned around mechanically, then sprung back in alarm: Vincent was staring straight at her with bloodshot, wild eyes.

He had finally woken up.

Vincent stood half-way through the doorway of the bedroom, so that Aeris could only see half of his face and body. He did not flinch a muscle.

Though Aeris could barely distinguish his tall, black figure in the dark, her hands trembled on meeting his glowing eyes. Even if she had wanted to speak, the pounding in her heart denied her any voice.

She retreated a step or two in spite of herself, then stood rooted to her spot. Her legs began to shake underneath her. Vincent slowly emerged from the bedroom, his two arms folded loosely across his chest. As he staggered towards her, his eyes suddenly flashed with strange, hectic delirium. His face, now clean of all blood, looked more waxen and pale than ever before.

He did not stop until he was exactly one step away from Aeris.

There was an agonizing stillness in the hall. Vincent appeared to find the girl's terror quite amusing; an evil smile gradually twisted his lips.

"I must frighten you a great deal..Aeris..," he began in a hoarse whisper. His blazing eyes narrowed keenly on her face.

"N..no..," she stammered softly, "I'm not afraid of you..."

"Then why are you shaking?"

A sharp, cold sensation licked her spine, causing her to tremble even more violently; but Aeris refused to admit her fear. She cast her eyes to the floor in anguish, and remained silent.

"I bet I frighten you more than your Professor..," Vincent chuckled in a low voice, "..I even bet you wished sometimes you could go back to him rather than stay with me.."

Aeris started at the unexpected accusation, unsure whether she should argue or ignore it. She found her quizzical eyes riveted on his pale face, but he only returned her look with a stoic expression.

For some reason, Vincent suddenly stepped away from her. He retreated dejectedly to the darker end of the hall, avoiding her gaze altogether. He hung his head so low, some of his hair tumbled over his

haggard face, even over his shoulders. The darkness of the hall shrouded him in some invisible cloth, as though it wanted to conceal a secret from the girl's eyes.

Aeris studied his pitiful figure in silence: his arms appeared much thinner in that loose, sleeveless shirt; the blackness of his hair and shabby clothes only intensified his paleness. Her heart flooded with pain.

Why is he like this?! Aeris cried in her mind, he's completely lost his mind!

But before the compassionate girl could open her mouth, Vincent shot his ruby-red eyes at her again. They glared with a malicious fire.

"Did you ever ask yourself why I scare you so much?" he sneered contemptuously.

Aeris stared blankly at his figure in the dark.

"Is it my hideous face?" Vincent asked as he gently touched his cheek, "Or my claw, perhaps?"

He lifted his claw up to his wasted face and marveled at its long, sharp fingers that gracefully curved inwards. Aeris thought she heard him snickering.

"You always seem to shake just looking at my claw," Vincent muttered half-audibly, "Is that what scares you so much?"

Aeris, of course, dared not answer. Instead, she pressed her back against the wall, trembling as the madman eyed her from the black corner. Though she could barely make out the outline of his body, the darkness had completely obscured his face from her. Strange to say, Vincent seemed to derive pleasure from wallowing in that darkness. Aeris could see his two bloodshot eyes flicker playfully at her distress.

"But no..," Vincent whispered to answer himself, "You're afraid of me because you're the one who can...see through this mask I hide behind.."

He covered his face with his sharp claw, letting its cold fingers spread all over his "mask" until Aeris could only see one red eye; it glared scornfully at her.

"Heh heh..," sniggered Vincent under his breath, "..a little girl like you.."

Her hands clasped themselves over her breast in an attempt to calm her heart. She had never seen Vincent look so sinister; he looked ready to murder her any moment.

"I could walk anywhere...talk to anyone," he raved on without removing his claw, "..even talk to old, decrepit men on trains..and they would call me 'young man'..."

He pulled his claw away from his face, then scoffed hatefully, "They only see the mask...the idiots! They can't see the monster like you can."

"V..Vincent..," Aeris forced out in alarm.

"I don't mean that monster..the one with the wings and claws..," the madman sighed. He ran his trembling fingers through his chaotic hair, mumbling, "..no..I mean you see the other monster...the one that wouldn't help Lucrecia..it's the one that hounds me day and night...no matter where I hide.."

She took a step towards him, but stopped short on meeting his strange eyes: they had shifted from a spiteful glare to a bitter, melancholy glow. His feet suddenly grew unsteady, and he collapsed to his knees in an instant. The fever had obviously torn all his senses apart; Vincent sat slouched on the ground, not understanding how he had landed there in the first place. He clutched one side of his head in pain, nearly tearing the hair from their roots.

Aeris forgot her fear in a second. she immediately rushed over to him. Yet despite all her entreaties and calls, Vincent continued to clutch one side of his head. His eyes darted from one end of the room to the other, as though he could actually see someone.

"But, it's all for the experiment..," Vincent ranted to himself, "his wonderful experiment.."

Aeris forcefully tore his hand away from his face, and peered into his ashen, sickly face. Unimaginable pity swelled in her heart. Vincent pressed her mouth with his cold hand before she could utter a word.

"Sh! Sh! Listen!" he whispered cautiously, glaring at one corner of the room, "..he's looking for you...he can't find you, that's why he's cursing so much..."

But this was too much for the poor girl; she could not bear to see him so miserable.

"No one's there, Vincent," Aeris cried as both her hands gripped his, "You have a..a fever and.."

"Sh! Listen!!" he growled, looking all around the room then straight at her, "..now he's screaming! He wants to finish..he must finish the experiment! they..they're all calling me a monster.."

"But you're not a monster, Vincent!!" Aeris argued loudly. She held his feverish face between her two hands, and repeated, "You hear me?! You're not a monster!!"

Vincent's crimson eyes froze on her troubled face when she finished shouting those words. She struck him as particularly beautiful and young at that moment. But no sooner had he realized that than his whole face darkened with immense hatred.

Suddenly, he pounced on the girl in a fit of rage. Though Aeris struggled wildly and screamed to break loose, Vincent easily pinned her against the floor with amazing new strength. In a flash, the madman had her flat on her back, with her two hands firmly implanted near her head.

"What would *you* know about monsters?"he sneered as he brought his face close to hers, "You're just a child! A CHILD!!"

"Ah!! Y..you're hurting me..," Aeris sobbed; his claw was crushing her wrist under its heavy weight.

"Do you have any idea how much blood I've shed?!" Vincent raved, beside himself with anger, "Can you smell it on my body? Can you see it on my face?! Tell me, aren't I a monster?!"

"No!" she snapped back, "No! I don't believe you're a monster!"

"Of course I am! That's why I scare you! It's the monster! Say it! Say: Vincent, you're a monster!"

"You can't be a monster!" Aeris insisted stubbornly, feeling his grip tighten on her, "Even if you change into that horrible creature..it's not your fault!!! You're NOT a monster!!"

A heavy pause fell on the two again. Aeris gasped out loud, completely overwhelmed with his madness. Vincent gazed down at her coldly, as an animal may study its prey before killing it. An unnatural smile crept across his lips.

"Heh heh..do you know why I even bother with you, Aeris?" he asked vehemently, "Do you know why I seem ready to throw away my stupid life the minute I hear you're in danger??"

She slowly turned her head to look up at him. Her hair had become loose during the struggle, and had scattered all around her head, making her seem more beautiful.

"It's not because I care for you," Vincent answered, "Fah! I don't care for anyone!! It's not because I'm kind or soft-hearted..far from it!! I could still kill as easily as before!"

His burning eyes consumed her in their insane fire until tears streamed down her cheeks. He was hurting her beyond endurance. "

It's for Lucrecia," he dropped his voice to a harsh whisper, "It's always for Lucrecia. I pretend I'm protecting her instead of you..that she's the one near me instead of you..it's her, not you! NOT YOU!!"

The girl clenched her little white fists, but did not answer.

"I'm a selfish..selfish bastard..," Vincent muttered to her softly, "I would have let Davoren drag you away to Hell, for all I care, if I wasn't like this."

She still did not reply.

"Now, answer me: aren't I a monster?" Vincent asked her. He even loosened his grip slightly.

"At first, I..," she stammered after a short silence, "..I thought you were very cold-hearted..yes, maybe I even felt you were a monster..so I hid away from you..because you scared me so much, like I had wronged you somehow.."

Her voice sounded very steady despite her violent trembling. Vincent narrowed his keen, mad eyes, weighing every syllable she uttered. He seemed to grow more spiteful.

"But..," Aeris continued, now looking directly at him, "..when you ran after me in the rain..when you said you felt 'concern' for me..I *knew* then you weren't a monster at all."

He gave a slight twitch at the word "monster".

"And Vincent, when you hugged me after all of that," she cried in anguish, "it wasn't a monster that did it! It was a human being! A kind, gentle human being!"

"What kind of bullshit is that?!" he growled through grit teeth, "You make me sound like a saint!! I've killed and destroyed so many lives..trampled all over everything..I can't even remember when I.."

"I don't care what you say!!" Aeris interrupted, shaking her head vigorously, "I don't care if you think you're a monster! Maybe you were one in the past, but I will not believe you're one now!!!"

Her bright green eyes flashed straight up at him as she finished, "And if you won't listen to me, then pretend I'm Lucrecia for one moment and open your ears: You are not a monster!!!"

Aeris squeezed her eyes shut, breathless with agitation. A strange, bitter feeling stung her pounding heart. Vincent stared coolly at the distressed girl he held pinned down on the floor. His hand grasped her wrist so tightly, he could feel her pulse throbbing in pain.

His head suddenly felt cold, even though the rest of his body burned with fever. He automatically withdrew from Aeris, obviously ashamed he had harmed her. Vincent crawled away as she sat up, but grew tired after a few inches. He huddled dejectedly by the wall.

"F..forgive..I didn't mean to hurt you..," he muttered, looking at his claw in dismay, "..and I didn't mean to vent my hatred on you like that.."

Aeris watched him edge further away from her, as if the darkness could perhaps shelter him its black arms. She did not say anything.

"When I said I was concerned about you, I really meant it," he whispered bitterly, "..but your pain is only physical..it goes away after a while...you wouldn't understand why I'm like this..'mentally shattered' is the expression I think I used.."

His confused eyes wandered all around the black hallway until he could see no more. His senses were fading into oblivion.

"What would I give to satisfy her, Aeris?" Vincent whimpered, addressing solely himself, "I stayed out of her way..I punished myself and let others punish me...I joined Avalanche, but it wasn't for the Planet..I never cared about the Planet...it was all for her.."

Aeris crawled over to him in silence, and touched his bare arm softly. He did not notice her at all: he seemed to look straight down a bottomless pit of chaos; his mind drew closer and closer to the brink of insanity.

"But I know there is nothing..," he mumbled tiredly to the darkness, "literally nothing I can do to win her forgiveness for what I've done.. I don't deserve it, anyway...ugh! What a hideous creature I am.. a..mon..s..te..r..."

The fever drowned him at last. Vincent's whole body suddenly slumped to the side, but Aeris caught him in her arms before he could crash into the ground. He had lost conscious again.

Strange that she did not cry, nor did she sob out his name, or even quiver in fear. Instead, she embraced his lifeless body all to herself. She nestled his head against her shoulder, stroking his black hair tenderly. She began to cradle him gently from side to side, like a mother lulling her child to sleep. She said nothing to wake him.

Vincent had finally slipped into the bleak abyss of delirium. The ugly pit eagerly yawned open its mouth to admit him into the darkness, then sealed him away from reality.

He felt very cold, especially in his fingertips.

And his mind strayed back...back..thirty-one years ago.....

-End of Chp.14

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.15

His tie suffocated him until breathing altogether became painful. He felt very hot in his suit.

"Damn them, anyway," he cursed under his breath. He dared not speak aloud..not here.

Vincent, with his gun gripped in both hands, huddled next to the ventilation grate. He had sneaked into the Reactor via the second main pumping pipe, and had crawled all the way up through the ventilation ducts until he reached the main reception hall. There, he was told to "stay put" in the duct until further notice.

The monotonous humming of the pumps below hammered his ears non-stop. Occasionally, a shrill whistle screeched through the whole Reactor, signaling the refilling of some materia tank. But otherwise, nothing interrupted the dull droning of the pumping pipes.

Vincent peeked curiously through the ventilation grate: the main reception hall was strangely abandoned. The whole Reactor, in fact, seemed to be deserted.

He looked all around the ventilation duct he had squeezed himself through. It was surprisingly well-kept, almost dust free, yet hot beyond endurance. Vincent could barely see ten inches in front of his face. Although the grates permitted some light to pass, darkness dominated the labyrinth of air ducts.

Hearing someone scuffling through the ducts, Vincent turned his head to face the intruder. He wasn't surprised to see a man crawling on all fours towards him. In truth, he had been waiting nervously for the arrival of this man.

This tall man, who looked around thirty, had chest-nut hair and deep honey-coloured eyes. A tiny radio receiver was stuck in one of his ears. He wore a dark navy-blue suit exactly similar to Vincent's.

"There're exactly 26 terrorists in the entire Reactor," the man whispered gravely, "..but they're obviously not professionals... just some hired thugs off the street."

Vincent nodded his head once.

The man glanced through the grate hurriedly, then asked, "Anyone pass through the main hall..er..what was your name again?"

"Valentine, Sir. Vincent Valentine."

"Of course, I'm sorry," the man humbly apologized, "I've been on vacation too long. So, anyone pass through the main hall?"

"No, Sir. Nobody," Vincent answered with marked respect.

The man nodded his head solemnly as he studied Vincent's face, which made the latter very uncomfortable. Vincent peeked through the grate again, pretending to confirm his answer.

"You're the new Turk President ShinRa hired, eh?" the man smiled kindly, "Sorry we hadn't had time for a proper introduction, Valentine: my name is Davoren J. Murdock, but just call me Davoren, Pleased to meet you at last."

Vincent dutifully shook the hand Davoren extended towards him. Of course, this man needed no introductions: Davoren was the leader of the Turks. Gerald and Cindy, the other two Turks, had made sure Vincent knew that.

Funny..he doesn't behave like a leader, Vincent reflected to himself.

"Hoy! Davoren!" called a clear voice through the radio receiver. Vincent immediately recognized Gerald's voice, a member of the Turks. He had such a noticeable, distinguished accent.

"Yes, Gerald, you found the hostages?" Davoren asked. His face instantly shifted from carefree to serious as he tapped the receiver in his ear.

"There's 48 of 'em, Sir," the voice spoke, "16 are in the West Wing of the Reactor, and 32 near the draining pipes on the ground floor."

"Are all the hostages alive, Gerald?"

"Aye, Sir," the Turk answered after a short pause, "So far, the lit'le buggers 'aven't killed anyone."

"Very well. Wait until Cindy reports to me."

Vincent began to tug at the hammer of his gun while they waited silently for the other Turk to report. Davoren stared absent-mindedly at Vincent's gun, then remarked casually, "I read your CV, Valentine. It said you're pretty handy with firearms."

"I don't know, Sir," Vincent replied curtly. For some reason, he shoved his gun back into its holster.

"Well, well," Davoren chuckled, completely in good-humour, "You'll know by the end of today."

Suddenly, the radio receiver beeped twice, which effectively cut the conversation short.

"Yes, Cindy, go ahead," Davoren ordered, tapping the receiver again.

"Sir, I found all the scientists they're holding hostage," she answered. Cindy had a playful, sweet voice, even when dead serious.

"And?"

"I'm afraid it's confirmed, Sir: Professor Gast is among the hostages."

"...acknowledged, Cindy," Davoren sighed. He scratched his head in annoyance, as though that last scrap of news bore great significance.

Vincent fidgeted nervously, but remained silent.

During the last three years, many powerful companies had witnessed ShinRa rapidly rise from an unknown business investment to a mega-sized corporation of vast influence. Soon, everyone, even little children playing with their dolls or plastic swords, knew the importance the name "ShinRa Inc." bore.

Not surprisingly, ShinRa made several enemies as its power hungrily soared to unbelievable heights. Its president, or the "ShinRa Jackal" as everyone nicknamed him, astonished his enemies with his shrewd, cunning brain: within a single year, he had destroyed three rival companies.

One by one, the resentful companies disappeared until only one blocked ShinRa's way: The Hawking Industrial Corporation of Midgar.

Hawking, a middle-aged man of spiteful appearance, made no secret of his utter contempt for ShinRa Inc. He openly abused its illustrious president, attacking all his "avaricious, self-centered policies".

Nevertheless, ShinRa Inc. spread its large wings all over Midgar. And how angry Hawking was to see another ShinRa Reactor completed on time.

"That Jackal has already built three Reactors!" Hawking had thundered angrily, "The devil take him and all his blasted Reactors."

But that curse did not satisfy the furious Hawking at all. He knew his company would be trampled on like any other. It was only a matter of time..unless, of course, he "thwarted" the Reactor somehow..

So, at around ten o'clock in the morning, President ShinRa received information that terrorists had invaded one of his Reactors. They had threatened to kill every employee there, including all the scientists, unless he shut the Reactors down immediately. They even claimed to have Professor Gast, ShinRa's top scientist, held at gunpoint.

After many curses too upsetting to repeat, the ShinRa President gave a direct order to the Turks: they would "handle the matter as they saw fit".

"16 hostages in the West Wing, and 32 near the draining pipes," Davoren muttered to himself at length, "Cindy, where's Professor Gast?"

"In the West Wing, Sir."

Davoren's face darkened with serious contemplation. He seemed to argue something fiercely in his brain. Vincent glanced at him from the corner of his eye, then looked away coolly.

"There're 26 terrorists in the Reactor," Davoren explained in a very business-like air, "Fortunately, none are professional. 15 on the ground floor, 11 in the West Wing. That means that 32 hostages are guarded by 15 terrorists, and 16 by.."

"Oy, yer doing me head with all those numbers, Davoren," interrupted Gerald. His voice sounded very tired., "Just tell us what to do."

"Right, right. Valentine and I will take the ground floor, you two take the West Wing. That means you'll have to save Professor Gast."

"Yes, Sir!" answered both Turks at once.

"And listen," Davoren warned very sternly as he tapped the receiver in his ear, "We have a direct order from the President: no terrorist, on any account, is to be spared. every hostage is to be saved. No room for screw-ups, got that?"

"Even the janitor?!" Gerald asked in surprise.

"Yes, Gerald, even the janitor," Davoren resumed , trying to stifle a laugh, "When you shoot, aim for their heads. We move in, kill them, and move out at once. Any questions?"

"Dammy, Sir," Gerald commented, "Ye be sure to watch over the lad...this 'ere is his first fight.."

Vincent frowned contemptuously: Gerald had this annoying habit of addressing him as "lad", even though Vincent was older than him by three years. He only called him that because Vincent was a new Turk.

"Don't worry about him, Gerald," Davoren smiled, "You just watch your own back. Contact me if either of you are injured. If not, wait until I contact you. Over and out."

Without another word, Davoren yanked the receiver out of his ear, then tossed it into his pocket. Vincent wasted no more time: he instantly began to prepare his gun for battle.

But much to his embarrassment, Vincent's hands could not stop trembling. He dropped many bullets as he fumbled to load his gun, nearly dropping the gun itself. A cold, nervous felling tickled his heart.

"How long have you been a Turk, Valentine?" Davoren asked after a brief pause. He seemed quite interested in Vincent.

"About six months, Sir."

"I see. And how many missions have you been on so far?"

"Three, Sir," Vincent muttered softly, "One escort, two assassinations."

"Assassinations, hey?" his leader pronounced, eyeing him with more curiosity, "the Mayor was killed during his re-inauguration two months ago. They never found the assassin..was that you?"

"I don't know, Sir," Vincent replied, slightly confused, "They only give me a picture and tell me where to shoot. I'm never told who I kill."

"Ha ha! Fair enough," Davoren laughed amicably, "What you don't know can't hurt you, I guess."

Davoren groped at his pockets until he pulled out a small, rectangular timer. Vincent cocked his gun loudly, then leaned against the wall of the air duct while his leader began to program the timer.

Neither spoke a word, which only intensified Vincent's apprehension.

"You nervous, Valentine?" Davoren whispered without looking at him.

"No, Sir."

"Good, good. Open combat can get a bit brutal.. especially for rookies."

Though Vincent nodded his head calmly, his heart pounded as violently as ever. He had never been on a mission involving hostages and terrorists. Nor had he ever teamed up with all the Turks at the same time. Except for the one time he had to escort the President with Gerald, Vincent had always worked solo.

Not that it mattered to him whether he killed terrorists...only the novelty of the mission filled him with great discomfort.

"Hey," called Davoren, interrupting the man's reverie. Vincent automatically turned to him.

"Don't get yourself killed trying to impress me ," winked the leader with a friendly smile, "Just do your job. You're pretty good with that gun, I can tell. It'd be a shame if you died so soon."

Vincent blinked in surprise at the compliment, not sure how to answer back. But Davoren saved him the trouble; his face suddenly assumed a serious expression as he gave Vincent one nod of the head.

That was the signal for "attack".

Vincent immediately tore open the grate, trying not to make too much noise. He gracefully slipped out of the air duct, followed by Davoren, who held onto the timer as if to dear life.

No sooner had the two Turks landed on the ground, than Vincent bolted straight towards the main hall which lead to the Reactor. He glued his back against the wall near the entrance, his gun right infront of him. he listened attentively for any activity in the hall. Nothing.

After a silent moment, Vincent cautiously peeked into the hallway: it was a luxurious, spacious hall, with pink lanterns flickering dimly on both sides. He noted a screen monitor brutally smashed. Shattered glass, along with bullet shells and empty cartridges littered the marble floor. The terrorists had obviously been through here.

Vincent scanned the entire hallway, suspicious he may chance upon a terrorist lurking in the shadows. He spent a full minute just checking.

When he was sure the terrorists had left no sentry, Vincent made a signal to Davoren from behind, meaning that all was clear. The two men crept noiselessly but speedily through the corridor, past the smashed monitor, down the flight of steps, until they reached the elevator. It would take them down to the Reactor.

Davoren pressed the button. At the same time, Vincent fixed his gun on the metallic doors, in case any terrorist should happen to be inside.

Sweat trickled down Vincent's forehead. some strands of black hair dangled loosely infront of his tense face. He wished he had longer hair..at least then he could tie it back.

The elevator announced it's long-awaited arrival with a loud chime. Nobody was inside.

In a flash, both Turks dashed into the elevator, each man huddling in opposite corners near the door. Davoren struck the lower button in certain haste, but the lazy elevator mechanically sealed the two inside with perfect ease.

During this time, neither man breathed a word. Davoren pulled out his semi-automatic gun, making sure it was loaded to the max. As the elevator neared its destination, he closed his eyes composedly, as if concentrating all his thoughts on one single issue.

Vincent glanced at his leader with obvious curiosity. He guessed Davoren was praying; he noticed the man's lips move silently. He even crossed himself reverently when the elevator halted.

He expelled a breath, then looked significantly at Vincent, as if to say "are you ready?"

Vincent nodded his head. His eyes shone brilliantly with excitement. Come what may, he was ready.

-End of Chp.15

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.16

Before the elevator door had fully withdrawn, both Turks dashed out onto the platform towards a gigantic, cylindrical generator. The two men crouched by this impressive machine, still not daring to speak a word.

Vincent had been told ShinRa Reactors consisted of basically three large platforms with the ground floor sandwiched in the middle, but he had never actually been inside one before. His keen eyes followed the magnificent pumps that arched majestically way up to the black ceiling. Countless metallic pipes of all sizes adorned the whole place; some sprouted out of the brick walls; others bent into tanks, or sometimes dug into big, complex machines.

Gaskets, valves, and colourful screen monitors were plentiful. The pungent smell of raw, uncompressed materia shocked Vincent's senses so strongly, he pressed one hand over his nose in disgust. He could still hear the dull hum of the pumping pipes filling the dark Reactor.

A rough tug at his sleeve immediately interrupted Vincent's observations. Davoren silently motioned for them to move towards the edge of this huge platform. Vincent obeyed his command.

Both Turks crept with their backs bent until they reached the railing that bordered the first platform. As they approached the brink, Vincent discerned loud, coarse mutterings down below on the ground floor. He assumed those were the terrorists.

The two men lay flat on their stomachs when they finally reached the edge of the platform; neither dared look over it. Vincent gripped his gun rigidly between his fingers. He felt hot and cold at the same time.

Davoren put his finger to his lips, meaning that Vincent was to remain perfectly still. He stole a glance over the edge, barely long enough to see below, then instantly pulled his head back.

"There're eight of them down there," Davoren whispered softly, "Three around the entrance, two by the stairs, and three at the pumps."

Vincent nodded his head in silence. He understood that the hostages were held at those pumps as well. Therefore, they would not attack the terrorists stationed there..for the time being.

Davoren looked hard at Vincent as he muttered, "If you're really as good as your CV claims, Valentine, you should be able to shoot the three men at the entrance. I'll take out the two by the stairs. We have to reach the ground floor before their reinforcements arrive. We attack in twenty seconds."

Both men automatically synchronized their watches, and waited.

As the seconds steadily passed by, Vincent could hear the men below chattering away, blissfully unaware of their ensuing death. One of them began tell a dirty joke, while his comrades roared with laughter.

Vincent glanced timidly at his leader, then tightened his grip on his gun.

It was time.

Both Turks sprang to their feet at once. without even looking, Vincent bent over the railing and fired at the three men by the entrance. He killed them instantly.

At the same time, Davoren flew down the metallic staircase, killing two terrorists who blocked his way. Vincent rushed after Davoren down the stairs, keeping his head low and arms stretched out. His mind had frozen completely; all his thoughts were focused on killing the terrorists.

Utter chaos broke out amongst the three remaining terrorists. No words could describe their shock on spotting Vincent and Davoren, already half-way down the staircase, with their guns blazing in front of them.

"SHIT!! IT'S THE TURKS!!!" screamed someone.

"SHOOT THEM!! SHOOT THEM!!" bellowed another.

Vincent nearly stumbled over as a mad torrent of bullets attacked the stairs, but both men only redoubled their speed. The iron balustrade rattled stiffly with the endless shower of bullets, trying its best to protect the two Turks. Many bullets whizzed over Vincent's head; one even snatched a lock of his hair.

His senses sharpened with every gunshot. He fixed his bright eyes directly on the foot of this staircase. Yet despite all that wild, crazed gunfire and the mad rush down those metal steps, Vincent never felt cooler in the head.

The instant the two Turks had cleared the battered staircase, they lunged forward to duck behind a large delivery tank just ahead. The angry bullets tore furiously at this barrier.

Both men huddled behind this stout tank, letting the terrorists bombard it as long as they pleased. Vincent could hear them screaming all sorts of curses over the loud bullets. But more importantly, he could discern their desperate fear...he did not even have to look at their faces.

A Turk; ShinRa's beloved secret service, sometimes humorously nicknamed "the Men in Blue". Everyone in Midgar, from the highest business executive to the lowest beggar on the streets, trembled at the mention of that simple word.

Yes...even those pathetic, untrained terrorists were afraid deep down in their hearts.

The gunfire suddenly ceased, shattering Vincent's thoughts. He turned to Davoren for any instructions, but his leader merely shook his head sternly: he wanted Vincent to stay behind the tank, and wait.

Vincent heard many scuffling and confused shouts over at the enemy's side. Obviously, the rest of their comrades had arrived to help.

"Reload your gun, Valentine," Davoren whispered without looking at him, "Always check your ammo whenever you find a shelter."

"Yes, Sir," Vincent muttered obediently.

"Hey! Hey! You turkeys!!" boomed a gruff voice from the terrorists' side, "Might as well waltz outta there and let us kill ya!! There's only two of you and seven of us!!"

Vincent silently reloaded his gun, ignoring the feeble challenge. When he had finished, Davoren pulled him closer by the sleeve. His eyes gleamed with agitation.

"Listen, there's a purple gasket on the left corner near the entrance," the leader murmured hurriedly, "It's just above their heads. On the count of three, you blast it. See that black furnace over there?"

He pointed to a round, sooty machine placed a few yards away. Vincent saw it.

"When you shoot the gasket, run straight for that furnace," Davoren ordered, "I'll cover you. Do you understand?"

Vincent nodded his head.

"C'mon out, you bastards!!" shouted another terrorist with apparent arrogance, to the amusement of all his comrades. They all began to jeer and hurl curses at the two Turks, thinking them helplessly cornered.

"Feh..amateurs," Davoren scoffed under his breath. He held Vincent's arm firmly as he counted, "one...two...three!!"

Vincent immediately rolled out into the open while Davoren opened fire on the stupid terrorists. He killed one man, and injured another in the neck. The rest of the astonished terrorists scurried behind any barrier, then blasted furiously at both Turks.

As Vincent dashed to safety amidst all the insane cross-fire, his eyes spotted the mentioned purple gasket. His hand automatically reached up to aim.

With one clean shot, Vincent blasted the lid off the gasket, causing the surrounding pipes to swell with unbearable pressure. Suddenly, the whole piping network behind the terrorists exploded. Hot, blinding steam hissed evilly out of the broken pipes. Soon, they were engulfed in the thick gas.

Maddened with panic, the terrorists began to shoot randomly in hopes one stray bullet may kill a Turk. But Vincent had already fled behind the furnace, and Davoren still huddled against the ever-enduring delivery tank.

Davoren pulled out the small timer he had programmed in the air duct. After cranking the dial, he flung it straight into the middle of the terrorists. The next second, a deafening explosion rocked the entire Reactor, causing more pipes and shattered iron bars to crush the enemy. Davoren had thrown a small time bomb.

Without another moment to waste, Davoren rushed towards the furnace as fast as he could. His sharp ears heard some terrorists swearing and shouting to each other about "a grenade". Davoren scowled: he had expected the bomb to kill all the terrorists.

On reaching the shelter, Davoren found Vincent crouching by the furnace, the sweat streaming down his face. He was not afraid, just hot with all the steam. When Davoren was assured Vincent wasn't injured, the two men glued their backs against the furnace wall. Vincent held his gun directly in front of his pale face.

"Two of those jokers are still alive," gasped Davoren as he looked solemnly at Vincent, "They're gonna throw a grenade at us."

Vincent stared blankly at the news, then decided to kill the remaining terrorists in one sweep. But before he could attack the enemy, Davoren yanked him back behind the furnace.

"No! No! No!" Davoren scolded. He spoke very hurriedly, "The purpose of a grenade is to drive you out of your shelter. They're expecting us to run out from either the left side of the furnace or the right. Now, to counter-attack a grenade AND surprise the enemy, you jump out from the least expected direction."

Vincent scratched his head in confusion. Davoren spoke too fast for his comprehension, and all his tactical logic only baffled the poor Turk further.

"When they throw the grenade," Davoren concluded, "We jump *over* the furnace, and kill the bastards. Understood?"

Vincent pushed his hair out of his eyes, muttering a respectful "yes Sir". After all, who was he to argue with the leader of the Turks?

Suddenly, a round grenade landed with a loud thud exactly in front of the two Turks. Its fuse sparked wildly.

"NOW!!" thundered Davoren.

In a flash, both men leapt on top of the furnace, each aiming his gun straight at the two remaining terrorists. Vincent shot one man in the head, Davoren got the other in the eye.

Vincent stared in wonder at the two dead bodies they had just shot: the mission was completed. He sighed in relief.

Suddenly, Davoren grabbed him and sprang away from the furnace, just as an ear-splitting explosion ripped through it. The strength of the blast sent both men sprawling against the ground, but Davoren held Vincent in such a way that his back alone took the full blow.

"And don't forget about the grenade, either," Davoren smiled as he struggled to get up.

Vincent instantly helped Davoren to his feet. The two stared silently at the burning furnace, with all sorts of wires and horribly distorted iron bars protruding out of it. It was destroyed beyond recognition.

"C'mon," Davoren ordered after a moment's pause, "We have to find the hostages."

Their quest ended very shortly. The two Turks discovered all the hostages stuffed into a corner next to one of the draining pumps, looking overwhelmed with horror. They had, undoubtedly, heard all the racket during the battle, and had huddled silently in their spot.

When they saw the two Turks walk up to them, the poor hostages gaped with mouths wide open, unsure who those two were. One man in a smart business suit dug his face in his hands to stop crying. There were two women trembling in each other's arms, and glaring suspiciously at the two new strangers. An elderly man, on spotting Vincent's gun, blurted out a prayer.

"We were sent to rescue you," announced Davoren in a clear, loud voice, "Everyone all right?"

He heard a faint "yes" murmured; some only nodded their feeble heads as an answer. The two women burst into tears, causing another young man to join them.

"They're all unhurt," Vincent confirmed after he had checked everyone, "Three have fainted, but no injuries, Sir."

Davoren ordered all the freed hostages to remain calm and seated until further notice. Reassured that everything was in order, Davoren propped the radio receiver into his ear, then tapped it once. Vincent lingered carelessly a few yards away, awaiting any further orders.

"Gerald? Come in, Gerald!" called Davoren into the radio receiver.

"What took ye so long?" laughed Gerald's happy voice through the receiver, "We finished three minutes ago. All eleven terrorists shot dead, Sir."

"Are all the hostages all right?"

"One got a grazed shoulder, Sir," answered Cindy instead, "Another man got a broken leg, but everyone's okay."

"And Professor Gast?"

"He's 100 percent safe, Sir. I'll evacuate all the hostages immediately."

"Right," Davoren agreed, "we just need to make sure we got all the terrorists. Give us a minute."

"Yes, Sir!" replied both voices firmly.

"Valentine, count the bodies by the entrance," Davoren instructed gravely, "I'll count the ones over there."

"Yes, Sir."

For the first time since he had stormed the Reactor, Vincent saw the actual faces of these terrorists. One body was helplessly crushed underneath a large iron bar, so that only its dead hand appeared visible. Another man lay flat on his back, still clinging to his gun. Vincent noted a terrorist heaped into a corner, his empty eyes expressing genuine pain. They all lay lifelessly on the bloody floor, silently crying for any pity from a living soul.

But they found no such compassion in this Turk.

Vincent merely walked past them, counting them as though counting sheep. He felt no pity on seeing these dead men, nor did any guilt or sadness prick his heart. He felt nothing.

He trotted away to report the number of bodies: he had counted nine. He searched all over the place for Davoren until, much to his surprise, he found the man lingering over a dead body blasted against the wall. It was the last terrorist he had killed.

Vincent walked up to his leader, and patiently stood next to him, waiting for him to speak. He could hear Davoren muttering a prayer over the body in complete veneration. Though Vincent did not bother looking at the dead body, he strained every nerve to hear the prayer.

"..Ye shalt find thy wandering soul at the end of thine pain...and may the Kingdom of Heaven embrace thee for eternity..amen..."

Vincent thought the words very peculiar and curious. They stuck to him for a long time afterwards.

"Sorry," mumbled Davoren without looking at him, "I didn't mean to keep you waiting."

Vincent told him he had found nine bodies.

"And I counted five," calculated Davoren thoughtfully, "..eleven..nine..and five...that makes 25.."

Both men looked at each other in sudden alarm: there should have been 26 terrorists.

"Gerald, are you SURE you counted correctly?" asked Davoren into the receiver. His face tensed in apprehension.

"Aye, sir."

"Gerald, there's still a terrorist loose in the Reactor. He must've escaped before I threw that time bomb. Listen, you and Cindy evacuate the hostages. Vincent and I will hunt him down."

"As ye wish, Sir."

Davoren pulled out the receiver from his ear, his face betraying obvious agitation. He signaled for Vincent to prepare his gun: they were going to the materia reservoirs down below. That was the only place left to hide.

The two men crept as stealthily as cats down the black hallway. Each man held his gun near his face, ready for any sudden attack. As they edged near the foot of the stairs, Vincent could hear the noisy pumps churning the raw materia in the pool below. It took him a great deal of self-control to endure the pungent smell and sweltering heat.

The hall diverged into two paths: one led straight up to the delivery pipes above, while the other to the main bridge across the materia pool. Vincent motioned his head towards the direction of the main bridge. He would take this path. Davoren nodded his head in agreement, then took the other path up to the delivery pipes.

Vincent cautiously emerged into the main bridge. This large bridge stretched from one end of the Reactor to the other, straight across a pool of cool, emerald green materia. He noted with casual interest the thin metallic churners which monotonously revolved around the thick materia.

It was unnaturally quiet.

Vincent's sharp eyes darted all around the place as he stepped across the bridge. His gun was gripped tightly between his rigid fingers; hot sweat trickled down his tense face. He felt very tired.

"LOOK OUT!!!" shrieked a wild voice.

Before Vincent could fully turn around, a violent bullet grazed his arm, causing him to nearly stumble backwards with the impact.

He immediately aimed his gun at the source of the attack, but stopped short in alarm: his assailant had a young woman as hostage.

This terrorist, a bulky man with a bloody kerchief tied around his head, held this poor young woman in front of him, with his gun pressed against her throat. The woman, mad with fear, sobbed hysterically. It had taken her unimaginable courage just to warn Vincent.

"Okay, asshole!" bellowed the terrorist, tightening his grip around the woman, "Drop the gun!!!"

Vincent's eyes narrowed sternly, but he kept his gun fixed on the terrorist. He said nothing.

"Drop it, I say!!" thundered the man. He squeezed his gun against the woman's throat, making her scream even more wildly, "Drop it, or I'll kill her!! I will!!"

Vincent knit his brows in contempt, then dropped the gun in front of him.

"Goddamn Turks!!" spat the terrorist, "Think you can friggin' do whatever you want! RAISE YER HANDS, BASTARD!! NOW!!!"

Vincent raised his hands obediently. His cool eyes shone with strange composure.

The terrorist gasped angrily as he glared at Vincent, his new prisoner. However, a cocky grin soon spread all over his sweaty face. This situation obviously amused him greatly: he had just captured an actual Turk!

"HAH! Not so tough without your goddamn gun, eh?" the man sneered with relish, "You Turks think yer so high 'n mighty, when you're nothin' but yellow-bellied wimps!"

"At least I hide behind a gun instead of a woman," Vincent remarked calmly.

The terrorist blinked stupidly at the answer, then snarled, "SHUT UP, SMART-ASS!!! You sure got balls opening your mouth!!"

Vincent only rolled his eyes in scorn, which enraged the terrorist further. The man suddenly stepped forward, dragging the trembling young woman with him. His brawny arm still held her in front of his large body.

"What's your name?" the terrorist thundered, pointing his gun straight at Vincent's head.

"Valentine."

"Huh!! And what's YOUR name, missy?" the man demanded. He tightened his grip on the helpless woman to force out an answer.

"..L..Lucrecia, sir...", she finally sobbed.

"Lucrecia, eh?" the brutal terrorist asked, "You ever seen a dead body, Lucrecia?"

"Y..yes..sir..,"

"Where?!" he demanded savagely.

"Ah!! In..in the morgue..." Vincent glanced at something near the pipes above, but instantly riveted his eyes back on the terrorist's face. He seemed to grow more and more calm and collected with every minute.

"But you never seen a body dying in front of ya?" the man scoffed. He glared ruthlessly at Vincent's face.

"..n..no, sir..," Lucrecia wailed.

"Well, yer in luck, honey!" the terrorist laughed as he got ready to pull the trigger, "You can see Vincent die in front of you!!"

But three loud gunshots from above instantly interrupted the man. He shot his head up to the pipes high above the bridge, then spotted Davoren crouching unsteadily over one of the delivery pipes. Obviously, Davoren had fired those three shots into the air.

"SHIT!!!" roared the terrorist savagely. His gun immediately opened fire at Davoren. The assailant had been successfully distracted.

In a flash, Vincent lunged for his dropped gun, then fired one single shot at the stupid terrorist: the bullet missed the woman's head by an inch, but pierced straight through the man's skull.

Wild with pain, the terrorist twisted around as he tried to scream out loud. However, his clumsy body suddenly stumbled over the railing of the bridge, and he plunged into the pool of green materia below. He never emerged again.

"Valentine!! You okay?!" called Davoren from above when he had steadied himself again. He sounded very worried.

Vincent nodded his head at his leader.

"Hang on! I'll be down there in a minute!!" Davoren shouted. He began to backtrack from the huge delivery pipe.

Davoren, in truth, had went as agreed to check the delivery pipes above; but on hearing Lucrecia's scream and a loud gunshot, had immediately rushed to investigate the matter. He had seen Vincent being held at gunpoint, so decided to act quickly.

He had climbed onto one of the large delivery pipes, hoping that if he could distract the terrorist long enough, Vincent would use the opportunity wisely.

Much to his relief, Vincent had used it.

As he thrust his gun back into its holster, Vincent finally noticed poor Lucrecia standing rooted to her spot. Her wild eyes stared blankly at nothing. Her hair hung in loose strands all around her head, making her seem more shocked than ever.

Vincent glanced uncomfortably at the distraught woman, then walked over to check whether she was injured at all.

"Miss? Are you all right?" he asked concernedly. He stood exactly one step away from her.

The young woman started on hearing his voice so close, and gaped emptyly at him. Suddenly, her eyes flashed with unmistakable fury.

"YOU JACKASS!!" she cried, slapping him clean across the face with all her might. The slap cracked like a whip against the man's cheek.

Vincent, with one hand over his cheek, stared in absolute disbelief at the infuriated young woman. Somehow, that wasn't quite the response he had expected.

"You could have killed ME with that damn stunt of yours, idiot!!!" the woman thundered, "You only missed me by a hair!! I can still hear the bullet whiz by ear!!"

Tears began to flood her eyes. Her hand trembled violently as she glared at the astonished Vincent. However, he only blinked confusedly back at her, as though he could not understand a word.

"God..of all the irresponsible...male-chauvinistic..," Lucrecia spluttered angrily. But she could not bear this man any longer. She stormed away from Vincent, beside herself with rage.

"Um..you're welcome," Vincent said after she had left.

-End of Chp.16

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.17

"Oy! If I see another bairn again, I think I'll go mad!" exclaimed Gerald vexedly.

"And what on earth is a 'bairn'?" asked Cindy in amusement.

During one lazy afternoon, three days after the Reactor incident, the four Turks had found enough time for some coffee and a friendly chat. Cindy had been lounging on a couch, reading some fashion magazine, when she had spotted Vincent leaving the library. The woman immediately called him, and insisted in her usual sweet way he join her for a cup of coffee in the ShinRa cafe. Vincent, of course, could not refuse her.

While Cindy was chattering away to the silent Vincent about some trifle subject, Davoren had chanced upon the two. Eager for more company, Cindy kindly invited him to join them as well.

Soon, Gerald had stormed into the cafe, muttering curses in his strange dialect. He collapsed into a chair at the table of his friends, guzzled his coffee down, then made that bizarre exclamation.

"A bairn!" he insisted, eyeing Cindy suspiciously, "Ye know! A child!"

"Oh? You don't like children?"

"Fuh! I liked 'em until now!" the Turk spluttered.

Vincent sipped his coffee quietly, then checked his watch. Davoren, laughing good-humouredly, offered the angry Gerald a cigarette to soothe him. The Turk snatched it in annoyance.

"I'm just after kidnapping a lit'le rugrat," Gerald muttered as he forced the cigarette into his mouth, "Aie, the guttersnipe! He wouldn't stop crying! Gave me this flippin' headache, blast 'im."

Cindy could not stop laughing at his childish anger. Davoren lighted Gerald's cigarette, then lighted one for himself too. Vincent politely refused the cigarette Davoren offered him.

"Damned if I ever have a bairn!" Gerald scowled, "Ugh! The very thought turns me stomach!"

Gerald was a sandy-haired young man around 23 years old, from the far, far North. He was of medium height, with sharp, rugged features and bright green eyes. His parents, proud owners of some huge farm in the North, had slaved most of their lives just to get their son into ShinRa Inc. as a desk clerk.

But Gerald had become a Turk by sheer accident: when some important ShinRa official had ridiculed his foreign accent, Gerald broke the man's nose with one punch. The ShinRa President, delighted with Gerald's spirit (he didn't like that official either), had made him a Turk.

Cindy, a raven-haired beauty around 22 years old, came from a more genteel background. She had a soft, slim figure, with dark brown eyes. Both her parents were business owners of some importance, and at first had enrolled her as a secretary in ShinRa Inc. Much to their dismay, their willful daughter found the job 'boring and useless'; she applied to be a Turk instead. The President at first had expressed some skepticism on account of her being a young woman, but eventually had accepted her.

Vincent did not know much about Davoren's background, only that ShinRa valued him, and that virtually everyone who worked in that company honoured him greatly. Indeed, even those who hated him felt a

certain amount of respect for this Turk: for when Davoren performed his job, he made sure it was a job well done.

When Gerald had finished venting his hatred on children in general, the conversation turned to the Reactor incident of three days ago.

"Ey, lad," Gerald smiled at Vincent, "And how'd ye manage with those terrorists? Yer arm was injured, I hear."

"Oh, it was nothing, really," Vincent mumbled, swirling his coffee cup nervously, "The bullet only grazed my arm. In fact, it barely touched my skin."

"Aye. Well, never ye mind," he comforted, nodding his head knowledgeably, "I'm sure ye'll do better next time, lad. We were all beginners at one stage."

Vincent only knit his brows as a response. It annoyed him when Gerald treated him as a clueless "beginner"...almost as much as that ridiculous nickname "lad".

"Huh! He may be a beginner Turk," Davoren interjected, puffing his cigarette coolly, "But he's a first-class master with that gun of his...*WAY* better than you, Gerald."

Gerald, of course, instantly demanded an explanation. So, Davoren began a lengthy description of Vincent's impressive skills with the gun, emphasizing his accuracy in particular.

The two Turks, especially Cindy, listened very attentively, but Vincent only fidgeted nervously in his seat. Praise, even well-meant, had never pleased him at all. He was more satisfied to fulfill his duty without recounting the means.

"Bet you can't do THAT with a gun, Gerald," teased Cindy, trying to look innocent, "And you can't call it 'beginner's luck' either, eh?"

"Balderdash!" scoffed Gerald as he crushed his cigarette into the ashtray. He eyed Vincent with evident interest, but said nothing.

"Wait, I'm not finished yet," Davoren chuckled, "Lemme tell you how he wasted the last terrorist..."

The image of Lucrecia suddenly sprang to Vincent's mind as Davoren began the little story. His hand involuntarily reached for the cheek she had slapped so violently. Her slap, in fact, had hurt him more than the gunshot.

"Who was that?" Vincent asked when Davoren had finished talking.

"Hm? Who was what?"

"That..that woman the terrorist had hostage," Vincent explained timidly, "Who was she?"

"Oh..um...she's that new lab assistant..," Davoren thought aloud, his cigarette in his mouth, "..yeah..I think her name's Lucrecia.."

No sooner had Davoren uttered her name, than Gerald spat out the coffee he was sipping. He appeared very excited all of a sudden.

"Are ye joking?!" he cried, grabbing Vincent's sleeve frantically, "Ye saved Lucrecia, did ye?!"

"Uh..yeah..I guess.."

"Aye! You lucky dog, you!!"

Several people in the cafe turned their heads towards the direction of the Turks. Cindy glared suspiciously at Gerald, not at all pleased with his obvious enthusiasm. She then began to coolly poke at her piece of cake with a fork. Davoren smoked his cigarette silently, wondering why that woman's name had aroused such excitement in this Turk.

"I bet she was all over ye!" laughed Gerald with a sly nudge, "C'mon! Out with it! What's she say to ye, lad?"

Vincent's cheeks flushed slightly in confusion: he could have said that Lucrecia had slapped him, called him a jackass amongst other things, then stormed away without any thanks. But instead, Vincent only answered, "Nothing, actually...she just walked away."

"Don't be too disappointed, lad," Gerald sighed, "She's always after giving us poor men the brush-off. But damn me if she isn't a fine, pleasing lit'le thing!!"

"Huh! You seem to know a lot about Lucrecia, Gerald," Cindy muttered with apparent scorn. She placed one hand under her chin, and impertinently looked away.

"And who wouldn't?" he snapped back defiantly, "Just about every man here has noticed her! But she always gives 'em the cold-shoulder!"

Vincent tapped the table top, sorry he had mentioned the subject. Davoren continued to puff at his cigarette quietly. This conversation only interested him mildly.

"She only thinks of her work," Gerald complained, turning to Vincent again, "All she ever does is run around that lab upstairs. She won't even give a man a chance to open his mouth 'afore she walks away! Aye, she's too obsessed with her job, she is."

"I believe the word is 'dedicated'," corrected Cindy.

"Mebbe so...but what an absolute angel! A beautiful face! A nice lit'le waist I'm sure any man'd love to hold..a pair of slender legs..an'.."

"Now, Gerald," Davoren scolded firmly, "None of THAT, please."

"I'm telling ye, lad," Gerald resumed after he apologized, "I once tried to chat her up. Dammy, she wouldn't let me finish me sentence! She just brushed past me like I wasn't there at all! I think it was me accent she didn't like."

"Yeah..that must've been it," Cindy mumbled sarcastically. She only "humph"ed when Gerald glared at her.

"Ey! Ey! Lemme tell ye this story, lad!" Gerald resumed, much amused, "See, every man in ShinRa was interested in Lucrecia when she first came. One day, Donal went up to her an'.."

But the minute he blurted out that name, Gerald instantly smacked both hands over his mouth. Cindy gave a violent start at the name, then darted her head towards Davoren in alarm. Vincent looked around at the nervous company, wondering why the name "Donal" frightened the two Turks so much.

Davoren, however, puffed out a cloud of smoke in a very cool manner, as though Gerald had said nothing at all.

"D..Davoren..Sir..," Gerald stammered anxiously, "I..I'm sorry..I shouldn't ha'.."

"Excuse me," Davoren replied curtly, "The President said he wanted to see me now."

After carelessly flicking his cigarette into the ashtray, Davoren walked away from the group. He said nothing more.

An unnatural silence fell on the group when their leader had left.

The remaining three Turks, especially Cindy and Gerald, fidgeted nervously in their seats. Judging from their apparent embarrassment, Vincent guessed this "Donal" fellow bore great importance to Davoren. Gerald coughed to ease the tension, but that only added to his awkwardness. Cindy's brown eyes flared up at him in anger. "

You and your big mouth!!" she snapped at him all of a sudden, "You just HAD to mention Donal! Couldn't sleep tonight unless you said his name, could you?!"

"Look, I'm sorry!" Gerald apologized fiercely, "I didn't mean to say his name!! It was a flippin' accident!!!! Alright?!!!"

The two dissenting Turks began to argue vehemently, one accusing while the other defending, until Vincent asked bluntly "Who's Donal?"

Both Turks stopped short on hearing the simple question, then suddenly fell quiet again. Vincent watched them hum and haw for a full minute, each waiting for the other to speak first.

"Donal was the Turk before ye, lad," Gerald finally replied, "..He was Davoren's lit'le brother...his only brother.."

Vincent was silent for a moment before he inquired, "Did he have a fight with Davoren? Is that why you're not supposed to mention his name?"

"No. Donal disappeared...about seven months ago..and still 'aven't been found yet."

In half an hour, the two Turks had finished recounting the full story: Donal, a sprightly young man barely 21 years old, was sent on a simple escort mission to some remote town called Wutai. One week later, he mysteriously disappeared.

Naturally, ShinRa Inc. combed the entire island for Donal, questioned several witnesses, even sent a full search party to Wutai. Nothing. The Turk had simply vanished off the face of the earth.

"But the mongrels searched for only two weeks!" remarked Gerald contemptuously, "Full search party', bloody muck! They never even found his body!"

Nevertheless, Donal was declared to be dead, at least officially. ShinRa, indeed gave up the costly search after only two weeks, and easily found a substitute: Vincent.

However, Davoren angrily demanded ShinRa continue the search for his missing brother. When President ShinRa refused, Davoren insulted the man straight to his face, then signed his own resignation paper: If ShinRa would not search for his brother, he personally would.

"He..quit??" Vincent interrupted in amazement.

"No way!" Cindy answered, shaking her head vigorously, "The President refused point blank to accept Davoren's resignation, even after all the insults. Good Turks like him are hard to find, if you know what I mean."

"So..what happened after that?"

"Well, Davoren kept on insisting his brother was alive, and ShinRa kept on telling him he was dead, until the poor man had a serious mental breakdown. They even had to hospitalize him later on."

"Aye," Gerald agreed with a melancholy sigh, "Davoren had practically raised his little brother. And when he lost him so suddenly, ye might say he lost his will to live as well."

The President, realizing how devastating the loss had been on Davoren, immediately granted him an extended vacation for three months; to "get his life back together", as he later expressed. Gerald and Cindy, under the President's orders, advised Davoren to take the needed vacation, and stay in ShinRa. Too heartbroken to argue, Davoren eventually agreed.

"Y'know that day we stormed the Reactor was his first day back on the job," Cindy concluded at last, "He appears to be coping well..but I don't think he ever recovered from the blow."

A heavy silence fell on the three Turks again, making them appear very awkward to the other people in the cafe; even the waitress who brought them the check could not help giving them an odd look. Cindy gazed vacantly at Gerald twirl his fork between his clumsy fingers. Vincent placed one hand under his chin, and stared at the dismal grey skyline outside the huge glazed windows.

He felt particularly embarrassed for starting this conversation. His mind fumbled for some excuse to leave until the intercom on the wall saved him.

"Mr. Valentine," called a clear voice through the intercom, "Please report to the President's office. Mr. Valentine to the President's office."

Vincent immediately rose to leave, mumbling a hurried farewell to the two Turks. However, Cindy stood up with him as well.

"Wait, I'll walk you there, Vincent," she smiled coquettishly, glancing at the astonished Gerald for a moment, "I have something very important to tell you."

Before Vincent had a chance to protest, the woman slipped her graceful arm around his, and smiled so innocently into his face so as to render him silent. Gerald, fuming with rage for some unknown reason, scoffed audibly as he turned his head away from the two. Cindy pretended she had seen nothing, then sweetly pulled Vincent out of the cafe.

"Heh heh," she sniggered when they had left, "Gerald's so cute when he gets angry.."

The two walked down the corridor to the President's office, brushing past employees who bustled about to finish their work. It was already six o'clock in the evening. Vincent did not quite understand what "important" thing Cindy wished to tell him, but asked no questions.

She probably just wanted to tease Gerald..the little flirt, he thought to himself.

As the two ascended the steps to the office, Cindy suddenly tugged Vincent's arm to stop him. Her face still retained a childishly sweet expression, but her brown eyes lit up with a cunning gleam.

"Hey, Vincent," she whispered, peering slyly into his quizzical face, "Do you know *who* asked me about you yesterday?"

From her guileful look and playful voice, Vincent guessed he should know. Unfortunately, no one came to his mind. He only shrugged his shoulders defeatedly.

"Why, Lucrecia, silly!" she announced.

"What?!" he cried, completely stunned with the answer.

"Oh, yeah, it's true," Cindy resumed innocently, "See, yesterday, I was hanging around the Main Reception Hall, when she walked up to me. She asked me if I knew a Turk called 'Valentine'. Of course, I pretended I was stupid and asked her to describe you for me, which she did. I could tell she was REALLY interested in you just from the way she described you."

Vincent blinked in surprise at her. Her sinister artfulness simply astounded him.

"Oh! I said, 'THAT Valentine!'. So, I told her a bit about you," Cindy laughed, winking at him, "Don't worry, I put in a good word for you."

He only managed to nod his head as acknowledgment for her kindness.

"I'm happy she's interested in you, Vincent," Cindy smiled angelically, "Goodness only knows WHAT I would have done to her if she were interested in Gerald. She would have made me really jealous!"

So, with another carefree laugh, Cindy bade Vincent a sweet adieu, and skipped down the stairs. Vincent's eyes followed her until she had disappeared from his sight, then resumed his journey up the steps.

He had plenty of time to collect his scattered thoughts; plenty of time to push away all those "useless frivolities" and "silly nonsense". So that by the time he reached the President's office, Vincent had completely re-focused his mind on his job.

-End of Chp.17

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.18

President ShinRa made no secret of his love for ostentatious luxury, as could be guessed from his enormous office which occupied the entire 70th floor.

This spacious office, bordered with glazed windows all around, betrayed every sign of incredible wealth and comfort. The marble floor was impeccably waxed everyday. Large, elaborate lanterns illuminated every corner of the office, for the sole purpose of showing off the magnitude of the room.

But most importantly, the President's impressive desk dominated the entire front of the office. It rigidly curved into a U-shape, with all sorts of screen monitors, buttons, and speakers adorning its interior. Many had described this famous desk as the symbol of the vast wealth ShinRa had accumulated in a mere three years.

Vincent marched into this office, looking as morose and serious as ever. The ShinRa President, who was ranting angrily into the phone, beckoned for the Turk to step forward. Vincent obediently stood in front of the large desk, and waited for the President to address him.

Though ShinRa was around 28 years old, he looked much older. His short, corpulent figure tended to waddle whenever he moved excitedly about the room. His coarse, mustard-coloured hair had been forcefully combed back, while a trim moustache outlined his upper lip. Virtually everyone agreed ShinRa's most prominent feature was his nose. Indeed, it was a snub-shaped, stubby nose with wide nostrils. To be blunt, he was hopelessly ugly.

Nevertheless, what ShinRa lacked in looks, he cleverly made up in style. His smart, dark-pink suit was undoubtedly tailored in the very best of shops. He always propped the most expensive fountain pen in his breast pocket, even though he never used it. A magnificent moonstone ring adorned his fat middle finger, and magically shimmered whenever his hand moved.

But his most beloved article of luxury, besides his impressive desk, was his specially imported cigars. Vincent could not remember him without a cigar stuck either in his mouth, or between his clumsy fingers.

When finally done heckling, President ShinRa slammed the phone shut with a violent oath. However, on noticing the Turk, his face shifted from a scowl to a good-natured, hideous smile. He automatically reached for a cigar.

"Ah, Vincent," he greeted as he lit the cigar, "And how is our newly-appointed Turk doing? Enjoying your job, I hope?"

"Yes, Sir," Vincent replied coldly but respectfully.

The President huffed out three perfect circles of smoke, watching them disappear into thin air with absurd fascination. Vincent did not flinch a muscle. He knew the President didn't call him just for an idle chat.

"Davoren just finished his report about you, Vincent," ShinRa chattered on, "And what a delightful report! He was really impressed with your gun skills, obedience, and a string of other things I can't remember at the moment. Now that's what I need, by Juniper! Good Turks who can take orders!"

Vincent merely pushed his black hair out of his face impatiently. He didn't find this praise very meaningful. The President began to rummage through a stack of papers heaped on his desk, laughing as happily as ever.

"Mind you," he joked without looking up, "If Davoren himself says you're good, then you MUST be good. It's not easy to impress that man. No! No!"

"Thank you, Sir."

"But he also said your 'sense of tactics' could use some help, especially in open, all-out combat," The President remarked. He pulled out some papers, then added playfully, "but this isn't military school, you know! This is a company! And it's about to become a monopoly very soon."

The President suddenly pressed a button on the intercom, and ordered sternly, "Bring him in to me now, Katya."

"Yes, Mr. President. Right away," replied a woman's voice. She sounded very annoyed.

The President took a huge whiff at his cigar. As he puffed out an impressive amount of smoke, he eyed the Turk very keenly. His two piggish eyes instantly lit up with a dark, evil fire.

Vincent saw he was finally getting to the point. "Tell me, Vincent," he said at last, "do you know who Mr. Hawking is?"

"Yes, Sir. He's the President of the Hawking Industrial Corporation of Midgar."

"Right on the nail!" laughed ShinRa, shaking his filthy cigar in Vincent's face, "And I made Gerald kidnap a 'bairn', to use his words. Can you guess whose?"

Vincent paused a moment before he answered, "I assume it is Hawking's child, Sir."

"Very good!" he beamed delightedly.

ShinRa hopped into his dark leather chair, still puffing his cigar smugly. He held his hand at arm's length, so as to study his beautiful moonstone ring, then continued, "See, that Hawking geezer thinks he can stand up against ME with his out-dated scrap of garbage he calls a 'company'. Did you know he hired those terrorists to destroy my Reactor?"

"Yes, Sir. I did."

"Now, I suppose I could be an uncivilized ass and tell you to go shoot him, like you did with the Mayor. On the other hand, I got this brilliant idea to get even with him! Yup, hang me if I'm not a genius!"

Vincent hoped he wasn't expected to answer that last comment.

The President roared with laughter at his "brilliant idea" until Katya, his secretary, stormed into his office with a sobbing young boy. The child, no older than eight, screamed furiously as the woman dragged him forward. He clutched at his stuffed toy as though it would somehow protect it from these strangers.

Vincent looked askance at the small, shrieking child, then understood why Gerald had been so annoyed that afternoon.

"Mr. President!!" Katya declared, exasperated beyond limits, "This brat is driving everyone nuts!! He hasn't stopped crying since he got here!! We tried T.V., stories, even lullabies for God's sake!! He will not shut up!!!"

The angry secretary gave the poor child a violent tug, which made him scream at the top of his lungs. Vincent fidgeted uncomfortably as the child's shrieks hammered his ears. However, the President beckoned for Katya to bring the boy over to him. She silently obeyed, only too glad to rid herself of the troublesome burden.

"Hey, kiddo! Why are you giving everyone such a hard time?" the President smiled amicably. He perched the sobbing child on his knees, then laughed, "C'mon! Tell Uncle ShinRa why you're crying so much?"

"I wah...I WANT MY DADDY!!!" screamed the pitiful boy. He then buried his tearful face in his stuffed toy, unable to say anymore.

"Aw! We're going to see Daddy right now!" comforted ShinRa kindly as he stroked the little boy's hair, "We're all going to see him! C'mon, now! Big boys never cry!"

The boy continued to sniffle loudly, but his shoulders stopped shaking. That last piece of news had somewhat comforted him.

"Hey! I know what you really want!" the President cried happily, "Lookie! Lookie! Candy tarts!!"

His fat hand immediately reached for the drawer, and pulled out a neat bowl full of colourful candies. The boy marveled at so many sweets, his wet eyes dazzled by the bright colours. He then looked amazedly at this ugly man.

"Well, go on! Take one. Hell, take as many as you want!" the President laughed, "Take it all, if you can have it all! That's what I always say!"

After some hesitation, the boy snatched a handful of sweets, and stuffed them into his mouth at once. ShinRa only redoubled his laughter at the boy's childish greediness.

"Say! What a cute little bear!" he exclaimed as he patted the stuffed toy, "What's his name?"

"Woody," the boy sniffled with a mouthful of sweets.

"Here you go, Woody! Have some candy tarts too!" The President chuckled, pretending to give the toy some sweets.

So, in a mere ten minutes, the illustrious President ShinRa had not only silenced the sobbing child, but had also made great friends with him. The boy squealed with laughter, and prattled on about many things (like Woody, his best friend Mark, and Daddy's garden). Vincent was certainly impressed.

When the President finally placed the boy back on the ground, he slowly got up from his leather seat. He took a last whiff at his beloved cigar, then flung it away in a silver ashtray nearby.

"Katya," he ordered sternly, "Tell Davoren to get the car ready. We leave in fifteen minutes."

Katya, absolutely stunned by his success with the child, immediately scurried away to fulfill his wishes. ShinRa took the boy's little hand in his awkward paw, but stared straight at Vincent's face. That carefree, inane smile had been replaced by a serious, business-like expression.

"You're coming too, Mr. Valentine," the President stated, "We're paying a little visit to Mr. Hawking's mansion. Be sure you're downstairs on time. Dismissed."

Vincent, after a respectful bow, silently marched out of the luxurious office.

The child's happy laughter still rang in his ears, even after he had entered the glazed elevator and sealed himself inside. The slow elevator steadily journeyed down to the ground floor. Vincent leaned his back against the elevator wall with folded arms, and gazed meditatively at the grim Midgar skyline outside. It was already pitch black outside.

He had a vague idea what the President intended to do with that child: most probably some kind of revenge on Hawking for disrupting his Reactor. But Vincent also strongly suspected an ulterior motive for kidnapping Hawking's son. If not, then why didn't he order Gerald to just kill the boy?

Thus argued Vincent in his brain, debating about what secret motive the boy could serve. So engrossed in his private thoughts, he hardly noticed the elevator halt momentarily to admit another person inside. His idle eyes happened to glance at the new passenger. Much to his astonishment, it was Lucrecia.

The woman fidgeted at the far end of the elevator, staring timidly at the Turk from the corner of her eye. Her cheeks flushed when he had finally noticed her, but she kept her soft eyes fixed on his face.

Vincent, of course, straightened himself up at once. He ran his fingers through his thick, black hair as he cast his nervous eyes to the ground. Not knowing what else to do, he thrust both hands into his pockets, and turned away from the embarrassed young woman.

The pain of her slap pricked his cheek again. He could still recall how badly it had stung him for a full hour afterwards; he had even considered putting some ice on it.

Yet strange, he could not quite remember Lucrecia's actual face. In fact, she had been severely blurred in his memory during the last three days. Vincent glimpsed very quickly at her, but long enough to see all her face.

Gerald hadn't exaggerated one bit when he had described Lucrecia as "beautiful". Her long, brown hair had been carefully braided behind her head, with some loose strands dangling around her delicate face. Her gentle eyes shone softly through her smart glasses, making her lovely face appear even more graceful.

She wore a long, white lab coat which dismally failed to conceal the slimness of her body. Her hands struggled vigorously to carry several files and a large book, while at the same time balance her briefcase.

An extremely awkward silence dominated the elevator for a full minute. Vincent lacked the courage to open his mouth for fear of angering her (or getting slapped again). And besides, what could he possibly tell her?

Cindy's playful words floated back to his mind. It then occurred to him that *Lucrecia* had been asking about him just yesterday.

"How..how is your arm, Mr. Valentine, Sir?" Lucrecia asked all of a sudden. She looked anxiously at his face as she pushed her glasses up her nose.

Vincent stared blankly at her for a moment.

"My arm??" he echoed in amazement.

"Yes, Sir. The one that got shot."

"Oh! My arm!" he started, understanding her at last, "..er..it's fine, thanks to you. you warned me just in time."

"Good...I..I'm very pleased to hear that," she faltered nervously. Suddenly, one of her clumsy files crashed onto the ground, scattering all its papers around the poor woman's feet. Lucrecia's cheeks flushed heavily with complete mortification. Vincent automatically crouched down to gather the file for her.

"NO!NO! I'll get that!!" she cried in alarm. In a flash, she bent down to snatch the file out of his hands. Her nervous hands quickly stuffed all the dispersed papers into the file. she sprang back up to her feet just as the elevator door withdrew on the ground floor. After mumbling some obscure apology, Lucrecia bolted out of the elevator in a panic.

Without another look back, she dashed through the reception hall, nearly knocking over some employee with a stack full of papers. Lucrecia ran out the main entrance, and Vincent saw her no more.

He followed her a couple of steps, but soon halted in the middle of the reception hall, completely dumbstruck. He had only exchanged a few words with her; what on earth could he have said to upset her so badly?

As he scratched the back of his head thoughtfully, his eyes caught two yellow sheets of papers helplessly crushed underneath his foot. He picked them up curiously.

They must have slipped out of her file, Vincent reflected.

Even though they were two sheets of ordinary paper, he flicked through them with strange interest. Neat, tiny handwriting completely covered one page, while the other contained a little sketch with the name "JENOVA" scribbled underneath it. Vincent studied the sketch, trying to figure out what it should be. Unfortunately, his shoe had dirtied it beyond recognition.

After a moment's thought, Vincent carefully folded the two sheets and slipped them into his breast pocket. He would return them first thing in the morning...

But for now, he must concentrate on his job.

-End of Chp.18

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.19

The Hawking Mansion, comfortably snuggled in the far outskirts of Midgar, overlooked one of the most magnificent gardens ever seen. This impressive house, with beautifully stained windows and a pea-green brass gate, betrayed great signs of aristocratic taste. Large bay windows bulged between the marble columns that extended high up to the roof. In addition, green ivy leaves crawled over parts of the mansion, adding to its magical charm.

As night finally devoured the sky, a pearly round moon hung itself high above the beautiful mansion. Silence crept around the majestic garden, shushing any kind of disruptive noise. But while this death-like stillness hovered outside the mansion, a bright, warm light flickered through one of the upper windows inside. Occasionally, an obscure shadow peeked through the curtains, then reluctantly retreated back.

Silence ruled the garden supreme until a black, shiny car ruthlessly shattered the tranquility into oblivion. It noisily invaded the garden, zooming over the cobblestone path. As the car neared the mansion, it gradually slowed down until finally halting at the large brass gate.

Davoren, who had been the driver, immediately alighted the black car to open the door for President ShinRa. At the same time, Vincent dismounted with the little child sleeping soundly between his arms. Because his cold face had frightened the boy to silence, Vincent had been unanimously chosen to manage the child in the car. The boy soon had fallen asleep in the Turk's lap, exhausted with all his previous crying.

Vincent refused to comment when the President had called the spectacle "cute".

After gently nudging the sleeping child, Vincent set him on his two little feet, making sure the boy held onto his precious teddy bear. The sleepy boy blinked in silent wonder at the giant mansion, then stared way up at this tower of a Turk who had brought him here. Vincent watched the child closely lest he would try to "misbehave". The child, of course, dared not even move a muscle under the Turk's keen, cold eyes.

President ShinRa clumsily hopped out of the car, brushing the sleeve of his elegant suit. As he selected a cigar from his golden case, his piggish eyes happened to spot a black figure in the lit window above. However, this mysterious shadow soon disappeared again.

Davoren silently lit the cigar for the President, then marched up to the huge brass gate. He only banged the heavy door-knocker one before a thin, drawn butler emerged through the gateway. He scanned the three guests insolently, giving Vincent a dirty look in particular (maybe because he happened to be nearest to the child). Without a word, the servant admitted them into the mansion, and slammed the gate shut again.

The butler led the three visitors through the grand marble hall, and directly up the broad steps to Mr. Hawking's study room. Every object in this impressive hallway expressed elegant taste: a huge, brown vase embellished in gold occupied one entire corner, while various exotic plants and expensive oil paintings adorned the creamy-white stone walls. Thick velvet curtains heavily draped the large window at the landing of the staircase. Indeed, Mr. Hawking was well known for his fondness of classic antiques.

President ShinRa could not help but whistle in genuine admiration.

"What a beautiful mansion! Hawking sure has exquisite taste, eh Chuckles?" he laughed, addressing the stiff butler in front of him.

The indignant servant immediately turned to answer the President, but the cold look on both Turks strongly discouraged him. Instead, he conducted these unwanted guests to the study room as quickly as possible. Vincent dragged the child along in an iron grip, even though he knew fully well the little boy wouldn't dream of escape.

They finally reached the study room at the end of the hallway. The butler opened the stout oak doors for the visitors, giving each man a scornful look as he entered, then closed the doors after them.

The guests stepped into a spacious, square room, with a large bay window exactly opposite the door. Two stately bookshelves stretched along the two walls, interrupted occasionally by a bronze statue or a beautiful painting. A majestic mahogany desk occupied the end of the room, demanding the admiration of all beholders. The three men found Mr. Hawking seated at this ornate desk, with nervous fingers twiddling anxiously.

His grey eyes flared up furiously as President ShinRa swaggered into the room, followed by his two tall bodyguards. Vincent lingered a few steps behind the President with the child loosely held in his hand. Davoren stood directly in front of the heavy oak doors to bar any "uninvited" guests from intruding into this private meeting.

Both Turks had assumed a hard, business-like air, while ShinRa smiled and puffed coolly at his cigar. One would have thought he were Hawking's best friend.

"Good evening, Mr. Hawking," greeted the ShinRa President amicably, "I was just telling your butler what a fine house you got here."

"Bastard!!" roared Mr. Hawking at the top of his lungs. He sprang up to his feet and slammed the desk with both fists, "What have you done with my son, you despicable..."

"Tsk! Language, Mr. Hawking!" The President scolded playfully as he shook his fat finger, "You shouldn't swear in front of little children. They're so impressionable."

Saying that, President ShinRa stepped aside to let Mr. Hawking see his precious son. On spotting his father, the poor child shrieked "Daddy!". But before he could dash to his father, Vincent snagged his collar forcefully to hold him back. Davoren fixed his gaze on the struggling child who screamed in fear, yet said nothing.

Vincent stared coldly down at the little boy squirm around in his tight grip. He did not speak either.

"Now now!" ShinRa laughed at the pitiful child, "You mustn't interrupt when grown-ups are busy talking! That's very rude!"

"Let him go!! I demand you release him now!!" thundered Mr. Hawking, much enraged by the rough treatment of his son.

President ShinRa, with his cigar stuck between his twisted lips, eyes this incensed man contemptuously. The child's cried grew louder until Vincent cut him short with a sharp twist of the collar. The boy choked between sobs, but dared not scream anymore.

"You 'demand'?" ShinRa echoed mockingly, "Pardon me if I beg to differ, Sir. It's the other way around: I demand, *YOU* obey."

A heavy silence filled the room for a moment. It obviously took Mr. Hawking a great deal of restraint to soothe his raging emotions. His anxious eyes continuously returned to his son, then shot up to Vincent's cold face. They silently implored the Turk to be more gentle with his beloved son.

But Vincent still kept a tight grip around the boy's collar.

"What..what do you want?" Mr. Hawking finally muttered. He turned to ShinRa with clenched fists and angry eyes.

"Compensation for the damage of my Reactor," he stated, puffing a full cloud of filthy smoke into his enemy's face.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Sir."

"Oh! I'm sorry!" cried ShinRa sarcastically. He even smacked his puffy cheek in feigned embarrassment, "Lord mercy! I must have mistook you for ANOTHER Hawking who hired some shit-heads to disrupt my Reactor!"

"Sir!" Hawking retorted indignantly, "If you go so far as to accuse me of hiring some terrorists to 'disrupt' your Reactor, then I assure you, I haven't.."

"We have several documentations which are solid proof your involvement, Sir," Vincent interjected in a factual tone, "The documents clearly account the sum of money paid to the terrorists. In addition, they specifically enumerate the guns and ammunition supplied to those same men by your company."

Hawking was dumbstruck.

"Furthermore, Sir," continued Davoren instead, "We have numerous witnesses linking your agents to the terrorists. Finally, reliable sources indicate those terrorists had disrupted the ShinRa Reactor under your direct orders."

Mr. Hawking gaped at the two men, crushed by the accumulation of evidence against him. His alarmed eyes darted from Vincent to Davoren in search of pity. But neither Turk would involve himself in this discourse, and stared coldly back at the crushed man. Their sole purpose had been to state the evidence.

"See, it's not a question of whether you did it or not, Hawking," sneered ShinRa triumphantly, "It's rather how much compensation will you pay me. Do you understand, or do you want them to repeat all that again?"

Hawking turned his head proudly to ShinRa, still too dignified to admit his involvement. The child stared tearfully at his "Daddy", but the grip on his collar barely allowed him to breathe let alone cry out. The two Turks kept their cool eyes riveted on the two presidents, awaiting any further orders.

"If I pay you, will you release my son?" Hawking muttered through grit teeth. His eyes flared up angrily at President ShinRa's pudgy face.

"Well, it depends. How much WILL you pay?"

Hawking paused a moment, then stated, "Ten million gil."

The President frowned at the generous sum, then began to waddle around the room, followed by the eyes of all those present.

"Now, lemme see," he thought aloud, "Your thugs barge into my Reactor, threaten to kill my employees, including my best scientist, unless I shut it down. Not only that, they endanger the lives of my Turks."

President ShinRa stopped at a marble bust of Mr. Hawking placed on a low silver column. His mean eyes studied the sculpture with evident interest. He then puffed smoke in its white face, and tapped his dirty cigar over its head.

"Of course," the President resumed, "they end up destroying my furnace, a pressure gasket, pipes, and a whole list of other things that's gonna cost me a fortune to repair! You can bet your sweet patootie it will, Mac!!"

He marched straight up to Mr. Hawking, his repulsive, bloated face fuming with increasing rage.

"And finally, one of your shitty goons fell into my materia reservoir and clogged up the main drain! What fun we had fishing out his carcass And you offer me a measly ten million gil for ALL that?! I make 100 times that in one day!!"

Mr. Hawking's eyes tensed in alarm. Sweat trickled down his wrinkled forehead. He had expected ShinRa to be quite pleased with the sum.

"Now, if you really want to compensate me, Hawking," ShinRa said after he had calmed himself, "Give me your company, and watch me crush it in front of your eyes."

Hawking's mouth dropped in astonishment at the outrageous proposal.

"WHAT?!!!" he shouted, wild with rage.

"If ShinRa Inc. becomes a monopoly," the ShinRa President explained sternly, "I could make more money than your puny brain can ever dream of. I'll be so busy counting my new profits, I just might forget this nasty incident. So, what will it be, old man? Is it a deal?"

Mr. Hawking broke away with a violent oath. He stormed up to his desk, then suddenly turned around to face the three hateful guests. Though he addressed ShinRa, his wild eyes focused right on Vincent's face, as if daring him to harm his son.

"My company was built by generations of Hawkings!" he thundered indignantly, "I will not hand over my company to a young, miserable upstart like YOU, Sir! Nor will I surrender the toil of my grandfathers for your grubby hands to wreck and make money off!! I do not regret what I did to your disgusting Reactor! You're nothing but a greedy, money-minded pig only concerned with your petty profits!! Rot in Hell!!!"

Both Turks exchanged a significant look, but immediately fixed their cold eyes back on their President. President ShinRa stared at his enemy, much impressed with his passionate outburst. He even flung his cigar on the carpet, and clapped his "grubby" hands in mocked admiration.

Vincent narrowed his bright eyes, expecting some upcoming command any minute.

"Nice speech, Hawking. I'm touched, really!" President Shinra applauded with an evil grin. He suddenly stopped, and scoffed at the proud man.

"Vincent," the President ordered coldly, "shoot the kid."

Davoren gave a violent start on hearing the command.

Vincent immediately yanked the small child off his feet by the collar and held him at eye-level. The boy struggled wildly for air amidst choked sobs until Vincent pressed the cold muzzle of his gun against his little head. The child instantly froze solid, his bleary eyes staring straight at his horrified father. He could not breathe anymore.

"STOP!! WH..WHAT ARE YOU DOING??!!!" cried Mr.Hawking in alarm. His wild eyes darted between President ShinRa and Vincent, "LEAVE HIM ALONE!! HE'S JUST A BABY!!!"

The ShinRa President gave Vincent a meaningful look, then waddled over to the petrified Hawking. Vincent felt the child's body grow heavy, but still kept the gun at his small head. Davoren stared intently at Vincent from behind.

"You can't have your cake and eat it, Mr. Hawking," sneered ShinRa contemptuously, "It's either your company OR your son."

"HAVE YOU NO CONSCIENCE, MAN??!!" cried the anguished Mr. Hawking, looking straight at Vincent in horror, "HAVE YOU NO HEART??!! YOU CAN'T SHOOT A CHILD!! YOU CAN'T!!!"

Vincent stared stoically back at the poor men. He did not flinch.

"Of course he can!" ShinRa answered, "I pay him to shoot whoever I want shot!! You think he'll give a SHIT if he kills a little brat?! Go on, Vincent! Shoot him!!!"

"NO!! NO!! STOP!!!"

Mr. Hawking collapsed to his trembling knees, his grey eyes flooding with tears. The President looked down at his enemy's shaking body, then gave both Turks a triumphant wink. Neither man winced a muscle, or opened his mouth.

"T..take my company if you want it, ShinRa!!" Hawking cried, burying his ashen face in both hands, "Take my house...take my life if that's what you want!! But please..PLEASE..don't..don't harm my son!!"

The pathetic man could not say anymore. He broke down into violent sobs, mumbling broken sentences to the three guests. The President let the man weep for a full minute, then decided to "finish him off".

"You're lucky your son put me in such a good mood, Hawking," he began amicably, "I was going to suck you dry then just kill your son after I was done."

Mr. Hawking shot up his head in disbelief. It had never occurred to him this despicable man would have extorted him to that extent. He was speechless.

"But, I'm afraid your son has entertained me too greatly for me to kill him," the President laughed. Suddenly, he cut himself short, and stared ominously down at Mr. Hawking, "Don't mess with me, old man, or next time you won't find me in such a good mood."

The stunned Mr. Hawking shivered violently at the threatening tone. The President raised one brow as if to say "Understood?", then marched towards the oak doors, saying, "Expect a visit from my lawyers about all the paper work. Pleasure doing business with you, Sir. Toodles!"

Davoren immediately opened the door for the victorious President, then followed him out of the study room. Without a word, Vincent dropped the half-dead child to the ground. He watched him totter away to his sobbing father, gasping and choking all the way. Mr. Hawking instantly embraced his precious son with all his might. He was completely broken.

The child, who understood nothing, peeked over his father's shoulder to look at his tormentor. His small, round eyes gaped in wonder at Vincent's tall figure and cold.

However, Vincent only thrust his gun into its holster as he marched out of the room. He did not bother looking back at the stunned, little child he would have killed.

And his heart felt nothing.

-End of Chp.19

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.20

"Where to now, Sir?" Davoren asked after they had driven out of the Hawking Garden.

"Hmm...lemme check..," President ShinRa replied, pulling out his small social calendar.

The car zoomed across the lonely highway, flying past the dark trees which outlined both sides of the road. In the distance, the brilliant city of Midgar sprouted out of the black ground to illuminate the sky high above. Davoren diverted the car from the endless highway, and headed straight to the dazzling city ahead.

President ShinRa lounged comfortably on the back seat of the car, flicking through his little book. His two Turks occupied the front. Davoren drove the car, while Vincent brooded out the window, his hand under his chin. He gazed absent-mindedly at the trees and occasional lamp-post whiz by his idle eyes.

"Oh joy," the President grumbled sarcastically, "I have yet another dinner party with those boring Morgan's. All they ever do is gab away about their holidays in Costa del Sol...as if I give a damn."

Davoren glanced at the exasperated President through the front mirror, then steered the car into another black road. He silently headed directly to the Morgan's grand villa at the very end of Midgar. The black hills carelessly rolled past the car as it journeyed down the snake-like road. Vincent noticed a thick blanket of grey clouds crawl up the sky towards the tranquil moon. Rain loomed in the bleak horizon.

Nobody spoke a word during the long trip, though sometimes the President hummed a familiar tune to break the silence. In truth, neither Turk felt very inclined to speak in the presence of President ShinRa, as though he evoked some repulsive feeling in their hearts.

"Say, Vincent," the President addressed, breaking off in the middle of his song, "If I hadn't looked at you in time, would you have shot that child?"

Vincent sat upright on hearing the simple question, his eyes glimpsing at Davoren for some reason. However, the man drove on without even taking his eyes off the road; the question did not seem to interest him at all.

"Yes, Sir," Vincent replied indifferently, "If that were your order, then I would have obeyed it."

"Even though you knew it was a little, innocent child?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Yeah, I thought so too," agreed President ShinRa pensively, "You put that gun against his little head so easily; like you were combing your hair or putting on your coat. And when I saw your face, yup! I just knew you *would* shoot the kid."

Vincent folded his arms very uncomfortably as the President's crude analysis continued. Davoren glanced askance at the morose Turk, but otherwise, kept his focus on the ever-winding road.

"I like your style, Mr. Valentine," the President chuckled, examining his shimmering moonstone ring, "Strict obedience is a quality I definitely admire in a man. Davoren didn't exaggerate when he said you literally took an order without question."

"Thank you, Sir."

"What about you, Davoren?" President ShinRa asked slyly. He shuffled his bulky body to the other end of the car so as to see the man, "What would YOU have done if I gave you that order?"

Davoren silently turned the wheel of the car as though he had not heard the playful question; nor did the illustrious President ShinRa insist on an immediate reply. In fact, he seemed to have already guessed the answer. Vincent gazed outside the window again, relieved to be free at last.

"I would have done exactly what Vincent did, Sir," Davoren answered finally, "I would have yanked up the child, and pressed my gun against his head, just like he did."

"I believe you," the President laughed, studying the man's face from the side, "But would you have shot him? An honest answer now! I know you never lie, Davoren. Would you have actually shot the child?"

He paused a moment before saying, "No, Sir. I would not have shot the child."

"Even if I, your President and superior, ordered you to?"

"Yes, Sir. Even then, I would not have shot the child."

With a good-natured laugh, the President lit a cigar for himself and leaned back in his seat. He bore a striking resemblance to a pig with his ugly, bloated face and twinkling eyes. An insolent, broad grin contorted his lips as he puffed at his cigar. Davoren seemed to exert all his strength not to look at this repulsive man. His cool eyes were rigidly fixed on the road.

"I knew you wouldn't," commented the President after a pause, "Which is exactly why I chose Vincent to manage the child. Sometimes, Davoren, I wonder how you can still be my most reliable Turk when you tell me bluntly that you won't obey my orders."

"You misunderstand me, Sir," Davoren replied dryly but calmly, "I merely said I would not have shot the child."

Vincent eyed Davoren very curiously, then glanced back at the fat President. He recalled Gerald and Cindy recounting the story about their leader insulting the President straight to his face. Davoren certainly sounded quite capable of repeating the incident, judging from his annoyed, restrained voice.

"Oh, tut tut!" laughed the President, amused with the Turk's vexation, "I won't hold your honesty against you, Davoren. Why, you're the only man I'd trust my life with! C'mon, don't be angry."

Davoren's hard eyes glanced at the President through the front mirror, but immediately shot back to the road ahead. He increased the speed of the car slightly.

Probably to get rid of him sooner, Vincent mused, can't say I blame him.

"One would think that because I threatened the child, Hawking crumbled down," President ShinRa stated after a pause, "but that's not true! You see, gentleman, Hawking's OWN folly brought him down."

The two Turks exchanged a significant look, bracing themselves for the upcoming speech. Vincent kept his arms folded across his chest, while Davoren busied himself with the driving.

"Hawking could have got away with destroying my Reactor if not for this one flaw: parental love," ShinRa coughed importantly, "Now, if he were smart, he would've let Vincent kill his son, and then he'd keep his company. What could I have done to him THEN? Nothing!"

The President took a huge whiff at his cigar, excited by the prospect of honouring his two Turks with another speech. indeed, ShinRa was quite notorious for spouting out speeches on the spur of the moment.

"But since the old geezer loved his son, it was easy to break his proud, scrawny spine. The minute I threatened his son, his parental love got in the way, and now he's lost everything...just for a little brat!"

The joke was too delicious. His portly belly heaved as the President burst into coarse, loud laughter. he tried once or twice to continue, but every time fell back to the same insolent laughter. Vincent rolled his eyes away in disgust. Davoren, however, seemed to bear the man's crudity better.

"You can't blame it on love, Sir," Davoren commented composedly, "After all, parental affection is only part human nature."

The President puffed out an impressive amount of smoke, then gazed thoughtfully outside the foggy window. His pudgy face had changed drastically from silly to serious, but his eyes still glittered with evil playfulness.

"I have this theory, Davoren," he began again as he studied his dirty cigar, "See, life is simply a series of business transactions with variable profits. Even child conception is a business transaction, and the profit is product you get when the child grows up."

Neither Turk cared to comment on the analogy.

"Yes, children are the perfect investment, because you're creating a business partner for yourself. You can mould the child's personality to suit your own liking, and use him in your business. If you waste your time on 'parental affection', then you lose it all...just like Hawking did tonight."

President ShinRa smiled smugly at his misconceived eloquence. Except for the monotonous humming of the zooming car, no one interrupted the silence.

"Heh, but that's not how MY son is gonna be. No sir!" President ShinRa muttered through his big cigar, "We won't waste his time or mine on that sappy, sentimental nonsense of 'parental affection'. He's gonna be my business partner, moulded by my two hands."

"I wasn't aware you were planning on having a son, Sir?" remarked Davoren with a faint smile.

"Huh! Of course I plan on having a son! You think I'd let the City Counsel and blood-thirsty tax-collectors gobble up my money after I die? Heh heh... what a shock they'll get when they see my son just like me..Hell, no! MUCH worse than me!"

The ShinRa President exploded into another bout of laughter, then concluded amusedly, "Yes, much, much worse than me. So much that if some idiot holds a gun against my head and says 'do this and that, or I'll kill your daddy', my son would snap his fingers in the man's face and say 'Good riddance! Kill him, for all I care!'"

Nobody answered him. Davoren turned the car around another obscure bend, and sped up the black hill. Vincent, with both arms still folded, cast his eyes down on his lap. A disgusting, sour feeling tickled his throat.

"THAT is how the perfect father-son relationship should be," the President remarked knowledgeably, "100%, affection-free, business! What do you think, Vincent?"

"I don't know, Sir," Vincent replied dryly, "I have no intentions of having any children, at least not in the near future."

"Feh! If I had a fraction of your looks, buddy, I'd be making children left and right," ShinRa remarked under his breath, then laughed out loud, "Oh well! Live with what you got, I suppose..Ah! are we there already?"

They had, indeed, finally reached the grand villa of the wealthy Morgan's. Built about a century ago, this house spread itself all over the hill top, with three marvelous gables jutting out of the stone facade. White marble steps led up to the main entrance, where Mrs. Morgan was busy greeting the arriving guests.

Davoren halted the car at the foot of the marble staircase. He shifted in his seat to alight the car, but President ShinRa stopped him with a wave of his hand.

"Don't bother escorting me, Davoren," he laughed, reaching for the door handle, "I can walk myself up the stairs."

President ShinRa stumbled out of the car just as Mrs. Morgan flew down the steps to greet her new visitor. They exchanged a friendly greeting, the President complimenting her exquisite pearl necklace. The kind, simple-minded woman offered some "tea and crumpets" for the two Turks, but they politely refused the generous offer; they had to report back to ShinRa headquarters.

"Come back here at two in the morning," the President ordered Davoren before leaving the car, "That's as early as I can make it."

"Yes, Sir. Enjoy the dinner."

The two Turks watched the corpulent President waddle up the marble steps, with Mrs. Morgan chattering by his side. When ShinRa had finally disappeared into the grand villa, Davoren pressed his forehead against the car wheel. His whole countenance betrayed immense fatigue mixed with vexation.

"You live in the ShinRa Apartment Complex, right?" he sighed without looking up.

"Yes, Sir."

"I'll drive you there, then head back to head quarters. No point two of us waiting for him."

Without another word, Davoren back tracked out of the gravel path, and fled through the bronze gates down the hill. Soon, the car was zooming on the main highway again, heading straight for Midgar. It began to rain.

Neither Turk spoke for a long time. Davoren focused his full attention on the black, empty road. Vincent glimpsed at his leader once or twice, but gazed mostly out the misty window. His dull mind drifted from one trifling to another as grey shadows whizzed past the window. He felt very tired.

"Tell me, Vincent," began Davoren, breaking the stuffy silence, "What do you think of the ShinRa President?"

Vincent turned his head to Davoren suspiciously, then mumbled, "I don't know, Sir."

"Oh, c'mon," he laughed weakly, "I can see the answer just looking at your eyes. Are you afraid I'd report you if you tell the truth?"

Davoren smiled amicably at the Turk, trying to encourage him further. However, Vincent avoided his look by staring outside the foggy window again. He kept his keen eyes fixed outside even though the rain had obscured everything to blackness.

"He's the most vulgar, crass, and disgusting ignoramus on earth, isn't he?" Davoren answered himself, "I pity his future son, whoever he'll be."

Although Vincent could not agree more, he kept his face rigidly hidden from his leader; he still refused to comment. Davoren glanced at the frigid Turk very thoughtfully, then his attention returned to the road. Vincent carelessly watched the rain lash against the cold window. His idle finger began to doodle on the foggy glass, drawing squiggles or writing some abstract name. When he realized he had scribbled "JENOVA", he immediately swooped it away.

The silence endured for five heavy minutes.

"Vincent," Davoren began again, "Do you believe in God?"

Vincent turned in amazement to the man, completely surprised by the unexpected question. Though Davoren hadn't lifted his eyes once off the wet road, his voice expressed deep solemnity; he actually expected an answer this time.

Vincent thought a minute, then replied cautiously, "I suppose there *is* some kind of supreme being watching over everything."

"You sound so exact."

Davoren chuckled at the man's "exactness", but his grave expression soon returned.

"Well, they tell us 'God is good'," Davoren resumed coolly, "or 'Yea, God doth saveth the down-trodden and punish the wicked'. Didn't they teach you that when you were a kid?"

The Turk nodded his head slowly. He studied Davoren's face, running his curious eyes over every feature they came across.

"If that's so, Vincent, why do you suppose God lets bastards like ShinRa live? He lets that man trample over everyone else just to fill his pockets with more money."

"I suppose...because there's a Devil too," Vincent replied softly.

"Hah! Good answer!"

Another pause.

"But not a devil with horns and a long, pointy tail," Davoren smiled bitterly, "This devil wears a blue suit and tie. It assumes the shape of normal men, yet threatens, kills, and of course gets away with it, just to make SURE ShinRa's pockets stay full."

Saying that, Davoren turned his face to Vincent for a response. His knit brows and frown intensified the hateful gleam in his honey-coloured eyes. Vincent only looked down again, hesitating to ask any questions. Nevertheless, he was extremely interested in what Davoren had to say.

"And who suffer the most, do you think?" Davoren concluded in a low voice, "Why, people like those men we slaughtered in the Reactor. They suffer the most to satisfy ShinRa's greed."

"Sir," Vincent interrupted all of a sudden. He fixed his quizzical eyes right on his face, "Those men were threatening to kill ShinRa employees. Are you saying we shouldn't have killed them?"

Davoren's eyes narrowed in unmistakable scorn at the simple question. He immediately glanced askance at Vincent, then focused on the road again. Hot rage seemed to boil in his heart.

"Those were also poor, illiterate men from the slums, Mr. Valentine," he replied with great restraint, "Hawking dazzled them with a couple of gils if they would pick up a gun and scare some employees. To be blunt, Hawking used them to fulfill his own means."

His voice suddenly softened, but the hard, bitter tone still remained, "Yet ShinRa ordered us to massacre them as if they were professional, first-class terrorists. And what did we kill them for? To make ShinRa Inc. a monopoly...to make that fat toad of a ShinRa richer.."

Davoren glanced again at Vincent, then concluded sadly, "That's how meaningless human life is to this money-grubbing company. One of the most sacred gifts from God, traded for hard, cold cash."

Vincent looked at this bitter man, then turned away to wonder at the strange paradox: how could Davoren, the LEADER of the Turks, insult ShinRa Inc. at the same time? how could everyone, even President ShinRa himself, value this man who made no secret of his hate for ShinRa Inc.?

Another awkward silence sprung up between the two Turks, neither man caring to speak anymore. The torrential rain continued to pour down as the car raced down the deserted highway. They were already approaching the check-point at the large iron gates of Midgar.

Davoren stopped the car when a heavily-clad soldier signaled for him to halt. He gruffly demanded some ID, but on recognizing Davoren, immediately allowed them to pass in a most respectful manner.

The car whizzed up the road, cutting through the pouring rain like a bullet. Huge, grim buildings flew past the speedy car, accompanied by dazzling neon lights and colourful posters. Unfortunately, the rain fell so persistently, Vincent could only see pink blurs of light flash past his face.

He stole a curious glance at Davoren, as if he could guess an answer from his face. The brilliant neon lights lit up the man's handsome face, streaking it with hues of pink or yellow. His features seemed sharper, yet his eyes stared absent-mindedly through the wet front window. He looked so sad.

"Can I ask you a personal question..Davoren?" Vincent began cautiously, He had never addressed his leader by his first name before.

Davoren looked indifferently at the Turk, muttering, "Go ahead."

"If you hate ShinRa Inc. so much, why did you become a Turk?"

"Money," smiled Davoren mysteriously, "I joined for the money."

Pardon me for saying this, but you don't look or sound the type who'd.."

"Oh, no! The money wasn't for me! I could've been a street-sweeper, for all I cared. No, the money was for my brother."

Vincent started in alarm at the surprising reason. He instantly recalled the long, painful story about Davoren's brother and how he had fought with the President over his search. He fidgeted nervously in his seat, trying to avoid the man's eyes. His cheeks flushed slightly in embarrassment for starting the conversation.

"It's alright," Davoren smiled calmly, "Gerald and Cindy have already told you all about my brother, judging from your reaction. But it's true. The money was to put me brother through college."

Vincent turned his eyes back to Davoren, trying to guess his meaning. Though Vincent did not encourage his leader any further, Davoren decided to continue all the same. His spirits seemed to lighten as he spoke about his missing brother.

"See, we were extremely poor at the time, and I had to take care of him ever since he was ten years old. I think I joined ShinRa Inc. as some clerk or another, which was fine until I found out he wanted to go to college."

Davoren steered the car around a curb, then went on as friendly as before, "Now, the pay wasn't THAT great, so I had to figure out how to help him.. 'education is everything', as the saying goes. And since I wasn't smart enough to be a scientist, or strong enough to be in SOLDIER, I became a Turk."

He looked proudly at Vincent.

"Mind you, I worked my butt off all the time, but so what? Every gil I made went to my brother until he graduated...full honours too! And by the time he became a Turk, I was already leader of the Turks. Heh heh..I sound more like a father the way I'm going on..."

Vincent beheld this man in strange wonder. Perhaps now he understood better why everyone respected Davoren so much, even the cold-hearted ShinRa President. In truth, Vincent had never seen such a sacrificing nature as Davoren's.

But then he remembered... Davoren's brother was dead.

"I..I'm sorry," Vincent apologized confusedly, "I wouldn't have asked you if I had known your brother was involved..."

"Hey. Don't worry about it."

Neither man spoke another word until they finally reached the large apartment complex. The car slowly rolled across the parking lot, then halted at the main entrance.

"Well, here you go," smiled Davoren amicably.

After mumbling some thanks, Vincent fumbled at the door to step out. But on opening the door, Davoren stopped him by gently gripping his shoulder.

"Tell me honestly," he begged with stern eyes, "Would you have really killed that child?"

Vincent paused before muttering dryly, "Yes, Sir."

"Even if you knew he was innocent, and his only crime was being Hawking's son?"

"Yes, Sir," Vincent insisted, looking very cold, "When I am given an order, I obey it. I do not judge the moral nature of the order. My position only requires that I fulfill the wishes of my superiors without question."

The two stared intently at each other, Vincent feeling more and more uncomfortable with Davoren's scrutinizing eyes. Only the sound of rain lashing against the car top disturbed the stillness. Suddenly, a most fatherly, kind smile stretched across Davoren's face.

"Yes, you're an excellent Turk already, I can see," he chuckled quietly, "I just pity the child you nearly killed. He'll be having nightmares about you for a long time."

Vincent blinked surprisedly at the strange comment, then stepped out of the car. He watched it roll away quietly, until finally turn around an obscure curb, and disappear in the rain.

All of a sudden, he remembered he had to return Lucrecia's papers tomorrow morning.

-End of Chp.20

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.21

"Ooooh boy..," sighed Vincent.

The elevator halted abruptly, then chimed as its metallic doors withdrew on the 68th floor. He had reached famous ShinRa Laboratory. Vincent stepped out very cautiously, like a cat unfamiliar with new territory. He found himself, much to his confusion, drifting down a winding corridor in search of some reception hall. A scientist pushing a cart of test tubes nearly rammed into him, yet sped away as if not seeing him.

His feet wandered down the corridor until finally he discovered the wanted reception hall. Several desks cluttered this vast room, with all sorts of scientists bustling about in a hurry. Some bent over microscopes; others raced around collecting or delivering papers, while the rest wrote furiously about their observations. Nobody paid any attention to the lost Turk.

Looks like a flea-market in here, Vincent reflected scornfully.

After great effort and amazing patience, Vincent finally induced one of the busy scientists to spare one minute of his precious time. He asked politely for "Ms. Lucrecia", and was informed he could find her in the Specimen Observatory further down the hall.

"Now go away! Shoo!" the huffy scientist dismissed.

So Vincent trotted down the hall, looking all around himself in wonder. Two women scientists who were chattering away stopped as he passed them, and followed him with their curious eyes. He obviously did not belong here.

Vincent turned around the endless corridor, when coming face to face with two large, glazed doors. A plain sign reading "ShinRa Specimen Observatory" had been neatly inscribed on top.

His searching eyes scanned the interior through the glass, hoping to find Lucrecia without actually venturing inside. Unfortunately, she was no where to be seen. Taking a deep breath, Vincent pushed his way into the ominous observatory.

It was a small, square room squeezed into one corner to the story. Two large specimen tables with overhanging neon lights occupied the centre. Endless rows of towering bookshelves ran all along the walls, crammed with files, journals, and books. There were two elderly scientists mumbling between themselves over a specimen, but stopped short on spotting the intruder.

"My word!" exclaimed one of them to his colleague, "What's that Turk doing here??"

Vincent nodded his head respectfully at the two, then wandered between the rows of bookshelves in search of Lucrecia. He checked one row after another, losing hope with every passing bookshelf. Until finally, he found her. She was standing on a step-up ladder next to a shelf, completely engrossed in reading a large file.

All her soft hair had been heaped into a charming, loose ponytail behind her delicate neck. She wore no lab coat this time, thereby showing the slimness of her body, especially her supple waist. Her shining eyes devoured the pages of the file. She didn't even hear Vincent walk up to her.

He forced out a cough, which immediately grabbed her attention. The minute she noticed Vincent near her, Lucrecia stared blankly at his face, obviously shocked to find him here. Her nervous hands slammed the file shut, then hugged it against her chest. The two were silent for a minute.

"M..Mr. Valentine..," she faltered at last.

"..uh..Ms. Lucrecia," he interrupted, more nervous than her, "..forgive me..but, last night when you..uh...ran off, you dropped this..,"

He fumbled at his breast pocket as Lucrecia hopped down from the ladder to face him properly. He handed the two folded papers over to her, unable to speak anymore. Lucrecia examined the papers after unfolding them, then shot her eyes up to him in alarm.

"Sorry," he apologized softly, "I accidentally stepped on the sketch and ruined it. Now it looks like an ugly woman with a turban."

He had, of course, braced himself for her worst reaction, maybe even another slap on the face. Lucrecia stared at him as he finished, then suddenly burst out laughing.

"But that's what it's *supposed* to be," she explained, "It is an ugly woman with a turban!"

When he finally understood her, Vincent mumbled, "Oh..sorry..."

She looked up at him through her smart glasses, still retaining her kind smile. Vincent fidgeted anxiously as a heavy silence weighed him down; he felt he should say more to her. Unfortunately, his mind had blanked out the minute he had opened his mouth.

So, his mission now completed, Vincent decided to leave.

"I apologize for bothering you, Ms. Lucrecia," he muttered, turning away from her awkwardly, "Good day."

"Wait!!!"

Lucrecia instantly covered her mouth in embarrassment for being so loud, but stepped in front of Vincent to block his way. After propping her cumbersome file on one of the shelves, she looked up at him so as to say something. However, every time the poor woman tried to begin a sentence, her tongue stumbled over the words nervously. Finally, she broke down in annoyance.

"Listen," she sighed in defeat. She pulled off her glasses and looked straight into his eyes, "I've been meaning to apologize for...for what I did..the other day in the Reactor. That was NO way to show gratitude for saving my life."

Vincent did not answer.

"And I'm most, most ashamed that I slapped you, Mr. Valentine," Lucrecia said with flushed cheeks, "I hope I didn't hurt you?"

"Oh no, not at all," he automatically lied. Vincent thought a minute, then added, "Truth is, Ms. Lucrecia, I can't blame you for getting angry with me. But it's not like I could've warned you beforehand that I was going to shoot..uh..see,I..."

Words failed him again. Vincent ran his fingers through his black hair, berating himself for speaking so inconsiderately to her. Luckily, Lucrecia wasn't offended at all. In fact, she smiled more kindly than before.

"I understand," she replied, extending her hand, "And please, just call me Lucrecia...er..sorry, I only caught your last name back there..,"

"Oh, my name's Vincent," he said as he shook her hand firmly.

"I tried finding you out so I could apologize..but I must confess, Vincent, I got too embarrassed to actually walk up to you. I'm very sorry for being such an ungrateful.."

"Hey, it's alright. What matters is we're both alive and well."

Lucrecia silently nodded her head in agreement. Her bashful eyes turned away from him, seeming to hesitate about some important matter. Vincent, on the other hand, had nothing more to say. He looked around himself once or twice, then finally broke the silence.

"Well, I shouldn't keep you from your work any longer, Lucrecia. Good bye."

With a most respectful bow, Vincent brushed past her towards the exit. Lucrecia apprehensively watched him walk away until she finally called him again. Vincent turned around in confusion as she trotted up to him. Her beautiful face expressed intense nervousness.

"Um...Vincent," she faltered in a low voice, "I'm having my coffee break now. Would you..would you care to join me?"

Vincent blinked in more confusion at the kind invitation, yet made no reply.

"Unless of course, you're busy!" she argued, waving her two hands in front of her, "I don't want to drag you with me if you don't.."

"Oh, no. I..I'd love to join you."

The two new friends spent a full hour in the ShinRa cafe, chatting casually about themselves. Vincent dodged all personal questions aimed at himself; he was, by nature, fiercely private, and preferred not to "blurt it all out", even to someone as friendly as Lucrecia. Nor did Lucrecia dream of intruding. When she had noticed Vincent's reluctance to answer any personal questions, she cleverly steered away from the subject.

Instead, she began to timidly speak a bit about herself. Occasionally, she hesitated, not wanting to bore Vincent with those frivolities, but he always urged her to continue. Indeed, his eyes lit up with great interest as she spoke.

He found her overly modest about her position, and quite respectful to all her colleagues (especially her superiors). Nevertheless, Vincent could see in her a rare insight and intelligence which most her esteemed colleagues dimly lacked (males included). And her shy, humble nature only added to her charm.

Lucrecia finally explained that after graduating from Junon City University, she had applied to ShinRa. Inc in order to finish her postgraduate work. Luckily, Professor Gast had accepted her as a lab-assistant, and she had entered the company about a year ago.

"So, you're doing research now, are you?" Vincent asked, eyeing her curiously over a cup of coffee.

"Y..yes," she stammered in a low voice, "To be a full-time scientist, I need to present a research paper to the Midgar Institute of Biological Engineering. Professor Gast has been quite kind and patient with me. He even helps with my research paper sometimes."

Vincent did not interrupt her, but stared very keenly at her nervous face.

"I need to thank you again, Vincent," she said as she looked at him directly, "Those two papers you returned to me were notes for my research paper...I spent three days non-stop just trying to gather them."

"This research paper of yours must be hard work. What's it about?"

Lucrecia fidgeted in her seat, unsure whether he would understand all the technicalities, but he gently encouraged her to tell him. She yielded.

"Actually, I'm working with a team of scientists on this new project called the 'JENOVA Project'. It's hard work, naturally, but very exciting! Especially working with all these famous scientists."

Vincent immediately recalled that strange name scribbled over her sketch. He had thought "Jenova" was some woman's name.

"No, no," Lucrecia laughed, "JENOVA is a project funded by ShinRa Inc. It's a living entity we named after Professor Gast's dead wife."

Vincent did not understand.

"Okay, look," she explained, dragging her chair closer to him, "A year ago, Professor Gast and his research team picked up strange signals during an archeological dig in the North. According to the readings they got, some life form was buried under the rocks. When they excavated the site, they found this..this living organism frozen in the snow."

"A living organism frozen in the snow?" he repeated, puzzled by her meaning, "How could it survive such harsh climate?"

"That was the mystery! Primary analysis indicated this creature was thousands of years old, yet still alive. It had different molecular and cellular structure unlike anything else. It was, to be simple, an alien life form."

"An alien life form', eh?" he wondered. He suddenly remembered something, "Say, is JENOVA that same discovery Professor Gast made some months ago? He wrote in one of his journals that when he exposed living human tissue to the cells of that..er...'life form', it altered the human tissue without changing itself."

Lucrecia gaped in surprise as he finished, then exclaimed, "How..how did you know that???"

"Oh..uh..," he faltered confusedly, "I..happened to read one of his reports a couple of months ago. I...sorta..like reading about those kinds of things..."

The conversation inevitably turned to science. Vincent explained that he spent most his free time in the library, reading anything he came across. Lucrecia was fascinated to know he had read several publications on "that alien life form", even though parts had been "too scientific" for him to fully

understand. Nevertheless, he had thought the discovery quite intriguing, especially the part about tissue exposure.

"Of course, YOU know much more about this," Vincent smiled amicably, "Whatever I understood from it, I thought interesting. It must be great doing actual research on such a fascinating discovery."

"Y'know, you're amazing," Lucrecia blurted out, staring right into his face with a smile, "I mean, here I am, chatting with you, a Turk, about the project, when some scientists in the lab haven't even read one report! Are you sure you're a Turk and not a scientist in disguise?"

Vincent assured her he had "no head for science", but merely enjoyed reading about it. They chatted some more about the discovery and the lab, until Lucrecia stopped short.

"Oh..oh my God!" she muttered, a mischievous smile playing on her lips.

"What?"

She sprang to her feet instantly, then pulled him up by the arm, crying excitedly, "C'mon! I want to show you something! C'mon!" She pulled him out of the cafe, her heart fluttering with excitement.

Vincent let himself be led along endless corridors and up the staircase. He wondered what "something" Lucrecia was so eager to show him, yet did not ask any questions. She took him through a metallic doorway down the hall, into a small, dim room. Before he realized where he was, Vincent found himself in front of a preservatory tank.

This huge, round tank dominated at least two-thirds of the room, with three stiff pipes boring straight into its top. Countless buttons, levers, and rubber tubes adorned its bulky structure. One square window marked the centre of this impressive tank. A dazzling purple light illuminated from the inside of this impressive tank, yet the fog on the window obscured the interior.

Lucrecia dragged Vincent in front of the square window. Wiping the mist off the glass with her sleeve, she beckoned for him to come closer.

"Go on," she encouraged in a whisper, "Look inside."

Vincent glanced suspiciously at her excited face, then peered through the glass. His eyes widened in shock: it was that "ugly woman with the turban".

"That's JENOVA, the alien life form," she whispered, still excited.

JENOVA looked like the bust of a woman wearing a draped headdress. Her round, waxen face and empty eye sockets aroused strange disgust in Vincent, intensified by those awkward tubings protruding under her grey body. One of her breasts bore a circular, dark blue marking, while her body hung over a thick rope of wires. Two heavy wings sprouted out of her back, filling the entire tank. Vincent had never seen such a hideous creature.

He turned back to Lucrecia.

"They actually brought JENOVA to Midgar two months ago," she explained, "We haven't stopped analyzing her ever since she came."

"She's hideous," Vincent commented when his voice returned.

"Heh heh..yeah, I thought so too," she smiled happily, "But if you look at her everyday like I do, you get used to it."

Vincent wanted to ask her something, when suddenly a raging voice shouting "LUCRECIA!!" startled the two from behind. The poor woman immediately turned around in alarm.

"Oh!!" she exclaimed nervously, "..P..Professor Hojo!!"

Professor Hojo, a bony young man in a loose lab coat, stormed from the doorway up to the two intruders. His lean, drawn face expressed immense fury, further emphasized by his incredibly high forehead. All his black, sleek hair had been pulled back into a tiny ponytail, yet three strands dangled in front of his rat-like face. He wore a pair of black glasses over his long nose.

The man brushed past Vincent most rudely, and stood directly in front of the trembling Lucrecia.

"I..I'm very sorry, Professor Hojo," the poor woman apologized humbly, "I was only..."

Hojo folded his thin arms across his chest, loudly berating Lucrecia for "trespassing into the preservative". Lucrecia apologized meekly for every rebuke she received. She hung her head as Hojo shook his long finger in her face to scold her "stupidity and carelessness".

Vincent, thinking this insolent man had gone too far, decided to interfere.

"It was my fault, Sir," Vincent interrupted him in the middle of the reproof, "I asked her to show me the preservative tank."

Lucrecia looked at him in alarm on hearing the lie. Hojo, who hadn't noticed Vincent up to now, looked up and down at his tall figure, then turned to face him. He twisted his thin lips into a scornful grimace, his arms still folded. Vincent kept his clenched fists down by his side, and stared challengingly back at the Professor.

"You're a Turk, eh?" Hojo asked. His mocking eyes scanned Vincent again.

"Yes, Sir. I am," he replied sternly, as if to actually say, "you got a problem with that?"

"State your business, then. What, pray tell, do you want with a preservative tank?"

The question was perfectly legitimate. Vincent fumbled for a reasonable excuse, yet failed to find any. Hojo tapped his arm in certain impatience; he obviously didn't find this Turk's presence very pleasant. Fortunately, Lucrecia intervened in time.

"He..he's a friend of mine, Professor," she explained hurriedly, "I just wanted to show him the preservative tank before.."

"This isn't a public house for idle chit-chat, woman!!!" Hojo thundered, stamping his foot angrily, "You take your friend out of here this instant and report back here!! We still haven't finished all the tests!!"

"Ah..y..yes..Professor. Right away!"

Before Vincent knew it, Lucrecia dragged him out the preservative room and down the corridor. He glanced behind just as they turned around a corner: no mistake; he had distinctly seen glaring straight back at him.

"Who was that?" he asked as they descended the staircase towards the elevators.

"That was...Professor Hojo," she explained in embarrassment, "He's a scientist on the 'JENOVA Project' too...one of the leading ones, in fact."

"He has no right to yell at you like that."

"Actually, he does. It was my fault. I..I forgot he had ordered all un-authorized personnel off the tank premises."

"And I still say he was rude."

"Well, Professor Hojo can be a hot-head sometimes," she smiled, trying to soothe his anger, "Thanks for sticking up for me, by the way."

"Oh..uh..no problem."

Neither spoke another word until they reached the elevators. Vincent reluctantly pressed the button, then turned to face Lucrecia again. She fidgeted a bit, still embarrassed with the last scene, but finally managed to look up at him.

"Anyway, Vincent," she concluded by extending her hand to him, "I apologize again for the other day, and thank you so much for retuning my two papers. They're very important to me."

He shook her hand again, but this time kept a hold on it.

"Lucrecia," he asked in a low voice, "Can I see you again?"

She started at the question, then faltered slowly, "Of course..V..Vincent..if you want to.."

"How about tomorrow?"

"I'm sorry..I can't. I have to work with Professor Hojo all day tomorrow in the lab."

Then the day after?"

"You're very persistent, aren't you," she smiled bashfully, "Okay, I'll be free in the afternoon."

Vincent, quite pleased with another chance at meeting her, boarded the elevator when it arrived at last. He turned around to bid her a final farewell.

"Say, Vincent?" Lucrecia called before the doors shut.

"Yes?"

"I..I'm very happy we're friends now."

He only managed to smile back at her. The elevator doors quickly closed on him again.

-End of Chp.21

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.22

The months rolled by very gently.

A windy autumn gradually replaced the hot summer, banishing it from the city until next year. What trees the grim Midgar still possessed soon lost their precious leaves in the wind, and stood as barren as ever in the smog. The cool, chilly wind constantly huffed over the city, yet failed to fully remove the stuffy heat trapped within.

Despite the seasonal changes in Midgar, scarcely anything changed amongst the Turks. Vincent still kept a cool "friendship" with his colleagues; close enough to exceed an acquaintance, yet not intimate enough for a personal friendship. In all fairness, they were fiercely loyal and co-operative, yet Vincent never felt very attached to them, even after many more months of work in ShinRa Inc.

Cindy, though intelligent in her own cunning way, obviously preferred Gerald to Vincent's company. And Gerald, being an established anti-reader, favoured more rowdy modes of entertainment which did not appeal to the Turk's taste (like fast cars, snooker, bars, and rugby matches).

Not surprisingly, Davoren became his closest Turk friend. The beloved leader of the Turks, while always modest and easy-going, also possessed a serious, almost depressed, nature as well. He sometimes advised ways for Vincent to improve his gun skills even further, which the latter heartily thanked. However, Vincent enjoyed Davoren's perceptive (and cutting) "observations" about ShinRa Inc., especially on an intellectual level. And the more Vincent listened to him, the more he respected and valued this man's friendship.

He only met Professor Hojo occasionally whenever he happened to be near the ShinRa laboratory. The insolent man would snub him with a loud "harrumph", then brush past him as sullenly as before. Vincent, of course, never wasted his time on Hojo, thinking him simply "an arrogant, skinny grouch".

Vincent was slightly surprised to find his opinion widely shared. Once, Gerald and he happened to spot Professor Hojo trotting some distance away, his two scrawny arms behind his bending back.

"Fuh! Whatch it, lad," Gerald had warned scornfully, "There goes the sorriest bit a' milksop ye'll ever see, ye will!"

The secretaries always grimaced behind Hojo's back as he walked away; other employees, normally talkative, would pause whenever he passed by. Even the ShinRa President seemed to hold this scrawny man in contempt; not as blunt as his employees, of course, but equally as hateful. Indeed, nobody liked this spiteful scientist, nor did he make himself very agreeable to others.

"But what can you do?" Lucrecia had sighed as she tried to explain to Vincent, "He's still part of the 'JENOVA Project' team...like him or not."

As the months carelessly slipped by, Vincent and Lucrecia grew more intimate with each other. Whenever time permitted, the two friends would meet in the cafe or library. Vincent still avoided discussing any of his missions for fear of upsetting her (they usually involved some form of violence). Instead, he encouraged her to speak about her research or any other recent issue. He never grew tired listening to her talk excitedly about the "JENOVA Project". Nor did her unselfish dedication and patience ever cease to amaze him. Indeed, he found her company far superior to any other.

Whenever she smiled, Vincent felt her warm his heart to the very core. If she spoke, he listened with all attention riveted on her alone. In his eyes, every word, every move, every look of hers was a stroke of wonder.

Not that he lacked any control over his emotions. On the contrary, Vincent performed all his duties and missions as impeccably as before. In fact, the President had been so impressed with this Turk's obedience and perfection, he bestowed on him a most generous raise. Vincent's face always assumed a hard, cold expression during working hours. Even Lucrecia had once declared how unfriendly his face could look at times.

"You should smile more, Vincent," she had insisted, "After all, you're smart...well-off...not to mention very handsome..," but she instantly blushed for some reason, then changed the subject.

He only felt those strange emotions when *she* was near him.

Unfortunately, Lucrecia grew increasingly absorbed in the "JENOVA Project" as time passed by. She would spend days on end, scribbling in her notebook under a bright lamp. She constantly ran between the preservative room and the laboratory with all sorts of files in her delicate arms. Yet despite all the hard work, nothing could dampen her spirits or enthusiasm about the project. She had, in short, sacrificed all her time and energy for the "JENOVA Project". Much to her relief, Vincent never pressured her into meeting him. He only asked she "take it easy".

The two friends saw less of each other, Lucrecia too engrossed in her research, and Vincent swamped in missions requiring his "special touch". A week flew by unnoticed, neither person having the time to even think of the other.

One evening, Vincent chanced upon Lucrecia rushing through the hall with some papers heaped in her hands. On hearing her name called, she noticed him, and they chatted for a few minutes about trivial matters. Luckily, Lucrecia had just completed her lab work for the day. That task done, she was tidying up before heading home. Vincent, being done too, asked to accompany her some of the way. She gratefully accepted.

The streets of Midgar had emptied considerably after the warm sun had descended the sky. A chilly autumn breeze blew over the gloomy city, swirling bits of papers and dead leaves on the pavement. Night enshrouded the sky with a black, starry blanket, thereby forcing a stillness on the usually bustling city. Though occasionally a stray car zoomed through the quiet streets or a lonely passerby skipped across the road, the streets remained almost deserted.

The two strolled casually down the tranquil streets, talking in a very subdued voice. However, they too grew silent as they crossed the bridge towards the city centre. Vincent, with his hands thrust in his pockets, occasionally glanced at Lucrecia, but returned to his own thoughts again. It was very quiet in the city.

"Do you always carry that gun with you, Vincent?" she asked all of a sudden. Her eyes looked up at him with slight apprehension.

"Hm? Yeah..it's an old habit," Vincent sighed knowledgeably, "But it's more comfortable than the AK. 47 semi-automatic rifle I hide on my leg."

Lucrecia stopped short on hearing the comment. She gaped straight at him with a most horrified look on her face. Vincent, on the other hand, smiled at her shocked expression, then decided to calm her down.

"That was a joke," he explained.

She blinked in surprise, only muttering a faint, "Oh!"

They resumed their journey along the road, Lucrecia still trying to find the humour in his "joke"; she thought it perhaps too "Turkish" for her to grasp. Vincent walked by her side as quietly as before. The two followed the winding path around a corner, through a black alley, until finally emerging into the city's main square.

The city square was merely the banking section of Midgar, named so because of the ugly stone fountain marking its centre. A high, broad parapet surrounded the fountain, whose centre basically consisted of three tiers piled over each other. Yet despite its grotesqueness, this unfortunate fountain retained a certain charm, if not a strange beauty, about it: the pure, shimmering water covered the dull tiers with a thin sheet of silver as it streamed downwards. The moon's reflection in the water constantly danced, caused by the gentle ripples of the clean water.

The two lingered a moment near the fountain, neither wishing to disturb the pleasant sound of the water gently splashing into the fountain.

Lucrecia suddenly took Vincent by the arm and pulled him over to the fountain for a closer look. After placing her briefcase on the ground, she gracefully perched herself on top of the stone parapet. Vincent watched her sit with her back facing the fountain, letting her two feet dangle playfully downwards. He then leaned against the parapet, and gazed silently at the silver water dance in the fountain.

A peaceful silence fell on the two for a few minutes.

"Say, Vincent," she asked in a most soft voice, "When did you first become interested in guns?"

He glanced at her briefly, then replied, "When I came to live with my uncle in Midgar, he happened to be some famous gunsmith. He always used to tell me I had potential to be a gunsmith like him...so I think when I turned twelve, he taught me how to handle a gun. And by then next year, he let me practice with real bullets."

"What did your parents think?? Weren't they afraid you'd hurt yourself?"

"I doubt it. My mother had died when I was three...and my father..he committed suicide a few years later...from grief, I was told. So, I went to live with my uncle in Midgar after that."

Lucrecia paused a long time before timidly reaching for his hand. Vincent felt a strange thrill at her warm, soft touch, yet refused to look at her anxious face. Instead, he fixed his eyes on the shimmering water.

"I..I'm very sorry..," she whispered as she pressed his hand gently.

"It's alright," he smiled without turning to her, "I don't remember them, really... just this fuzzy blur in my memory."

Another prolonged silence fell on the two again. Leaning his body further against the parapet, Vincent ran his cold fingertips through the soothing water of the fountain. Lucrecia watched him for a while until she suddenly hopped off the stone parapet. She leaned next to Vincent, and gazed dreamily at the silver water shimmer in the moonlight. Vincent studied her face from the corner of his eye: he had never seen her look so beautiful as she did that moment.

"So, you've been practicing with that gun for a long time now," she marveled, turning her head to him, "I bet you couldn't wait to become a Turk when you were a kid."

Vincent pulled his wet hand out of the cool water, his eyes still lingering over her lovely face in complete fascination.

"Actually, I didn't care what I became," he corrected good-humouredly, "My uncle at first wanted me to take over his gunsmith business, but then thought I could do better than that. He happened to know all the right people in ShinRa Inc., so..I became a Turk."

Lucrecia looked quizzically into his face, as if doubting the whole truth of his simple story. Her disappointed look amused Vincent greatly.

"Well, I never claimed to be a very ambitious man," he could not help adding with a smile, "To me, one job's as good as any other. That's why I admire you so much, Lucrecia: you know exactly what you want, and won't let anything stop you."

Lucrecia started on hearing his generous compliment, then blushed slightly as her eyes returned to the clear water. Vincent turned around so that his back now leaned against the parapet. Try as he may, he could not tear his eyes away from Lucrecia, who fidgeted bashfully by his side.

"To tell the truth, Vincent," she giggled softly, taking off her glasses, "I didn't know what I wanted to be either...not until I was seventeen.."

He looked significantly at her, studying every feature of her lovely face as she continued, "One morning, my father and I were walking in the woods near our house. He made me look all around myself, and I always remember him saying 'Everyone here is running around, looking for miracles on earth; but they can't see the biggest miracle of all, even though it's right in front of them: the miracle of life'. And I thought that was so wonderful..I..I simply wanted to know what exactly gave things 'life'...heh heh...so, here I am now."

Vincent only smiled at her, yet said nothing.

"That's why this project means so much to me," Lucrecia explained with shining eyes, "Even though JENOVA is a completely different life form..it too possesses life. And if we can unlock some of its secrets, then maybe...just maybe, we can unlock some of the secrets to human life too."

She glanced timidly at Vincent when she finished, and found his bright eyes riveted on her face. The two stared fixedly at each other, until Vincent suddenly broke the silence.

"Lucrecia," he asked very softly, "Do you know that you're....beautiful?"

The woman blinked in complete surprise at him. Her cheeks flushed heavily as she looked down in shame, as though he had scolded her for some mistake. She even retreated one step away from him.

"But, I don't mean JUST physical beauty," he explained hurriedly, "I won't lie to you: you are that most beautiful woman I've ever seen. But, Lucrecia, that's not the only thing I love in you..I think you're beauty springs from the inside too."

Lucrecia looked curiously up at him again, but did not open her mouth. She still appeared overwhelmed with her emotions.

"I mean, you're very noble-minded," he continued as he stepped closer to her, "And I can't help but marvel at how hard-working, intelligent, and principled you are. You're far more superior to any other person I've met. Sometimes, I wonder why I'm the only one who sees all this. I..I'm not trying to run any corny lines to you, Lucrecia..I'm just saying how I feel about you."

An awkward silence followed.

She hesitated several times, dismally trying to avoid his eyes, until finally faltered very softly, "Th...thank you..Vincent...I..you're very kind.."

Lucrecia looked around herself in apprehension, then resumed more confidently, "When..when other men walk up to me..I never bother even listening to them..because I can tell how crude their minds really are..."

When she noticed Vincent standing exactly in front of her, eyeing her very keenly, she dropped her voice even further, "But...that's not how I feel about you..no, not at all...you're so different from the others..."

She broke down in the middle of her sentence, letting silence reclaim its lost place again. She only managed to look up at his face, her mind waiting for a response.

Her beauty was, simply put, stunning.

Vincent gently placed both hands on her soft cheeks, and stooped slightly to kiss her. He could feel her whole body tremble as he pressed his lips against her mouth, almost as though she were afraid of someone catching them. However, some of her tenseness quickly dispersed when he began to caress her cheeks and run his fingers along her slender waist; she even ventured to touch his cheeks most tenderly and return his kisses. Yet her body continuously quivered with some suppressed emotion.

Suddenly, Lucrecia forcefully shoved him away from herself, and stared at his astonished face with her trembling hand over her mouth. Hot tears began to flood her anguished eyes; her legs shook violently underneath her.

Vincent, wondering what exactly had upset her, opened his mouth to speak. But she shook her head vigorously to stop him. Her tearful eyes darted all over the place in complete anxiety, then focused directly on him.

"V..Vincent," she faltered on removing her hand from her mouth, "P..please..don't ever do that..again..please..."

"I'm sorry," he immediately apologized in most gentle tone, "If I knew you didn't like..."

"No!! No, it's not that at all!! It's the opposite, in fact!!" she interrupted passionately, much to his surprise, "I..I loved the kiss..I really did...and as for you..I.. I feel this...see, I can't..you..you wouldn't..oh!"

Unable to express herself any further, Lucrecia snatched her forsaken briefcase off the ground, and nervously placed her glasses on her nose again. Vincent watched her fidget around, completely baffled by her strange answer. After wiping away her tears, Lucrecia made a deep bow to him, then straightened herself up again very excitedly.

"Th...thank you for walking with me, Vincent," she spoke with a wooden smile, "but..I..I have to go home now...thank you...g..good night!"

She instantly dashed away. Before Vincent had a chance to stop her, Lucrecia had scurried away across the square, and disappeared out of his sight.

The stillness crushed him utterly.

He stood rooted by the stone fountain, completely dumbstruck. His confused mind recalled every syllable of their conversation, but could make no sense of her last response. He admitted he hadn't had any intention of confessing or kissing her until the very last minute. But while he was kissing her, she seemed to enjoy it...she even confessed so herself! If that were so, why in God's name did she push him away like that, as if he intended to poison her?

Maybe she simply did not feel the same emotions he felt for her.

Vincent wisely decided to avoid Lucrecia until she would forgive him. He performed all his missions with redoubled diligence which astounded his friends, and won him more acclaim from the President. If he chanced upon her in the hall, he passed her as though he had not seen her at all. He even avoided the library for fear of meeting her, preferring to join the other Turks in the cafe or lounge. He happily embraced any chance to push Lucrecia from his thoughts. For a long time he was quite successful, yet she always occupied some corner of his mind.

Lucrecia occasionally bumped into him in the corridor, and was forced to mutter some confused "excuse me" before scurrying away. Her restless eyes always avoided looking up at him, perhaps for fear of blurting out some suppressed emotion. Her whole countenance trembled at his sight, then she instantly would dash away in distress.

One whole month dragged by. Vincent never attempted to contact or reach her. He would not impose himself on her, nor would he upset her further if his presence discomfited her in any way.

Sometimes, however, Vincent wondered why Lucrecia had repulsed him that night. He could have sworn the words "I love you" were on her lips, yet she seemed to desperately force them back. When he had kissed and fondled her, he knew she enjoyed it (why else would she kiss him back if she didn't?!) Indeed, she seemed to have forgotten most her timidity and fears as he touched her. But she instantly pushed him away, as if remembering something. And now, she seemed so afraid of him.

What contradiction was that? Why did she repulse him, she enjoyed his caresses?!

"Gerald," Vincent complained to his friend, completely at his wits' end, "I don't understand women."

"Aye, lad, join the rest of the male population," Gerald sighed tiredly, "I'll wager if ye can understand a woman, ye must be a genius!"

-End of Chp.22

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.23

The Nibel Mountain peaks pointed up to the blue sky, some daring to disrupt the puffy, sailing clouds. Those magnificent mountains, with their snowy caps, towered high above their rugged domain. Their hard, barren rocks surveyed the rolling hills below with a sneer, most contemptuous of their gentle, meek appearance. A biting, arctic wind incessantly huffed between the jagged peaks to discourage any life from thriving. Indeed, many had ominously described the Nibel Mountains as "the solid proof of Nature's mastery over the earth".

Yet despite the tyranny of those cold mountains, a small village had managed to snuggle up comfortably at its majestic feet. The mountain tops all scoffed at this insignificant village, but decided to spare its measly life, thinking itself far too mighty to crush it.

The sleepy village of Nibelheim, initially a camp for miners, betrayed every sign of rural life. The quaint, cozy cottages clustered around the stone square, while a timeworn, battered well marked the centre. A low fence surrounded the village, with a plain, wooden gateway to welcome visitors (which weren't that many). Lush green grass fringed the edges of the village, even though autumn had assumed control long ago.

At daybreak, the villagers would stumble out of their cottages to complete their daily tasks. The venerable innkeeper swept his doorstep every morning, then bustled inside to prepare breakfast for his guests. Hard-faced, sleepy miners would shuffle out their houses with picks, ready to dig in the mountains for materia. Their stout wives lingered by their doorways, gossiping about the news of the day. No sight warmed the heart more than these good villagers bustling about in the morning.

Unfortunately, these simple people bore an unreasonable terror of any stranger who stumbled into their quiet village. Most of them scurried back inside, yet peered through the windows to study the new-comer. Therefore, when the rumor about "ShinRa people" arriving here proved correct, everyone barred their doors in fear. The men lingered by the inn door, waiting for the "ShinRa people", while the more timid women peeked through the windows from time to time. The children, on the other hand, pressed their full faces against the window panes and waited impatiently. They seemed particularly excited at the idea of seeing "an actual Turk!".

Two lightly-armed soldiers were seen to march across the village square and stop at the wooden gateway. They still chatted in a subdued voice as they waited, but always kept their eyes fixed on the hills beyond. They too appeared anxious to greet these expected guests.

All of Nibelheim, in fact, braced itself for the anticipated arrival.

A low buzz echoed across the silent hills, gradually growing louder with each minute. Soon, a black, posh car was spotted zooming up the path towards the village. Everyone watched it approach until it finally halted at the humble gate.

Vincent, who had been the driver for the journey up to Nibelheim, silently dismounted the car. At the same time, a tall, middle-aged man with a moustache stepped out. The Turk opened the back door for Lucrecia and Professor Hojo, then signaled for the two soldiers to approach. They immediately marched over to the car.

After a sharp salute to the new company, one of the soldiers began to unload the luggage from the car. Meanwhile, the other soldier conducted the four new guests through the gate and across the village square.

A deathly silence fell on the village as the ShinRa visitors headed towards the stony staircase just beyond the square. Curious heads peeked through dim windows or half-opened doors; they marveled at each passing guest, but none dared breathe a word for fear of attracting undue attention.

Fortunately, none of the solemn guests expressed much interest in the quiet village, save Lucrecia who smiled in wonder at the charming surroundings. Professor Hojo only "humph"ed loudly and tied his hands behind his back as usual when unimpressed. They marched in a single file up the stony steps, still led by the soldier, until finally, they reached the ShinRa Mansion.

Nestled at the higher end of Nibelheim, the ShinRa Mansion overlooked this sleepy village with an air of arrogant superiority. ShinRa Inc. had purchased this grand mansion from some wealthy merchant (now dead), and renovated it into an outpost for "special uses". None of the simple villagers ever neared it without a foreboding. Perhaps the deathly silence that always hovered over the grey roof frightened them; or maybe those towering gables which stoically eyed their peaceful village filled their hearts with discomfort. Not surprisingly, the villagers avoided the mansion as best as possible, especially when occupied with "ShinRa people".

The mansion had snuggled itself comfortably along one edge of the humble village, surrounded by a high stone wall to ward off uninvited guests. An iron gate reluctantly admitted visitors along a winding cobblestone path up to the arched door, where two towers jealously guarded the entrance. A sequence of large, rectangular windows crammed the brick facade, while a corresponding series of gables peeked out along the roof.

Indeed, this eerie mansion bore a strange mixture of ominousness and beauty, further accentuated by the gentle sunlight shining between the cold gables.

The new guests marched past the iron gate, up to the impressive oak door. The soldier silently led them inside, then slammed the door shut behind himself.

They entered an extremely spacious hall, each wall with a door leading to a different room. A bronze chandelier dangled high up from the ceiling, showering the entire hall with a delicate, gentle light. At the landing of the broad staircase, three enormous stained windows overlooked the hall below. A huge oil painting of the mountains adorned the wall by the staircase, while a glass lantern hung over every door on the ground floor. One round carpet piece marked the centre.

The four guests waited patiently for a moment until Davoren appeared at the landing of the stairs.

"Ah, Professor Gast," he greeted respectfully, "Welcome to Nibelheim, Sir."

Davoren descended the staircase to welcome Professor Gast, the middle-aged man with the moustache. Though nicknamed "The Greatest Scientist on earth", Professor Gast's appearance failed to fit the prestigious description. He was an extremely tall man, with a thick moustache and freshly-cropped greying hair. His strong chin certainly expressed strict authority, but his fatherly eyes warmed up to anyone who approached him. Modest to almost a fault, he was, as Lucrecia had rightfully described him, very patient and friendly; traits which did not befit "The Greatest scientist on earth" (or so at least President ShinRa had declared)

After shaking hands with the three scientists, and a quick exchange of greetings with Vincent, Davoren conducted the guests up the broad steps. he guessed them to be quite fatigued with the journey across the countryside.

"I trust Mr. Valentine made sure you all had a comfortable trip, Professor Gast?" Davoren asked as they ascended the stairs to the second floor.

Professor Hojo only scoffed, but Gast graciously answered, "Oh, quite so, Mr. Davoren. We had a pleasant journey up to here, thank you."

"Is all the laboratory equipment ready, Sir?" interjected Hojo with forced politeness, "I want to start immediately."

"Of course, Professor," Davoren replied, "Everything has been prepared."

"No, I think it's better if we rest for a while," Gast suggested amicably to his colleague, "I'm sure poor Lucrecia is extremely exhausted with the long journey."

Davoren halted in the corridor as he turned around to face the dissenting visitors; he folded his arms, waiting for a final agreement. Lucrecia fidgeted very nervously in her spot while Vincent stood a few steps behind her. Professor Hojo's mean eyes glared back at the silent, timid woman, then at the two Turks most insolently. An awkward silence fell on the group.

"Fine! Fine!" the spiteful man spluttered, "I suppose we ALL need some rest."

"Very well, then," resumed Davoren, "I'll guide you to your rooms. Right this way, please."

Seven months had passed since that terrorist incident at the Reactor, yet Professor Gast had never stopped voicing his displeasure. He had been so brutally terrorized, so roughly mishandled, he had demanded President ShinRa find him a quiet place for research.

"Far away from the riff-raff of this crazy city, and all this gratuitous violence!" as Gast had angrily expressed.

Being in charge of the promising "JENOVA Project", and unquestionably the most important scientist in ShinRa Inc., Professor Gast's wishes were immediately taken into consideration: he wished to conduct further "investigations" into the alien life form as part of the overall research, yet refused to have an entire committee of scientists tagging along. This research required the presence of two scientists, three at most.

"You'd think he runs the place, the way he's ordering everyone around," President ShinRa had complained while reading the list of requests, "Who's the boss around here, anyway!"

Nevertheless, Professor Gast's wishes were obeyed. The President chose Nibelheim, a remote village near the rugged mountains of Nibel to be the research place. The villagers were kind-hearted, simple people ("stupid" was the President's expression), and would hardly interfere with the Project. The ShinRa Mansion could accommodate several scientists, all the necessary laboratory equipment, including a preservatory tank for JENOVA.

Therefore, the alien life form was carefully transported via the sea to the quaint village of Nibelheim. In the meantime, Davoren had been sent one month in advance to prepare the mansion for the arriving guests. He had dutifully overseen the delivery of JENOVA from the harbour to the preservatory tank; every room in the mansion had been impeccably prepared; he had even hired a servant, some middle-aged woman of homely appearance, to cook and clean for the honoured guests (however, she was strictly instructed NOT to near the library below).

Vincent, on the other hand, was ordered to escort Professor Gast and his entourage when they would actually leave Midgar. President ShinRa, furthermore, had informed the Turk he would be staying at Nibelheim, with Davoren, until the research was completed.

"Now that could range from one month to a full year," the President had laughed, puffing his dirty cigar, "So you be sure to bring along plenty of video games, magazines, or whatever else you like, Vincent. Nibelheim is the most boring place on earth..right after the Morgans', that is."

So, with a most friendly handshake, President ShinRa wished the Turk a "bon voyage", and dismissed him.

Since that fateful night one month ago, Vincent had never tried speaking to Lucrecia. Her repulsive action still baffled his senses, yet he patiently waited for her to forgive whatever offense he had committed against her. Unfortunately, Lucrecia never came to him; either the Project had completely won her attention, or she simply refused to see Vincent anymore. He knew she tried her best to avoid him, as though he intended to harm her, but still, Vincent would not impose himself.

His reaction had been ambivalent on learning that Lucrecia would be on the entourage to Nibelheim. Vincent, of course, missed her immensely, even yearned for her again. On the other hand, her reserved treatment of him had left a sharp pang in his heart. However, Vincent bore the blow as gracefully as he could, and maintained a stoic face.

She scarcely spoke to him during the entire trip, if only to say "excuse me" or "sorry". Much to his dismay, she preferred to discuss testing samples, data information, or other complicated details with Professor Hojo. Her eyes always avoided Vincent's, and she treated him with such stiffness, it pained him deeply.

Yet despite her caution, Vincent could see straight through her cold disguise. He detected an unnaturally nervous tremor in her voice whenever she spoke in his presence. If their eyes happened to meet, Vincent instantly discerned her frightened look. Lucrecia seemed so afraid of him; afraid he'd guess some dark secret of hers. Though she vigorously sought to conceal it, she knew Vincent had noticed her apprehension. He only pretended to notice nothing.

However, Vincent wasn't certain what exactly aroused such distress in Lucrecia. At first, the kiss had sprung to his mind: perhaps *that* still upset her? But his anxious heart insisted something else, far more serious, troubled the poor woman. But what?

Vincent battered his brains in search of a satisfactory answer, yet none justified her strange behavior.

Days passed. The three scientists bustled incessantly downstairs in the library, scribbling furiously or conducting mysterious "tests". In fact, they seldom emerged from the basement during the day, if only to grab a bite or take a quick nap. Neither Vincent nor Davoren dared disturb them; instead, they strolled around the village, or chatted idly over a game of poker. Though Vincent considered Davoren his best Turk friend, he never confided in him any of his personal concerns about Lucrecia. If Davoren asked him why he looked so wistful or glum, Vincent would automatically blame it on the autumn weather.

He kept all his thoughts, concerns, and worries bottled up in his own mind. A thousand little questions frustrated his senses: he *knew* Lucrecia concealed some heavy matter not meant for him to know. He saw it immediately whenever she passed or looked at him.

But what was it she tried so hard (and in vain) to hide from him?

Determined to set his mind at rest, Vincent decided to ask Lucrecia herself for a definite answer. Therefore, one afternoon, about two weeks since their arrival, Vincent wandered down to the library.

-End of Chp.23

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.24

The path to the basement consisted of a long winding staircase leading down, down to the caves below. On entering this twisting passage, Vincent paused to look around, then ventured down the wooden steps very cautiously. A chilly wind howled through this dim passage, making the echoes of his footsteps sound louder. The flimsy steps creaked as he descended down, yet Vincent refused to be deterred. He would find an answer today.

After clearing the footing, Vincent marched through the underground cavern, ignoring the sickly skulls which cluttered the corners. He passed the crypt chamber, until he finally reached the doorway to the ominous library.

As he neared the door, Vincent heard the two voices of the Professors discussing some subject very gravely. Hojo apparently wanted to finish some "tests", while Gast insisted they wait before continuing. Their dissentient voices grew increasingly louder as Vincent opened the door to a tiny crack. He peeked inside.

His eyes tensed as he spotted Lucrecia perched on a bulky operation table, fingering her lab coat very silently. Her pale face betrayed extreme sadness, if not utter despair, mixed with fatigue. Indeed, her mind seemed unaware of the two man's presence, so engrossed in her private thoughts.

Professor Hojo marched over to her, his brash voice still arguing with Gast, and handed her a glass of water. The spiteful man then began to gesticulate as he left the woman and returned to the other chamber, where Gast supposedly was.

Lucrecia rubbed her forehead as their dissentient voices filled the library. With a trembling hand, she lifted the glass to her lips, but stopped short on spotting Vincent at the doorway. He made some silent signal for her to follow him, then retreated back to the hall outside. Lucrecia glanced nervously towards the other chamber, where the two Professors were still arguing, then hopped off the table top.

After sneaking out the library, she gently shut the door behind her. Lucrecia coughed softly as Vincent stood directly in front of her, until she finally managed to look up at him. This was the first time they were alone since that night. The two fixed their eyes on each other for a full minute.

"Lucrecia," he whispered at last, "I need to speak to you."

She fidgeted in her spot, then protested in an even lower voice, "I can't, Vincent. they have to finish those analysis tests, and I must..."

"Please, Lucrecia," he begged, "If you don't want to see me again, I'll respect your wishes. But I only ask ten minutes of your time..please."

Her restless eyes darted all over the hall, suspicious someone may have overheard them. Lucrecia glanced at Vincent's pleading face, then feebly nodded her head in consent.

So, after excusing herself from the two Professors (Hojo needed some persuasion to release her), Lucrecia left the library with Vincent. Neither breathed a single word until they finally exited the mansion and were strolling towards the village square.

The sun had just begun to set between the mountain peaks as the two walked very slowly down the stony path. It's golden rays shone over the quaint village, so sorry to abandon it to the greedy night. Most of the simple villagers had retreated long ago into their cozy homes, tired and hungry. A warm fire glowed

through their smoggy windows, while a thin trail of smoke escaped their brick chimneys. The faint smell of food permeated the air as dinner time crept closer.

The two strolled across the deserted square, letting silence enjoy their company. Vincent wrangled his brains to begin the conversation, yet failed dismally to pin his exact thoughts, let alone express them. Lucrecia walked timidly by his side. She dared not open her mouth.

"Listen, Lucrecia," he began at length, "I can't figure out why you've been trying so hard to avoid me this past month and a half. If..if it's about *that*, then I.."

"N..no..Vincent," she interrupted very softly, covering her mouth for some reason, "It's not that at all..."

"Well, whatever be your reason, I won't discuss it with you. I wanted to talk to you about something else."

She glanced significantly at him, then cast her eyes down again. They paused by the battered well at the centre of the square.

Vincent cleared his throat, then resumed, "Lucrecia, I've known you for about half a year now, so I think I have some right to speak to you freely, and hope I won't offend you."

She tried to protest, but he silenced her with a wave of his hand, "No, no. Please, let me finish. Lucrecia, I know there's something troubling your mind, and I also know you don't want ME in particular to know it. You avoid me at all costs; you scarcely speak to me. But you cannot conceal it from me, Lucrecia, because I can *feel* it weighing you down."

She kept her eyes fixed on the ground as she replied in a faltering tone, "I..I appreciate your concern, Vincent..I really do...but there's nothing wrong or 'weighing' me down..I just.."

"Lucrecia," he interrupted firmly, "Please, do not lie to me."

The poor woman bit her lower lip to stop the tears from flooding her eyes. She even turned around to leave him, but Vincent immediately reached for her hand to stop her. He pressed it against his heart in hopes of mollifying the pitiful woman. Nothing hurt him more than to see her so miserable.

"Tell me what's making you so sad, Lucrecia," he pleaded very tenderly, "And I promise, I won't bother you ever again."

"Why are you doing this to me, Vincent?!" she scolded frantically, looking around herself in anguish. Her beautiful face bore a curious mixture of despair and frustration, "Can't you see how painful it is for me to see you? I tell you nothing is wrong! You..you're just imagining things, that's what!!"

Unable to say anymore, Lucrecia yanked her hand out of his and stormed away. Vincent followed her until she finally halted at the wooden gateway of the village. Though she refused to face Vincent again, he could see her shoulders tremble with great agitation; she even tried to desperately stifle her sobs. Vincent lingered a few steps behind her, then walked up to her.

"Lucrecia," he whispered lovingly, forcing to her to face him, "If there is anything I can do to stop your pain, then tell me, and I will do it. But please, don't torture yourself like this just to lie to me...because of all people, I can't stand to see you suffer."

"It doesn't matter anymore what I say, Vincent," she argued as she stepped away from him, "You wouldn't understand, even if I told you...and there's nothing you CAN do..it..it's too late."

"What do you mean 'too late'?"

Lucrecia hesitated for a long time, the same painful tears welling up in her eyes. She tried in vain to avoid looking at him.

"Lucrecia, what do you mean 'too late'?! Answer me!!"

"V..Vincent," she whispered at last, "I...I'm pregnant with Hojo's child."

Silence.

He gaped at her beautiful, tearful face, absolutely thunderstruck with the news. His senses swirled around his numb mind to comprehend her meaning. He tried several times to speak, but every time crumbled back to confusion. He could think of nothing to say, nor did she seem to expect him to. He stared blankly at her face for a full minute until his voice returned at last.

"Does...does he know?" he asked softly.

"Of course he does," Lucrecia answered, her eyes tensing in further anguish, "That was why I..told you not to kiss me...I was so afraid I would..forget myself, or you would..oh, see..I was pregnant then too. I've been so for the last three months..."

"I'm..sorry..," Vincent apologized feebly, "If I..I didn't know you and Professor Hojo were.."

"No! We're not!!" she denied, clenching her fists, "It's you I..I...see?! I told you you wouldn't understand any of this!!"

He studied her wretched face, yet made no reply.

"It's for an experiment," she explained, her voice dropping suddenly, "...for the Project.. Professor Hojo had designed this new experiment with Professor's Gast's help...and had asked me to..to.."

"What 'experiment'?" Vincent asked in alarm, "L..Lucrecia..are you some kind of guinea pig in this Project?! Is that what you mean?!"

Though she did not speak a word, Vincent immediately saw the answer as clear as day. His eyes widened in horror. Hot anger suddenly boiled in his heart.

"Lucrecia, don't you place any value on your life?!!" he cried passionately, "And what about your child?? Doesn't any of that mean anything to you??!"

"Listen," she answered, trying to sound as composed as possible, "I don't expect you to really understand this, but I have never dedicated myself to anything like I've done to this Project. I am prepared to sacrifice my time, energy..yes, even my life, if need be, for this Project. I have placed everything and everyone else after it, because to me, Vincent, this Project is the single most important factor in my life!"

She looked sternly at his face to make sure he heard every word. Yet despite the steadiness of her voice, her eyes retained a most painful gleam. Vincent stared meaningfully at her, then hung his head in shame. Neither spoke a word for a long time.

"I..I can't understand your actions, Lucrecia," he replied with great difficulty, "Nor do I have the right or capability to question them. If you..have chosen to do this, then I won't interfere in any way with you."

Vincent expelled a deep sigh, then looked straight at the woman as he continued, "But, Lucrecia, I can't help it if I love you so much..it pains me when you say you'd throw away your life...when you think it so cheap..while I'd gladly sacrifice mine a hundred times just for you. That's how much you mean to *me*."

Lucrecia turned her head away, clasping both her hands over her breast. She seemed to struggle violently to repress her emotions. Indeed, at times, she seemed on the verge of saying something, but checked herself in time.

"And even if my love is unrequited," he resumed calmly, "I..I won't complain or let you see my bleeding heart..just as long as I know you're absolutely *happy* with what you've done."

When Lucrecia made no response, but fidgeted in confusion instead, he took both her trembling hands in his. She dared not even lift her head to see that pleading expression on his face. Her shoulders shook as he bended slightly to peer into her suffering face.

"Lucrecia," he begged again very tenderly, "Can you look me in the eye, and please say you're happy with what you've done?"

He felt her hands grow alarmingly cold. Bitter, unchecked tears streamed down her cheeks as she tried to control her agitated emotion: perhaps she thought the request too much. Suddenly, her angry eyes darted straight up to him in unfeigned anger.

"Vincent," she sobbed out miserably, "just..JUST LEAVE ME ALONE!!!!"

Lucrecia immediately broke out of his grip and dashed out the gateway towards the fields just outside the village. Though Vincent called her name several times to stop her, she rushed away from him as quickly as possible. Vincent watched her until she finally disappeared behind some hills.

The cruel silence laughed at him.

He thought it best not to peruse her anymore. After all, what more could he do or say? Hadn't he already caused her enough grief? He began to wander aimlessly around the village in hopes of clearing his mind again. The news of her pregnancy still shocked him beyond belief: no wonder she had repulsed him so vigorously that night! No wonder she had avoided him all this time! She wanted to spare herself all this pain...she had thought he might stand in her way.

Vincent recalled every word of their last conversation, yet stopped midway since it only redoubled his pain. Strange he bore her no malice, nor could he scold her for spurning his love. He only felt this cold, black void gnaw at his heart from inside out.

He drifted absent-mindedly around the quiet village, listening to his footsteps echo on the stone pavement. He passed the same houses at least a dozen times until his mind simply lost track of time. His tired feet wandered over the village square, the mountain pathway, even the fields beyond the village, yet could not soothe his aching emotions. In fact, his ordeal worsened with every passing hour.

When Vincent had finally grown too weary of wandering, he headed back towards the village again. The bold sunset had streaked the sky with a brilliant hue of orange, fringed by a darker shade along the rolling hills. The distant howls of some lonely animal reechoed across the valley, as if mourning the departure of day. Indeed, a faint moon had already appeared at the far end of the sky, accompanied by a wintry breeze.

Vincent strolled along the beaten track up to the gateway, hanging his head in deep contemplation. His brows knit themselves so tightly; his face, his whole appearance expressed such solemnity. He struggled

to unite all his feelings, ideas, and emotions, yet all in vain. His tumultuous thoughts scurried around his mind, slipping out of his fingers like water.

A strange, persistent feeling tugged at his anguished heart; some emotion which ravaged his mind, but failed to formulate into words. It wasn't bitterness...not reproach..not pity..then what was it?

Vincent finally reached the wooden gateway of the village. Yet his feet froze solid on spotting two lovers embracing each other just a few yards away. Vincent hid behind one of the gateway's posts, and let his stoic eyes linger a moment on the tender pair.

The young woman, with a long ponytail dangling behind her back, nestled her entire body in the man's arms. She stood with her back facing Vincent, so that he could only see her trembling shoulders. Her head had buried itself completely against the man's shoulder as she sobbed in silence. She wore a long lab coat over her slender body.

Her lover, an extremely thin man, continuously stroked her back while whispering into her ear. He fixed his narrow eyes on the stony ground, so that he did not notice the Turk either. His whole attention, in fact, seemed absorbed in soothing the woman's agitated emotions. He even kissed her hair several times in hopes of calming her. Similarly, the man wore a lab coat like hers.

Vincent had immediately recognized Professor Hojo and Lucrecia.

He gazed silently at the couple another minute or so before turning away in despair. Yet he only managed to take a few steps when he stopped again. His forlorn eyes stole another glance at the two.

Lucrecia had decided her own path, and obviously did not want Vincent to accompany her on the journey. If she had chosen the Project, then he would not interfere in any way. If she had chosen Hojo over him, then he would not complain or cry. Vincent thought himself far too loving, or probably just too stupid, to find any fault with Lucrecia.

What right had he to intervene now? How could he dream of questioning any of her actions, even her preference to Hojo?

He finally discovered what that strange emotion had been. It was bitter, hopeless defeat.

He watched the two dawdle in each other's arms another moment, then tore himself away before being noticed. He did not look back again.

What mattered his misery..if there was a smile to brighten her beautiful face? What mattered his pathetic pain...if Lucrecia was *happy*? Did it matter to him?

"As long as she's happy..," he repeated to himself in a whisper, "As long as she's happy... I don't mind."

-End of Chp.24

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.25

"Well, well, Mr. Valentine," Professor Hojo greeted mockingly, "I'm so glad you could spare a minute from your busy schedule."

Several days had passed since Vincent had last spoken to Lucrecia. After that miserable day, Vincent never neared Lucrecia for fear of upsetting her with his unpleasant presence. In fact, he avoided any kind of contact with her unless absolutely necessary.

He expected no apology from her; not even a kind word to ease his pain: why should she? *He* had wrought this suffering on himself. How could even dream of blaming her? Indeed, for every argument, he found some plausible excuse for her. He refused to find any fault with Lucrecia.

She spent her days imprisoned downstairs in the library, succumbing to all analysis tests both Professors thought essential. Every minute of her time or ounce of energy were immediately sacrificed to the greedy Project. Though Professor Gast warned her not to overwork herself on account of her child's health, Lucrecia refused to stop working. It was, literally, the only solace to her torn mind.

However, at some rare moments. Lucrecia would stop working and let her mind stray into her gloomy thoughts. Nobody could guess what or *who* occupied her mind during those few minutes.

Yet while poor Lucrecia slaved in the Mansion, Vincent scarcely stayed inside. The grand, beautiful house had aroused such a passionate disgust in his heart, he preferred to accompany soldiers on patrol duty rather than lounge inside. If not, then he would practice with his gun in the deserted fields beyond the village; perhaps just drift aimlessly along the hills, even though Davoren warned him many times of wild animals. Anything but sit in that loathsome mansion.

Despite his distraught, broken heart, Vincent concealed his feelings so artfully, especially from Davoren, nobody would have guessed anything troubled his mind. His impeccable obedience impressed everyone around him, as well as his business-like, courteous manners. Yet his face had grown exceptionally cold in such a short time. A hard, unnaturally frigid glow had appeared in his eyes. He hardly spoke unless spoken to, and shunned any form of company, preferring to wallow in his private thoughts by himself.

On one particular autumn afternoon, Vincent had been aimlessly strolling along the fields as usual, when a soldier came rushing to him from the village. Through several gasps, he informed the Turk that Professor Hojo wished to see him immediately, concerning "some very, very important matter".

Vincent resentfully consented to obey the hateful request (he did not find the thought of meeting Hojo particularly appealing). So, without further delay, he returned to the quiet village, the breathless soldier lagging behind him. Vincent marched wearily into the Mansion, through the endless corridors, and down the twisting passage. He stopped momentarily at the dreaded library door to knock, then obeyed on hearing Hojo's brash voice cry "enter".

Vincent took three steps into the dim library before halting near the first bookshelf. His eyes scanned the new surroundings: several gigantic bookcases, stuffed beyond the limit with books, ran uniformly along the stone walls. An awkward generator had miraculously squeezed itself at the opposite wall, filling the library with a very low hum. The huge, rectangular operation table Lucrecia had been perched on still dominated the far corner of the room. Yet now numerous dissection instruments cluttered the top, accompanied by two yellow manuscripts and a glass of water.

Vincent also noted the stacks of books huddling along the grim walls, some wide open, others rudely overturned. Several scraps of crumpled papers scattered around the book stacks, as if paying homage to

their vast knowledge. Finally, a flickering lamp, cruelly pushed into a corner, filled the great library with a dim, feeble light. The three scientists had obviously been quite busy with their Project.

Professor Hojo emerged from the other chamber of the library, wearing his thick glasses and carrying an enormous book between his bony hands. He welcomed the new guest with that previous remark before slamming the book shut and turning his face to the Turk. Vincent, however, merely stiffened his back as a response. His calm eyes fixed themselves on the malicious Professor with an abnormally stoic expression. He did not show the slightest trace of annoyance at the sarcastic remark.

Professor Hojo dumped the burdensome book on the disorderly table top, the adjusted his glasses very arrogantly. With a most haughty motion of his hand, he beckoned the Turk to step forward, as if saying "I am your superior, Sir, what will you do about *that*?" Vincent obeyed the command in silence.

"Now then, Mr. Valentine," Hojo said, eyeing the morose Turk top to bottom, "I asked for you because I want to discuss some matter of particular interest to me. To be specific: Ms. Lucrecia."

Vincent made no answer, except a slight twitch of his hands at the mention of the name. The Professor coughed importantly, studying the Turk's tall figure with peculiar interest.

"Let us be honest, Sir," Hojo declared as he tied both arms behind his back, "I never liked you the minute I saw you. I think you a pathetic lackey to the company, despite all your over-praised merits. And you do not particularly hold me in high regard, correct?"

Vincent still refused to answer. He remained rooted to his spot, returning Hojo's glare with a perfectly unruffled look.

"Well, you're a man of few words, I see," the Professor frowned contemptuously, "No point stating the obvious. But I did not wish to waste my precious time on such frivolities, Mr. Valentine."

He began pacing around the untidy room, re-adjusting his glasses whenever they slipped down his nose. His long shadow danced with the flickering light as he glared maliciously at the unresponsive Turk. Vincent never flinched from his spot. Instead, his cool eyes followed the Professor; he masked all his emotions behind a most serene visage.

"Mr. Valentine," the spiteful man pronounced firmly, "regardless of our mutual dislikes, I would like to remind you of your proper position. The ShinRa President grants us scientists full authority provided our work benefits the company in return. YOUR duty, Sir, in case you had somehow forgotten, is to merely oversee our safety, and any interference in our work means a breach of your duty. Is that clear?"

When Vincent made no reply, Hojo stamped his foot with incensed impatience.

"DAMN YOU!!!" he roared at the top of his voice, "ANSWER ME!! IS THAT CLEAR?!!!"

Vincent reluctantly replied, "Yes, Sir."

"Furthermore, Mr. Valentine, might I also remind you that as a Turk in ShinRa Inc., you are obliged to obey our commands to the letter. And not, under any circumstances, question or judge our actions with your poor, narrow judgment. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir."

Professor Hojo pursed his thin lips as he halted directly in front of Vincent. His rat-like eyes narrowed keenly on the Turk, ready to murder him if only possible. Vincent still retained the stoic expression on his hard face; he refused to answer the impudent man beyond that required.

After an awkward silence, Hojo resumed his pacing around the room. He occasionally kicked a hapless book out of his way, yet never took his scornful eyes off the Turk.

"I am pleased you understand," Hojo smirked, that same mocking tone returning to his voice, "Apparently, you forgot your duties a few days ago. I happened to find Ms. Lucrecia quite upset with your..how do I put it...'difference of opinion' as regards to.."

But Professor Hojo stopped short on noticing Lucrecia standing in the doorway, her pale face betraying great distress. She had, in fact, been listening behind the door to Hojo's harangue until she finally decided to discover who the addressee was. At the sight of Vincent, intense alarm had seized her so violently, she almost collapsed in her spot had not she gripped one of the bookcases. Vincent, on the other hand, merely glanced back at her, then returned his calm eyes to the spiteful Professor. He made no acknowledgement, not even a polite nod of the head, to poor Lucrecia.

"Ah, my dear, we were just talking about you," Hojo greeted amicably, yet keeping his narrow eyes fixed on the Turk. The Professor then made some gesture to invite her forward, and resumed, "As I was saying, Mr. Valentine, I happened to find Lucrecia crying by the village well, quite upset with your opinion concerning a particular aspect of the Project. Indeed, she was so distraught, it took me well over an hour just to calm her down to a reasonable level and find out what upset her."

Vincent did not wince a muscle at Hojo's accusing tone. Lucrecia, who had walked up to the Professor during his speech, now fidgeted very anxiously a few steps behind him. Her tearful eyes dared not look up for fear of meeting Vincent's; instead, she cast them down to the stony ground in shame. Nor could Vincent induce himself to look at her suffering face. In truth, it took him great effort to maintain his stoic expression, knowing at the same time how badly this embarrassing spectacle pained her. He wished Hojo had at least the decency to spare her this confrontation.

"And obviously, Mr. Valentine," Professor Hojo sneered through grit teeth, "your opinion, the very recollection of it, still distresses Ms. Lucrecia. Therefore, Sir, I ask you to restrict any further personal opinions to yourself, without conveying them to Ms. Lucrecia. To be honest, you lack the proper judgment, capability, and intellect to debate our actions or express any valid opinion about them."

Lucrecia turned to the professor, much alarmed at his brazen behavior. She opened her mouth to protest, but immediately turned away in disgust. she could not say anything to stop this humiliating scene.

When he had finally finished his pompous lecture, Hojo folded both arms across his chest and glared arrogantly at the Turk. However, Vincent would not answer. He had merely stared calmly back at the insolent man, letting him hurl insult after insult at him as much as he pleased.

A heavy stillness filled the room for a moment. Professor Hojo tapped his foot impatiently, while Vincent persisted to linger in his obstinate silence. Lucrecia did not speak a word either.

"Do feel free to speak, Mr. Valentine," invited the Professor mockingly, breaking the silence at last, "It takes at least two people to make a conversation, you know."

Vincent said nothing.

"P..Professor Hojo..please don't do this..," Lucrecia beseeched meekly. But Hojo only dismissed her with a rude wave of the hand: he *would* have an answer!

"From what I gather, Sir," Hojo sneered as he tied both arms behind his back again, "You think yourself a very...*close* friend to Ms. Lucrecia, yes? I would think you'd have much to say to me, especially regarding..."

"With all due respect, Professor," Vincent interrupted dryly, "I would prefer you refrained from discussing my personal life, as it is, and forgive my impertinence, none of your business."

"Ah!" exclaimed Hojo, eager to argue, "But you certainly took the full liberty of discussing *her* personal life, even though it was, to use your own words, none of your business."

"You misunderstand my intentions, Professor," Vincent answered with a cool, restrained tone. He glanced at Lucrecia, who had turned away in disgrace, but immediately returned to the malicious Professor, "I assure you, I had no desire to upset her or offend her feelings. I had merely expressed a heartfelt concern for Ms. Lucrecia's safety and her child, on account of her involvement in the JENOVA Project."

At the mention of 'the child', Hojo gave the Turk a very suspicious, hostile look. His piercing eyes darted back to trembling Lucrecia, silently berating her for having revealed too much. However, he soon faced Vincent again, quite agitated but under control. An ugly grimace distorted Professor Hojo's thin lips as he resumed to pace around the chaotic room; he tied both arms behind his back as usual. Both Lucrecia and Vincent watched him, one apprehension, the latter with well-concealed yet genuine hatred.

In truth, Vincent could not recall when Professor Hojo had struck him as more revolting, despicable, and spiteful than he did at that particular moment.

"A heartfelt concern for Ms. Lucrecia's safety and her child, hey?" repeated Hojo in a mumbling voice full of malice, "Hm..hm..and pray tell me, Mr. Valentine, what aspect of the JENOVA Project do you reckon to be a threat to Ms. Lucrecia's safety? On what facts, with your obvious lack of information, do you base your 'heartfelt concern' on? Enlighten me, do!"

Hojo's increasingly aggressive tone startled the poor woman. Vincent narrowed his keen eyes at the Professor's biting sarcasm, yet replied as coldly as before, "I realize your knowledge of this Project surpasses mine greatly, Professor. However, I found Ms. Lucrecia's consent to become..pardon my bluntness..a human guinea pig quite alarming."

"There! Now we're going around in meaningless circles again!" thundered Hojo, losing all patience in a flash, "Need I constantly remind you of your duties as a Turk?! I say you..."

"I am quite aware of my duties as a Turk, Professor," Vincent interrupted composedly, "You need not remind me of my obligations to ShinRa Inc., or to you, thank you."

"Yes..so you claim! If you were, indeed, aware of your duties, you would not pester Ms. Lucrecia with your unfounded fears or 'heartfelt concern', Mr. Valentine! You do NOT argue or question our decisions..your sole duty is to ensure our safety! nothing more, nothing less."

"But you can't just experiment on human life, Professor!" stated Vincent very firmly, feeling the suppressed rage rise to the surface. His eyes involuntarily glanced again at Lucrecia, who too struggled against some violent emotion.

Hojo suddenly halted in front of Vincent, his eyebrows knitted in intense fury; this challenge to his authority obviously enraged him beyond measure. Vincent stiffened his back on meeting the Professor's fiery eyes, yet refrained from speaking.

"We are scientists," Hojo hissed as he pushed his glasses up his nose very haughtily, "And we can do *whatever we want! As a Turk, you will obey MY authority and MY command!! If I tell you we can do whatever we please, then you will accept it without question!! That's is your sole duty: to obey your superiors!! Do you understand, you meddling piece of COW DUNG??!!!!!"

Hojo's brash voice roared all over the library by the time he had finished those words. His lean face fumed with wild rage as he poked Vincent's shoulder to emphasize his point. Lucrecia was thunderstruck with horror.

"And if you dare...even DARE interfere with us again," Hojo spluttered uncontrollably into Vincent's calm face, "I swear you will suffer the consequences!! MARK MY WORDS, TURK, YOU WILL!!!!"

Vincent coolly wiped the Professor's spit of his own face, then stood as rigidly as before. He made no reply.

Hojo opened his mouth to continue, but stopped short when he noticed Davoren suddenly enter the library. The Professor glared breathlessly at the intruder for a moment before turning away in annoyance. The leader of the Turks paused a minute before venturing further into the dim room. He nodded his head respectfully to Lucrecia, whose cheeks were flushed in unconcealed embarrassment.

Hojo guzzled down the full glass of water, yet said nothing.

"Is there a problem, Professor?" Davoren asked finally.

Vincent and Lucrecia remained rooted to their spots, while Hojo yanked off his glasses on hearing the innocent question. His mocking eyes continuously darted back to Vincent's calm face, growing more insolent with every word.

"Why, yes, Mr. Davoren," the spiteful man sneered loudly, "Evidently, I'm trying to do *your* job. Namely, teaching one of your men his proper place as a Turk in ShinRa Inc."

Davoren glanced back at Vincent, then replied coolly, "I see. Has Mr. Valentine offended you somehow?"

Hojo scoffed again at the question, but answered with forced politeness, "To be sure! Kindly, Mr. Davoren, remind your man over there that any interference in *my* business constitutes an interference in my company's business. If he has...a problem with the Project...then he is to restrict his thoughts to himself! I will not tolerate any sort of disobedience or disrespect from anyone!!!"

Davoren happened to glance at Lucrecia for a split second. Yet from his face alone, she realized at once Davoren had guessed the exact "problem". He had, indeed, overheard enough of the speech to understand that she was pregnant, and had accepted to be a guinea pig for some mysterious experiment. The poor woman, mortified beyond measure, decided to flee this horrid spectacle. So without even a polite farewell, she rushed out of the room, as if escaping a dreadful nightmare.

Vincent stepped aside to let her pass, then resumed his formal spot after she had left. Davoren coughed to ease the tension he had caused while Hojo only turned his back away from the two men; he found their presence an unbearable nuisance.

A very awkward silence followed.

Though Vincent's face still retained the same dispassionate composure, his blood boiled with violent rage. He had clearly seen Lucrecia's embarrassed tears as she left through the door. Despite her every effort to avoid his eyes, he had seen them streaming down her cheeks.

Davoren cleared his throat, then answered very deliberately, "Of course, Professor, nor will I tolerate such behavior. If Mr. Valentine has...disobeyed or disrespected you in any way, I will, most assuredly, speak to him," he looked askance at Vincent as he added, "...and he will apologize if necessary."

Hojo twisted his lips into a wry smile, only too delighted at the thought of an apology. He tied both arms behind his back as he faced Vincent, his mean eyes gleaming with triumph. Instead of defending himself, Vincent stood rooted to his spot; he would not speak.

"However, Professor Hojo," Davoren continued in a surprisingly firm voice, "I'll also remind *you* that you must...and will...show Mr. Valentine the proper civility required, since he is an employee under the direct command of President ShinRa."

Hojo glared maliciously at the man, yet said nothing this time. Davoren's hard face and cold tone certainly discouraged any interruption.

Davoren folded both arms before adding with more coolness, "I would also strongly advise you to refrain from comparing Mr. Valentine to...animal excrement...in future times. It is quite indecorous, not to mention very unwise, if you understand me."

Professor Hojo acknowledged the meaning with a dismissive nod of the head. He gave Vincent one last haughty look before turning away from the two. He began rummaging through the manuscripts cluttered on the table, and said no more.

Davoren, believing his point had been understood, decided to retreat out of the library. Therefore, with a tap on Vincent's shoulder, he signaled for them to leave the insolent man alone. The Turk immediately obeyed.

Professor Gast bumped into them as they exited through the doorway, his face showing great puzzlement mixed with compassion. After a sincere apology to the two gentlemen, he entered the library, then closed the door behind himself.

"I say, Hojo," Professor Gast asked piteously, "What's wrong with Lucrecia? I happened to see her running to her room, crying her eyes out! Poor girl! You're always so rough with her."

"Bah! You know how sentimental women are!" Hojo scoffed in a loud, contemptuous voice, "Only fit to cry at the slightest upset...especially when pregnant!!"

Vincent happened to hear that last remark as he left the loathsome library. Though he followed his leader as obediently as any soldier, his heart swelled with such unbelievable rage. So much so that his whole face, unable to resist the passion any longer, darkened with unforgiving hatred.

He wished he had shot Hojo...yes...one clean shot through the head would have sufficed...

-End of Chp.25

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.26

"I don't care what kind of grievance that sour sod has against you," Davoren had ordered gently but firmly, "You are not to go near Professor Hojo again, even if he tells you to, understood, Valentine?"

Vincent, of course, obeyed his leader's command without question. Since that horrible confrontation, he avoided any contact with the scientists unless absolutely necessary. He never returned to the grim library below, nor did he even near the scientists' chambers.

If he chanced to meet Hojo in the hallway, he respectfully made way for him to pass without a word. The insolent Professor would glare at the Turk top to bottom, then snub past him very arrogantly. Vincent, on the other hand, would resume his way down the corridor, pretending nothing had happened.

He never saw Lucrecia during those tedious, mundane days. He understood how his presence upset her, especially after witnessing that embarrassing scene in the library. Therefore, Vincent avoided her in particular as best to his abilities. A full week dragged by in which neither even dared think of the other: she still slaved below in the library, fumbling among test tubes and tissue samples, while he performed whatever duty required for the day.

Yet her absence only intensified his heartache instead of softening it (even if he always denied it). At times, the agony gnawed at his heart so violently, no amount of wandering or patrolling could hope to soothe its intensity.

Lucrecia, in his eyes, was exempt from all blame: he had promised he would not interfere with her decision, even though a horrible presentiment warned him of some unknown danger. Let her do whatever she pleased..why grieve her more than he had already done?

He became increasingly withdrawn as the days rolled by, preferring to wallow in his own gloomy preoccupations. Vincent would wander hours on end in the empty fields of Nibelheim, or simply lounge under a stout tree until dusk. Nature surrounded him with every splendour it could concoct in hopes of lifting his sunken spirits. Yet his mind found the charm of this rustic land quite distasteful: the majestic mountains ceased to excite his wonder; the once quaint, winsome village now seemed an unbearable prison, especially the Mansion; the endless hills, frilled in patches of lush green grass, only irritated him further.

Indeed, the poor, heartbroken man found no solace anywhere to drown his aching misery. Despite his vow not to interfere with Lucrecia, Vincent always suffered. Nevertheless, he somehow swallowed the pain, and said nothing.

Though Davoren noticed (quite keenly) how forlorn Vincent had become, he never asked the Turk to share his personal troubles. He was either too busy satisfying the scientists' demand, or perhaps he felt it wisest not to poke his nose into Vincent's business.

Davoren, however, defended his friend against Professor Hojo's biting remarks very fiercely. If the insolent man muttered some comment aimed at Vincent, Davoren would answer for the Turk in more sarcastic tone; then he'd dryly order the Professor to "not waste anymore time with his petty disputes". Hojo never dared argue with the beloved leader of the Turks (the President would be *quite* angry if he did); instead, he would retreat quietly away. In short, Davoren made sure Vincent was left alone.

And naturally, Vincent was grateful for this man's kindness.

Yet, in truth, Davoren had grown very preoccupied with his own thoughts since that horrible confrontation. Although he knew of Lucrecia's pregnancy and consent to be a human guinea pig, he never voiced any opinion on her decision, at least not to Vincent's knowledge. His mind seemed engrossed in an entirely different matter.

Davoren would mysteriously disappear for hours during which no one knew where, then emerge again, his face expressing profound solemnity. The man often sat alone in the parlour, engrossed in deep meditation; or maybe linger by the large stained windows, smoking a cigarette very thoughtfully. If Vincent happened to spot his leader in that pensive state, the latter would immediately smile and laugh to disperse any suspicions.

Yet despite Davoren's reassurances and good-humoured denials, an ominous suspicion continually pestered Vincent whenever he met his leader. So much that he'd inquire, very cautiously, whether an illness, or perhaps some trouble, ailed the man. He sensed a dark hidden secret behind that friendly face; something he felt *he* should know of as well. But Davoren only shrugged off Vincent's quizzical look with a warm smile, then a pat on his friend's back.

"Poppy-cock! You're so used to being gloomy, you think EVERYONE is like you," Davoren teased light-heartedly, "I tell you, I'm fine!"

Unfortunately, the nagging suspicion clung to Vincent's mind, insisting this man withheld some secret from him. He could have persisted until he discovered it, only he had no actual proof Davoren harboured some sinister secret. Instinct alone would not suffice.

Maybe he's right, Vincent reflected to himself, maybe I'm just imagining things...

One chilly autumn evening, almost two weeks after that library incident, Vincent left the Mansion for his usual stroll along the village square. A faint orange hue had singed the cloudless sky as the day slowly faded into darkness. The wintry breeze howled over the cobblestone ground, promising of a cold night very soon.

Through every cottage window, a friendly fire glowed to warm the house inside, while a thin trail of grey smoke danced up the chimneys. Vincent passed many ruddy, dirty-faced miners returning home with their picks. Some tipped their hats respectfully as Vincent passed, others simply ignored him, being too exhausted to notice anyone, and quite hungry for food. Many a miner stumbled through his doorway, shouting "Dinner!!" at the same time. The children were immediately called inside before latching the door. Young girls who had been sent to fetch water scurried back home, several of them eyeing the passing Turk then giggling bashfully amongst themselves. Even the dogs were called in for their dinner.

Therefore, in a remarkably short time, the village square emptied completely, save for the occasional miner who wandered into the inn for a drink. Every door was securely locked; every window firmly shut; and all villagers snug inside their warm houses for the night. Not a soul dared stir the stillness of the air, except for the cheers of the merry guests bustling inside the cozy inn.

Vincent, with both hands thrust deep into his pockets, wandered aimlessly about the square for some time until halting at the giant well. Leaning his back against the bulky structure, he heaved a heavy sigh, then closed his eyes in exhaustion. The cold wind caressed his face so soothingly, all sound soon faded into oblivion, even the rowdy laughs of the miners inside the inn.

His torn thoughts scattered in all directions, tripping over small details or petty observations; he simply let them drift in any direction they pleased. Yet no matter what path he perused, or how many twists and turns he followed, his mind always returned to the same thought: Lucrecia. Always..always..and nothing but Lucrecia.

While he was thus preoccupied, Vincent's eyes happened to stray to the far side of the square when he gave a violent start: Lucrecia was standing there, looking very timidly at him. He knew not how long she had been lingering there, yet judging from her nervous face, guessed it to be a long time. She had probably found him brooding by the well, and waited patiently for him to notice her. When he finally caught sight of her, Lucrecia cringed back a step in spite of herself, as if he intended to harm her.

Vincent straightened himself up at once, but dared not advance towards her. Instead, he fixed his quizzical eyes on her distressed face, wondering internally what purpose had she to wander outside at this late hour.

The poor woman hesitated a few minutes before mustering all her courage in a resolute sigh. She walked across the cobblestone square, towards the silent Turk. On reaching him, she glanced around herself to make sure they were out of hearing distance, then looked straight up at Vincent. Though her voice sounded reasonably steady, her eyes shone with incredible anxiety, almost fear.

"Vincent," she whispered cautiously, "Can I please speak to you for a moment? Please..just a moment."

Her pleading tone alarmed him beyond measure. He guessed immediately from her eyes something horrible troubled her mind. So, without a second thought, he nodded his head in consent: he would speak to her.

Lucrecia looked around herself again, suspicious of some invisible eavesdropper lurking in the shadows, then took his hand. Vincent could feel her cold hand tremble in his as she led him away from the well and through the village gate. The two walked hand in hand for a short distance, neither speaking a word, until they finally reached the apple orchard.

Snuggled at the very end edge of Nibelheim behind some abandoned cottage, this apple orchard had been planted by some lonely gardener long ago. Its keeper dead, the unfortunate orchard gradually sunk into its present state of negligence. Greedy rust covered whatever remained of the iron gate. Patches of red ivy crept all over the stony wall, adding to the already ruined atmosphere. A cobblestone path, now hidden by tufts of frozen grass, wound around this haunted orchard until it reached the doorstep of the cottage.

Dead apple trees, utterly barren of any fruit or leaves, ran along both sides of the twisting path. While Time had disfigured some trees beyond redemption, most had been spared such a cruel fate. Yet every tree beheld its own frozen branches and hardened trunk in silent regret, as if mourning the loss of their beauty. Though once every few springs some apples would bloom in this abandoned orchard, it remained completely desolate through all four seasons.

Lucrecia, still leading the Turk by the hand, followed the winding cobblestone path until they reached the heart of the orchard. The dead branches of those woeful trees swayed gently in the cold breeze, as if welcoming the two visitors to their ruined home. Night slowly fingered the orange sky above, adding to the barren trees' destitute appearance. Therefore, by the time the two intruders had stopped, most trees had been devoured by the darkness. It was very quiet; not even the crows dared caw in this ghostly place.

When Lucrecia halted, she released Vincent's hand and took one step away from him. The Turk looked around at the dead garden in unconcealed wonder: he had, of course, passed this apple orchard many times during his lonely strolls along the fields, yet never dared enter it out of some vague suspicion. In fact, Vincent had disliked this place on first site. He scanned the frozen garden for a full minute before returning his attention to Lucrecia. She, on the other hand, fixed her tense eyes on his face, battering her brains to begin the conversation. Vincent said nothing to disrupt her.

"I know you don't want to talk to me, Vincent," she whispered very timidly, "especially after that..that horrible scene in the library with Professor Hojo."

He opened his mouth to protest, but Lucrecia shook her head before he could utter a word, "Sh! No, please. Don't speak, just listen. Ever since that day when I...I told you about my pregnancy..and that I decided to be a human guinea pig..I haven't been able to sleep at night. I always find myself thinking about you..and what you said to me. I try so hard to push you out of my mind by working, but I can't, Vincent. You always manage to torture me, someday or another."

Overwhelmed with this surge of emotions, Lucrecia's voice broke down in apparent agitation. She stepped away from him, trying her best to avoid his quizzical eyes, then stood perfectly still. Vincent, unsure how to defend himself against the accusation, fidgeted nervously in his spot. His mind struggled to gather all his scattered thoughts.

"I'm very sorry," he apologized in a low voice, "I'm trying my best to avoid you. I know you don't really want to see me either," he paused a moment to glance at her, then added, "If there were perhaps another way I could spare you this pain, then..."

"You can't, Vincent, you can't," she interrupted passionately, looking him straight in the eye, "Because it's how you feel *inside* that's torturing me so much! I don't know what to do anymore... your words and feelings just hammer me day and night, until I think I'm going crazy! And avoiding me won't stop it either, Vincent..it..it won't.."

Vincent stared blankly back at her, completely taken aback by her misery. He ran his fingers through his hair, fumbling for some comforting word to say, then hung his head in dejection: he did not know how to reply. Lucrecia, however, stepped closer to him, and looked very tenderly into his troubled face.

"Now please, listen," she pleaded softly, discerning his anxiety, "I've told you before, and I'll say it again: this Project means more to me than anything else..even my own life. I have to do this if the Project is to be successful."

The Turk made no reply.

"I know I'm risking my life, Vincent," she continued more softly, "But you must understand how important this whole JENOVA Project is. Yes, it's my life's dedication. So please, I beg you, accept what I've done, not in words, but in your heart too. When..you were arguing with Professor Hojo..I realized that you haven't really accepted what I've done."

He still did not answer her.

"If I should suffer for this Project," she concluded, "then I'll accept the consequences of my actions for the Project's sake.."

"But, Lucrecia, what about yourself? What about your own happiness? "

Although a simple question, Vincent fixed his eyes on her face as if his whole fate depended on her answer. Lucrecia stared back at him a moment before she began chafing her slender arms in obvious confusion. Her tense eyes refused to look at him. She made no reply, except cough softly once or twice.

A strange, unnatural stillness filled the orchard. All of nature, the brittle trees included seemed to await her answer. Vincent's entire face darkened sternly as he watched the poor woman hesitate. He narrowed his bright eyes on her beloved face, searching for an answer to his burning question. Lucrecia, however, stepped further away from him to escape his hard scrutiny.

"Vincent, I just don't know anymore, but I don't want you torturing me like this," she beseeched wretchedly, "It's like..it's like I want to do something..but then I remember you and get all confused. I..I'm

torn, Vincent..I don't know what to do... and it's all your fault. So please..please, Vincent, accept what I've done."

When Lucrecia had finally finished her pitiful supplication, Vincent walked over to her without muttering a word. She dared not retreat from him as before, but stood rooted to her spot, anticipating his reaction. Vincent stopped directly in front of her and waited for her to look up at him. His face bore such a hard, stern expression, it startled poor Lucrecia to the point of frightful alarm. She realized she had angered him.

"I assure you, Lucrecia, I never had any intentions of torturing you in my life," he stated in a cool tone, "And I would sooner die than make you miserable. If you've chosen this experiment over..," he nearly choked out "over me", but instead said, "..over your own life, well, who am I to judge you? I promised you I would not interfere, regardless of what I think, just as long as you're *happy* with what you've done. And I will keep my promise."

She made no response. Instead, she cast her eyes down in shame. Vincent turned slightly away from her as he added, almost viciously, "But that will never change my feelings towards you, Lucrecia. I still love you, and always will. You most certainly haven't the right to stop, because I can't."

Another awkward silence followed. The cold wind puffed across the cobblestone path, overturning dead leaves and pebbles along the way. The pearly moon had besieged the sky long ago, scattering all the tiny stars over its black domain. It was quite dark.

Neither breathed a word during this time. Vincent's eyes riveted on her troubled face, bore straight into her very soul. Lucrecia continuously dodged his look as suppressed tears welled up in her eyes. Soon, her cheeks flushed in unmistakable agitation. Therefore, believing the Turk had nothing more to say to her, she turned around to leave.

However, Vincent quickly gripped her trembling hand and pulled it back to him before she could even take a step. He pressed her hand against his chest with both hands so tightly, she could feel his heartbeat. Though a tender look had replaced his previously hard expression, he still retained that same painful gleam in his eyes.

Lucrecia could only stare back at him in wonder. She said nothing.

"Damn it, Lucrecia," he cursed under his breath, studying her face more intently, "I can't stand to see you cry, let alone suffer like this. And I have this nagging, horrible presentiment that you'll come to some harm because of this Project. I want to protect you from whatever this threat is..sacrifice anything I must to keep you safe..even..even if you obviously don't return my affections."

He felt her wriggle her hand in his firm grip, yet continued as softly as before, "You can tell me you're happy, and I'll believe you. Tell me I make you feel miserable, and I'll go away. But you can't erase this bad feeling from my heart, Lucrecia..it won't go away, not as long as you..."

But Vincent stopped short when he noticed Lucrecia give a violent start and stare, absolutely horrified, at something behind him. He slowly turned his head around to see what had frightened the poor woman. Much to his alarm, he found Davoren standing a few yards away, with both his arms folded loose across his chest.

Vincent was dumbstruck.

-End of Chp.26

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.27

Neither Vincent nor Lucrecia had even heard that man creep up from behind and watch them during their fervent conversation. Vincent dared not guess how much Davoren had heard, or what thoughts ran through his mind at that moment. Hundreds of fears tumbled inside Vincent's stunned mind as he searched Davoren's face for any hint of his reaction.

Yet the man bore such an unnaturally cold visage, totally contrary to his usual friendly nature, Vincent soon gave up the attempt. He stood rooted to his spot, awkwardly fumbling in the silence.

Lucrecia immediately slipped her hand out of Vincent's grip before retreating a few steps. She hid both her trembling hands behind her back, as if hiding the evidence of some heinous crime. She too stared intently at the leader of the Turks, trying her best to read his mind yet appear calm at the same time.

At least one minute of embarrassing silence passed in which no one muttered a word. Even the wind had ceased blowing, not daring to disturb this heavy stillness. Both visitors fixed their anxious eyes on the unexpected intruder. Davoren, however, merely lighted a cigarette for himself in the most natural manner. He seemed to find this secret "rendez-vous" quite normal.

Unable to bear the suffocating silence any longer, Vincent decided to leave before matters grew any worse.

"Ah..pardon me, Sir..," he mumbled confusedly as he walked past his silent leader. Vincent, without looking back once, marched away from the two. But Davoren paid no heed to the Turk at all. His whole attention, in fact, was rigidly fixed on Lucrecia. The woman only fidgeted in her spot, blushing in genuine embarrassment at the intrusion. He had obviously come for *her* with a definite purpose.

"Ms. Lucrecia," addressed Davoren after puffing out a cloud of white smoke, "I don't claim to be an ardent scientist like yourself or your prestigious colleagues. Nor have I the privilege of knowing you as... intimately as Mr. Valentine does."

Vincent halted abruptly on hearing his leader's strange, cold tone, then turned around to face the men again. However, Davoren kept his back to the Turk, as though unaware of his presence. His entire focus stubbornly insisted on Lucrecia in front of him.

"What you decide to do to yourself is truly your own business," Davoren continued coolly, "...just as long as you scientists do your job."

"Y..yes, Mr.Davoren, Sir..," agreed Lucrecia, sounding very confused.

"Yes, indeed, Ms. Lucrecia. You scientists are allowed to do *WHATEVER* you want, experimenting on anything that tickles your fantasy. And as good Turks, hired by the illustrious President ShinRa, we must step aside..no, we must MAKE SURE you carry out your little tests."

"Davoren..Sir..," Vincent interjected cautiously as he took a step near his leader. A grave sense of danger warned him of some brutal confrontation.

Davoren, enraged at the interruption, only gave the Turk one sharp look over his own shoulder to silence him. Vincent stopped again, absolutely stunned by the malice in the man's eyes. His mind argued that either a demon had possessed Davoren, or the man had simply taken leave of his senses.

When Vincent had thus been effectively silenced, Davoren turned again to the trembling Lucrecia. He took another whiff at his cigarette, then resumed with a stronger, venomous tone, "You discover this amazing 'alien life form'..something so different from all other creatures and, of course, are so eager to discover how to use it to Mr.ShinRa's advantage. Everything else becomes insignificant, including life...human life."

Vincent's muscles tensed at the unexpected mention of JENOVA. During his entire friendship with Davoren, he had never once heard the man express any interest in science, let alone such meticulous research like the JENOVA Project.

His anxious eyes immediately darted over to Lucrecia. Though she was shaking under Davoren's hostile scrutiny, her face maintained a very resolute look.

"Yes, Ms.Lucrecia," Davoren sneered, dropping his voice suddenly, "even the life of your own child doesn't matter when it comes to this little experiment of yours."

"What right have you to chastise my job, Mr.Davoren?" the woman retorted softly but quite firmly, "My decisions and choices are of no one's concern...not yours..," she glanced at Vincent, then concluded, "..or anyone else's."

"You're right, it isn't. To be honest, I don't care a fig what you scientists do to your own lives."

Davoren puffed his cigarette as his fiery eyes narrowed keenly on the woman in front of him. He paid no attention to Vincent, who still lingered some steps behind him. The poor Turk remained quiet, unsure how to stop this madness.

"It's none of my business, yes, very true," agreed the angry man after an awkward pause, "But I ask you, Miss, what business is it of *yours* to experiment on a little child as though it were some filthy laboratory animal?!"

For a full minute, nobody spoke a word.

The silence crept through the dead apple orchard, shushing any rustling leaf or insensitive insect brave enough to disobey its command. Both Davoren and Lucrecia stared intently at each other, while poor Vincent fidgeted some distance behind his leader, almost ignored. His eyes hesitated between the two, wondering where to find an explanation to this mystery.

Davoren suddenly advanced towards the silent woman, reaching for something inside his coat. He flung a bundle of loose papers onto the frozen ground, then scattered them about with a contemptuous scuffle of his foot.

"I've been doing a little...'research' into your experiment, Ms. Lucrecia, since I had the misfortune of witnessing that scene in the library," Davoren growled through a white puff of smoke, "I found so many details so new to me. I'm sure this Project will go under the "strictly confidential" files, especially that part about the JENOVA cells."

Nobody spoke a word.

"And I also read a bit of your colleagues' report," the man explained more viciously, "Very interesting that bit about testing the effects of JENOVA on an unborn fetus. According to the Hojo's theory here, you could create a whole new breed of super-humans with that gunk!"

Another heavy silence followed.

Vincent was thunderstruck on finally understanding the truth: Lucrecia was not the guinea pig at all, her child was! And for what? For some "experiment" of Hojo's??

"L..Lucrecia," Vincent faltered, taking one step forward, "..you..had a child..just to..experiment on its body??"

She silently implored him to stop by looking at him. However, he only knit his brows in anger as he demanded, "Answer me already!! What exactly did Hojo *DO* to you?!!"

"It's part of the experiment," she answered meekly as she edged away from the two men, "..to..to test the effects of the JENOVA cells on developing human tissue..a..a child.."

"And..he.."

"Yes..yes, Hojo..he injected a dose of those cells into my womb.."

Vincent listened to her in horror, yet could not make any sense of her words. Her did not need to. He saw everything so clearly now: her pregnancy had been part of an experiment of Hojo's. That was all!

"Goddamn it, woman!!" thundered Davoren all of a sudden, flinging his cigarette away, "Aren't you a mother?! Doesn't your heart ache when you see what you've done?! You're letting that bastard experiment on your own CHILD!!"

"I have accepted the consequences, Mr.Davoren," she replied coolly.

Davoren stared back at her in disbelief, absolutely shocked with her calm answer. Her hands still quivered in spite of her every effort to stop, yet never had either man heard her sound so firm.

Vincent hesitated a moment before asking, very softly, "Lucrecia, you know as well as I do what those cells can do to human tissue. The child could maybe survive, but what about you? It..it could poison your body."

Lucrecia, however, turned her face away in anguish. She could not reply to that simple comment.

The agonizing silence felt as though it would stretch for eternity. Vincent stood rooted to his same spot, intently staring at the silent Lucrecia. Similarly, Davoren kept his keen eyes riveted on the unfortunate woman. Yet while Vincent's whole countenance betrayed every sign of trouble and genuine distress, the leader of the Turks expressed nothing but contempt, if not burning anger, for Lucrecia. He had not liked her simple answer at all.

"When I had first joined ShinRa Inc., you could not believe how blind I was," Davoren recounted, interrupting the stuffy stillness all of a sudden, "All that ever mattered to me was getting money for my brother. All that ever mattered to me was protecting and helping him in any form I could. But when..when I lost him..when he disappeared without a trace, that made me see one truth that had been right under my nose."

Vincent, feeling a strange discomfort prickle his heart, slowly reached for his gun, but did not pull it out. Davoren took no heed of him.

"Do you want to know what truth I discovered, Miss?" the man continued through grit teeth. He took one menacing step towards her, then roared at the top of his lungs, "I discovered that ShinRa Inc. treats EVERY human life like some damn toy!! That vulgar toad we call 'Mr. President' only abuses life, then throws it away when it's not useful anymore. To this company, money, results, and power is WAY more

important than life..any life! My brother was a loyal Turk, but what happened when he disappeared? He was forgotten and replaced. Why? Because the President did not want to waste any more precious gils in search of him: he simply was not useful anymore!"

Lucrecia retreated two steps, but stopped short on realizing she had been cornered against a frozen tree. The frightened woman pressed her back against the tough bark of the tree, desperately trying maintain a calm, resolute face. She said nothing.

Being behind Davoren, Vincent could not see the man's face. Nor had he any need to: Davoren's cold, bitter tone alone warned the Turk his leader had somehow "lost his sanity". Vincent quietly unholstered the gun while keeping his sharp eyes on Davoren's back. He listened very intently as the man spoke again.

"And what about that incident in the Reactor?" recalled Davoren, still ignoring the Turk behind him, "Our beloved President bids us go slaughter some misguided beggars in a Reactor just to make him richer. And you scientists are no better! You rot in your laboratories, trying to play God with any life your grubby hands can touch. And now, this! You go play with a child's life..A CHILD'S LIFE, Ms. Lucrecia! And your own, no less!!"

"Don't you dare stand there and judge me, Sir!" answered Lucrecia with a soft but firm voice. She still kept her back glued to the tree, as though it could somehow shield her from that man. Davoren listened to her with a most scornful look on his face.

"What I feel never mattered!" she continued, "If I have chosen to sacrifice everything I possess for this experiment, then so be it! I will not be lectured by anyone! Especially a Turk!"

Neither man interrupted her. Instead, they both studied her beautiful, troubled face in silence. Vincent fingered his gun without pulling it out. Davoren, on the other hand, seemed completely absorbed in what the woman had to say.

"If anyone plays with life, it's the likes of you and Vincent," Lucrecia accused, growing firmer with every word, "I know..what kind of dirty work you Turks do. I've even seen some of it too. But I'm doing this to help the Project, whether you agree or not, and then..."

However, Davoren cut her short by suddenly pulling out his own gun and aiming it straight at Lucrecia's head. Poor Lucrecia stared, completely dumbfounded, at the muzzle of the gun, then at Davoren's unnaturally cold face. All words failed her. She could only tremble in horror.

It seemed Davoren had, indeed, lost all patience along with his sanity.

"I won't deny I too have played with human life, Ms. Lucrecia," Davoren replied very calmly, "It would be wrong of me to contradict you. But I always, ALWAYS, respected the sacredness of human life as a whole."

Lucrecia's breathing grew increasingly faster as she noticed Davoren's finger twitch on the trigger. He kept his gun firmly riveted on her head. Nothing could deter him from her.

"And it turns my stomach, Ms. Lucrecia," he concluded maliciously, "to know I'm here, taking part in this experiment, by letting wannabe-gods like you scientists treat lives...children's lives like garbage!! It just plain disgusts me!!!"

Both Lucrecia and Davoren stared intently at each other, seeming to expect the other to act or say something. Yet so great was the poor woman's terror, she could not find enough strength to speak

against Davoren's gun; and what would be the use? He had, quite obviously, lost his mind! Her entire body, especially her hands, quivered with unimaginable fear. The madman narrowed his eyes on her pale face, then cocked the gun once.

Neither spoke a word until Vincent's firm voice suddenly ordered, "Davoren, drop the gun."

Davoren turned his head slightly around on hearing the voice, yet still kept his gun rigidly aimed at Lucrecia. Indeed, the man had been totally oblivious to Vincent's presence until then. During the entire final discourse, Vincent had kept his own gun cautiously lowered but quiet near. He had been, of course, extremely alarmed when Davoren had pulled out his gun and aimed it at Lucrecia. Yet that loud cock of his weapon confirmed the Turk's fear: Davoren intended to kill her.

Therefore, without a second thought, Vincent had pulled out his gun and aimed it directly at his leader's head. He dared not imagine what he would actually *do* if Davoren refused to obey his command; he himself scarcely understood what he was doing. All he knew was that his friend had lost his mind (how else could he possibly express it?) and that Lucrecia was about to be harmed.

"I said drop the gun, Davoren!" Vincent repeated, emphasizing every syllable more firmly.

Davoren studied the Turk's cold face for another minute before returning again to Lucrecia, who still trembled in front of him. His shiny black gun shimmered in the pale moonlight, bluntly refusing to change its target. Nor did Vincent waver either: he kept his gun firmly fixed on the back of the man's head.

But would he..could he actually pull the trigger?

"Davoren, please," Vincent implored in a low voice, "I..I don't want to shoot you."

Lucrecia had clasped both hands over her breast in a vain effort to calm herself. Yet for all her vigorous attempts, her heart refused to stop pounding. She stared, eyes wide open, at the insane man before her without even crying out.

When a full minute had elapsed, Davoren began laughing softly to himself. He did not lower his gun.

"Yes, Vincent," he addressed the Turk, though he still kept his eyes as well as his gun fixed on Lucrecia, "Yes..and you probably will shoot me too. Ah, the perfect Turk is the one who can kill ANYONE on the spur of the moment..the one without anything even resembling a conscience to hinder him. Heh, just the type the President wants: the type who murders, threatens, and obeys without question."

Davoren glanced behind his back to look at the Turk, then added viciously, "Feh, a monster in human form...that's all you are, that's all you'll EVER be."

Though Vincent felt his heart pound loudly as the man finished, his mind seemed quiet cool and collected. He stared back at his bitter leader with a stoic expression on his cold face. For the first time in his life, the gun felt slightly awkward in his feverish hands.

I can't shoot him, Vincent repeated internally at least a thousand times, I can't shoot him...this man is my best friend..I can't shoot him...

But my duty IS to protect these scientists..it's to protect Lucrecia from any danger. And even if it wasn't, I still would protect her! So, if I must shoot..then..then I...

Thus stood the two men, completely absorbed by the silence, while poor Lucrecia trembled against the dead tree. She could not speak. Another moment passed.

Suddenly, Davoren turned to Lucrecia again and reached for the trigger. Vincent only heard one, single shot ring out across the lonely orchard. All was silent again.

He saw Davoren stumble forward, a wild gush of dark blood sprouting out the back of his head. He saw his leader crash onto the cobblestone pathway right at Lucrecia's feet. The thick red fluid flowed out until Davoren's whole head lay soaked in a puddle of blood. The man lay head down on the stony ground, both arms pitifully outstretched in front of his bloody head. His dreadful black gun had been rudely discarded a few yards away. It too was stained in his blood. Davoren did not move.

Vincent had shot him without even realizing it.

Lucrecia gazed, completely horror-stricken, at the bloody corpse lying at her feet. After a moment, she looked up at Vincent in disbelief, yet could not open her mouth. The Turk studied her shocked face for perhaps two minutes, then back at the dead body. He did not speak either.

Strange to say, he felt no guilt or remorse.

Vincent was sure Lucrecia screamed at that moment, even though he could not hear anymore. Yet he remembered clearly hearing a rush of footsteps storming into the abandoned orchard. There seemed to be several people at the scene all of a sudden: those were the villagers. He also recalled some men rush over to Davoren and examine his corpse while some others carried Lucrecia away (who was hysterical by that time). He felt many hands roughly grab him at once, and the strange words "Murder! Murder!" ring in his ears.

Some evil, malevolent feeling crept up from behind him, yet he could not muster enough strength to resist it.

Without warning, two icy-cold hands dug deep into his chest and began tearing his lungs to shreds. Vincent struggled wildly to break loose, to cry for help, to escape this mysterious attacker. But the more he wrestled this attack, the more painful his ordeal grew. Hot blood gargled up his throat as his whole chest heaved in pain. His head swam around and around.

He could not breathe anymore. Strange, unfamiliar voices screamed through his ears until insanity broke through. He thought his lungs would explode any moment. He felt something pull him away..and away...far away...

Suddenly, Vincent woke up from his nightmare in the middle of violent coughing fit. He had been re-living his past: all of that madness had happened thirty-one years ago.

He was back in the present now.

-End of Chp.27

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.28

Vincent thought the coughing fit would never end.

He sprang up in some unknown bed, choking wildly over his hot blood. With one hand pressed over his mouth, the sick man bent double over himself in hopes of perhaps easing the pain. Yet the attack would not spare him: it sunk its sharp claws deeper and deeper into his lungs until he began hacking on his own blood. He could not breathe at all.

His whole trembling body burned with fever. His head, in particular, throbbed in torturous agony. He could not hear or see anything. Nor could he remember where he was now or why he had been brought here. A black mist had completely engulfed his senses, letting him grope through the maddening darkness alone.

The coughing fit grew considerably worse.

Those ghostly voices from his nightmare still taunted his battered ears as the seizure ravaged his fragile body. He coughed until the blood soaked his hand. He squeezed his burning eyes shut, trying desperately to manage just a whiff of air as the fit tore his whole chest apart. The murderous fever raged through his shaking limbs like wild fire. Delirium had torn his mind to shreds.

He thought he should cry out, but the unmerciful fit had even robbed his voice. He could not speak, only cough and splutter over his blood.

Indeed, the torture felt as though it would last forever.

However, the brutal attack eased slightly when Vincent felt something cold and wet caress his burning face. He still sat slouched up in bed, unable to see yet quite aware of the strange touch on his face. It felt so gentle, so soothing on his hot, sweaty face.

The cruel coughing fit, realizing it had lost the battle, resentfully faded into oblivion. Vincent placed his hand over his heaving chest as his torn lungs filled with precious air. He took several gasps at once, afraid the murderous fit might return. He still could not see.

As the pain slowly evaporated, Vincent became increasingly aware of the presence of another person near him. At first, it was nothing but a vague presence around him, shapeless and part of the darkness. Yet as his scattered senses gradually returned, Vincent could hear a soft voice whispering something into his numb ears.

The voice sounded terribly muffled to him at the beginning, but steadily became clearer until he realized it was a girl's voice. Unfortunately, he could not remember whose.

A very gentle hand stroked his hair and feverish face for a moment, while the soft voice repeated a word into his ears. Vincent then felt somebody lay his aching head on the pillow again. A thick blanket was pulled over him with tender care, and that same gentle hand returned to his face, pressing his forehead every so often.

When some of his sight returned at last, Vincent found himself laying flat on his back in some warm bed. Several blankets, including one thick quilt, covered his shaking body. He did not recognize this bed at all. He looked around without moving his head: nothing but a stuffy darkness dominated the small room. Everything to his weary eyes lay dismally hidden in the shadows.

Vincent, completely ravaged by delirium, looked up at some black figure lingering over him. He had to fumble with his muddled senses another minute or so before the mysterious figure actually took shape. It appeared to be a very young woman, with bright green eyes intently set on him. Her brown hair was let loose, so that it flowed in noticeably thick curls behind her back and over her shoulders. Vincent noted mostly how frightened and anxious the girl appeared.

He did not recognize her either.

Yet strangely, Vincent could not tear his burning eyes away from her pale face. Indeed, he beheld her as some ghost there to visit him. The girl leaned further down so that only a few inches lay between her face and his. She stared intently at him, scrutinizing every detail her eyes came across, then whispered that same word one more time.

Vincent finally realized she had been calling his name.

Slowly, he lifted his trembling hand to her face with great effort. She did not flinch or move away when his hot hand touched her cold cheek. Instead, she let him caress her cheek as long as he pleased without speaking another word.

"Ah..." Vincent grunted softly, remembering the girl at last, "A..Aeris..."

"So, you finally recognized me," Aeris smiled happily. A very relieved look replaced that previously anxious one.

He looked around himself without removing his trembling hand from her cheek. The room was pitch black.

"Wh..where am I?" he whispered in confusion.

"Sh...sh..you're in bed at home," the girl reassured tenderly, "You were just having a nightmare, Vincent. It was all just a nightmare. Now go back to sleep."

He stared back at her in complete disbelief, caressing her soft cheek with his burning hand to confirm his blurry sight. His wild eyes darted all over the black room: yes, he was definitely in his own bed, back at home.

For one full minute, he was totally silent.

Suddenly, Vincent yanked his hand away from Aeris' face as if struck by lightning. The girl, puzzled by his strange behavior, drew herself away from him. She sat perfectly still on a chair by his bed, and watched him fumble in silence.

Vincent, beside himself with delirium, grabbed a strand of his hair and beheld it in absolute amazement: how long it was now! And how thick! It seemed much shorter just minutes ago.

With amazing effort, the man pulled out his metallic arm from under the covers and held it in front of his sickly face. He studied the long, sharp claws; the curved strips of metal which collectively formed his palm and wrist. Where had this horrible arm been moments ago? Just a short time ago, he had an ordinary arm like any other.

Yet he had forgotten this arm had been there for thirty-one long, miserable years.

After another minute of intense scrutiny, Vincent dropped his metallic claw onto his chest without a word. His memory instantly flowed back to his confused mind: he had merely been re-living.. re-performing his past without even realizing it. The Turks, Davoren, ShinRa and Lucrecia. All that madness finished *thirty-one years* ago. He was trapped in the present time now.

"You still have a very bad fever," Aeri finally said, felling his burning forehead again, "Would you like a drink of water?"

"Yes."

He managed to sit up on his elbows while the girl filled a tall glass with cool water. Vincent greedily guzzled it down in one gulp, then sank back into his pillow, completely drained of strength.

"At least you've stopped raving now," comforted the girl as she covered him with the blankets, "Maybe now, you can get some sleep. Let me just wash your face one more time, okay?"

Vincent watched her soak a small towel into a basin of water placed by his bedside, then wipe his whole face very carefully. The girl leaned over him so closely, he could scrutinize every detail of her lovely face. She wore a loose sleeping gown with a long cream-coloured shawl over her slender arms. He noticed (very keenly) how careworn and fatigued she seemed, even though her green eyes still retained their same brightness. Whenever her fingertips touched his feverish skin, his entire body shivered involuntarily: she was so cold.

Neither spoke a word during this time. The girl tenderly wiped his face for about fifteen minutes without once looking into his eyes. Too tired to speak, Vincent contented himself by watching her in silence.

When Aeri had finally finished, he immediately turned his back to her, burying most of his face into the soft pillow. Never had exhaustion ever overpowered his body so completely. His weary eyes grew steadily heavy until they shut of their own accord.

Though his back turned and both eyes firmly closed, Vincent could detect every movement of Aeri's body with no difficulty. He heard her shuffle out of her chair, then sit by him on the cozy bed. Aeri ran her fingers through his thick hair once or twice before she touched his cheek lightly to check his temperature. He did not flinch a muscle.

After another silent moment, Aeri snuggled up against his back, but kept her feet off the bed. She nestled her head against his shoulder, trying her best not to disturb his precious sleep, then lay perfectly still. She seemed to have fallen asleep.

Vincent made no effort to remove her. On the contrary, her presence so near to him filled his weary heart with strange comfort.

Neither spoke a word for a long time. Darkness enshrouded the bedroom, allowing only the smallest tint of light to smuggle through the curtains. Silence in all its power ruled this room supreme, save for the monotonous tick-tock of the clock by the bedside. Vincent never moved once for fear of disrupting the peaceful stillness. Most of his ashen, wasted face lay hidden in the soft pillow, while his body trembled every so often with sickening fever. Aeri nestled herself further against his back, but still kept her weary head rested on his shoulder.

"Aeri?" Vincent called softly without moving a muscle.

She only lifted her head from his shoulder as an answer.

"How long..have I been sick like this?"

Aeris rested her chin against his shoulder so that she could see part of his face from the side. She replied, very wearily, "About a week."

Vincent slowly re-opened his crimson eyes with a low "hmm", and was silent again.

"You've had this horrible fever for about a week now," the girl whispered without lifting her head, "At first, you were totally unconscious for almost four days. And you..you coughed out a lot of blood too. But during the last three days, you've been raving like crazy...sometimes for six, seven hours non-stop."

Aeris carefully sat up again, yet kept her body snuggled against Vincent's back. He felt her shiver slightly, then tighten her shawl around her shoulders.

"Yesterday was the worse day. You were so delirious, you were practically screaming," she continued, "And..and I..we all got so frightened, we didn't know what to do anymore. You wouldn't stop raving, and clutching your head; and the fever just grew worse no matter what we did. I was so sure you'd die before the night was through...but Cloud swore he wouldn't let you die yet. So he.. he filled the bathtub with water, dragged you all the way to the bathroom, then dunked your whole body into the tub to cool you."

Vincent turned his face slightly around to look at her, but made no comment on the crude method of battling the fever. Aeris glanced at him a minute, then fingered her shawl very uneasily.

"Tifa was pretty angry, and nearly kicked Cloud outside," she recounted more softly than before, "She thought he intended to drown you. The fever went down a short while later, but you still raved on and on, and didn't recognize anyone, even though your eyes were wide open.

Vincent certainly did not remember any of that. Indeed, his whole mind had been so absorbed in that nightmarish flashback, reality.. *this* reality had been completely forgotten behind.

He studied her tired but beautiful face another minute or so, then buried his feverish face in the pillow once more. Aeris stayed nestled against his back, her bare feet and shoulders shivering occasionally from the cold. She fingered her light shawl in silence.

"Aeris?" Vincent called again. He did not look at her.

"Yes?" she immediately replied.

"How long have you watching over me?"

The girl hesitated a moment, then answered, "I can't remember exactly...maybe a day and a half."

"That's a very long time. You could make yourself ill if you go on like this."

"Oh, I don't mind..it..it's okay..really."

"What time is it now?"

"Um..," she mumbled as she checked the clock by the bed, "It's almost two a.m."

Much to her puzzlement, Vincent shifted around, the forced himself to sit up in bed. He sat slightly bent forward, so that their faces were quite close. His black hair, disheveled beyond hope, tumbled around his

head and well over his shoulders. His pale face lay hidden in the darkness, yet his ruby-red eyes glowed keenly as they studied the girl's face and slender figure. He said nothing for a long time. All his attention riveted itself on her.

Aeris, alarmed at his strange silence, looked back at him in confusion, but dared not open her mouth. She humbly let his blood-shot eyes wander over her as long as they pleased. Although she could barely make out his face in the darkness, Aeris was quite sure no detail of her face, no movement of her body, could escape Vincent's notice. Therefore, she sat still on the bed, fidgeting slightly under his sharp scrutiny.

"You look very tired," Vincent whispered at last.

"Ah..th..that's because I haven't slept that much," she faltered in a low, nervous voice.

"I thought Cloud and Tifa were here too."

"Yes, they are, but they're sleeping in the living room. They both took care of you..much better than I could ever. Tifa always knew what to do, and which medicine to give you. She didn't panic as much as I did when the fever got too bad like yesterday. Actually, she did most of the work..."

Aeris paused when she noticed Vincent's piercing red eyes still fixed on her, then continued softly, "But Cloud did a lot of work too, you know. He cleaned the bathroom after you..puked in it that other night, the blood and everything else. He always brought clean water and got the medicines you needed. Also don't forget, he's the one who stopped the fever. Only sometimes, he'd get really angry because you weren't getting better."

Vincent silently listened to her, watching her all the while intently. He leaned further to scrutinize her beautiful face more closely, yet said nothing. Though Aeris tensed in her spot on being so keenly studied, she did not edge away.

"To tell the truth," she concluded, casting her green eyes down to the black ground, "Tifa was supposed to be sitting up with you from midnight until five o'clock. She told me to wake her up after my shift was done. But I just couldn't do it. She looked so tired, I thought it plain cruel to wake her: she deserved some decent rest after all her work. So, I took her shift too."

She hesitated a moment, then added, almost inaudibly, "And besides..I..I just wanted to be with you."

Another silence, more noticeable than the first, filled every corner of the dark room. Vincent gazed thoughtfully at the timid girl in front of him, then down at his sharp, metallic claw. Aeris, on the other hand, looked at him from the corner of her eye. She tried her best to see his actual face. Unfortunately, the room was so dark, the girl could barely make out the outline of his face.

The distant chimes of some bell-tower far away signaled the arrival of the second hour after midnight. Both Vincent and Aeris listened attentively to the bell disturb the peaceful night, then fall silent again. Neither spoke a word until Vincent suddenly touched her hand very lightly. Though startled by the unexpected, hot touch, Aeris did not draw her hand away.

"You're very cold," he remarked in a soft undertone.

"It's because you still have a fever. Your hand is very, very hot, so you think I'm cold."

But Vincent, of course, knew she was lying. He had noticed, even felt, her shiver several times, despite the shawl around her slender arms. He frowned disapprovingly.

"I want you to go get some rest now, Aeris," he ordered gently, pulling away his burning hand, "You're too tired to sit up any longer, and could make yourself ill if you don't rest properly."

"Ah, no, I can't do that!" Aeris protested fervently, " You still have that fever, Vincent, and it may get worse if I don't wash your face every hour. No, don't worry about me. Just please, please, go back to sleep."

He beheld her tired, pleading face in silence. She would obviously fight fatigue, sleep, even possible illness just for his sake. She seemed to think her health quite insignificant compared to his own.

Vincent, however, thought otherwise.

Therefore, without another word, he tore off the thick blankets, and made room for another person. Much to Aeris' shock, Vincent slipped his metallic arm around her supple waist, then slowly pulled her into bed with him, discarding her useless shawl onto the floor. despite her weak protests, he covered her snugly with all the warm blankets before settling down beside her.

An extremely awkward silence followed.

Vincent slowly turned his back to the bashful girl, and was perfectly still in his new place. Aeris, embarrassed by this unexpected intimacy, covered most of her blushing face except for her eyes. Her hands trembled slightly as she glanced askance at the man by her side. Yet Vincent took no heed of her at all. His back faced her completely, with the blankets hiding most of his head. He did not speak to her.

Aeris immediately turned her back to him as well, but voiced no more protests. Exhaustion had overwrought her entire body so completely, and this soft bed warmed her cold limbs so wonderfully; she couldn't have moved a muscle even if she had wanted to. In truth, she was tired far more than realized.

The girl buried one side of her face into the pillow, snuggling further under the warm blankets. Her weary eyes drifted aimlessly along the black room, stumbling across shapeless shadows, until they closed from exhaustion.

Thus, the two lay together, each facing the other's back, for a long time. Aeris rested on her side, listening to the peaceful silence. Vincent did not move, except perhaps cough whenever his chest heaved, or when the fever gnawed at his burning body.

"Vincent?" called Aeris hesitantly.

He mumbled a tired "hm" as a reply, but did not turn to her.

"Do you remember any of the things you raved about?"

Vincent, whose eyes had been shut up to then, mechanically re-opened them. He thought a minute before answering, "Not really. What did I rave about?"

"Oh, I don't know; mostly things that didn't make sense. You.. raved about ShinRa, sometimes about Professor Hojo or some 'experiment'. You also raved quite a bit about an apple orchard, and about that..that man..Davoren."

He listened to her in silence.

"But most of the time, you raved about a woman named Lucrecia," Aeris continued in a hushed whisper, "At times, it seemed you were talking to somebody, like you could actually hear voices. Other times, you

just raved on and on about strange things I couldn't understand. I wished I could help you..I wanted to *so* badly, it sometimes made me cry. And I tried my best..but..but I.."

Vincent wearily placed one arm under his head as his metallic claw drew itself across his heaving chest. He did not speak for a long while.

"What did you do?" he asked all of a sudden.

"Mm?"

"When I was raving...how did you try to help me?"

Aeris hesitated, afraid to answer his simple question, then finally faltered, "you..you wouldn't stop raving..day and night, and coughed out so much blood. You'd tear your hair, and call yourself a monster over and over again. I couldn't do much, even though I would have given anything to help you. So I'd..hold your hand...just hold it..and whisper in your ear. Anything that came to my mind, I said it."

"Like what?"

"Ah..I told you how much we all wanted you to get better, because everyone was worried sick about you. If I was alone with you in the room, I'd hum a song into your ears," Aeris paused before concluding softly, "Or sometimes, I just kept on repeating your name, hoping somehow, somewhere in your nightmares, you'd hear me."

Fatigued beyond measure, Vincent closed his weary eyes again, then nestled his head further into his hot arm. Besides an occasional cough, he lay perfectly still, with his back turned to the girl.

"I don't remember," he stated monotonously.

"That's okay. It was all nonsense anyway."

"No, it wasn't," Vincent defended, his voice softening with every word, "It was your voice calling my name that pulled me out of the nightmare, Aeris."

The girl made no response in recognition of his gratitude, except tighten the cozy blanket around her cold body. Nor did Vincent peruse an answer. He lay quietly in his spot, letting his dull senses wallow in the tranquility.

Silence, ruler of the black room once again, hushed all sounds in its domain. Nothing dared challenge its tyrannical authority until Aeris suddenly and noisily shifted around. she lay flat on her back, with both hands firmly clasped on her breast. She stared at the black ceiling above, her heart struggling against some violent, inner emotion.

"As long as..as I can remember, the Professor has been torturing me," Aeris faltered in a low, quivering whisper, "He loved to..do all these 'tests'..that hurt me so much. I never knew what he did exactly. He usually drugged me, or just let me faint if the test became too painful. And I always..always heard his voice hissing in my ears non-stop. I couldn't even cry out because my limbs ached so much..."

Though Vincent did not answer, he opened his red eyes as she faltered in her story. He listened most attentively than before: her strange tone had drawn his full attention.

Aeris glanced at his back, then resumed, keeping her bright eyes fixed on the black ceiling, "One night..the Professor left me in the lab,but..but forgot to lock the door. I stared for maybe five whole minutes at the door. N..next thing I know, I was running outside. I just wanted to escape."

Vincent made no answer.

"I ran..and ran, she continued, tightening her hands on her breast, "I knew the guards were after me. I could hear them chasing me from behind. I passed so many buildings...and alleys..and faces on the streets. All that mattered to me was escape. I never wanted to go back there...never."

Aeris heaved a long sigh, overwhelmed with this surge of hatred for her mysterious tormentor. She turned her back to Vincent again, but kept her quivering hands clasped over her bosom. To her annoyance, painful tears welled up in her eyes, despite her every effort to suppress them. She knew not why she was telling this man of her painful past. It seemed the words poured out of her mouth of their own accord.

Vincent, however, kept his back turned to her, as if oblivious to her pitiful struggle.

"I've never felt absolutely safe, even after meeting you and the others," the girl said, trying in vain to control her tears, "There is always this corner in my mind that says I can never, ever escape. The Professor..or..Davoren will eventually catch me again, and just drag me back. It's like I'm trying to run away from a never-ending nightmare."

She scornfully wiped away her tears, then concluded in such a low voice, "But now..at this moment, I feel safe...because I know you'll be safe too, and you'll be there by my side when I need you. Just for this one time, I don't have to worry about the Professor or Davoren," Aeris paused before adding more softly, "I wish this feeling could last forever, Vincent...just to feel absolutely safe from harm.. like I feel now."

But you know as well as I do it's just a wish..poor little girl, Vincent reflected to himself bitterly, there's no escaping *those* kind of nightmares. They may come and go, but never, never leave you alone.

How it pained and angered him to see this young girl...a child compared to him...suffer the same tortures he had. Even more that he could not fully shield her from this unseen Professor, despite all his efforts.

Yes, Vincent scoffed at himself, just the same with Lucrecia.

He trudged through his entangled thoughts another minute or so before finally turning around to the pitiful girl. His hard metallic arm full encircled her slender waist, as if afraid someone may snatch her away any moment. He drew her closer to him from behind. Aeris gave a slight start at the touch of his skin against her back, but offered no resistance to the gesture. He nestled her back and head against his chest, then wrapped blankets around her body.

"Don't think about the Professor or those bad memories," he whispered into her ear, "Go to sleep, Aeris. For now, just go to sleep."

She nodded her only once. Vincent tenderly kissed her cheek, like a parent coaxing a child to sleep, then lay still. He felt her tense body gradually relax in his grip, but kept his metal arm around her waist.

In a minute, Aeris was fast asleep.

He lay there for a long time, with the poor girl sleeping snugly in his arms. Perhaps he too fell asleep for a while; or just stayed awake, feeling her cold body against his feverish skin. Hundreds of random thoughts, snippets of different memories, and new preoccupations pecked at his battered brain all the time. Soon, he grew weary of his bed.

Careful not to disturb Aeris' badly-needed sleep, Vincent slipped out of the warm bed. He wandered over to the closet in hopes of finding suitable clothing to cover his boxer shorts (indeed, his fever had been so intense, his friends had no choice but to strip off his pants). Vincent noiselessly rummaged through his clothes until at last found a pair of loose black pants. He immediately slipped into the garment, tucked his sleeveless shirt in, and tied the rope belt around his waist into a knot.

That task completed, Vincent drifted over to the window. After a moment's hesitation, he withdrew one of the curtains, thereby inviting the lovely moonlight into the black room. At first, the light hurt his strained eyes unbearably. However, as he gazed silently through the window, he became quite used to the beautiful, gentle light. It was snowing outside.

With peculiar morbid gloominess, he watched the soft snow playfully descend the black sky, past his window pane. The snow flakes danced before his blood-shot eyes, floating down towards the frozen ground outside. Vincent noticed one particular snowflake tumble against the window, then disappear the instant it touched the glass.

He touched the icy window in silent wonder. His burning fingers twitched uncontrollably at the cold feeling. Slowly, the morose man pressed his hot cheek against the window pane, letting the violent surge of coldness rip through his feverish body. However, he felt no discomfort whatsoever. Vincent kept his cheek glued to the freezing glass, wallowing in this strange, soothing sensation.

His tall figure and the window cast a sharp shadow on the bed, which stood just opposite the window. When he had finished, Vincent turned fully around to face the foot of the bed. The shadow of the window frame cast itself on the whole bedcovers; his shadow fell very awkwardly across the whole bed, disrupting the square pattern of the window frame.

He noticed Aeris' face in the lovely moonlight at last. She still slept on her side, with her two hands carelessly laid in front of her soft bosom. Her eyes were lightly closed, making her appear more dead than asleep. The girl's loose hair all lay pushed back behind her head, except for a few long curls that tumbled over her slender shoulders. Her face appeared quite pale.

Vincent found her strangely beautiful in the moonlight. Perhaps the purity of her pale skin struck his fancy; or maybe the way her long hair curled behind her head and tumbled over her white shoulders. Whatever his reason, Vincent gazed very thoughtfully at Aeris while she thus slept.

She's such an innocent little girl, he wondered internally, just like Lucrecia was...she's tortured and suffers day and night from some Professor...just like Lucrecia was too...

Yes Vincent, you seem to find this girl *so* similar to Lucrecia in many different ways...

Yet what did you do when Lucrecia REALLY needed you most? You simply abandoned her; you let her suffer alone. And after all that high-falutin' crap about you loving her...hah! What a hypocrite you are! It IS your fault, no matter how you cut it..your fault she died.

Yes...and ever since, you've wished to atone for that one sin. If you could protect someone *just like Lucrecia*..someone who needs you now as much as Lucrecia needed you then...maybe you'll be forgiven.

So, is that all this girl really worth to you? Just a means of winning forgiveness for *your* crime?

Vincent suddenly broke away from his gloomy train of thoughts before an answer could come. He had, in fact, been only semi-conscious of his thoughts until that blunt question had struck him.

Time dragged by. He paced around the dark room until finally, when too exhausted to walk any further, he returned to his bed. He flung himself on top of the bedcovers, then turned his back to Aeris. He heard her sigh softly, then shuffle slightly under the blankets. When he closed his eyes, they did not open again.

He could not remember when he fell asleep that night. Although he tried his best not to think, his stubborn mind persisted to return to that hectic nightmare one last time.

He remembered that day, thirty-one years ago, when he stopped aging. It was the same day Lucrecia died.

-End of Chp.28

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.29

Vincent spent the next few days in an almost trance-like state. Time had ceased to have any meaning to him. All he knew was that Lucrecia was safe, and Davoren dead.

Immediately after the brutal shooting incident in the apple orchard, the Turk (or the "murderer" as the villagers referred to him) spent his lonely days confined to his quarters. ShinRa Headquarters strictly ordered him to remain sealed in there until they reached a decision regarding this critical situation. Vincent offered no resistance, not even a word in his defense, but succumbed to all tedious procedures with remarkable coolness.

He wasted his hours pacing around his room, with folded arms and a patient expression on his face. If he grew tired, he slept. If he became hungry, he ate whatever they gave him. Sometimes, he'd gaze absent-mindedly out the window, pretending to watch the majestic Nibel Mountains outside. Other times, when exhausted from walking, he'd lay flat on his back in bed. Silence and boredom were his sole companions.

His door, double locked from outside and always guarded, never opened, except when the timid maid delivered his meals. Nor had the morose Turk any taste for company. He refused to speak a word unless unavoidably necessary. Instead, he preferred to wallow in his own gloomy meditations without interruption.

Surprisingly, Vincent could not remember what thoughts occupied his mind during those lonesome hours. He probably recalled his dead friend, Davoren, and his close friendship with the man. Past memories floated back to his mind, reminding him of how well the title "friend" had suited the ex-leader of the Turks: Davoren had saved his life in the storming of the Reactor. Davoren had always respected and helped him whenever possible. And Davoren also defended him when Professor Hojo had confronted him in the library.

Indeed, that man had watched over each and every one of his Turks as faithfully as a sheepdog. To Davoren, the safety and friendship of his Turks had always been his first priority, even before duty. He hadn't been *just* the leader of the Turks. He had also been a loyal friend and ardent guardian to his men. In return, this man had undoubtedly earned the respect and loyalty of all his Turks, including Vincent's.

Yet despite their close friendship, Vincent hadn't hesitated to kill Davoren that night. In fact, his finger had pulled the trigger without he even realizing it.

Vincent thought perhaps he should feel regret or guilt for Davoren's brutal death. He should, in the normal order of things, feel his conscience prick his mind non-stop until insanity broke loose. But did he writhe in his bed at night, tortured with remorse for his friend's murder? Did he tear his hair, his heart bursting with agony for his heinous crime?

No. Such sentiments had never existed in the Turk's cold, dead heart.

To his surprise, Vincent felt no guilt, not even a tinge of pity, for this horrible death. As long as Lucrecia remained safe from harm, then his friend's death meant nothing to him. If he had taken his friend's life, or a worthless beggar's life, what difference would it have made? He still killed. Davoren's death only meant more blood on his already bloody hands; just another life he had taken in the name of duty. He had done it many times before. Too many for him to remember.

So why should he feel guilty *now*?

Lucrecia alone possessed the key to his cold heart, his very soul. Only that one woman touched him where everyone and everything else dismally failed. Nothing, not even Davoren's tragic murder, could reach his frozen heart. It had always been Lucrecia, and no one else but Lucrecia.

Davoren's horrible death, Vincent heard, had caused a wild buzz in the usually quiet village of Nibelheim. For days, everyone spoke of nothing but the "apple orchard murder". Women stopped each other in the marketplace to gossip about it. The miners retold the incident at least a thousand times until they knew it by heart. However, although the murder had certainly sparked keen interest amongst the curious villagers, no one knew exactly **why** Davoren had been so brutally slain. Some believed the two Turks had been quarrelling; others argued that Davoren had had some "wicked intention" on that beautiful woman; some went as far as to swear that Davoren had, in fact, committed suicide.

"Ah, but who are we to say for sure?" one very old villager repeated sagaciously, "Only the ShinRa know."

Shortly after the bloody incident, ShinRa Inc. issued a brief official statement to settle the matter. It called for calm amongst the villagers; that due to some "misunderstanding" on part of the former leader of the Turks, Mr. Valentine was obliged to protect the company's interests by killing the man. The whole case would HENCEFORTH be closed, and all work in the materia mines would continue as regularly scheduled.

The villagers, though disappointed with this vague explanation for the killing, obediently accepted the company's statement. The miners now found a hundred other topics to discuss besides the mysterious murder. The women busied themselves with the tedious housework, not at all interested in the brutal incident. If the murder was even hinted at, the subject would be immediately diverted to a different topic. None of the ominous villagers dared meddle in "ShinRa matters" for fear of sharing Davoren's gruesome fate. As long as the company paid their wages and protected them, the simple villagers found no reason to intrude into ShinRa's private business; let them do whatever they pleased.

So, the subject was dropped, and eventually forgotten.

On the same day ShinRa Inc. issued that statement, Vincent finally learned of his fate: he would resume his full duties as a Turk, and remain stationed in Nibelheim until all scientific research was completed. He would protect the scientists as his obligations required, in addition to seeing to all their needs. The ShinRa President would "personally see to the rest of this nasty matter" without prosecuting or even punishing the Turk. In fact, the President commended Vincent for his strict adherence to his true duties in the face of danger.

Vincent's gun, which had been confiscated during his confinement, was immediately returned. The Turk resumed work the very next day, as if nothing had ever happened.

Therefore, in a mere two weeks after Davoren's tragic demise, ShinRa Inc., thanks to its diligent efforts, restored the peace in Nibelheim. As expected, the simple villagers soon forgot the disturbance, and returned to their hard work in the mines. The scientists slaved non-stop downstairs in the grim library, heedless to the world outside. Life, indeed, resumed its usual course.

Both Professor Gast and Hojo treated the Turk as before, Hojo with a bit more politeness. Although he still glared hatefully at Vincent whenever they chanced to meet, the spiteful man restricted any comments to himself. The Turk, in return, treated the two professors very respectfully. If they asked for any specific supplies, he made sure they were delivered promptly. If any problem arised, he attended to it the very same day. Their comfort seemed his sole priority.

Vincent seldom spoke to anyone, preferring to busy himself with his duties. Nor did anyone venture to speak to him: his cold, expressionless face certainly did not invite friendly conversation. He was always alone, as far from human company as possible.

The soldiers addressed him very respectfully, with a sharp salute and attentive ears ready for his orders. The kind-hearted villagers tipped their hats or bowed whenever the Turk passed them. Everything had been restored to its formal state.

All of Davoren's personal belongings were immediately returned to Midgar. Vincent never thought of asking what happened to the dead man's body: he *assumed* the corpse had been buried somewhere, probably in the grass fields; or maybe shipped back to Midgar. Any other reminders of Davoren, like his forgotten pack of cigarettes or his favorite book, was suitably disposed of (how happy were the soldiers to receive the cigarettes!). All traces of the man were completely erased.

Davoren, the beloved formal leader of the Turks, was never mentioned again.

The months steadily passed by, the chilly autumn replaced by a bitter cold winter. Though Lucrecia's delicate condition became increasingly apparent, she refused to leave her work in the library to rest. This grim place, surrounded by countless books and shelves, seemed her sole refuge from some spirit only visible to her. It wasn't until two months before the birth that Professor Gast, aided by Hojo's insolent threats, were able to persuade the woman to rest her body.

"Yes, Lucrecia, my dear, you must rest now," Professor Gast begged kindly, patting her trembling hand, "It isn't wise for you to slave like this, with a child only two months away from birth."

"Do not forget," Hojo intercepted haughtily, "that child's birth is our most important priority. If you do not rest, Miss, then the child could suffer. Remember, it's been exposed to JENOVA cells, so its development is very different. You must rest and let us monitor its development, otherwise all our work these past months would be in vain. Do you understand?"

Lucrecia only hung her head and sighed tiredly, "Yes, Sir."

Vincent scarcely spoke to Lucrecia after that bloody shooting incident. He avoided her at all costs; shunned any contact with her; and only talked to her unless necessary. He was told, much to his alarm, that the poor young woman had been in wild hysterics for hours after witnessing that brutal killing. Professor Gast had succeeded in calming her only after several reassurances and sympathetic words. For days afterwards, Lucrecia had spent her time in bed, suffering from a fever and slight delirium. Though reasonably well now, Vincent realized his presence would merely upset her further: seeing or speaking to him would remind her of that awful confrontation in the apple orchard.

Therefore, the Turk never neared the woman. On rare occurrences, if they happened to meet in the hall, Vincent would only nod politely and pass her by. He never looked her straight in the eye when they talked (an even rarer occurrence). Nor did he ever wander down to her chambers to visit her (she never asked for him, so why bother her?). He grew more distant with each day, his coldness increasing every time he noticed her swollen belly. In short, he occupied his time with his own duties, or simply wandered aimlessly along the fields until dusk, sometimes until nightfall.

Not to say he never thought of his beloved Lucrecia. On the contrary, that woman, her whole spirit and very soul, filled his aching heart at all times. He yearned for her all the time, especially during the cold, black nights he spent awake in bed. That same horrible foreboding *still* haunted his mind day and night; an inexplicable dread that some harm might befall Lucrecia. How badly he wanted to protect her, not just from Davoren's gun, but from all that might threaten her safety.

But Lucrecia had chosen her path by herself, and had begged him not to follow. This mad experiment meant literally everything to her. His petty worries and vague insecurities bore no significance to her (why should it?).

So, Vincent swallowed his fears for Lucrecia's sake. Though that presentiment always plagued his weary mind, he managed to somehow check his emotions. He artfully concealed them under a hard, cold visage, far away from her eyes to see. All he could do was watch her from afar. Just watch.

The bitter winter eventually faded away as the flowers began to bloom out of the frozen ground. The birds, home after a long journey, chirped with all their might to charm their listeners. Every tree swayed with the cool breeze, delighted at the gentle movement. Lush green grass, even brighter than before, blanketed entire hills with a fresh new cover. Though the cold winter fought valiantly for its domain, it soon lost its throne. All of nature, weary of its cruel tyranny, banished it until next year.

At long last, when spring arrived, the child was born. Lucrecia named it "Sephiroth".

-End of Chp.29

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.30

During his entire stay in Nibelheim, Vincent had seen Sephiroth only once, which was three weeks after the birth. He happened to be ascending the stairs when he spied the maid leaving one of the rooms, with the child in her hands. Curious to see the boy, Vincent halted the maid in the hallway, then asked (very politely) about any supplies the household lacked. The maid, being of a well-disposed nature (and also a big admirer of this Turk), began a lengthy description of all the supplies necessary for the week.

"Oh yes, Sir! We're out of butter! Goodness, Professor Hojo throws a fit if his baked potatoe has no butter on it," the kind woman prattled on, fearful of forgetting an item, "La, Sir! Please don't forget I need money to buy a new pan! That last one was...."

Vincent, while nodding every so often to acknowledge her demands, carefully scrutinized the baby between her hands. In return, the boy stared back in complete awe at this tower of a stranger.

The child was a plump, soft little thing, with the most amazing pair of bright green eyes. They shone in childish wonder at the world around them, trying to make sense of it but understanding nothing. His hair colour, of a delicate silver leaning more towards light grey, certainly won the admiration of anyone who beheld it; a very unusual colour indeed, further emphasized by his white, soft skin. He had a beautiful round face, which showed childish innocence in its purest state.

To Vincent, Sephiroth looked like any other child.

"I think that's all, Sir," concluded the chattering maid at last, "I'd say maybe 30 gil would do it."

"Ah..yes ma'am, of course," the Turk replied, fumbling awkwardly for his wallet. He gave her the necessary money (plus a little extra for her to keep). After a pause, he asked, rather cautiously, "Where are you taking that child?"

"Oh, Sir," she sighed, snuggling the baby more tightly, "The Professor wants little Sephy to be moved down to the basement today. Heaven knows, I begged him not to. Why, he's barely three weeks old, the little darling. Ah, but he just made a sour face and ordered me to 'just do it'. There ain't a speck of decency in *that* scoundrel!"

Vincent eyed Sephiroth another minute before inquiring even more cautiously, "And how is Ms.Lucrecia? Is she better now?"

"Ah! The poor dear! She's still hurting from the labour, even though, like I said Sir, it's been three weeks. All she does is pine by the window, sighing her heart out. It's enough to break your heart, Sir, and she's *SUCH* a pretty, pretty young woman too!"

"I see. Well then, it's best you go now."

"Yes, Sir," she immediately obeyed, curtseying before leaving.

Vincent watched the kind maid march down the hallway, humming softly to "little Sephy" who had fallen asleep against her bosom. When she had finally disappeared from his sight, the Turk resumed his own way.

These scientists are brutal, Vincent mused to himself, the child's barely three months old, and already they...

The two Professors, to be sure, treated the child as an amazing phenomenon. Their eyes had gleamed with great but constrained excitement on the day of the birth. They spent the first week examining every aspect of the child's anatomy, from the tip of his hair to his tiny toe. Every detail, down to the most meticulous, needed to be recorded: tissue samples for further research; more "tests" to confirm results. The list stretched on forever.

How often did Vincent spot either Professor Gast or Hojo barging into Sephiroth's room, carrying at least three notebooks and some bizarre device in their hands. They remained sealed within that room, sometimes for hours, "analyzing" the child for their mysterious purposes. Many times while passing them in the halls, Vincent heard the two men eagerly discussing the boy. They never tired of speaking about Sephiroth.

"The boy shows a marked difference in many various aspects," Professor Gast had once remarked excitedly. The two scientists were marching through the corridors when they met Vincent, who immediately made room for them to pass. Hojo, as usual, snubbed the Turk, but Professor Gast greeted him quite amicably.

As the two men descended the staircase, Vincent heard Gast say, "...he's similar to normal humans, but closer observations show he's totally different. If my analysis data is correct, then.."

"Ach! We can't assume anything until we FULLY analyze him," Hojo interrupted rudely, "I say we bring the child NOW downstairs for a complete, thorough testing. Why waste anymore time on simple analysis when we should have already started on the more important ones?!"

"Now, now, Professor Hojo."

"Don't you 'now now' me, Sir! The President is expecting a full report in a month. And since Lucrecia, our lab assistant, is still ill, we must work double time to finish! These analysis tests are crucial to the JENOVA Project!"

Vincent listened to the two dissentient scientists debate until they cleared the stairs and entered another room. One would have thought they were discussing a laboratory animal, not a human life.

No sooner had three weeks passed, than little Sephiroth was transferred from his warm crib to a cold hard tabletop down in the grim library. Undoubtedly, the two men performed every "analysis" test in existence on him, furiously scribbling down all the results. For days on end, they toiled like demons, knowing no rest or mercy. They scarcely left the library below, if only perhaps to grab a bite and a nap. Both, though Hojo more in particular, shunned any contact with the outside world. All their sweat and hard work was dedicated to Sephiroth.

No one knew (or dared imagine) what horrible forms of torture Lucrecia's son suffered in the name of science. Sephiroth was never seen again, nor had anyone the courage to ask about him. In fact, the very mention of the Professors' "work" sent shivers down anyone's spine.

The Nibelheim villagers, as always, remained oblivious of any "ShinRa matters" conducted inside the grand Mansion. The soldiers, though aware of the child's existence, never bothered discussing the topic. The maid, busy to her ears in housework, hardly mentioned the boy. Similarly, Vincent strictly stuck to his duties, and said nothing.

Sephiroth obviously concerned the two Professors only.

However, some nights, when not a soul stirred the stillness, Sephiroth's pitiful shrieks re-echoed through the huge mansion. Though quite faint, the cries could reach Vincent's ears as he lay awake in bed. The

child wailed for hours, during which Vincent stayed perfectly still in his place, his eyes fixed on the black ceiling. Poor Sephiroth sobbed for any kind soul to rescue him from the loathsome library. Sadly, no one ever came.

Vincent wondered if Lucrecia could hear the child's pitiful cries like he could.

Much to his annoyance, he found himself thinking a lot about her lately. The very recollection of his beloved set his mind adrift in a thousand different directions. The fear that some harm may befall her still haunted him non-stop. Whenever he passed her closed door, the desire to embrace her all to himself nearly blinded his logic. He discerned an invisible danger hovering over her head, ready to devour her any moment.

Fortunately, Vincent would check his feelings in time, then continue his way past her door. Though the presentiment never spared his mind, the Turk refused to be guided by emotion rather than reason. Besides, he had heard Lucrecia was quite ill. So why irritate her more his unpleasant sight?

The poor woman, indeed, had suffered enormously during the actual labour. Immediately after the painful delivery, Lucrecia had sunk into a dangerous level of semi-consciousness, further plagued by fever and genuine fatigue. Professor Gast, greatly concerned about her, strictly forbade anyone to visit Lucrecia (save the maid) until her health had recovered. The young mother, ravaged by delirium, had cried for days afterwards, sobbing reputedly for her child as well as for "him" (no one knew exactly *who* she meant).

Thanks to Professor Gast's medicines and the maid's tender care, Lucrecia eventually recovered enough of her health to see her child. However, being still in this critical state, the ill mother was only granted two looks at the boy: one during his second week (in which he was named), and right before his cruel transfer down to the hateful library.

Surprisingly, Lucrecia made no protest or complaint on hearing of Sephiroth's transfer. She listened very attentively to Professor Hojo explain, in his usual brash manner, how important these "analysis tests" mattered to the overall Project. He emphasized a dozen times how significant those tests were to the advancement of their research.

"And I won't tolerate any silly, womanly, sentimental nonsense from you, Missy!" the insolent man concluded, shaking his long finger in her face very haughtily, "You have successfully fulfilled your part of the experiment, so don't interfere with mine. Is that clear?"

Too heartbroken to argue, Lucrecia nodded her head, then tiredly turned away. She never saw her son again.

One month rolled by. Spring reluctantly faded into a cool, breezy summer. Lush blankets of fresh grass covered the rolling hills. Every green leaf on each branch of every tree swayed in the wind. The golden sunlight, only too eager to reach the fertile land below, delighted the winsome village with its warmth. The birds, though regretting spring's departure, nevertheless celebrated the glories of summer.

Until that time, Vincent had not seen his beloved Lucrecia even once since her son's birth. Although she had recovered sufficiently by the time summer arrived, the woman, for some obscure reason, refused to see anyone. She never left her chamber, preferring to hide away from the world outside. She scarcely ate the food delivered to her door, and would not speak to anyone under any circumstances. The kind-hearted maid, worried out of her wits, had on many occasions, begged Lucrecia to "open the door and have a bit of food". However, Lucrecia remained silently imprisoned in her room, her door barred and double locked.

She had not, in fact, crossed the door's threshold since Sephiroth's birth. Nor had she spoken a word to a soul for all that time. Nobody knew exactly *what* that poor, depressed woman did in her room.

Professor Hojo, being too engrossed in organizing the analysis results, had no time to waste on Lucrecia. The soldiers, as expected, never bothered worrying about any of the scientists. Each day dragged by, with the young mother still hiding all alone in her chamber. It seemed Lucrecia had lost all interest in the world outside her room.

On one particular warm day in the very late afternoon, Vincent heard a cautious knock at his door. He carelessly dumped the book he had been reading, then opened the door. Much to his surprise, he found the maid before him, breathless and on the verge of tears.

"Sir!" she exclaimed hurriedly, her heart swelling with pity, "I've tried and tried, but Ms.Lucrecia won't come out of her room! She's been locked up for a month now, barely eating and never speaking a word to a living soul!! I just don't know what to do anymore! I'm so worried about her, the poor little dear!!"

Unable to contain her grief for Lucrecia's misfortune, the compassionate woman burst into tears. Vincent spent at least five minutes calming her, asking her to repeat herself several times, until he finally understood her problem. The kind-hearted maid meticulously described Lucrecia's harsh, self-imposed seclusion. She had become so desperate, trying to coax the young mother out of her hideout, but all in vain. "

She doesn't even answer me, Sir!" the woman complained tearfully, "for a whole month now, she won't come out! I told Professor Hojo, but he only yelled at me for bothering him. Well! I hope he ROTS in that library of his if he won't help this poor woman! The shame of it!!"

At her wits' end after so many failed attempts, the maid had finally sought Vincent's help.

"I know you're not like that grouch of a Professor, Sir," she pleaded to the Turk, "If anyone can talk some sense into poor Ms.Lucrecia, it's you. Please Sir, talk to her! She hasn't opened her door or her mouth in a month, and I'm afraid she'd dead!"

Vincent immediately promised the woman he would speak to Lucrecia and lure her out of her room somehow. So, after many such assurances and vows, the Turk successfully mollified the tearful woman. Her work for the day now finished, he dismissed her very politely, even walked her to the front door. The good woman blessed the Turk for the hundredth time, then left the Mansion in reasonably high spirits.

He shut the door immediately after she had cleared the gate. Vincent leaned against the heavy door, trying to organize his thoughts into a reasonable order. The haunting silence of the whole mansion crushed his senses to bits; it seemed he was the only soul living in it.

Without further hesitation, Vincent decided to try his luck with breaking Lucrecia's imprisonment. He skipped up the stairs, then noiselessly marched down the corridor towards Lucrecia's room. On reaching his destination, the Turk tapped the door lightly, and waited.

No reply.

He knocked the door again more firmly. Still no reply.

"Lucrecia," he called gently, "It's me."

Vincent waited patiently for an answer. None came.

"Lucrecia," the Turk called again, more softly than before, "If you don't open the door now, I'll break it down."

When his threat received no response, he took one step closer to the door and whispered, "Please, Lucrecia. I want to talk to you."

He stood rooted to his spot, patiently waiting to hear her voice. An unnatural silence filled the hallway, challenged only by the howls of gusty winds outside. A full minute passed without even a faint scuffle inside. Weary of the wait, Vincent lifted his hand to knock again when the door suddenly unlocked.

The door opened to a tiny crack, small enough to barely allow a pair of tense eyes to glare at the Turk. Vincent returned Lucrecia's strange glare with a restrained expression. This was the first time they had seen each other in a whole month.

"I don't want to see you, Vincent," she stated, growing more irritated with each word, "I don't want to see anyone. Just leave me alone...all of you."

Vincent fixed his keen eyes on hers, but did not speak.

"I don't want to see you or that horrid gun of yours! It scares me, Vincent. I can't bare its sight!" she whispered in tearful exasperation, "Everyone is pounding in my brain...why can't they all leave me alone?! The Professor...that stupid maid...Sephiroth.. Davoren...even you! I want to be alone! Alone!!"

"I'm not carrying my gun," Vincent replied coolly. To prove the truth, he opened his jacket, then showed her his side-holster: it was empty.

"And there's nobody here but me," Vincent reassured softly. He pressed his hand against the door, as though he would push it open, then implored, "Please, Lucrecia, I won't harm you. Just let me talk to you."

A most peculiar silence fell on the two. Neither muttered a word for a moment. Instead, they gazed intently at each other, Vincent with tender concern, Lucrecia with crumbling resistance. At last, she fully opened the door to admit the Turk, still refusing to speak. Vincent entered her room.

"Close the door," she begged in a faltering voice, "Please.. close it and lock it.."

He obeyed without question.

Her whole body shaking in agitation, Lucrecia hobbled over to the large window, and gazed absent-mindedly through the glass pane. She took no heed of the new guest, as though unaware of his presence. An entirely different matter seemed to occupy her battered mind.

Vincent scanned her square, stuffy room with mild interest. He noted several bedcovers scattered across the bed, some tumbled into a heap on the floor. In an easy chair, both Lucrecia's glasses and some overturned book lay ruthlessly discarded on top of each other. The ancient lantern behind this comfy seat cast a very weak light in the room. Two medicine bottles and a tall glass of water stood erect on the tabletop, with some colourful tablets scattered around them. Finally, Vincent spotted a tray of food rudely shoved into the far side of the room. The food had not been touched.

He turned his attention to Lucrecia. She stood leaning against the window frame, her back mostly facing him. Her disheveled hair had been carelessly heaped into a distorted bun, so that several strands dangled against her long neck. The tired woman wore a very loose silk robe around her graceful body. Her feet were bare.

Lucrecia's careworn, wasted face, however, alarmed Vincent the most. That healthy rosininess in her soft cheeks had withered away. Her eyes, blood-shot with many bitter tears, betrayed deep sadness, if not utter despair. This passing month had drained the very life out of Lucrecia.

Yet despite the cruel illness, Lucrecia still retained a strange beauty about her. Sadness had crushed her spirit; despair had wrangled her heart. Nevertheless, Vincent gazed thoughtfully at her beloved face in silent fascination. The long, harsh seclusion hadn't robbed an ounce of her beauty; it had only added a sad touch to it.

Lucrecia spent a long time looking through her window without speaking to Vincent. A cool evening loomed in the sky as the red sun sunk into the rolling hills. The birds' sweet chirps filled the air, interrupted occasionally by the rude caws of a crow. A branch near Lucrecia's window caught her hallow eyes. It swayed playfully in the breeze, often times scratching her window, as if it too wanted to enter.

She watched the meek branch dance in the wind. Vincent waited patiently for her to speak first. Though so many thoughts cluttered his mind, he knew not how to express them.

"You look well," the young woman remarked casually. She did not turn to him.

Vincent made no reply.

"You don't go out for your strolls as often as before," she muttered in an almost reproaching tone, "Sometimes from my window, I'd see you leave the house to go for a walk. But now, you hardly do that."

She drew one arm across her bosom, and covered her haggard face with the other. Her shoulders shivered, struggling against a violent surge of emotions. She seemed to be fighting brutal, physical pain.

"Lucrecia," Vincent began gently but firmly, "Why won't you come out of your room?"

"I don't want to..."

"You've been locked up in here for nearly a month now. You eat very little, if at all. From your face, I can tell you've been crying a lot and hardly sleep. Now please, Lucrecia, tell me what's wrong?"

"I don't know," the miserable woman faltered, "...I'm torn in so many pieces, I just don't know anymore."

"Are you...afraid of something?"

She glanced at him, her pale face devoid of any expression, but instantly turned away. She did not answer.

Vincent paused a moment before asking, "Are you afraid... of what happened *that* night..when I killed him?"

"I don't know! I don't know!" Lucrecia cried in anguish, "I hear Davoren's voice calling me a monster for experimenting on my child! I hear you promising me not to interfere, even though I know you want to. Then..then Hojo's ugly voice just pounds in my ears..he..tells me I must give myself to the experiment..and I feel him touch my body... UGH!! It makes me sick!!!"

So enraged by the tumultuous emotions, Lucrecia nearly stumbled to the floor had not her hand caught the table. She clutched her breast in agony. Vincent moved to help her, but stopped short when he noticed her recoil away from him. She leaned against the table, her sole support.

"Don't come near me," Lucrecia implored wretchedly, "Just..just stay back...everything..it just screams in my head, and tears me inside out, Vincent. I don't know where to hide."

She steadied herself again, but kept a tight grip on her bosom. Vincent watched her in concern.

"You remember that night, ages ago, when I told you why the JENOVA Project meant so much to me?" Lucrecia recalled dreamily, "..it was the same night you kissed me. I..was so sure of myself back then.. so arrogantly sure...ah, but now! Now I'm lost in the dark, and can't find my way out."

If this pitiful woman possessed any strength at all, it soon disappeared. Lucrecia's whole body wobbled to the side as her feet lost balance. Unable to contain his alarm any further, Vincent dashed to the delirious woman and caught her before she could collapse to the floor.

"LET ME GO!!!!" she screamed at the top of her lungs, "LEAVE ME ALONE!!! LEAVE ME ALONE!!!!!"

Wild with rage, Lucrecia fought violently to break loose from Vincent's grip: she screamed, cried, even kicked his shins more than once. All in vain; the Turk surpassed her power greatly and refused to let go. She did not hear him call her name, nor could she feel him shake her shoulders in hopes of restoring her lost sanity. Instead, Lucrecia struggled to free herself from him, even though she knew his arms alone prevented her collapse.

To be short, Lucrecia had lost her mind.

Losing his patience at last, Vincent roughly swept his arm underneath Lucrecia's two legs, while the other arm encircled her back. Despite her fierce kicking, the Turk managed to carry her all the way to the easy chair with little difficulty. After brushing aside her book and glasses, Vincent sat in the comfy chair and forcefully perched Lucrecia on his lap. Whenever she tried to escape, he yanked her back to him. He shook the woman so violently, repeating her name over all her insane cries, until she suddenly stopped. He had restored her reason.

Lucrecia stared blankly at his face, gasping and scarcely understanding how she had landed in his lap. Vincent held her tightly in his arms for fear she may either lose her balance or her mind again. His hand continuously rubbed the young woman's back in an effort to soothe the turmoil in her mind.

Lucrecia looked all around herself in wonder before asking the Turk directly, "Did you see Sephiroth?"

Vincent blinked confusedly at the unexpected question, but dutifully replied, "Yes, I did."

"When?"

"Right before he was taken to the library."

"He's beautiful, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"I wanted to hug him..all to myself, just like this.."

She crossed both hands across her chest, as if actually embracing a child. Vincent made no comment.

Lucrecia fidgeted in his lap, trying weakly to stand up. Unfortunately, her feet refused to obey her command, and her body continued trembling. Vincent watched her grapple with her muddled emotions for a long time. He held her very carefully in his lap without disturbing her.

"I just wanted to hug him, Vincent," she whispered softly, "..to feel his little body in my arms...once would have been enough for me..."

She cast her eyes down in shame, then slowly nestled her head against the Turk's shoulder. Lucrecia placed her clenched fist against his chest, choking on many bitter sobs. Vincent did not move.

"But Professor Hojo wouldn't let me," she complained, "..Sephiroth..my poor little son... he's for the Project, not me. I had agreed to it, so I gave him away. I was so sure of what I was doing..the road was so clear to me, I could even see the end of it. But when you came, Vincent, I became lost a bit, like I didn't want to finish the road anymore..and when you..you killed Davoren that night, I lost my way completely."

Vincent gently loosened her hair, so that it tumbled all around her shaking shoulders. He placed his hand on her head, which snuggled even more against his shoulder at the kind touch.

"I had agreed to bear all of this," she sobbed in misery, "I remember telling Davoren 'I accept the consequences', and I will. But it's not fair, Vincent! It's too cruel! The Professor wouldn't even let me hug my son! I want Sephiroth, Vincent, I want my son!!!"

Both her arms suddenly embraced his neck. Lucrecia buried her full face further into his shoulder, repressing her sobs to her best abilities. Vincent felt her whole body shiver in his lap.

"Lucrecia," he whispered compassionately, running his fingers through her hair, "I'll bring Sephiroth to you."

The heart-broken mother looked at him in silence.

"I'll bring him up here, straight to you," he promised, "But you must go to sleep, Lucrecia. You need some rest."

For some reason, Lucrecia lifted her shaking hand and caressed the Turk's cheek. She gazed tiredly at his face, her cold fingertips running along his pale skin. A very weak smile crossed her lips.

"You've always been so kind to me, Vincent, even though I've hurt you at least a thousand times. I'm sorry," Lucrecia sighed sadly, "..you're only so warm and loving with me..while at the same time, you can kill anyone else...murder them in cold blood. It's like a very small part of your heart works, while the rest is frozen dead."

He did not answer.

"When you bring Sephiroth to me, we can go for long walks in the fields," the sad mother dreamed to herself, "He's too small, so I'll have to carry him. If you want to, I'll let you too carry him a bit. He'll call me 'mama'..heh, and I'll teach him to call you 'Dada' ...yes, I'll pretend you're the father instead of that horrible Professor Hojo..."

Vincent studied her beautiful face in well-concealed pain. He had lied to Lucrecia: Sephiroth, all his analysis tests being completed, had returned to Midgar in the company of Professor Gast. Most of the soldiers, weary of the uneventful countryside, decided to return to the city as well. Only Professor Hojo remained in Nibelheim in order to revise his final report on the Project. Naturally, Vincent's duty required him to stay in the village until all the scientist's work finished.

Regardless of the painful truth, Vincent nodded his head in agreement to Lucrecia's pitiful fantasy. He would do anything, even pretend to be Sephiroth's "Dada", if only he could induce Lucrecia to sleep.

The room had grown considerably dim during their meeting. The approaching night streaked a deep shade of blue across the heavens, casting most of the room into shadows. The birds had long ceased their chirping, so that the heavy silence in the room struck Vincent as extremely unnatural. Lucrecia nestled her head against his shoulder once more. With one hand clasped over her aching heart, she sat perfectly still in his lap.

"You didn't come," Lucrecia whispered softly all of a sudden.

"Hm?"

"While I was locked up in here all by myself, I cried all the time," Lucrecia recounted in anguish, "I cried my heart out ten times a day. I.. I wanted you to come to me, Vincent. Deep down, I wanted only you to help me out of this darkness...to stop this miserable nightmare! I cried day and night for you, Vincent, but you never came! You never came!"

Vincent was silent.

"Even though I loved you and wanted you to come so badly, you never came," the pitiful woman concluded in a whisper.

Drained of all strength, Lucrecia sunk her head against his shoulder in complete silence. Her entire body never stopped shaking in Vincent's arms. She watched the sky fade to blackness through the window, then buried her face into the Turk's neck. Vincent carefully leaned himself back against the easy chair, making sure his movements did not awaken the exhausted woman, then snuggled her body more securely against his.

He sat in this position a long time, watching the room surrender to darkness. The Turk rested his head against Lucrecia's as his thoughts dispersed in different directions. Every passing moment, every sigh the woman heaved sharpened a very strange sensation in his heart. In all likelihood, Lucrecia hadn't meant those harsh reproaches. To be sure, her grief had clouded her reason, enough to accuse the Turk of abandoning her.

But she had spoken the truth.

Vincent admitted to himself he had always somehow known Lucrecia was not truly happy. He **MUST** have felt her misery as the experiment slowly drained the life out of her.

How many times had the pessimism that Lucrecia would be harmed plagued his mind? Indeed, why hadn't he ***acted*** to protect her from this menace? Instead, he had chosen to wallow in self-pity, excusing it as "non-interference". All those past declarations of love battered his mind. What disgust he felt with himself. They were empty words, devoid of any true feelings.

He ***should*** have interfered, even though his mind had discouraged him. He ***should*** have obeyed his fears rather than discredit them. He ***should*** have protected Lucrecia instead of idly watching her suffer by herself.

Suddenly, Lucrecia's sufferings, agonies, and tears became ***his*** fault. Her pain was his sin.

Thus sat Vincent, fumbling with his heavy guilt. His past life mattered very little, if at all, to him. He found no regret in slaughtering misguided beggars in a Reactor, threatening little innocent children to satisfy his

superiors, or murdering his best friend so ruthlessly. To him, these crimes bore no consequence, not even an ounce of significance, compared to abandoning his beloved Lucrecia.

How could she ever forgive his blindness? How could he ever forgive himself?

When at last unable to bear this burden of guilt, Vincent carried Lucrecia straight to bed. He stretched her body fully on the bed, then covered her with the bedcovers. The Turk wiped her tear-stained cheeks with his gloved hand before leaving the bedroom. He left the door ajar.

Vincent lingered in the dark hallway for one long minute. His weary eyes glanced to the far side of the hall, which ultimately led to the loathsome library below. Hojo, no doubt, had been slaving all this time down there in preparation of his report.

Silence slithered through the black corridor, interrupted by a rude creak of some rotting wood. The stained windows rattled with each howl of wind. Complete darkness dominated the hall.

Vincent fetched a stiff wooden chair from another room, then propped it right next to Lucrecia's door. After glancing into her room one last time, the Turk dropped into the chair, overwrought with exhaustion. Although he closed his eyes and folded his arms across his chest, Vincent did not sleep a wink the entire night.

Just before the arrival of dawn, Vincent heard a faint "thump" in Lucrecia's bedroom. The Turk, his senses sharper thanks to his lack of sleep, instantly sat up in his chair. He listened for a moment: nothing. Had he simply imagined the sound?

He stood up. Rubbing his tired eyes, Vincent cautiously peeked into the dim room. Everything seemed to be in its proper order, except for an extremely peculiar shadow lying heaped up on the floor. It appeared to be a body. Much to Vincent's horror, it was Lucrecia.

With a loud oath, the Turk dashed to her body. Lucrecia lay heaped up on the floor, face down and both hands close to her bosom. Her hair was scattered around her head, even over her face. Evidently, the woman had awakened sometime earlier, and must have collapsed suddenly in her spot.

"Lucrecia!!" Vincent called loudly, "Lucrecia!! Wake up!!!"

Vincent turned her onto her back. He tore open her collar, calling her name all the time, while patting her cheeks. She did not respond.

Frantic beyond reason, Vincent checked the woman's pulse: he could barely feel a heartbeat throbbing very weakly. Lucrecia was dying right before his eyes! She would surely die unless he helped her now.

In a flash, the Turk stormed out of the bedroom like a perfect madman, then dashed down the dark hallway. He knew not what help he could get for the dying woman, but understood she lingered between life and death. He rushed down the stony passageway, heading straight for the grim library. That was his last hope.

On barging in, breathless with agitation, Vincent found Professor Hojo writing on the operation table. Several scraps of paper littered the bulky table, some crumpled up, others heaped under the flickering lantern. The Professor immediately turned to the rude intruder, his face showing great annoyance, as if to say "How dare YOU bother ME?"

"Professor!!!" Vincent gasped out, taking a step closer to the man, "You have to help Lucrecia!! She's dying!!!"

Hojo narrowed his mean eyes with peculiar interest at the Turk, but said nothing.

Vincent felt the anger boil his blood as he cried, "She's having a heart attack!! If we don't hurry and save her now, she'll die for sure!!!"

"Let her die then," scoffed Hojo simply.

Perhaps he had lost his mind, or maybe he had simply misheard the man. In either case, Vincent whispered in absolute astonishment, "What?!"

"I say let her die and rot in her grave," Hojo repeated, stepping closer to the shocked Turk, "The JENOVA cells have poisoned her body, so she will die very soon. Besides, she's outlived her usefulness. I don't need her for my experiment anymore."

"Have you lost your mind??!!! You can't just..."

"Ah, but *you*, my dear Sir..you will do quite nicely for my experiment..heh heh heh..you'll be part of my OTHER experiment... heh heh heh heh..."

Vincent stared in amazement at this mad scientist, not understanding his strange meaning at all. Hojo glared maliciously back at the Turk, while a sinister grin played on his thin lips. Vincent suddenly felt nauseated with the Professor.

"What 'experiment'?" he cried, losing his patience with the deranged man, "Professor, you've just FINISHED an experiment!!!"

"I know that, you idiot! That's NOT the experiment I meant!!" Hojo shouted angrily. He gripped his hair in frustration as he roared, "You...and him... all of us..will be part of ANOTHER experiment!! I'm not finished yet!! I must finish my experiment! WE'RE ALL PART OF THE EXPERIMENT!!!!!!!"

Vincent was dumbstruck with this man's madness.

"It could take ten..fifty...maybe a hundred years to finish," the insane Professor ranted on, eyeing Vincent so viciously, "...it'll take time, Sir, TIME to finish my experiment. But never mind, Mr.Valentine, you can sleep for all eternity, preserved just as you are now. And when it's time to finish my experiment..I'll wake you."

The movement was instant; so fast, so unexpected at that mad moment. In the blink of an eye, Professor Hojo yanked out a small revolver from his pocket and fired once straight at Vincent's chest. The Turk lost all sensation of his surroundings, except for a murderous pain ripping through his chest. The bullet had most likely hit his heart.

Everything went black.

The very moment he hit the floor, Vincent sprang up in bed in a cold sweat. He looked around himself silently. This was his bedroom in his apartment. Here was his frightening metallic claw. There was Aeris, sound asleep under the covers, safe by his side.

It was all just a nightmare.

It took him great effort to understand he had been merely re-living his past once again. All of that madness died long ago: ShinRa, the library, Hojo, Davoren...and Lucrecia; they were all ghosts haunting

his past. They were just faces and places floating in his memory. That horrible nightmare finished thirty-one years ago, never to return again...

Or did it?

-End of Chp.30

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.31

Sad how out of all the vast treasury of memories one human mind contains, very selected few actually survive till the end. Most of them fade away with time, losing their novelty and flavour. The once sharp details become dim; the clear faces turn blurry. Indeed, most of our memories are so similar to paintings: the older they grow, the more faded and dusty they become. When Time at last fades their colours and obscures the details, those wasted memories are sometimes utterly forgotten.

Yet the precious few memories which completely evade Time, on the other hand, remain forever fresh in the mind until death. These memories could be happy, confusing, sad, or even painful. Nothing, not even Time itself, could hope to dim one detail of it: the face remains forever fresh; the moment forever new; the emotion forever vibrant.

It simply refuses to die.

Despite the torturous, long years of separation, Lucrecia's precious memory remained thus forever preserved in Vincent's mind. He sealed her beautiful face in his memory. Every curve of her slender figure, every movement of her body had long engraved itself into his brain. Vincent still remembered the feel of her hair between his fingers; the incredible amount of respect and admiration he felt for her; even the warmth of her gentle touch. He had absorbed her whole spirit into himself, and jealously protected it from any tarnish Time may induce.

However, with the precious memory of his beloved Lucrecia came the unbearable guilt of abandoning her in her most hour of need. The self-disgust and hatred always wrangled his aching heart whenever he recalled her image. This one wretched sin, of all the horrible sins he had committed, haunted this man's lonely days and cold, black nights. They never granted him peace, nor would they spare his tortured mind.

Thirty-one years could not mollify his guilt. On the contrary, time had only intensified the pain until his sin obsessed his tormented mind. He yearned for forgiveness...*her* forgiveness. What hatred and revulsion he felt at himself whenever he remembered how he idly watched her suffer so miserable and alone. Her bitter, bitter reproach "you never came" hammered his head and tore his senses to shreds. He wanted peace of mind, which ultimately meant his beloved's forgiveness.

If only he could somehow suffer to atone for the unbearable crime. Somewhere on this wretched earth, there *must* be some excruciating punishment he could endure to win her forgiveness. Some arduous task he could perform, some torture he could undergo just to stop the guilt from haunting him.

And yet, Vincent knew no amount of groveling, suffering, or torment could match the agonies Lucrecia had borne. In being honest with himself, Vincent never believed, not even for one moment, he could hope to atone for his crime. He had loved Lucrecia with such a violent passion, yet at the same time had abandoned her to a cruel fate. He had watched her suffer instead of preventing her pain. In short, Vincent did believe himself *WORTHY* of Lucrecia's forgiveness.

Her pain had damned him to a wretched life forever plagued by guilt and relentless self-hatred. He would always live in misery and bitter remorse, denied any peace of mind.

But most importantly, Vincent would live his lonely life as he had always: a stone-hearted, demoniacal monster. Not because he could transform into a hideous creature with sharp claws and black wings. That monster was merely part of his abnormal body he artfully concealed behind a human guise. No, the real monster was *him*: it was the same heartless creature who just watched Lucrecia suffer instead of protecting her.

Let that be his eternal punishment. No mercy. No forgiveness.

But Vincent had Aeris, a frightened little child lost and hounded by her dark fears. If he protected her now like he should have protected Lucrecia thirty-one years ago.....if he, in fact, **PRETENDED** he fought for Lucrecia instead of Aeris.....would the sin be washed away? Would the guilt at long last spare his tortured mind?

Would he **THEN** be forgiven?

Vincent suddenly broke off in the middle of his gloomy thoughts without waiting for an answer. After waking up a second time during the night, he had set his tired mind adrift until he had sunk into semi-consciousness. Though aware of his wandering thoughts, he scarcely possessed any control over their direction or meaning. Yet, being still so physically and mentally weak, Vincent had offered no resistance to his train of thoughts; at least, not until that desperate question struck him in the face. He abruptly ended his morbid meditation by forcing his eyes open.

A peaceful silence ruled the grey bedroom.

He lay flat on his back in bed, his dull attention tiredly focused on the ceiling. Both his hands rested on his calm chest, the metallic claw heaped over the other hand. Vincent scarcely twitched a muscle whenever a cold shiver tickled his pale skin. On the contrary, he felt quite relaxed. Though the bedroom was quite cold, Vincent had chosen to sleep on top of the covers in hopes of cooling his feverish body. Much to his relief, his plan had succeeded: the fever had almost disappeared.

He glanced askance at Aeris, who slept buried underneath all the warm covers. She lay snugly nestled against his body, most of her face hidden under the blankets save her eyes and hair. Sweet slumber had overpowered her senses so completely, she lay oblivious to her surroundings, even to some of her curls that dangled before her lovely face. She did not move when Vincent flicked a strand of her hair away. Utter exhaustion had rendered her helplessly unconscious.

He turned his eyes back to the ceiling, and did not move for a long time.

Gentle morning sunlight smuggled through the window, slowly dispersing the darkness away. Since Vincent had left only one curtain open during the night, some of the room basked in sunlight while the other parts lay in grey shadows. Vincent languidly watched the ceiling brighten as the rosy morning besieged the bedroom. When he had heard the faint chimes of the bell tower signal six o'clock, Vincent sat up in bed.

He gazed absent-mindedly at the window just opposite the warm bed. Pure white snow had clogged the corners of each window pane, while a gentle mist completely smeared the glass. Indeed, it had snowed very heavily all throughout the night.

Vincent hopped out of bed. After one good stretch, he wandered over to the cold, misty window. He wiped the fog away with his hand, then peered through the glass: the whole world outside lay trapped in snow. It covered every rooftop and car in view. The bare tree branches outlining the streets below were laden with clumps of snow. One passerby trudged through the thick snow piled on the sidewalk, making sure his precious briefcase stayed safe and dry.

Vincent turned his weary eyes up to the grim skyline of the black city. The ugly tall buildings and banal offices contrasted sharply with the beauty of the pure snow. The soot and grime would probably soon dirty the snow's beautiful whiteness. How greatly winter in Midgar differed from winter in Nibelheim...

He turned abruptly from the window on remembering that loathsome village. Its memory filled him with intense pain, just as much as Lucrecia's filled him with bitter guilt: It was in Nibelheim where he realized his heinous crime. How long ago it happened, yet how vivid it seemed.

The mirror hanging across the room suddenly caught his eye: Vincent stared in silent wonder at his image, which returned his look with the exact same expression. His face had grown quite wan and haggard. The cruel illness had, in truth, drained every ounce of life out of his weak body until not a drop remained. His keen red eyes sparkled brilliantly like a pair of rubies.

And how pale his skin was! His disheveled, long black hair tumbled in lustrous strands all around his head, a few in front of his face, others well over his shoulders. The shocking contrast between his jet black hair and pale white skin only added to his wonder. He had also grown thinner: his sleeveless black shirt and loose pants felt a bit baggier than he last recalled.

But it's the same face, Vincent mused to himself, the exact same face I had in that hectic nightmare....

He stared very meaningfully at his face, his turbulent thoughts scurrying around his head. That face did not belong here, it belonged to his bloody, murky past. And yet, he still bore the same young, fresh face he had borne thirty-one years ago. Age hadn't touched it a wrinkle.

To his bitter mind, this face hardly differed from an artful mask, cleverly disguising a monster as a human.

Feeling sudden disgust at his "mask", Vincent tore his eyes away from the mirror back to the misty window. He folded both arms across his chest as he gazed broodingly out the glass pane. The bakery shop down the street finally opened its doors to greet the cold morning. Little school children scurried down the pavement, throwing snowballs at each other all the way. Several of the black buildings in the distance had already returned to work. The whole city of Midgar braced itself for another cold winter's day.

However, Vincent only noticed these signs of life with hardly any interest. Many thoughts, far too morbid for the cheerful morning, occupied his mind. He paid no heed to the bright world outside. He had grown quite accustomed to the gloomy world inside his head.

The pleasant tranquility of the cold bedroom pleased him.

Unfortunately, the loud sound of the door opening disturbed his gloomy meditation. He glanced askance at the intruder without muttering a word.

Tifa stumbled into the bedroom, yawning and rubbing her sleepy eyes. Her chaotic hair all hung behind her back, with many distorted strands pointing in every direction. She wore a large, long night-shirt, horribly wrinkled from an unsettled sleep. Evidently, she had just woken up.

She fully stretched out her two slender arms as another lazy yawn attacked her. When at last she noticed Vincent by the window, she sprang back in surprise, exclaiming, "V..Vincent!!!!"

"Good morning, Tifa," Vincent greeted calmly. He returned her stunned look with a very composed expression.

Tifa, of course, had least expected to see this man up so early, standing in his usual aloof manner by the window. Nor had she dreamed of finding Vincent speaking and behaving so coolly. She strongly suspected he still suffered from delirium, but was pretending to be sane.

"Vincent...you..," she faltered confusedly, marching over to him, "..are you...all right???"

"Yes. I'm fine now."

Still doubting his sanity, Tifa pressed her hand over his forehead, then his cheek. Vincent fidgeted uncomfortably under her sharp scrutiny: she peered suspiciously into his pale face; examined the smallest detail for any sign of delirium. Nevertheless, Vincent dutifully succumbed to her will, and made no protest to the inspection.

"The fever..it...it's practically gone!" Tifa cried amazedly, "..my God! And you're not raving anymore! You've almost recovered!!"

Vincent only nodded once to the joyful news.

Tifa, on the other hand, expressed far more enthusiasm for his miraculous recovery. Much to his confusion, she threw both arms around his neck and embraced him. Being much taller than her, Vincent stooped slightly for her to fully hug him. Though he felt a bit awkward in Tifa's tight embrace, he did not resist the kind gesture.

"Ah, you jerk! What's the idea getting sick like that and making us worry?" Tifa reproached in a low, faltering voice. She tightened her grip around him, as if fearing the dreaded fever may return, "...coughing out all that blood, and raving like there was no tomorrow. We all thought you'd die before the night was through."

Vincent, sensing a sob in her voice, gently patted her back as he humbly apologized, "...I'm sorry, Tifa..I'm very sorry.."

"You don't have to apologize, Vincent," Tifa replied softly, "What matters to us is that you're okay now."

She held him in that friendly embrace another moment just to reassure herself of his presence, then released him. Vincent ran his fingers through his hair, thinking he should say more. However, since all words failed him, he turned awkwardly back to the misty window again. Similarly, Tifa fumbled in the uncomfortable silence. She glanced at his face from the side: how morose and pensive he looked. She gazed outside the window, wondering what thoughts preoccupied this man.

For one full minute, neither spoke a word.

"Excuse me, Tifa," Vincent began softly all of a sudden. He turned to face her as he said, "..I have to go now. Good bye."

"Eh??!!" she blinked in amazement, turning to him as well, "W-where are you going???"

"I need to take a shower, then get ready for work."

The simplicity of the answer doubled her astonishment. She gaped at his calm face, thinking she had perhaps misheard him. But his serious expression proved otherwise. Without another word, Vincent politely walked past her.

"W-w-wait a darn minute, you!!!" Tifa cried angrily, yanking him back by the arm, "You can't just 'get ready for work' as if nothing happened! You were raving with a killer fever only last night! And you still have a small fever too! You must rest!"

"But, I..I'm fine.."

"If it's your job, then don't worry," Tifa interrupted loudly, "I personally explained to them you couldn't go because you were sick. Now, unless you want that fever to return, Mr.Valentine, you'll get yourself straight back into bed! I do NOT want you having another relapse, and..."

"Sh!" Vincent hushed, placing his finger before his lips very nervously, "Not so loud. You'll wake her."

"Wake...her?????" Tifa repeated in puzzlement.

She looked deliberately to the side, where the bed stood, suspecting to find an explanation there. To her great shock, she finally discovered Aeris snuggled underneath all those warm covers. Aeris, who had noiselessly shifted to her back during the conversation, slept as soundly as ever. Her head was turned to the side, so that part of her beautiful face lay in her thick brown curls. The cozy blankets had slipped off her upper body, thus exposing her neck and entire shoulders. One of her delicate hands lay carelessly near her face, while the other clutched the hem of a blanket to her breast. Aeris only heaved one tired sigh. She looked extremely exhausted, but quite content.

To be sure, Tifa had not even noticed the girl sleeping so innocently in the man's soft bed. She gaped with eyes wide open at Aeris, then back at Vincent, who felt very uneasy on seeing her stunned look. Tifa spent a long time glancing between the two. Suddenly, she folded her arms and nodded her head quite sagaciously, as though she understood the real situation. Vincent watched her uncomfortably.

"Ah, I see," Tifa remarked, eying him very meaningfully, "So ****THAT'S**** what you two were up to while I was blissfully asleep. Guess I don't need to ask if you slept well, do I, Mr.Valen-TINO?"

Vincent blinked in astonishment at her sly meaning.

"Now wait a minute!!" he retorted but instantly lowered his voice, "You have the wrong idea. This is definitely NOT what it looks like..."

"Uh-huh. Sure," Tifa teased. She playfully slapped his arm as she added in a peculiar whisper, "You don't need to be so uptight about it, Vincent. I mean, no matter how you look at it, you're a man, and she's a pretty young girl. It's good to know underneath that cold exterior, you still have the same basic instincts all normal men..."

But she stopped short when Vincent abruptly turned away from her. He folded both arms across his chest as he closed his eyes in annoyance. His back remained rigidly facing the bed. Though Tifa knew her joke had probably offended him, she could not help but smile at Vincent's embarrassment.

"When I woke up around two in the morning, I found her at my bedside, washing my forehead...and trying to calm me down, because I was having a nightmare," Vincent explained in a low, controlled voice, "I could see her whole body shivering from the cold. She was so exhausted, I wondered how she managed to stay up at all. Then I learned she's been like this at my side for a day and a half. Well, I certainly didn't want her to become ill on my account, so I made her sleep in my bed."

Tifa raised an eyebrow suspiciously, as if doubting the validity of his simple story. Vincent glanced at her, then coughed uneasily. Tifa thought she saw a very light blush colour his cheeks, but he turned away before she could check.

"She slept under the blankets; I slept ON TOP of them for the whole night," he concluded softly, "That is all. I certainly did not exceed those boundaries."

"Heh heh..aw c'mon, Vincent! Don't be mad," Tifa laughed amicably at his stiffness, "I was only teasing you. Heck, I know you're not that kind of guy."

He looked suspiciously at her from the corner of his eye. Tifa winked playfully at him to prove she did, indeed, believe him.

"But you know, Vincent," Tifa added, her tone growing quite serious, "..Aeris lied to you. She didn't spend a day and a half watching over you."

He listened to her in silence.

"Aeris spent the full week literally by your side, nursing and caring for you. She never left your side. For a full week, she washed your forehead, held your hand, even whispered in your ears (I have no idea what she told you). Whether you were unconscious or raving like mad, Aeris watched over you by herself. She refused to let me or Cloud look after you, not even for a minute."

Vincent fixed his eyes on the view outside the window without interrupting Tifa. Tifa glanced timidly at his stoic face, then looked at Aeris. The girl hadn't moved a muscle.

"She probably just lied to you so you wouldn't get worried about her," Tifa excused for the kind-hearted girl, "Caring for you was so important to her, the silly thing hardly bothered sleeping. I told her to wake me at midnight, because I wanted her to get some decent sleep. But, of course, being so stubborn, she didn't listen."

An awkward silence filled the room as she finished her story. Vincent turned around to face Tifa again, unsure how to react to the truth. Tifa studied Aeris' tired face for another minute before she too turned to Vincent. Her brown eyes softened with tender kindness on meeting his calm, red eyes.

"Would you like some coffee before you go to work?" Tifa smiled simply.

Vincent nodded his head in consent.

"Alrighty then. It should be ready in a minute."

Tifa immediately left the room to prepare his hot drink. Vincent, on the other hand, lingered for another moment at the foot of the bed. His whole face darkened with some troublesome thought as he gazed very intently at Aeris. The girl slept in her same position, blissfully unaware of all around her. Sweet, deep sleep had gently lulled her eyes to seal shut. Vincent carefully tucked her in again, then drew the curtains across the window. He quietly shut the door after he left the room.

As he wandered down the familiar hallway, loud snores from the living room caught his attention. He silently peeked into this dark room in search of the noisy source.

Slouched on the couch, Cloud slept soundly in nothing but a light undershirt and his boxer shorts. Both his legs were wide apart, one dangling over the arm of the comfy seat. His head, with all that shock of blond hair, slumped sharply against his shoulder. A woolly blanket, obviously his own, lay discarded on the floor. Cloud snored with a large, gaping mouth, occasionally giving a sharp snort whenever he scratched his thigh. To be sure, not even the mightiest of earthquakes could have awakened this young man from his deep slumber. He looked exhausted beyond description.

Vincent frowned slightly at Cloud's sloppy way of sleeping on a couch, but let the tired man enjoy his rest. He entered the kitchen across the hall, where Tifa had just finished preparing his coffee.

"Careful now. It's very hot," she warned as she handed him a steaming mug.

Taking the cup in his hand, Vincent collapsed into the nearest chair by the wooden table. Without a word, he took a quick sip, then began idly swirling the drink. The hot coffee, with its distinct aroma, quickly sharpened his senses and dispersed whatever weariness still clung to him. He took another sip in silence.

Tifa watched him revel in his pleasant drink without interruption. After a moment, she too poured herself some coffee, and sat near her gloom friend. As she quietly sipped her hot drink, Tifa studied Vincent's pensive face from the corner of her eye.

"Cloud looks very tired," Vincent remarked casually without looking at her.

"Oh yeah. He should be after that little 'adventure' of his last night," scoffed Tifa, feigning real anger. She placed the mug on the table firmly as she recounted, "See, last night, you had this REALLY BAD fever. We were actually fighting just to keep you alive. You were delirious, of course, screaming and kicking. None of the medicines were working, and your body was burning like fire. So, leave it Mr. I-am-so-damn-clever Cloud Strife to come up one last ditch effort to save you."

She gulped down her coffee, disregarding its hotness, in an effort to mollify her agitation. Vincent eyed her cautiously, but did not interrupt her story.

"He filled the bathtub with water, dragged you all the way in spite of your raving, and dunked your whole body in the tub to cool you! I nearly murdered him! I mean, I thought he was trying to do some kinda 'mercy killing' by drowning you. But Cloud kept on repeating he wouldn't let you die just yet. So, he spent around two hours last night dunking your body in and out, until the fever finally went down. Naturally, he was exhausted, so there he is now, snoring away in dreamland."

She paused before adding softly, "I was skeptical at first... but I..I'm just glad his crazy idea worked."

An awkward silence followed after Tifa reached the conclusion. Vincent brooded over his cup of coffee, while Tifa glanced timidly at him to check his reaction. He swirled the hot coffee several times before standing up all of a sudden. Keeping his back totally turned to Tifa, he wandered over to the counter. Tifa wondered at his strange behavior.

"..Tifa..," he muttered after some hesitation, "..thank you. I..owe you my life. I'm very sorry for troubling you..all of you, like this.."

Although the show of gratitude quite simple, Tifa sprang out of her seat in great surprise, almost absolute shock. Vincent coughed uneasily at her reaction, but still kept his back turned to her. He could discern her confusion without even looking at her.

"Ah..now..h-hey, Vincent!" Tifa faltered nervously, walking over to him at once, "I told you you don't need to apologize for anything! You're our friend, remember? We all look out for each other!though the way you've been outta touch for this last year..not bothering to visit us even though you lived right here in Midgar... hhhmmm...makes me wonder if you really worth saving..."

When Vincent glared significantly at her, Tifa immediately laughed, "Just kidding! Kidding!!"

He leaned back against the counter, taking one last sip from his coffee before discarding his mug. Vincent silently folded his arms across his chest, and narrowed his eyes in deep contemplation. He paid no heed to Tifa who eyed him with peculiar concern.

"But, Vincent," she whispered, touching his arm lightly to win his attention, "I just want you to take care of yourself..and watch out for any danger. If not for your own sake, then at least for Aeris."

He made no reply.

"See, I'm very worried about you," continued Tifa softly, "I have this bad feeling you're hiding something from all of us. And I can't guess it, because you don't WANT anyone to. If there is anything, Vincent, any trouble..any danger you're concealing, then please tell me."

She stared so intently at his face, beseeching him to unburden whatever "trouble" pestered him. In return, Vincent gazed stoically back at her. For one full minute, no sound but Cloud's rude snores interrupted the heavy silence of the kitchen.

At last, Vincent turned away.

"...I cannot tell you, Tifa..," he apologized very gently.

"Vincent," she retorted in a cautious undertone, "Does any of this have to do with...a white-haired man?"

He froze solid in his spot on hearing those last three words. His reaction certainly baffled Tifa. She watched him fumble in confused hesitation for a minute. When he finally turned to face her, Vincent's keen eyes fixed themselves rigidly on her face, demanding an immediate explanation.

Tifa realized she had somehow hit the mark.

"I...I've been meaning to tell you this, but I forgot," she recounted nervously, "About a month ago, this man...with unnaturally white hair and these weird pink eyes asked me to meet up with him. He was a bit taller than you, around thirty, and wore this thick trench coat over his suit."

A dreadful uneasiness filled Tifa's heart as she looked into Vincent's morose face. He seemed to weigh her every word quite heavily. She distinctly recalled this mysterious stranger, but now his memory sent a cold shiver down her spine.

"He asked me whether I knew you...he even showed me a picture of you as a Turk. Then he asked me where to find you. At the time, I had no idea where you were. Like I said, you didn't keep in touch after Avalanche disbanded. I repeated several times that I simply did not know. So, he just left without another word, and I never saw him again. He...he was very strange. Oh, he was polite and everything, but he.. wouldn't tell me his name. He just seemed so bent on finding you."

Vincent's red eyes sharpened keenly at the conclusion of Tifa's story. A most solemn expression darkened his face. Several thoughts battled through his mind at the same time, each in a completely different direction. So engrossed in his own gloomy contemplation, he forgot Tifa standing concernedly before him.

The image of Davoren floated into his mind, both the one he had befriended in that nightmarish flashback, and the present one he fought that day Aeris ran away in the rain. His hair colour had faded from chestnut to abnormally pure white. his eyes, once of a deep honey colour, had changed to the strangest shade of pink. Nor did he behave like the Davoren Vincent had always known. Far from it, the Davoren Vincent had battled that night to save Aeris acted with such ruthless brutality..such bitter hatred. Not at all like the one who had shown genuine compassion and kindness.

Yet, the face remained the same, not a wrinkle added, not an ounce of youth taken. Davoren's face looked as young as it had the night Vincent killed him, thirty-one years ago. But HOW was Davoren alive....and why was he here?

He said he served some "Professor" now..the very same who had heartlessly tortured poor Aeris in a laboratory.....was it Professor *Hojo*? This mysterious "Professor" also wanted Vincent...why? What connection existed in all of this madness?

"an....'experiment'?" Vincent mumbled inaudibly to himself. He frowned at the unsatisfactory answer.

"W-what??" Tifa asked, baffled by his strange meaning.

Vincent suddenly looked at her on realizing how far his mind had drifted. Tifa waited anxiously for him to speak. His moody silence and grave expression alarmed her beyond measure.

"Listen, Tifa," he begged gently but firmly, "There are many... many things I can't tell you now because I don't want any of you involved. I don't want to endanger your lives when you can be safe as you are now. Trust me, when the time is right, I'll tell you all you need to know. But for now, Tifa, please don't ask me anything."

"But, Vincent, what..."

"Please, Tifa."

Both stared intently at each other. Tifa gazed searchingly into his ruby-red eyes, hoping perhaps to find answers to all her burning questions. Unfortunately, he had buried his own thoughts and misgivings under an absolutely stoic visage. He would not betray a thing to her.

Defeated at last, Tifa sighed softly, "I..I understand...but, Vincent, just be careful."

He nodded his head in silent agreement.

"Thank you for the coffee," he concluded politely, "I must take a shower now before going to work."

Without further argument, he left the kitchen.

His brain churned a thousand thoughts around his head, all related to Davoren in some way: undoubtedly, Davoren would return someday to claim Aeris for his "Professor". He showed no pity for the girl's fright; no regret for trying to drag her back to her despised tormentor. And Aeris, understandably, regarded Davoren as the cursed devil, and Vincent as her blessed guardian angel. She knew absolutely nothing of either man's past; only that she wanted to feel safe and free from harm, just like she had wished last night in bed.

The thought played on Vincent's mind: if you protected this girl NOW like you should have protected Lucrecia THEN.... maybe you'll be forgiven. Perhaps if you deluded yourself a bit and pretended you fought for Lucrecia instead of Aeris...sure, maybe you'll wash the crime clean from your hands.

But, Vincent, when Aeris ran away in the rain, mad with fear, you followed her without hesitation. You told her bluntly you felt "concern" for her...and that you didn't want to see her end up as "mentally shattered" as you were; you also said you understood her feelings; you wanted to help her. Strange enough, you meant those words....every single one of them. Last night, as she lay by your side remembering the torture she had endured, you embraced her to stop the pain. It hurt, even angered, you to see her suffer like you had long ago.

Were you pretending she was Lucrecia that time as well?

And is that all? Are you sure that is all Aeris is really worth to you? Simply another means of atoning for one sin you have become so desperate to erase? Could you really be such a selfish...monster?

The instant the simple question struck him, Vincent immediately shoved the whole thought away, and occupied his mind elsewhere.

-End of Chp.31

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.32

Aeris found herself helplessly enshrouded in darkness. The eerie silence filled her heart with dreadful fear. She was all alone.

"Wh..where am I..?" she whispered to herself.

She tried to walk forward, but could not move her legs a muscle. Some invisible force, infinitely stronger than her, rooted her feet to the spot. The heavy silence crushed her senses to bits.

"My dear... my precious little darling..," hissed a mocking voice suddenly into her ears, "..look at her..."

Aeris shivered on feeling a fervent breath tickle her neck from behind. It grew more and more hot until she thought it would devour her whole body. Yet surprisingly, Aeris dared not even try to move. She froze in her spot, offering no resistance whatsoever. Her anxious eyes frantically searched the black surroundings in hopes of finding the mysterious speaker: nothing but total darkness. She felt cold, especially in her feet.

"Who..who are you??" she asked when she had mustered up enough courage to speak, "What do you want with me??"

"We must complete the experiment..," whispered the same evil voice, "...where is she?...she can not hide... We must finish.."

"...'experiment'..??"

Silence again. Aeris looked around herself to search for the invisible speaker.

"What do you want with me? What?!!" she cried through the darkness.

"Heh heh heh heh..," the malicious voice chuckled from behind her, "..where is she hiding?... look at her..so perfect...so deliciously perfect..."

Aeris felt a burning hot hand fondle her neck, as if admiring her perfection.

Frightened out of her wits at the loathsome touch, Aeris frantically struggled to escape this mad nightmare. She cried, screamed for help, tried to wrench herself out; but her feet grew more leaden with her futile efforts. The malevolent voice, on the other hand, surrounded her from every direction to block her way. It hissed loudly into her ears until tears streamed down the poor girl's cheeks.

"Leave me alone!! Go away!!!" Aeris shrieked madly, "I know who you are!! I don't want to go back there!! Leave me alone!!!!!"

When she had finished screaming those words, the evil voice faded away into oblivion. The haunting tranquility returned once again. Aeris was alone.

"..leave me alone..Professor..," she whimpered through her tears, "..please...leave me alone.."

No reply.

Aeris gaped tearfully at the empty darkness for a seemingly long time. Slowly, she crouched in her spot, huddled her feet together and stayed perfectly still. Her cold limbs refused to stop trembling. Intense nausea sickened her anguished heart. The ghostly silence only doubled her fear. She felt like a helpless child, lost in a black nightmare without anywhere to run. Her pathetic feebleness irritated her beyond measure, yet at the same time frightened her.

Much to her surprise, Aeris finally noticed a round mirror hanging right in front of her face. Where such an object came from, she could not guess. Moments ago, she saw nothing but utter darkness. The girl stared blankly at the glass, as if it alone would explain the mystery to her.

Strangely, Aeris could not see her reflection in the mirror.

"But..what..does that mean?" she asked herself in a soft undertone. Her anxious eyes remained fixed on the mirror in hopes of obtaining an answer.

"Why isn't there an image on the other side? Why?" cried Aeris in distress, "Why can't I see myself?!"

"You see no image because YOU are on the other side.... *YOU* are the image!" boomed a thunderous voice right behind her.

"..me??..the..the image..??"

Aeris gaped incredulously at the empty mirror. The nausea nearly choked her as she desperately searched for her image. When she found nothing, frustrated tears welled up in her eyes. She seemed to have placed such childish importance on finding her reflection.

"It's you! You are the image! The perfect image!" sneered the loud voice straight into her numb ears.

"..stop it.."

"An image!"

"Stop it!!"

"An image!!!"

She covered both ears as she screamed at the top of her lungs, "STOP IT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

On hearing her own piercing scream, Aeris suddenly shot her eyes wide open. She found herself comfortably snuggled in a very warm bed, half of her face buried in the pillow. Her swollen eyes stung with many hot tears; she had been crying in her sleep. She lay on her side, sheltered under several thick blankets. Her limbs felt quite numb; her breathing fast.

For maybe five whole minutes, Aeris did not even twitch a finger. She wallowed in the peaceful silence, welcoming her scattered senses back. Slowly, she clasped both hands over her breast to soothe her pounding heart. It had all been only a bad dream.

"..I remember that dream..," she whispered inaudibly to herself, "..I had a similar one... when Vincent first brought me here.."

She did not move a muscle as the monotonous tic-tock of the clock fell on her dull ears. A calm darkness dominated the bedroom, accompanied by a most gentle stillness. Aeris scanned the dim room without

lifting her head: the curtains were drawn across the windows. The desk, closet, and all other furniture stood in their proper places, just as she remembered them.

However, the bedroom door had been left ajar. Aeris gazed in silent wonder at the bright light smuggle through the opening, and cast a sharp, irregular shape on the floor. She nestled herself further into the soft bed, reluctant to abandon it just yet, then closed her tired eyes. They stayed shut for a long time.

She thought she felt somebody peek into the bedroom, then quietly slip away. When she finally managed to open her eyes again, Aeris found no one there.

She could not recall whether she had fallen asleep again or not. Aeris forcefully induced herself to sit up in bed. After rubbing her tearful eyes, she hopped out of bed with new vigor. Such long, deep sleep had refreshed her immensely.

She found her cream-coloured shawl still lying on the ground, where Vincent had discarded it last night as he pulled her into bed. Aeris picked it up, then wrapped it around her shoulders. She carelessly tied her disheveled hair into a tight bun, ignoring the stray curls that dangled against her neck. When finished, Aeris slipped her feet into her warm slippers, and left the dark room.

The bright lights of the hallway dazzled her eyes for a moment. Faint sounds of the television in the living room immediately attracted her attention. After some hesitation, Aeris wandered down the corridor but halted at the entrance of the room. She looked inside.

The lights in the living room had been dimmed greatly. The curtains were drawn across the window, thus darkening the room further. Its volume reduced until barely audible, the T.V jabbered away in the far corner. Grey shadows danced on the walls whenever the bright screen flashed. Other than the low gibberish of the T.V, all was silent in the living room.

In the couch right in front of the entrance, Vincent lay slumped back with a folded wet towel plopped on his eyes and forehead. Since the back of this comfy seat faced Aeris, she could only see the back of Vincent's head. He made no movement at all. Aeris hesitated a moment between retreating and entering the dim living room. At last, she decided to venture in.

She tip-toed up to Vincent from behind, then paused at the coffee table, where she could see him in full view. The man rested comfortably in the couch, with both feet carelessly heaped on the table. His head bent sharply backwards so as to keep the towel on his face. His metallic claw lay on his chest while the other hand dangled over the arm of the seat. Aeris studied his tired figure for a long time. He seemed to have fallen asleep.

Her eyes wandered to the coffee table which supported his heavy legs. His black gun lay discarded on the tabletop, along with the apartment keys attached to his wallet. Evidently, he had returned from work not too long ago.

Aeris glanced timidly back at Vincent, who hadn't moved a muscle from his resting spot. She wondered whether she should re-adjust his position to make him more comfortable in the couch. However, the thought of perhaps disturbing his precious sleep strongly discouraged her, more the fear of irritating him with her petty cares. So instead, she chose to let him sleep in peace.

But before the girl could retreat, Vincent's calm voice suddenly asked, "Awake at last, are you?"

Aeris gave a start on hearing the unexpected question, but managed to falter out, "Ah..y..yes. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you, Vincent."

"I wasn't asleep," he stated monotonously.

For a full minute, neither spoke a word. Vincent took absolutely no heed of Aeris as she fidgeted by the coffee table, unsure what to do now that she had been discovered. His head remained thrust back against the couch, and the upper part of his face soaked in the wet towel. He did not lower his feet off the poor table, nor would he remove his claw off his chest.

"Sit down," he invited the timid girl.

She sat obediently by his side on the couch. Aeris drew both her legs together as she tightened the shawl around her shoulders. Vincent only re-adjusted the towel on his forehead, but made no other movements. He seemed to have forgotten Aeris' presence altogether. The muffled T.V continued its senseless jabber, angry that no one paid attention to it.

Aeris felt very awkward in this uncomfortable silence.

"Did you sleep well?" Vincent inquired all of a sudden. He still did not lift the towel from his forehead.

"Eh? Oh..oh yes," Aeris replied nervously as she fingered her shawl, "I slept like a baby all day today."

He made no reply.

"I felt so tired and exhausted, I couldn't even lift my head off the pillow," she continued, glancing cautiously at him, "I guess it's because I hadn't slept that well these past few days. And once I managed to actually fall asleep, all the weariness just piled on me."

"When you spend a full *week* instead of a day nursing the sick without any sleep, it's only natural you'd feel so tired," Vincent remarked meaningfully.

Aeris' cheeks flushed crimson on hearing the honest comment. She turned her head away, silently berating Tifa for revealing the truth to Vincent. Fortunately, he did not peruse the matter any further than that remark.

"You've been at work today, right?" Aeris asked after a short silence.

"Yes."

"I didn't hear you come in."

"You were still asleep."

She nodded to herself with a faint "Oh"; it must have been him whom she felt peek into the bedroom while she slept.

"You should have stayed home for today at least," Aeris reproached gently without looking at him. Her voice softened as she added, "..I don't want you becoming ill again... with that horrible fever tearing at your body and brain.."

"I'm all right, Aeris," he answered curtly.

In saying that gruff assurance, Vincent finally forced himself to sit up in the comfy couch. He lowered both feet, careful not to knock over the objects on the table. He slipped the towel off, wiped the water off his

pale face, then plopped the wet cloth back on his forehead. With a tired sigh, Vincent sunk back and shut his eyes once again.

His hand held the wet towel to his forehead. His metallic claw now stretched itself fully along the back of the couch, well past Aeris' head. The girl tensed slightly on feeling such a sharp, frightening object outstretched just behind her, but made no protest. She looked concernedly at Vincent, whose eyes remained shut.

"I had a coughing fit today," he sighed under his breath, "...and I think I'm having a little relapse now because of it."

His plain words alarmed the poor girl greatly. She immediately edged nearer to help him.

"It's nothing serious," Vincent reassured before she could speak, "...just a slight fever, that's all."

"Do you want me to.. wash your forehead, Vincent?" Aeris suggested as she touched his hot cheek, "Maybe it's better if you lie down for a while and let me..."

"No, it's okay," he interrupted gently without opening his weary eyes, "Just sit here with me."

Aeris paused a long time to study his face. Since he wore no bandanna, his thick black hair tumbled all around his head, some even over his face. He held the wet towel against his hot forehead, letting the cool water trickle down his hot cheeks. Both his eyes were lightly closed.

She also noticed Vincent's chest heave slightly every so often, as if bearing a dull pain snuggled deep within. To be sure, most of the signs of severe illness had disappeared, but Vincent still lacked a certain healthiness in his appearance.

"At least let me make you some herbal tea," Aeris pleaded, "Tifa taught me how to make this special kind of tea, and it's supposed to be really good for you. Do you want me to make us some?"

Vincent glanced askance at her, then nodded his head twice.

"I'll be back in a minute," she smiled in relief. With one quick pat on his knee, Aeris got up, and left the living room.

When she had gone to prepare the special herbal tea, Vincent nestled himself further in his restful spot. On discovering the remote buried under the cushion, he closed the troublesome T.V at once. He held the wet cloth against his feverish forehead without stirring a muscle. From the kitchen, he could hear Aeris humming sweetly to herself as she made the drink.

However, he suddenly noticed an old book dumped on the arm chair next to him. With curious interest, Vincent picked up the book and examined it silently: it was some novel from his personal library. After discarding his wet towel away, Vincent carelessly flicked through the pages, wondering how this book had landed in the arm chair.

"Okay. Here you are," Aeris announced as she entered with two small bowls of tea on a tray.

On placing the tray on the table, Aeris spotted the old book in Vincent's hand. She froze in her spot, overcome by great shame and extreme embarrassment. Without a word, Vincent watched the girl fidget nervously before him.

"I..I'm sorry," she faltered out guiltily, "I've been reading that book without telling you."

He made no answer to her confession.

"Sometimes, I get bored sitting here by myself, so I borrowed one of your books," Aeris explained, casting her eyes downwards, "..it was the only one I could actually understand. All the rest of your books are too... scientific, or just too hard for me. I was going to return it, of course! I accidentally forgot it there because I was too busy taking care of you."

Instead of replying, Vincent carelessly dumped the book on the table and turned his pensive face away from her.

Mistaking his reaction for anger, Aeris apologized with a humble bow, "I'm sorry, Vincent. I should have asked your permission first. I certainly didn't mean to..."

"You can keep the book if you like it," he dismissed casually without even glancing at her, "...and you don't need my permission for anything, Aeris. You've lived here for about a month now. This apartment is your home as much as mine."

Her cheeks blushed at his kind generosity. She murmured a very soft, "Thank you."

When he noticed the nervous girl still lingering before him, Vincent picked up a bowl of tea, then remarked coolly, "If you don't drink your tea, it'll get cold."

"Oh! Y-yes!" Aeris fumbled out at once.

She sat by his side again, and took the other bowl of tea for herself. Vincent watched her gradually overcome her confusion from the corner of his eye, but spoke no more.

"Wait, don't gulp it down at once," Aeris instructed before he could lift the bowl to his lips, "You should sip it nice and slow. And try not to drink the leafy herbs; they give the tea its flavor."

Being inexperienced in the art of drinking such special teas, Vincent dutifully obeyed her advice. He took a quick sip, then waited silently for the result. Aeris fixed her anxious eyes on his face to check his reaction.

"How... how is it?" she asked at last.

"It tastes a bit funny," he described after another sip, "..but it's not too bad."

"Then you like it!" Aeris beamed with delight, "This is the first time I actually make such a tea. I was afraid you wouldn't like it."

Vincent eyed her thoughtfully, but did not reply.

The two sat comfortably on the couch, sipping their hot tea in peaceful silence. Vincent in particular seemed to enjoy this tranquility. After finishing his tea, he placed the bowl in the tray and leaned back against the couch. Soon, his eyes shut tiredly as he sunk into his usual gloomy meditation.

Aeris, on the other hand, gazed intently into her bowl of tea. In truth, her faint reflection in the tea had caught her attention so suddenly, she could not tear her away from the bowl. That dreadful nightmare she

had just escaped crept back to her: she instantly recalled the blank mirror, and the evil voice hissing the word "image" into her ears. A slight shiver tickled her spine.

"You look troubled," Vincent commented suddenly, startling her out of her reverie. He kept his eyes shut.

"Eh?" Aeris faltered, "No...I..I'm just.."

"When I checked on you an hour ago, I heard you crying in your sleep. Were you having...a nightmare?"

After some confused hesitation, Aeris mumbled, "Yes."

"The...Professor'?"

She nodded her head, even though he wasn't looking at her.

Nevertheless, a deep frown darkened Vincent's face at her silent reply. His entire countenance, in fact, grew quite sullen and cold. Aeris tried to resume sipping her tea, but soon abandoned her bowl on the tray. She cast her eyes down at her feet.

"Nightmares..are awfully strange," Aeris remarked quietly, "...especially those that repeat themselves. I mean, you know what's going to happen, and you know how it'll end. but you're still scared when you wake up. You know it's all just a nightmare, but you still go through it as if it were real."

Vincent finally induced his keen, red eyes to look at her. He studied her lovely face from the side while she sighed to herself, oblivious of his scrutiny. He did not interrupt her.

"I've lived here for a month now...far away from the Professor and that hellish laboratory of his. And yet, he still hunts me down in my nightmares...he loves to torture me out of my senses. At times, it seems so real, I wake up thinking he's actually caught me. And it's the same nightmare, Vincent, over and over again until I burst out crying. It's like his way of *promising* me he'll capture me one day."

Vincent said nothing.

"Last night before I fell asleep, I made a wish," Aeris recalled, trying to sound more cheerful, "It's okay. You were so bored and tired, you probably don't even...."

"No, I remember," he retorted calmly, "I listened to you the whole time, Aeris. You told me you wanted to feel absolutely safe, just like you felt at that particular moment."

Aeris bashfully nodded her head (she hadn't quite expected him to have been such an attentive listener last night). She finally continued in a low but scornful tone, "..yes. That wish...it was such a silly thing to say, because I then told you that wherever I hide, whether I'm asleep or wide awake, I will always feel the Professor around me. I'll always know he'll try to grab me from behind... and drag me back. I just wanted that wish to be true so badly...that's why I said it. But it's still just a stupid wish."

"I don't think it's 'stupid' at all."

She blinked in surprise at his calm, gentle tone, then looked timidly to her side where he sat. In return, Vincent gazed thoughtfully into her green eyes, his aloof expression having softened at his own remark.

"I used to wish for the same thing every night," he whispered, bringing his face closer to hers, "..wishes could be impossible to achieve, Aeris, but that doesn't mean that they're 'stupid' or 'silly'."

Aeris looked in silence back at his face. Neither spoke a word.

At last with some effort, Vincent slowly forced himself to stand up. As he wandered over to the window, he pulled out his red bandanna from his side pocket, and wrapped it around his head several times. When he had finished, he peered gloomily through the window pane. His back faced Aeris.

The girl sat perfectly still in her spot, studying Vincent's tall figure without a word.

"Aeris?" Vincent called coolly.

"Yes?"

"I want to go out for a walk. Would you like to come along?"

Much taken aback by this sudden invitation, Aeris checked the clock on the wall, then sprang up.

"Now?! B-but, Vincent, it's nearly ten o'clock!" she protested nervously, "Most of the shops are closed, and there's hardly anyone outside at this late hour."

On turning to face her, Vincent looked straight into her eyes as he calmly said, "I know. That's why I want to go out now."

Aeris stared back at his face for a minute, then deliberately answered, "...all right. just give me a moment to change my clothes."

-End of Chp.32

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.33

Though night had seized the sky long ago, Midgar, proud as always, would not completely submit to darkness just yet. The stubborn city clung to whatever little life still throbbed in its corners at so late an hour.

The grim office buildings towered high above, lighting up Midgar in dazzling brilliance. An occasional car zoomed down the streets towards home. Lonely passersby scurried across the pavement, carrying things from grocery bags to brief cases. Most shops had locked their doors a long while ago, but kept the neon signs lighted outside to attract some attention. The bars and nightclubs, on the other hand, rejoiced in this darkness. Often when passing such places, rowdy cheers or lively music could be heard flowing through the closed doors. Indeed, life in Midgar fought to stay vibrant as long as possible.

Aeris and her gloomy companion Vincent strolled along the deserted boulevard, neither speaking a word to the other. Their loud footsteps re-echoed across the pavement as they journeyed down the black road and turned into a narrow side-street. Grey slush, once beautiful white snow, lay heaped on both sides of this abandoned street. Tall, sooty tenement houses had squeezed themselves along the dismal alley, each with shutters closed and doors double locked. An eerie silence clung to the cold, still air.

Aeris tightened her scarf around her neck, then edged closer to Vincent. In truth, she felt great mistrust, even a strange dread, as they strolled through this bleak alleyway.

The two companions finally emerged into the main square of the sector. Black shops and empty, closed cafes completely surrounded this place, while a broad cobblestone pathway cut straight through it. It was unnaturally dark. Yet despite the blackness, the tall lamp posts outlining the stony path fought fiercely for their own territory. Their brilliant light fell sharply against the black cobblestone road below.

The whole square was a dark land, lighted only by circles of bright light, which extended like an endless road to oblivion.

Aeris marched silently by the man's side, glancing around uncomfortably at the black surroundings and shapeless shadows. At times, she nearly begged Vincent to change their path, but checked herself before she could open her mouth. The haunting calmness of the empty square certainly discouraged any disruption, more so the pensive silence of her gloomy friend. So, she suppressed her own fears, and bore them quietly.

Vincent, on the other hand, seemed to find these ghostly surroundings quite normal, if not pleasing to his senses. He walked beside Aeris, with his hand thrust deep into the pocket of his long, black coat. His sharp metallic claw hung idly by his side, glinting whenever a lamp post passed overhead.

He wore a woolly muffler over his mouth and nose, so that his gentle breaths appeared as a white smoke dancing through his thick scarf. His whole appearance showed deep moroseness. Whenever Aeris chanced to glance up at him, she found his bright, red eyes engrossed in dreary contemplation.

The two walked on for a long time, following the endless path through the dark, lonely square. Aeris stole a timid glance at her cheerless friend, then instantly darted her eyes away; she assumed Vincent preferred this heavy silence to any kind of conversation. Indeed, the morose man never looked at her, not even a quick glance to reassure himself of her presence. Nor had he spoken another word after inviting the girl to join his night stroll. His mind had lost itself in a winding labyrinth of gloomy preoccupations. In fact, Aeris believed Vincent had simply forgotten her.

Much to Aeris' surprise, Vincent suddenly halted under a bright lamp post and turned slightly around to look at her. He stood in his place, letting his keen, piercing eyes search Aeris' confused face for some

particular indication. Alarmed by his odd behavior but too nervous to speak, the girl gazed back at him with scarcely any movement. She did not understand the meaning of his look, or his strange silence.

When another minute had passed without either speaking a word, Vincent gently pulled down the woolly scarf from over his mouth. His keen eyes remained riveted on the girl.

"This is the spot," he remarked coolly at long last, "this is where you crashed into me, the first day I met you. It was right here."

Aeris stared at him in disbelief, as if she hadn't understood his words. Her eyes, quite eager to recognize the place, darted all around the desolate square.

Yet how greatly this dark, quiet place differed from the one in her muddled memory. To her mind, confusion, chaos, and unbelievable fear marred that horrible night she came crashing into Vincent.

She glanced around herself one last time, but the shapeless shadows and grim surroundings did not look familiar. They did not match the blurry colours and wild voices in her memory.

"I'm sorry, I..I really can't remember that night very clearly," Aeris apologized meekly, peeking up at Vincent with her head bowed, "..I remember running... then all of a sudden, I'm sitting on the ground with someone crouching in front of me..it must have been you, only I couldn't hear your voice, because I was so scared."

Vincent said nothing. They both stood still in their place under the lamp post, one struggling with turbulent memories, the other listening in silence.

She gave a slight shiver as she continued softly, "..I remember you muffled my mouth with your claw..it felt so hard and cold against my skin. And... I kind of remember how you killed those men...but.."

Wrestling some painful emotion, Aeris placed one hand over her heart and cast her eyes downwards. A very sad expression spread across her beautiful face. Her green eyes, in particular, shone with a deep, melancholy glow. Though unable to see him, Aeris could sense Vincent's crimson eyes fixed straight on her, contemplating something only he knew of.

"..but I still can't remember knowing you or anyone else from before," Aeris sighed regretfully, "..you were a perfect stranger to me, even though you told me you somehow knew me. But I still can't remember, Vincent. when you called me 'Aeris' the first night we met, that name didn't sound familiar at all."

She hesitated a moment, thinking perhaps Vincent might comment or ask a question. However, the gloomy man contented himself by watching her in thoughtful silence.

"..and I literally can't remember a thing of my past either," Aeris muttered under her breath, almost as though she didn't want Vincent to hear her. She fidgeted uneasily in her spot, turning slightly away to avoid his scrutiny, then faltered out in a whisper, "It seems to me, I've always lived in the laboratory...with the Professor hanging over me."

A very awkward pause followed the instant Aeris finished her sentence. She could think of nothing more to add, nor did Vincent appear inclined to reply. The still air around them grew heavier in face of such stiff silence.

Aeris dared not lift her head for fear of meeting Vincent's red eyes riveted on her. A strange shame overcame her because of her pitiful inability to recall anything save the brutal tortures of the "laboratory".

She dropped her clasped hand to her side, awaiting some external reaction from her dispassionate companion.

However, Vincent merely turned away and resumed his walk down the lighted cobblestone path, more briskly than before. He did not speak or even glance behind him.

Aeris blinked in amazement at his silent abruptness, then immediately scurried after him.

After clearing the empty square at last, they emerged into a completely deserted street. Vincent silently trotted straight across the black road, then dodged around a dark corner, followed close behind by Aeris. For some reason, his pace quickened as they entered a maze of dismal alleyways and dirty back streets. Vincent marched on, heedless of whichever path his feet chose to peruse.

Heavy contemplation, mostly scraps of vague thoughts, weighed him down. His whole face had gradually darkened with a deeply pensive expression. His keen eyes remained fixed on the passing pavement beneath him, completely engrossed in private meditation.

Yet if someone had asked him at that moment what occupied his mind...what absorbed his attention so intently, Vincent would have undoubtedly fumbled out a soft "I don't know". For in truth, he himself hardly understood the meaning of all the busy thoughts churning around his brain.

Vincent halted on hearing someone panting softly a short distance behind him. He turned around as Aeris, with one hand over her bosom, trudged up to him. She stopped right in front of the silent man, then bent over so that her hands pushed against her knees. Her chest and back heaved with breathless gasps. Her cheeks were flushed pink.

"...I'm glad you finally slowed down," Aeris wheezed out when she found her voice at last, "...I could barely...keep up with you..the way you were rushing on.."

Indeed, so absorbed in his own thoughts, Vincent had simply forgotten Aeris behind. He hadn't even noticed how fast his pace had grown during his gloomy contemplation. Aeris had to run most of the time just to keep up with him.

"Can I...can I please sit down for just a minute?" Aeris begged through her gasps. She looked beseechingly up at Vincent.

Most ashamed of his unchivalrous conduct, Vincent immediately nodded his head in consent.

They soon discovered a low, stony wall hidden near some dead bushes. After sweeping off the snow, Aeris collapsed onto the grey parapet. She leaned backwards, supporting herself with both arms outstretched behind her. Her weary feet dangled numbly above the pavement. She shut her eyes in exhaustion as a tired sigh escaped her. They had been walking for a long time; nearly an hour and a half.

Vincent lingered a few steps away from her, with his hand shoved deep into his pocket. He eyed the worn-out girl indifferently, then turned his sight elsewhere.

Neither spoke a word.

When her breath had steadied once more, Aeris scanned the unfamiliar street before her. Incredibly long, this winding road extended from one far end to the next. The tall, ornate lamp posts along the path flickered a yellowish light across the pavement. Dark boutiques, with neon signs still brightly illuminant, and locked offices crowded this street. Scarcely a sound dared stir the calmness of the cold air. Silence lay unchallenged in this quiet place.

They had, in fact, wandered very far from the heart of the sector. Vincent had brought them to the lonely outskirts of Midgar, unintentionally in all likelihood.

For a long time, Aeris remained silently seated on the low wall. She glanced timidly over at Vincent, who stood with his back turned to her, then she stared down at her two dangling feet.

"If I ask you a question, Vincent, will you...please answer me honestly?" Aeris forced out in a low, hesitant tone.

Though her anxious eyes remained fixed on the ground, Aeris knew Vincent had turned his head towards her.

He thought a moment before replying monotonously, "Yes."

"What did you think of me?... I mean, when you knew me from before?"

On hearing the blunt question put so simply before him, Vincent turned his head away from the girl. He sunk into a long, grudging silence.

In her anticipation of an answer, Aeris began twiddling her thumbs in her lap. Her eyes remained bashfully cast downwards. Already, she half-regretted bothering him with such an awkward, ridiculous question.

"I had no real opinion of you," Vincent replied coolly at long last. He kept his back to her as he continued, his voice devoid of any emotion, "...I knew a bit about you, but I had absolutely no personal involvement with you. Tifa was much closer to you. She cried a great deal over you when you were stabbed."

Once Aeris had managed to look up at him, she could not tear her eyes away. She quietly hopped off the stony wall, but made no motion towards him.

Vincent paused a moment before adding with peculiar softness, "..and Cloud...he was also very close to you...probably the closest out of everyone. You two spent a lot of your time together, and he always tried his best to protect you. When you were stabbed, he was mad with rage, but the tears were streaming down his cheeks at the same time."

She did not interrupt him.

"But it wouldn't be fair of me to express any opinion about you, Aeris. I hardly knew you, and you never came near me. Our acquaintance never exceeded a polite exchange of names."

The girl hesitated a long time, her eyes still riveted on him. Vincent's back remained turned to her.

"...what about you?" Aeris asked him gently, "When I was stabbed... and everyone thought I had died...what did *you* do?"

Vincent plunged into another deep, thoughtful silence.

Aeris stood in her spot, facing this gloomy man's back without a word. Although the question had blurted out of her mouth by accident, she stared intently at him in wait of the answer.

"I didn't do anything," Vincent stated dispassionately, turning his head around all of a sudden, "When you were stabbed, I looked down at you once, then walked away. I never looked back again."

Aeris gazed at his cold, stoic face. Somehow, she wasn't too surprised with the blunt reply.

However, his callous answer had invited a very awkward silence to sprout between them. Vincent stood tall and erect before Aeris, his crimson eyes shining brightly at her in perfect coolness. Yet at the same time, those eyes gleamed with a peculiar glow Aeris found quite puzzling. An entirely different matter, far more important, seemed to weigh down on his mind.

But if any burdensome thoughts troubled Vincent, he refused to share even a glimpse of them with anyone save himself. He immediately tore his eyes away from the girl.

"Let's go," he mumbled as he resumed his path down the deserted street. He did not even glance behind him.

Great concern swelled her heart as Aeris watched Vincent move away. She quickly dashed after him, then on reaching his side, steadied her pace to match his. They walked on as silently as before.

No one spoke a word. They strolled all the way down the winding street, and passed the stone bridge which arched high above the rusty train tracks below. Engrossed once again in glum meditation, Vincent walked absent-mindedly along the path. Aeris marched silently by his side, yet avoided looking up at him for fear of annoying him.

The two companions walked a long time through the dark, cold streets. They passed houses enshrouded in darkness, their inhabitants blissfully sound asleep. They marched through the unfamiliar, bleak alleyways hidden in shadows. A bitter coldness hung about the still air.

While Aeris wondered where their long-winded path would eventually end, Vincent walked these black roads with perfect indifference. Perhaps he had already walked these streets before; or maybe, being so absorbed in his private thoughts, he cared not which way he followed. Either case, he plodded on with scarcely lifting his pensive eyes up to note his path.

"Vincent, what's that?" Aeris asked suddenly. She touched his arm lightly to make him stop.

They found themselves standing before the grand entrance of some dark, frozen park. A high stone wall languidly stretched itself from one end of the street to the next. Hard, barren tree branches reached out over this stony structure, as if beseeching any kind passerby to free them of this wretched prison. Pink glass lanterns had been fitted into the grey wall, thus lighting this lonely street against the cold night. White snow lay everywhere: it burdened the stiff branches of the trees, and piled up against the stony wall, sometimes reaching half-way up.

The "park" inside this high wall had enshrouded itself in darkness and grim shadows. The calmness outside its heavy stone walls could not match the deathly silence within.

Aeris, still holding onto Vincent's arm, beheld this mysterious place with an ominous feeling of apprehension. Vincent stood calmly by her side without a word. A profoundly thoughtful expression had darkened his face, adding a touch of sadness to his already gloomy appearance.

"...these are the 'Snow Fields'," Vincent replied unemotionally at last. He peered down at the girl beside him.

"...'Snow...Fields'..??" Aeris re-echoed softly, staring back at him in confusion.

Vincent nodded his head once before suddenly taking the girl's hand in his. He immediately led her straight through the huge entrance, and down the winding pathway. Aeris, scarcely realizing what this man was doing, followed him without a word of protest.

They had entered the "park".

-End of Chp.33

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.34

When the heart aches in painful misery, yet has no soul to comfort it...what happens then?

Whether a warm light shining within the heart, or simply an aura bound to the flesh, the human soul bears an amazing web of complexity. It unfolds into an endless labyrinth of different emotions, hidden thoughts, and dark secrets.

Yet surprisingly, the human soul also possesses an almost childlike simplicity to its nature. At its inner most core lies the profoundest of truths, so obvious yet somehow overlooked. At its centre hides the heart's simplest but most powerful emotions.

The human soul is so confoundingly mysterious, yet at the same time so artlessly plain.

This uncanny paradox is probably why the heart often draws near the soul in times of trouble. In its aching need for solace during pain, the heart often searches the soul for guidance, just like a compass.

But what happens to those who, whether on purpose or by sheer accident, simply have no souls in their hearts?

When there is no soul to seek comfort in during suffering.. what then? When the heart is torn to shreds by grief and pain, yet finds no solace or succour...what then?

Do such soulless creatures hide away from the world outside, preferring the lonely, gloomy one inside? Do they pine away in a corner all alone, tormented by despair?

Or do they simply roam the wasteland of wretched misery inside their own empty, frozen hearts?

Perhaps that is why they call themselves "monsters".

Vincent led Aeris by the hand down a long-winded gravel path. He walked quickly and silently, scarcely paying attention to anything save the black road ahead. Aeris, being held in his gentle but firm grip, followed him without a word. Something in the air of this cold, dark park discouraged any disturbance, even a simple question like "where are we going?".

Therefore, the timid girl contented herself with the silence.

The stony pathway snaked through this forest-like park, very often forking into other smaller roads. Pea-green lamp posts outlined one side of the path; they cast a feeble, yellow light against the hard ground.

Tall, lifeless trees, some twisted with old age, thronged along the gravel road to welcome the new visitors. Leafless and quite brittle, their branches hungrily reached out in all directions. Some stretched up to the black sky; others entwined with each other to form an arbor. This magnificent canopy of dead branches, frozen twigs, and hard vines arched high above the gravel pathway below.

In its greedy quest for land, the white snow had smothered the whole park underneath save, of course, for the stony path. A biting chilliness clung to the still air. The peaceful calmness that lingered about this dark place nearly resembled that of a haunted graveyard.

The two walked a long time through this quiet forest-park, neither speaking a word to the other. Eventually during the journey, Vincent slowed his pace down to an easy stroll. He never glanced back at the girl, even though he still held her hand. Nor did he seem fully aware or even caring of the path he followed. In truth, his mind had returned to the same vague, gloomy thoughts which had been pestering him all night.

When she had marveled enough at the eerie surroundings, Aeris peeked cautiously at Vincent. His face from the side struck her as extremely melancholy, if not mournfully absorbed in dreary contemplation. However, on perceiving his glum mood, Aeris thought it best to remain quiet.

They wandered for a considerable time along different pathways until Vincent, for some reason, took an obscure sidetrack down the hill. This black road cut straight through an impressive thicket of trees. No lamp post lighted this hidden road; it was extremely dark.

Nevertheless, Vincent marched through the darkness with a surprisingly calm and confident step. He tightened his grip on the girl's hand, but never once looked at her.

Suddenly, the throng of trees along one side of this endless, beaten track ended, and the two lonely companions emerged into the open again. Vincent at last released Aeris' hand, then stopped exactly one step away from her. His back was turned to her.

"Look," he ordered curtly with a careless gesture.

Puzzled by his odd manner, Aeris obeyed the command. Her eyes turned to the far side of the path, where he had motioned.

Much to her silent wonder, Aeris found herself standing before a barren, open field of snow. This lonely field hugged one end of the arborous hillside, then lazily spread itself far beyond the horizon. Not a single tree or brave shrub disturbed the rolling landscape. Far from it, this pitiful field had fallen victim to emptiness and sad despair.

Yet despite its lonesome desolation, the field also bore a strange, almost unnatural, beauty about it. It stretched for endless miles into the far, far distance, inducing a feeling of fearful awe to the barren vastness. A thick blanket of impeccable snow smothered the entire field end to end, thereby depriving any life a chance of survival.

The snow's saintly whiteness contrasted sharply with the blackness of the night. So much so that the snowy, winter-ridden field below shone in dazzling beauty against the dark sky high above.

A peaceful tranquility, quite pleasing to the senses, loomed about this wonderful place. Sadly, death and lonely emptiness also haunted the cold field. Not a life thrived in its vast quarters; not a sound stirred its heavy silence.

To be sure, it was a marvelous wasteland, but nevertheless, a wasteland.

Aeris certainly did not even try to conceal her wonderment. Her bright green eyes lingered on the snow-laden field, dazzled by its striking purity.

"This public garden was built about a year ago," Vincent recounted softly, eying the snowy wasteland with mild curiosity, "But by the time they had actually finished construction and planting, it was already winter."

Aeris looked at him but did not interrupt.

"The snow fell very hard that year, and completely covered these fields for the whole season. So, they nicknamed this place 'the Snow Fields'."

When he had thus concluded, Vincent relapsed into his strange moody silence. His back remained coldly turned to the girl, but his keen eyes had fixed themselves on the white wasteland. He spoke no more.

As if obeying some beckoning call, Aeris suddenly stepped off the stony gravel pathway, and wandered into the open snow fields up ahead. She trudged through the heavy snow, watching in almost childish fascination her boots leave a deep trail of footprints behind. Aeris had drifted only a short distance when she halted at last. She stood perfectly still in her spot, completely surrounded by wintry wilderness.

A deep sense of peace gradually overcame her heart.

From his spot over at the gravel pathway, Vincent studied Aeris' lonely figure against the pure-white landscape. The girl stood by herself, unaware of his thoughtful scrutiny. Her shining eyes lingered on the vast, white wasteland before her.

She heard Vincent slowly plod through the heavy snow towards her, but did not turn around to face him. Vincent halted a few steps behind her; he did not speak.

"The snow here is so white," Aeris admired at last.

"That's because it's far away from the smoke and soot of the city centre," Vincent replied casually.

The girl paused a long time before slowly sitting down in the snow. Regardless of wetness or coldness, Aeris huddled both feet together, and drew her knees up to her chest. Her arms encircled her slender legs as she studied the frozen landscape ahead.

Vincent glanced indifferently at the girl thus seated in the snow, then looked away.

"It's beautiful here...and very quiet," Aeris whispered, more to herself than to anyone else.

The morose man did not reply.

"How does this place look like in the springtime?"

"All sorts of flowers bloom here."

"Really?!" she exclaimed in surprise, looking up at him.

Vincent nodded his head as an answer.

"I'd love to see it."

Aeris turned her head away to gaze at the barren landscape, trying her best to picture the flowers in springtime. Vincent still lingered some steps behind her. He glanced down at the girl for a moment, then looked away again, this time to the far side of this endless field.

"But personally, I prefer the snow," Vincent forced out.

"Why?"

"I don't know. I've always liked the snow better."

On hearing his strange, soft tone, Aeris turned her head around, and peered from over her shoulder up at this man. Vincent, however, avoided her look. His bright, deep crimson eyes remained stubbornly fixed on the snow-ridden fields.

His tall, lonesome figure struck Aeris as unnaturally aloof and detached. Even the way he stood, with his sharp metallic claw hanging by his side, showed how withdrawn his nature truly was. Vincent's face betrayed a sad yet profound thoughtfulness. Some heavy matter seemed to weigh down on his mind.

Aeris turned her focus back to the wasted wilderness.

"Y'know, Vincent," she remarked meaningfully, "..these snow fields are very much like yourself.."

A very, very long silence followed.

Although she did not look behind, Aeris knew the unexpected comment had surprised Vincent greatly. She could even sense his thoughtful eyes lingering on her back.

At long last, Vincent walked up to the girl, and sat down in the snow right by her side. He did not seem to mind this wet, cold spot. His whole face darkened in gloomy meditation as the heavy silence stretched itself further and further.

"Aeris, I want to tell you something," Vincent finally declared, rather reluctantly.

The girl looked at him without a word; His strange tone certainly commanded absolute silence. But Vincent still would not look at her. His eyes remained rigidly focused on the far distance.

He took a deep breath before beginning softly, "There are many...'bad' things I've done in my past. Many things you'll never know about. Some of them you'd think evil, cruel, even inhuman....and you'd be absolutely right for thinking so too."

He gazed down at both his gloved hand and metallic claw. He seemed, while speaking so gently, to detect something only visible to his own eyes.

"See, my hands bloody with so many crimes and sins...no amount of cleaning can wash the stain out."

He slowly lifted his hallow eyes straight up to the black, starry sky high above. Millions of tiny stars had scattered themselves across the heavens, sparkling like diamonds against black silk. The bright moon, round as a perfect pearl, hung in the middle of the sky. It showered the barren snow fields below with its gentle moonlight.

Vincent brooded a long time up at these wondrous works of heaven. He had plunged into another long, deep silence. Aeris gazed keenly at his face from the side, but did not disturb his meditation. A strange anxiety troubled her as she sensed him sink deeper into sadness.

"On the very first day I became delirious, I remember I attacked you," Vincent recalled suddenly but with strange calmness, "..yes..I remember I pinned you to the ground."

"N-no, Vincent,' the girl faltered in alarm, "That wasn't your..."

"I felt so angry at you, Aeris, because you wouldn't call me a monster. In my whole life, I don't think I've ever been angrier than at that one moment. I just wanted to hear you say 'Vincent, you are a monster'."

Aeris looked concernedly at him, yet made no reply. Vincent did not return her anxious look. He sat perfectly still by her side, intently absorbed into the brilliant canopy of stars hanging above him.

"I was so angry at you because you wouldn't see the truth," he whispered, a tone of bitter resentment playing on his voice, "It angered me so much that you thought me some kind of holy saint, even though you knew nothing...absolutely nothing about my past.. maybe..maybe it still angers me."

He dropped his weary eyes from the black sky down to the snowy white fields below. He paid no heed to the silent Aeris, who gazed at the side of his face in great worry. Slowly, Vincent shut his eyes.

His mind raced past so many memories so quickly, he could scarcely grasp their meaning.

"But while I was raving with that fever, Aeris, I was having this horrible nightmare," Vincent muttered, his eyes still closed, "...I was literally re-living my past...I was like an actor performing a play..."

His mind hopped madly from one memory to another: President ShinRa's bloated face...Gerald and Cindy, the other two Turks... the quaint Nibelheim village...

"..and when I remember that nightmare...I wasn't a holy saint or an angel, Aeris.."

His mind, completely out of control, flashed past Professor Hojo's lean face, with those shiny glasses propped on his long nose....he saw Davoren's face smile affably back at him, like he always used to.....

"..In that nightmare..I was a monster...a demon.."

He zoomed past so many memories at once, hardly making sense of them, until suddenly he froze on Lucrecia's beloved face. In his mind, he could see her soft eyes stare straight at him in silent, reproachful sadness, just as she had looked before her sad death....

Vincent forced his eyes open to escape the painful reverie. He stared solemnly at the barren wasteland before him. For a long time, he wallowed in the silence. Though fully aware of the girl's presence next to him, as well as her concerned eyes fixed on his face, he did not even glance at her.

"I'm not blaming you for thinking of me like that, Aeris," he murmured softly, "You weren't there...in my nightmares..you didn't see me for what I really was. If you did...you wouldn't think me such a wonderful person, and you wouldn't think Davoren such an evil man.."

"That's not true, Vincent!" Aeris cried indignantly, appalled by such a thought, "He IS an evil man! Why, he..."

"No, Davoren was a very, very good man...he was much better than I will ever be...."

Aeris stared in disbelief at such praise.

"We were both Turks, that's true. But Aeris, Davoren was also a kind human being, and I was..well..a monster. Davoren... he somehow kept a soul alive inside of him, even amidst all the crimes and bloodshed. Me..I just never had a soul to begin with. I was just a bloody killing-machine that blindly obeyed orders."

For the first time, Vincent looked straight into Aeris' eyes. The girl stared back at him with concern, but also with another emotion he could not quite place.

"I don't want you to think I'm like these snow fields...all pure and innocent, just like their whiteness," he sighed in conclusion, "I'm not the wonderful saint you dreamed up in your fantasies. In reality, I'm the total opposite. That's the simple truth."

He turned his face away from her, and fell into thoughtful silence once again. Irritation seemed to trouble his mind; he knit his brows as he sunk into his usual gloomy moroseness.

"But that's not what I meant when I said you were like these snow fields, Vincent," Aeris corrected gently after a long hesitation, "I didn't mean you were 'pure' or 'innocent' at all."

Baffled by her mysterious words, Vincent stared at her from the corner of his eye. The girl returned his quizzical look with an enigmatic smile, then turned to the desolate wasteland. A very serious yet sad expression spread across her face as she stared into the far distance.

"When you look at these huge fields, Vincent, you see them buried under frost, ice, and so much snow," Aeris spoke at last in a soft undertone, "..the fields are so cold, and so empty. Everything is frozen dead, you'd think nothing can ever grow there."

Vincent did not answer.

"But you said in the springtime, the flowers bloom here. So, something was able to grow in these fields after all. There was life hidden underneath, only you didn't see it."

She paused a moment to reflect upon her thoughts, but never once diverted her eyes off the snowy, wasted fields.

"I don't know exactly what 'bad' things you've done in your past. They probably were evil and inhuman. I don't know what you did to Lucrecia..the..woman you love; you're still in pain over her, and maybe you should be. You say you never had a soul to begin with...and that you were a killing-machine... maybe you're right. I have no way of knowing for sure. I wasn't with you in that nightmare..."

Aeris suddenly looked again at the silent Vincent. Her bright green eyes shone with loving kindness as a gentle smile lit up her face.

"But I still don't believe you when you tell me you're a monster, Vincent. When you look inside yourself, you see all these snow fields: your heart's frozen dead, and there's no warm place for anything to grow among all the ice and cold. But see, that's where you're wrong and I'm right. Somewhere underneath all that snow, there's something new that wasn't there before...or maybe it was there all along, only you simply didn't know you had it. That's why you're not a monster in my eyes."

He said nothing.

"You think because I'm a child compared to you, I wouldn't know that much," Aeris added in a hushed whisper, bringing her face very close to his, "..you've been through many, many things in your own life, while I've lived whatever I remember of mine trapped in a dingy laboratory. So, in a way, you're right about that; you *do* know a lot more than me. But I know some things too, Vincent....and I know what's beneath the snow fields."

A heavy silence followed.

Vincent narrowed his eyes thoughtfully on the girl, his whole countenance expressing nothing but cool reservedness. In contrast, Aeris' lovely face beamed with gentler kindness the longer she gazed into his deep-crimson eyes. An almost prophetic air seemed to surround her.

When perhaps a minute had passed, Vincent finally stood up. He flapped the snow off his long, black coat, then turned his eyes down on the girl.

"It's getting late," he remarked without emotion, "We should be getting back home now."

He extended his hand out to Aeris, who readily accepted it. After pulling herself up, she carefully wiped the snow off her bottom and legs.

Soon, they were walking up the stony gravel pathway once again.

-End of Chp.34

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.35

Time had long passed midnight, instilling an even deadlier silence into the chilly air. At such a late hour, where endless darkness and grim shadows ran amuck, night had spread its vast wings clear across the sky.

In return, the frozen, deserted park down below had grown more still and ghostly than before. For any passerby looking up, the barren tree branches extended like thin, black arms overhead. Many pathways and corners disappeared into obscurity. Indeed, the meek, winter-ridden garden had humbly succumbed to the night's terrible decree.

The two companions slowly strolled up the gravel pathway in absolute silence. Their lonely footsteps re-echoed loudly in the still air, adding a feeling of haunted desolation to the place. Vincent led the way through several narrow side roads and dark arbors, followed close behind by Aeris. Often times, he chose pathways which extended through an eerie forest of dark, shapeless shadows; he hardly perused the broad, lighted ones. Perhaps he simply felt more comfortable in the dark.

The air stung with such bitter coldness, Vincent had muffled his mouth again under his woolly scarf. His keen eyes gleamed brightly in the dark, as if engrossed in deep, profound contemplation. Both arms had been stiffly folded across his chest to bar out the chilly air.

Yet in spite of the cold, the bleak darkness, and ghostly silence, Vincent seemed to find such a morbid atmosphere quite pleasing to his gloomy thoughts. He strolled with a steady, easy step through the deserted forest-park, heedless of the strange shadows that surrounded him from every direction. He never looked at the girl behind him, not even a quick glance to check on her; nor had he spoken another word since leaving the "Snow Fields". He was completely aloof.

Aeris quietly followed the man, her eyes timidly lowered down to the ground. She made no objections to any grim path Vincent picked (although she would have much preferred the brighter ones). Nor would she dream of even speaking for fear of disturbing his train of thought. In truth, his mood had grown so morose, Aeris preferred to be silent rather than arouse his annoyance with talk.

They walked thus for a long time through the park, passing so many leafless trees and following endless stone paths. The winding road extended into the black distance, often times merging into other side paths.

Though Vincent walked at a reasonably slow pace, Aeris found it increasingly difficult to keep up with him. Her feet ached miserably; her legs felt slightly sluggish. Vincent marched silently on, while poor Aeris lagged a step or two behind, occasionally rubbing her temples in exhaustion. Indeed, such a long stroll, across virtually the entire sector, had drained the girl.

"Are you feeling sleepy?" Vincent asked all of a sudden, stopping in his spot. He turned his head around to look at the startled girl.

"Eh?! Oh no," Aeris faltered confusedly, halting right behind him, "...I..I'm just a bit..tired, that's all."

She fidgeted in her spot, very uncomfortable with his thoughtful eyes lingering on her face. Vincent turned fully around to face the girl.

"If you're too tired to walk anymore, Aeris, I don't mind carrying you," he suggested softly.

"Of course not, Vincent!" she immediately refused, a light blush colouring her cheeks, "I'm fine...r-really!"

Though Aeris smiled to disperse his worries, Vincent still gazed thoughtfully down at her. He had easily detected the heavy fatigue playing on her voice, as well as a tired nervousness in the way she fumbled before him.

In his own mind, Vincent sorely berated himself for extending his night stroll to such a late hour, knowing the girl would eventually tire; more so for neglecting her while engrossing himself in private contemplation.

Without a word, Vincent extended his metallic arm out for Aeris to take, keeping his eyes fixed on her lovely face. In her surprise at the gesture, Aeris stared at the shiny, sharp object, then up at his expressionless face. After some hesitation, she slowly slipped her arms around his metal arm.

They soon resumed their path up the stony road, passing through a dark forest of stout, snow-laden trees and barren shrubberies. Out of kind consideration for the tired girl, Vincent purposely walked with an even slower pace to make sure she never lagged behind again.

Aeris walked very closely by his side, feeling nervously apprehensive of his cold, metallic arm snuggled between her two slender arms. Yet at the same time, she eyed it with cautious curiosity; she had never willingly touched his claw before.

"Y'know, I remember how much your claw used to frighten me," Aeris remarked softly. She tapped the claw once, then added under her breath, "..sometimes, it still does."

Vincent marched on without a reply.

"That night we first met, you muffled my mouth with it, and ever since, I get so nervous just looking at it, let alone touching it," Aeris smiled weakly to herself, "..it's so sharp..and feels so hard and cold.."

"It was quite heavy at first too," Vincent interjected coolly without looking at her, "and very awkward for me to handle. I couldn't move my arm at all, not even a finger, because I had no idea how...or maybe, I was simply too scared to try."

Aeris hesitantly peeked up at him, then lowered her eyes again.

"But eventually, I got used to it," he concluded simply, "I just pretended it was a normal arm, not a claw."

"Still..," the tender girl whispered compassionately, "..it must have been painful all the same."

With that kind comfort, Aeris gently tightened her grip around his hard arm, even though she knew he could not feel the touch.

Suddenly, Vincent froze still in his spot.

Puzzled by his abrupt behavior, Aeris stared up at him without releasing his metallic arm. Vincent, however, seemed to have utterly forgotten her presence. His keen, ruby-red eyes glared suspiciously at the road up ahead. His ears, pricked up in suspicious alertness, listened attentively to the air. He did not speak a word.

Aeris looked in the same direction which had so completely absorbed his attention: nothing. The trees were perfectly still; the air cold and quiet; the pathway empty. She let go of his arm.

"What's the matter?" she asked in fearful concern.

He made no reply, except narrow his bright eyes on the road. He seemed to see something...or someone only visible to him.

"V..Vincent?" she faltered out nervously, "What's wrong with.."

"Sh!" he ordered firmly, yanking her whole body closer to himself. His senses grew sharper by the second.

He had distinctly heard footsteps...many footsteps.

Much to Aeris' astonishment, Vincent quickly encircled her waist with his metallic arm, then immediately dashed for a dark thicket of trees on the side of the road. He easily hopped across the snow, landing safely behind some frozen hedges. With the girl securely tucked under his armpit and her mouth muffled, Vincent stooped cautiously as he crept his way along the bushes. He headed straight up to a large, stout tree.

This knotted tree, its bark roots gripped firmly into the snowy ground, stood with other such venerable trees in complete darkness. Its clumsy branches stretched out in all directions, intertwining around other branches so convolutedly, even the bright moonlight could not penetrate through. Pitch black shadows infested this thicket of trees. Absolute darkness ruled supreme.

No sooner had Vincent reached the stout tree, than he huddled against its rough bark. He instantly embraced the confused Aeris all to himself, pressing his metallic claw against her back to secure her body.

The darkness obscured the two completely. Vincent appeared as a very tall, black shadow, with deep crimson eyes glaring ever so suspiciously. He never once peeked around the tree or flinched a muscle, but kept his arm securely wrapped around the girl. He was perfectly silent.

Aeris had been swept away by Vincent with scarcely understanding the reason. From his tense, mistrustful behavior, she gathered the man had somehow detected something "bad" in the air. And he pressed her so tightly against himself, as if fearing this evil force might snatch her away any moment. The loathsome image of Davoren immediately flashed across her mind.

Against such a sinister face as that brutal gunman's, poor Aeris could not help but tremble. At the possible prospect of experiencing another bloody battle, or worse, of being forcefully returned to her hateful tormentor the "Professor", her trembling turned to violent shivering.

Sensing her obvious fright, Vincent nestled Aeris as deeply as possible into his open, long black coat. He gently pressed her head against his chest.

"I don't think he's with them," he assured in a barely audible whisper, "Just be quiet and hide your face."

Aeris nodded once. She buried her full face further into his coat, and did not move. Vincent, keeping his hand against her head, huddled himself deeper into the thick darkness. He was perfectly still.

The heavy silence in the park was unnatural. For a seemingly long time, everything was dead.

At long last, faint, very distant footsteps broke the stuffy stillness. They grew steadily louder and louder as their mysterious owners cautiously approached this path. Vincent still avoided peeking for fear of betraying his dark hideout. He kept his bright eyes fixed down on the girl snuggled in his arms, but focused all his attention on the movements of this unidentified enemy.

From the scuffling of their heavy boots, Vincent guessed three, maybe four men had reached this road. He automatically assumed they carried loaded guns ready to fire on the least suspicion. When he heard a very faint "bleep", Vincent realized these men had fitted transmitter radios into their ears. If so, then they wanted to stay in contact with each other, which ultimately meant that there were more men on the prowl in this park; and more men meant more guns.

But was Davoren with them?

Vincent sensed the men shuffle about here and there in search of something. They spread out in all directions off the gravel road, trudging as quietly as possible through the heavy snow. He heard the thick hedges across the pathway being roughly examined. Another man crept suspiciously along the trees by the roadside. One man in particular, rather large and muscular, wandered very closely to the dense thicket of stout trees. Luckily, Vincent had concealed himself so well in the bleak darkness, and the brawny man did not search that attentively, so he passed on by without noticing anything unusual.

These armed men spent almost a quarter of an hour in their intensive search. They scoured the entire road, checking the narrow sidetracks and scanning the territory.

During this painfully long time, Vincent neither flinched a muscle nor lifted his eyes off the girl, even when he came so close to discovery. Whenever poor Aeriis trembled (undoubtedly remembering Davoren), Vincent gently stroked her hair to soothe her distress. His hard metal arm remained protectively pressed against her back.

Finally, assuming all was in its normal order, the men returned to the deserted stone path. They met again at the very beginning of the road.

"Nothing here," confirmed one gruff voice, obviously into his transmitter radio.

Vincent heard a "bleep", then another voice answer through the device, "Roger that. We'll take the north part, the other team will take the section further down. You search the area again."

"I just told you, there's noth.."

"..and Mr.Davoren's orders are we search each area twice, second time more closely. Now go!"

That argument thus settled, Vincent heard the transmitter rudely closed. One of the men began to hurl out a string of violent oaths.

"Goddamn bastard!" the gruff voice cursed, stamping his foot in anger, "Just because Davoren gave him the orders, he acts like some big time hot-shot!!"

"Sh! Keep your voice down," begged a gentle voice, "Mr.Davoren said this guy we're supposed to catch is really, really dangerous. He could be hiding anywhere, even here."

"Oh, gimme a break!! Like that freak with the claw is **really** hiding from us in the park. How would Davoren know where this guy is, anyway?"

"Well, y'know," coughed a deep voice importantly, almost with a superior air, "Mr.Davoren has his own 'special' ways. I personally think he used to be a professional assassin, or maybe a spy.."

"Like shit you'd know!!" the gruff voice retorted rudely, "He could be the friggin' devil, with those weird eyes of his.... gives me the creeps! Damn man! If he wasn't paying us so much, I wouldn't give a...."

"Sh!Sh! Keep it down!" the same gentle voice pleaded nervously.

"Anyway, orders are orders," commanded a husky voice which hadn't spoken before, "...and the money he's paying is damn worth it too. Search the area again."

"Okay," grumbled the gruff voice, "but I never been wrong before, and I tell ya: no freak with a claw or a little girl is here in this park."

Vincent cautiously peeked around the ancient tree, then instantly hid his face again: There were four mercenaries, all armed. One wore a bright blue kerchief and a heavy, open coat; his rugged face looked very dirty in the feeble lamp light. Another man, of a lean appearance, carried two guns and an army knife. The muscular mercenary who had previously passed by wore a red scarf around his thick neck and three bandoleers across his brawny chest; he peevishly held a huge assault rifle between his paws. The last man, short with curly red hair, darted his nervous eyes from one corner to another in paranoid suspicion.

Soon, The armed men silently resumed their search along this empty road. They scattered off the gravel path again, and began slowly and meticulously inspecting every inch of the territory. The brittle bushes were savagely kicked; each tree along and beyond the roadside was searched; the dark sidetracks were re-checked, this time with greater care.

Vincent frowned in apprehension: if these men had, indeed, intensified their search, then it would be a mere matter of minutes before they uncovered this hideout. Immediately but with forced calmness, Vincent bent forward until his mouth lay right by Aeris' ear. He did not loosen his grip around her, or even lift his hand off her head.

"Aeris, listen to me," Vincent whispered very, very softly through his woolly muffler, "I want you to stay right here in this spot, okay? I'll only be gone for a short while."

When she had somehow brought all her fears and chaotic thoughts under control, Aeris nodded her head in consent. Vincent gently tore her away from his body, then leaned her back against the knotted tree. Her anxious eyes fixed themselves right on Vincent's face, even though the stuffy darkness completely obscured his features. In return, he gazed down at her for a moment, then abruptly turned away.

Without another look behind, Vincent noiselessly slipped out of the thicket of trees. He crept as stealthily as a cat along the frozen hedges, keeping his back sharply bent and head very low. His hand mechanically reached for his gun. It felt so cold between his hot fingers.

Based on those men's conversation, Vincent was now **almost** sure Davoren had not accompanied them on this mission. Most likely, the ruthless gunman had simply hired these mercenaries on condition they follow his orders to the letter: find the little girl and retrieve her unharmed; find "the freak with the claw" and retrieve him...dead or alive (probably better dead).

But a deep suspicion played on Vincent's mind: how, as one of the men had plainly pointed out, had Davoren known where to find Vincent? The man certainly possessed a wise and evily cunning nature, but he was definitely not psychic. Vincent suspected no spy or informer either; both Cloud and Tifa had proven themselves loyal friends many times, and they were the only two who knew for sure of Vincent's whereabouts. If so, then how could Davoren possibly know?

However, the instant he neared one of the armed men, Vincent automatically stopped thinking.

-End of Chp.35

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.36

Vincent instantly hid behind a sturdy tree, and held his breath in restrained anticipation.

Cautiously and with great stealth, he had crept all the way from his dark hideout, stooping low along the frozen hedges, and dashing noiselessly from one tree to another. His heavy boots made no sound in the thick snow. The cold gun felt quite comfortable in his tight grip.

Vincent had snuck farther up the long black road, through a low, woody area, when he detected an enemy close by. With redoubled stealthiness, he glued his back against the nearest tree, and was perfectly silent.

His keen eyes inspected the grim surroundings: this barren lowland snuggled comfortably along the foot of a hillock, separated by a crude wooden fence. The main gravel pathway extended over the hilltop, so that anyone wishing to descend into this low area needed to climb down a rocky slope first, then pass the fence.

Hundreds of black trees infested the land, their grappling roots buried under deep snow. Countless bushes and shrubberies, all thick and quite bare, scattered across the wasted lowland. They thronged around trees, or clustered together in silent misery.

Being thus so crowded with dead trees and brittle bushes, a heavy darkness loomed about this low woodland. It was an endless maze of black shadows, some twisting into the most grotesque shapes. The cold air was deathly calm.

From his hidden spot behind the tree, Vincent could sense one of the mercenaries shuffle about here and there in a thorough search. The man, with his gun undoubtedly ready to fire, cautiously examined any suspicious shrub and checked around all trees in his path. He made no indication, at least not audible, that he had heard Vincent sneak into this area.

A full five minutes dragged by. Vincent did not move a muscle. His back remained glued to the tree, his ears intently concentrated on the enemy's movements.

Vincent tensed as he heard the armed man wander near his hideout. Fortunately, the darkness seemed too ghostly, and the silence so heavy, the mercenary decided not to carry his search further into these bleak woods. Besides, they had combed the area just minutes ago; how could anyone possibly slip into here in such a short time unheard and unnoticed?

Thus assured, the man retreated back through the woody area. He walked with his back openly turned to the dark woodlands.

As the unsuspecting mercenary wandered away, Vincent stealthily peeked around the tree: it was the man with the blue kerchief and dirty, rugged face.

He's wearing a bullet-proof coat, Vincent reflected to himself, and I'm sure the others have bullet-proof vests too....

Vincent narrowed his cold eyes, then noiselessly dashed from his hideout to another tree close by. He huddled his side against the knotted bark, drawing his gun across his chest in wait of the "right moment".

A very faint, dull pain prickled his lungs. Vincent sensed a violent coughing fit not too far away. Already, his forehead felt a little feverish.

He peeked again, barely enough for one eye to look around the tree. The mercenary, still suspecting nothing, had halted at the foot of the hillock, right behind the simple wooden fence. His back completely faced Vincent. Another man stood on the hilltop, where the main road passed over. The two were talking loudly.

"Find anything?" asked the man on the hilltop. Vincent recognized him as the nervous, short mercenary with curly red hair.

"Naw, nothing here," assured the other man, "I checked the whole area...no freak with a claw or little girly."

"You sure you checked right?"

"Yep. If there WAS anyone, I would've heard it. My ears are pretty sharp, y'know."

Vincent slowly extended his arm out, and pointed his gun at the back of the unwary man's head.

"You checked those bushes over there?" the short mercenary on the hilltop questioned, "Mr.Davoren said this guy's supposed to be very fast and damn sneaky.."

"He just said that to watch you piss in yer pants. Geez, didn't you see that slick look on his face," interrupted the confident man arrogantly, "I tell ya, no one's here! I checked around real good and...."

Before the cocky mercenary could finish his sentence, Vincent suddenly opened fire. The loud bullet ripped straight through the man's skull, sending him tumbling clumsily over the wooden fence. He died instantly.

Vincent did not wait to hear the other mercenary shout at the top of his voice for his comrades, much less for them to rush over. Without looking back, he flew deeper into the black woods, hopping over bushes and racing past so many barren trees. He sensed heavy footsteps not too far behind him. Undoubtedly, the three remaining mercenaries, enraged by the brutal surprise attack, had decided to hunt him down through the woods.

Vincent suddenly dodged behind a tree, and was perfectly still. He glued his entire backside to the tree, pressing his gun against his heaving chest. In the near distance, he heard those men's shouts as they quickly drew nearer.

"Hurry! This way!! This way!!" roared a loud voice.

"You take that way, I'll go this way," commanded another angry voice, "Don't let your guard down...he's really dangerous!"

"I swear, I'll mutilate that goddamn asshole!"

Suddenly, all was still again. The entire woodland lay in darkness, its chilly air unnaturally calm.

Vincent basically understood their plan: they would surround him from three directions, then quickly close in on him to prevent his escape. That meant he had to somehow break through the deadly ring before being discovered. He also assumed these mercenaries had contacted the others for reinforcements, that is if the loud gunshot and commotion hadn't already attracted their attention.

The fact that Davoren hadn't personally attacked yet aroused Vincent's suspicion, almost to the point of alarm.

However, the approach of stealthy footsteps from behind immediately cut short all thoughts. Vincent held his breath as he sensed one of the mercenaries slowly creep along the tress, his gun most certainly ready to shoot any second. His sharp ears detected every movement of the approaching man: from his cautious steps in the snow, to the nervous twitch of his finger on the trigger. It was, as Vincent correctly guessed, the short mercenary with red hair.

The footsteps grew slowly closer. Vincent remained as still as a statue, his keen eyes fixed to the far corner. The darkness and shadows concealed him so completely, his tall figure appeared as part of the black tree. So much so that the red-haired man, though quite alert, snuck right past Vincent without even sensing his presence.

Instantly, Vincent grabbed the unwary man from behind. His hard metallic arm encircled the enemy's neck and crushed his windpipe. Frightened out of his wits, the mercenary screamed for help amidst wild chokes and fierce (but futile) struggling. In a flash, the other mercenaries rushed to the spot.

"THERE!!" thundered one man.

"SHOOT!! SHOOT!!!!!" roared the other man savagely. Vincent quickly bolted towards another tree, still holding the struggling mercenary around the neck. Insanely furious, the two men automatically opened fire on their target, thereby spraying the entire hostage with bullets instead. Vincent had used this mercenary as a human shield.

He released the bullet-ridden corpse just as he dodged around the tree. >From his spot, Vincent could see the man lying face down in the snow over a pool of blood; he was dead.

An all-out war immediately erupted. The two remaining mercenaries, aroused to madness, blasted away at an entire throng of trees, one of which their clever enemy hid behind. The hot bullets tore at everything in their way; they overturned all sorts of twigs, bark chips, and bits of frozen dirt into the air.

Both sides exchanged several shots at once. Vincent's whole body huddled behind the sturdy shelter, while his arm extended out around the tree to shoot. Yet unlike the wild mercenaries who fired indiscriminately, Vincent shot with tactical caution. Above this mad crossfire, he sharpened all his senses to pin-point his enemies' positions.

Without peeking around the tree, he aimed slightly to the left, and fired; one of the men screamed violently in pain. Vincent fired again in the same exact position, and heard the man crash heavily to the ground. He had killed another mercenary.

The last man, blind with rage, redoubled the amount of gunfire. Vincent, however, only returned a couple of shots before suddenly breaking away from the bloody battle. He bolted straight through the dark woodland, heading for the hillock up ahead. Though he never looked behind, Vincent knew the last mercenary, the big muscular one, was madly rushing after him. Not too far back, he heard the angry man trample savagely over the bushes and swear non-stop.

At last, Vincent reached the foot of the hillock. He immediately sprang up the rocky slope, and landed onto the main gravel path once again. Gun in hand, Vincent darted across the road. He huddled behind one of the trees along the roadside, and was perfectly still.

For the first time since fighting, Vincent noticed himself gasping deeply for air. Indeed, his chest heaved in such unbearable pain as he fought for a precious breath. To add to his ordeal, the fever had grown worse. He felt the coughing fit edge closer.

Soon, he discovered his right upper arm had been wounded in the battle. Vincent was certainly surprised; he hadn't felt any pain up to now, not even the slightest twinge. He gazed blankly at his torn sleeve, marveling at the dark, hot blood soaking the wound. Luckily, the bullet had only grazed his arm, so Vincent found it easy (or at least possible) to bear the injury.

A stern frown darkened his face: this battle had lasted for nearly half an hour, far longer than expected. He wanted to return to Aeris at once.

"Where are ya, you damn freak?!!" thundered a loud, enraged voice suddenly. It was the muscular mercenary with the assault rifle. In perusing his enemy, the man had climbed the rocky hillside up to the main road.

Vincent huddled himself further against the tree, bringing the gun closer to his hot face. He heard the angry man storm about here and there in a desperate search for him; he kicked the hedges viciously, and poked his gun around every tree in his path: nothing.

Like so many previous times, Vincent had hidden himself in the shadows. The man simply had no clue where Vincent's hideout could be. Breathless with his own rage, the brawny mercenary stood in the middle of the black road. His suspicious eyes darted all around the ghostly place.

"Come out here and fight like a man, if that's what the hell you're supposed to be!!" the mercenary roared, "You sure got balls doing my buddies in like that! Come out!!!"

Vincent made no reply. His bloody-red eyes shone in unnaturally cool composure.

"I swear that Davoren's gonna pay me TRIPLE the original price fer catching you...especially after all the trouble you've caused me!!" threatened the man, brandishing his huge fist into the air.

No answer.

The mercenary stomped along the roadside, pointing his deadly gun in angry anticipation. He wandered past Vincent's hideout, then halted a short distance away. He glared suspiciously at the dark surroundings.

Vincent never flinched a muscle.

"Slick-assed business man with a hefty cheque book...", the man spat out contemptuously, "...yeah, Davoren sure offered us a damn nice price fer you and that little chick, but it's still too damn low!!"

Vincent made no comment. An awkward silence followed.

"WELL, WHERE ARE YA, FREAK?!!" shouted the enraged mercenary impatiently, "WE GONNA PLAY CAT 'N MOUSE ALL FRIGGIN' NIGHT?!! COME OUT BEFORE I....."

Without warning, Vincent suddenly dashed across the road at full speed, right behind the mercenary's back. On detecting the black figure whizz by, the brawny man immediately opened fire with a loud curse. Vincent, however, evaded the wild bullets by rolling behind another tree; he did not return fire.

The big mercenary rushed after Vincent towards that tree, shooting all the way. The instant he turned around the tree, the man redoubled the amount of gunfire to make sure he killed the enemy. But he suddenly stopped short in complete disbelief.

Nobody was behind the tree.

Baffled by this mysterious disappearance, the man scratched the back of his head stupidly: he could have sworn he saw "the freak" dodge behind *this* tree. The man looked around himself again, but found no trace of his enemy.

It all lasted a moment. The mercenary just happened to glance up the tree, up at one of the hard branches, when he spotted a tall black figure perched on top. Before he could even open his mouth, one clean bullet hit him right between the eyes. The brawny mercenary stumbled backwards, then crashed to the ground. He lay face up in the snow, his mouth wide open and eyes blood-shot with pain; he was dead.

After luring the last mercenary to this tree, Vincent had simply leapt up to one of the branches, and ambushed the man. The bloody battle thus concluded, Vincent gracefully hopped off the tree branch down to the ground. He re-loaded his gun quickly, casting only an indifferent glance at the dead man by his feet.

His sharp eyes narrowed in deep suspicion: to be sure, Davoren knew fully well Vincent could handle these men. Trained and experienced as most of them seemed, these mercenaries hadn't a chance against a professional Turk, let alone Vincent's "freaky" skills (thanks being to his abnormal body). Though Vincent certainly felt tired after the battle, those men hadn't caused him too much alarm or trouble.

Then why would Davoren bother hiring such men, if he knew none of them could kill Vincent? Only Davoren himself had a fair chance against him; both of them had undergone the same experiment, and knew each other's abilities, not to mention fighting skills.

But Davoren hadn't shown up at all.....why? When he suddenly remembered Aeris, a possible answer popped into Vincent's mind: perhaps these mercenaries had simply been a distraction....a sort of diversion to busy him. In his care to keep Aeris out of danger, Vincent had left her *alone* in the safe thicket. So, if he wasn't there to protect her, then Davoren could just....

Before the ominous thought could complete itself, Vincent turned around to rush for the thicket. However, he stopped short on hearing many footsteps running straight towards him. Suddenly, five men emerged onto the road, all armed to the teeth. The reinforcements had finally arrived to avenge their fallen comrades.

"AH! THERE HE IS!!!" shouted one voice.

"SHOOT HIM!! NOW!!!!" cried another loud voice.

Vincent instantly dashed away from the angry men, just as they opened full fire on him. He flew up the winding pathway amidst the wild gunfire, then suddenly darted to the side, right into a heavily-forested area.

He heard the mercenaries rush after him. Their heavy boots trampled over everything in their path; their loud voices called to each other. It seemed these men would hunt Vincent down forever, if not to avenge their friends, then definitely for Davoren's generous reward.

Quite wisely, Vincent resisted the urge to simply turn around and fight his way through these men. On the other hand, he refused to drag out the battle like last time. He needed to reach the thicket immediately.

His brain drew up a dozen plans, recommending some and rejecting others. At last, Vincent decided his course of action: he'd fight these infuriated men while at the same time make his way to the thicket. He'd have to eliminate his enemies swiftly and move on, but also keep a cool head and his wits about him. Therefore, without further debate, Vincent decidedly tightened his grip on his gun.

During all this time, Aeris had remained safely hidden behind the tree in the dark thicket. The girl had sat huddled up against the rough bark, listening anxiously to the heavy silence. She had, of course, given a violent start on hearing the very first shot, but somehow had forced herself to remain still. As the loud battle raged on, stopping for a minute then restarting again, Aeris felt her heart sicken with anticipation. Her limbs hadn't stopped trembling, nor would the fearful thoughts spare her mind.

She heard many rough, faint cries re-echo in the far distance, and mad gunfire tear through the air. Yet to be honest, those noises didn't frighten her that much. The horrible image of Davoren caused her this distress; the ruthless gunman constantly haunted her, blocking out all other thoughts.

Even though Vincent had almost assured her that man wasn't there, Aeris could not rid herself of this one fear: being captured and dragged, against all struggling and tearful pleas, straight back to the "Professor"...back to torture, darkness, and endless nightmares.....

Aeris huddled herself further against the tree, as if it would somehow shelter her anguished mind from these nagging fears.

"..I..I want to go home..," she whispered inaudibly to herself, "..dear God..I just want to go home..."

A long, long silence followed.

"tsk tsk," answered a calm, playful voice out of nowhere, "Now isn't this a bad place to find a sweet little girl like you."

The familiar voice petrified Aeris beyond description. She immediately sprang up, looking all around herself to find the dreaded speaker. Her nervous eyes darted from one corner to the other: nothing but shadows and bleak darkness, frozen trees and empty bushes. In her great fright, had she simply imagined the voice?

"Here. Up here," called the voice, sensing her confusion.

Aeris looked up the stout, knotted tree she had been hiding behind all this time. She spotted on one of the branches high up, Davoren seated quite comfortably. His back leaned against the main tree trunk, while one leg dangled down in the air. He gazed amusedly down at the astonished girl.

"Hello, my dear," he greeted with the politest smile, "Long time, no see. Did you miss me as much as I missed you?"

Poor Aeris could only stare back at him in speechless horror. If she had enough strength to describe the man's gleaming pink eyes, she would have probably just called them "evil".

-End of Chp.36

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.37

At the sight of Davoren, Aeris felt her whole heart sicken with fear and loathsome dread. A violent bout of trembling seized her cold limbs. She knew not how long he had been spying on her from up there. Had he just arrived, or been there all the time, hidden in the shadows? In either case, she hadn't even sensed his presence.

Aeris thought this terrible gunman would leap down from the tree branch. He would grab her, maybe strike her to quell any resistance, then carry her off...straight back to the hateful "Professor". Indeed, his physical strength far, far exceeded hers. And against such a ruthless man, what chance had Aeris of defending herself or even resisting?

But Davoren made no indication he would leap off his comfortable spot, let alone mishandle the girl in any unmannerly way. Far from it, he lounged carelessly on one of the high branches, his back still leaned against the main tree trunk. One leg dangled loosely in the air along with the hem of his thick trench coat. He held a half-finished cigarette to his lips.

Davoren's handsome face expressed great affability, almost affectionate warmth, towards the confused girl down below. One would have thought he was her closest friend in the world. Yet his strange eyes betrayed all the vicious malice hidden behind that friendly visage.

Such a sharp contrast between the two extremes gave Davoren a most cunning, sinister look. In truth, if he had gazed down on Aeris with a cold frown instead, she wouldn't have found him even half as frightening.

For a full minute, neither the callous gunman or the girl spoke a word.

Both could hear the bloody battle raging furiously on in the far distance. The wild, loud gunshots filled the air until Hell seemed to break loose. Rough, faint cries and heavy stomping of feet re-echoed through the bleak woods. At times, an unnatural silence would suddenly interrupt the insane gunfire; not a sound stirred during this awkward moment. But instantly, the bloody battle resumed.

Davoren lazily folded his arm across his chest, holding the cigarette between his graceful fingers. Amidst all the wild crossfire suffocating the air, he paid no heed to such loud noises.

Through miraculous efforts and forced calmness, Aeris at last managed to gather her scattered thoughts again. She stood near the stout tree trunk, her face turned up to see this ruthless gunman in full view. Her anguished heart ached with every gunshot she heard: the bullets were all aimed at Vincent...all intended to kill him. Her hands couldn't stop trembling, not with that hellish nightmare perched above her on that tree.

But besides all the fear which had accumulated into her anxious eyes, deep contempt for this man also shone brightly. *He* had robbed her sense of security, *he* had pitted all those men against Vincent, and *he* had returned to claim her for the "Professor".

For some reason, Davoren tore his eyes away from her face. He gazed thoughtfully at the black tree tops scattered across the distance; their branches, like thin sickly arms, reached in vain for the brilliant canopy of stars high above.

"The Professor is very angry right now...just fuming like a steamboat with rage," Davoren began calmly without looking at her, "He's already a month behind on your testing and analysis data. He storms all

around the laboratory, blubbering about you and making everyone else's life Hell. But y'know, he's pretty mad at Vincent too..."

Aeris said nothing.

"Of course, he's also ticked off at me for failing to capture you two. Heh heh...he came this close to eating me as meat carcass and using my hair as coconut shavings."

Davoren turned his pink eyes down to the girl again. Though his face had grown expressionless, the evil gleam in his eyes still remained.

"You have no idea, my dear, how **badly** the Professor wants you back," Davoren stated, an ominous tone playing on his calm voice, "Every day, every night, he just yearns to have you again...."

Aeris recoiled a step in spite of herself. She felt disgusted and frightened at the thought of being so "badly" wanted by her tormentor. The cold-hearted gunman gazed down at her as he smoked his cigarette. He looked exactly as he had that miserable day Aeris first saw him.

The wild gunshots in the distance suddenly escalated to an all-out crossfire frenzy. Alarmed by the loud chaos, Aeris turned her head around: somewhere in these dark woods, Vincent was fighting those men. She gasped out loud when she heard a faint scream of agony (was it Vincent's??). Her heart swelled in anxiety. She desperately fought against a surge of tears.

Davoren, on the other hand, puffed out a cloud of smoke without the least care.

Aeris shot her angry eyes straight up at Davoren again. She clenched her two fists into tight fists, wishing she could punch this loathsome man off his high place.

"How did you survive?" Aeris asked.

Davoren lifted one eyebrow quizzically.

"Vincent dropped an entire wall on you. You were crushed underneath all the huge rubble...and then there was an explosion...and a fire! How could you have survived all that?!"

"I have....really, really, really tough skin," smiled Davoren with childlike simplicity.

Aeris scowled at the strange answer. Was he just kidding?

"...and I hardly feel any pain. So, I just dug out of the rubble and walked away," the man concluded, tickled with delight at his answer. Her anger seemed to amuse him greatly.

The mad battle behind turned into a wild war of hot bullets and confused skirmishes. The black woods re-echoed with fierce crossfire. It raged on for another moment, then suddenly ceased. With equal suddenness, one single shot rang out, followed by the most coarse scream Aeris had ever heard. Three more shots followed, and the battle erupted again, this time with redoubled fury.

Aeris clasped both hands over her heart as she beheld the dark woods before her: What if that was Vincent's scream? What if they had killed him? What if they were riddling his body with bullets?

Unable to contain her disturbing fears any longer, Aeris immediately rushed towards the battle zone. But she had only taken three steps when suddenly one loud bullet blasted right between her two feet. With a short scream, she stumbled forward, then darted her shocked eyes up the tree again.

She instantly spotted the silvery-grey gun in Davoren's hand, white smoke trailing up from the muzzle. He had fired that shot.

Aeris felt her blood run cold. That ruthless gunman could have killed her had he wanted to, or at least shot her legs.

"I wouldn't go in there if I were you, honey," Davoren warned with fatherly sternness, "Cute little girls like you don't belong in bloody battles between mercenaries and professional assassins."

He carelessly holstered his gun back into the depths of his trench coat. He sat in the same languid position, one leg dangling downwards and his arm folded across his chest. His evil eyes shone in mischievous delight.

Poor Aeris stood perfectly still in her spot, listening to the faint scuffles, wild gunfire, and distant cries tear through the cold air. She could no longer suppress her anger.

"Are you really that afraid to face Vincent by yourself?!" she cried, the rage seething inside of her, "All those horrible men..and all those guns..all against just ONE PERSON?!!"

A very sinister smile crossed Davoren's lips, as if relishing Vincent's unfair situation.

"Oh, I admit hiring twelve mercenaries to kill him was perhaps pushing it a bit too far," he laughed good-naturedly, "I know Vincent isn't his best in these all-out war fights. His strongest assets are his agility, sharp senses, and of course his aim. But no, not battle tactics."

Though Aeris' beautiful face expressed unforgiving anger for this shrewd man, anxious tears had welled up in her eyes. She did not speak for fear she might burst out crying.

"But, Vincent handles himself quite well when pushed into tight situations like these," Davoren praised, smoking his cigarette smugly, "Don't forget, he used to be an excellent professional Turk. I know he'll be okay. Save your sympathy for the poor slob's he's slaughtering instead."

The girl made no reply.

"If you were to go rushing into the battle like that, Vincent would lose a lot of his needed concentration. He'd have to protect you AND fight back. So, it's best you wait here where it's safe."

Aeris scoffed contemptuously at the word "safe", but otherwise, made no response. She noticed the once wild, raging battle had deteriorated to a hot exchange of fire. It sounded very close by.

When she heard a sharp bleep, Aeris looked suspiciously up at Davoren. In return, Davoren pulled out a radio transmitter from his trench coat pocket, and fitted it into his ear. With a polite "please excuse me" to the girl below, he tapped the device once.

"M-M-Mr.Davoren...Sir??" stammered a nervous voice the instant the receiver was opened.

"Yes?"

"S-Sir, this bastard is taking us out one by one too damn fast!! He kills one of us, and disappears, then he pops outta nowhere and kills again!! He's too quick for us to keep up with! This...this FREAK just ain't human!!!"

"No kidding," answered Davoren, rolling his eyes at the stupid remark, "Tell me, where are you?"

"I'm..I mean, we're n-near the main road, moving through the west section."

"How many of you are left?"

"Two..."

No sooner had the frightened voice spoken, than a very loud shot gunshot resounded through the transmitter, followed by a piercing scream of pain.

"Whoops! Now it's only one," joked Davoren without the slightest annoyance.

Aeris listened to this conversation in complete silence. She felt slightly relieved: at least she knew Vincent was still alive.

Davoren tapped the transmitter again, then instructed in a very business-like tone, "He's in the west section, near the main road. I'm already there, and I have the little girl. Be careful, he's killed eight men so far. You three come over quickly."

"Yes Sir, Mr.Davoren. Right away!" obeyed a gruff voice.

Davoren yanked out the transmitter from his ear, then dumped it back into his deep pocket. He smoked his cigarette indifferently, listening to the gunfire in the near distance. The battle had finally quieted down to a simple exchange of fire, with many heavy pauses in between. The ruthless gunman was silent for a long time.

Aeris studied his lonesome figure perched high up there. Her green eyes darkened in hatred: God, how she loathed this man beyond description!

"You don't like me that much, do you, my dear?" Davoren smiled archly to himself, breaking into her thoughts.

She stared back in surprise. He hadn't even glanced at her, yet had sensed all her emotions so easily.

"Heh...nothing hurts more than the scorn of a woman," he commented sagaciously. He touched the back of his head as he added with playful humour, "..but mind you, getting your head shot is quite painful too."

Aeris regarded him as a complete lunatic, or a fiendish demon. Either description fitted him perfectly.

A heavy silence followed.

Aeris started violently when an ear-splitting gunshot suddenly rang out right behind her. Without warning, a mercenary literally flew past her, spinning wildly through the air, until his back slammed against the tree Davoren sat on. The mercenary slumped lifelessly down to the snowy ground, leaving a trail of dark blood on the tree trunk as he collapsed. He lay against the tree, his bloody head bent down sharply. He was dead.

"Boy, you sure wasted no time getting here," laughed Davoren, checking his watch impressively, "Hmmm...seven minutes. Not bad at all!"

As Davoren thus spoke so light-heartedly, he looked at someone behind Aeris. The girl quickly turned around to find Vincent standing some steps away, having just emerged victorious from the bloody battleground. Obviously, he had shot the last mercenary, then had ruthlessly hurled the corpse straight into the thicket.

His gun gripped tightly in his hot hand, Vincent glared up at Davoren. But while Davoren smiled and happily waved his hand, the former man expressed no emotion whatsoever.

"V..Vincent!!" Aeris cried in relief and alarm. She immediately dashed to his side.

"But man! Don't you look like a mess!" exclaimed the ruthless gunman with great amusement, "You must be exhausted from fighting all those morons and running around."

As much as Vincent hated to agree, Davoren was absolutely right: he was a mess and quite tired. He looked battered. His chest heaved deeply, fighting for precious air. Sweat trickled down his pale, feverish face. Tiny splotches of dark blood blotted his cheek. Several long black hair strands dangled before his face.

His clothes had also suffered from the battle. He had lost his scarf, and the hem of his long overcoat lay in tatters. One random bullet had grazed his body just above the waist, leaving a noticeable, blood-soaked tear. Another wild bullet had nearly hit his thigh. The many rips and cuts at the bottom part of his pants proved he had been racing through the brittle bushes.

Though the battle hadn't been too much a challenge for Vincent, the intensity had drained him. Indeed, he had eliminated his enemies so quickly and had ran at such an amazing speed, fatigue had finally caught up with him.

"Vincent! You..you're bleeding!" gasped Aeris on spotting his arm wound.

"..it's nothing. Don't worry about me," he lied softly. In truth, this wound had grown considerably worse during the last fight. He could feel the hot blood trickle down his arm and drip off his hand. Even the tight grip of the gun felt wet with his blood.

Vincent glanced tiredly at Aeris as he asked, "Are you alright?"

"Y-yes. He..he didn't try to catch me," she faltered out, turning her eyes up to Davoren.

The gunman gazed silently down at the two without moving.

When reassured of the girl's safety, Vincent glared intently at Davoren high above on that tree. Gently slipping his wounded arm out of Aeris' grip, he staggered a few steps forward, then halted again. His piercing eyes never dropped off the gunman's pleasant face. Davoren smoked his cigarette with perfect ease. He stared back at Vincent, but would not be the first to speak.

This was the second time they had met in thirty-one years.

"You're still here," Vincent remarked coolly.

"What do you mean?" asked Davoren. He sounded a bit confused.

"While I was distracted with those men, Aeris was completely helpless against you. You had plenty of opportunities to capture her and escape, even in the short time it took me to get here. But, you're still here."

"Why, Vincent! I am offended!" declared Davoren in feigned indignation, "You think I hired those men to distract you? And you think me such a heel that I would take advantage of a defenseless little girl in her distress? Tsk! now that wouldn't be very gentlemanly of me, would it?"

Davoren smoked his cigarette one last time, then flung it away.

"And besides," the ruthless man added coldly, "That lame plan would only work if I had wanted the girl alone. I'm supposed to catch you too, remember?"

Vincent narrowed his keen eyes in deep suspicion: if those men weren't sent to kill him, and weren't a distraction...then what was their true purpose?

Aeris lingered a few steps behind, the anxiety tearing her heart apart. She did not speak at all.

Davoren finally hopped off the tree branch. He landed on both feet right in front of the stout tree trunk, a short distance away from the two. After carelessly brushing the snow off his trench coat, he thrust both hands deep into his pockets. His pink eyes flickered with evil playfulness.

Contrastingly, Vincent remained stoic, concealing all his suspicions and burning questions behind a cold face. To his annoyance, the fever raged ever stronger inside his weary body, especially his forehead. The coughing fit nibbled at his soft lungs, as if savouring the flavour before devouring the whole thing. He hadn't much time left...

The two men stood face to face in perfect silence.

"I must apologize for underestimating you last time, Mr.Valentine," Davoren began in what sounded like sincere regret, "I didn't take you half as seriously as I should have. I was basing my estimation only on what I knew about you thirty-one years ago."

Vincent made no reply.

"Last time, I only disabled your metal arm. I thought I could kill you off easily with that handicap on you. Looking back on that, I have to say I feel ashamed of myself. You proved yourself more than able and ready to handle any problems you land in. Why, you still managed to defeat me, and quite impressively too! I'd just like to say I'm sorry for underestimating you, my friend."

Vincent mistrusted this man completely. He gazed searchingly at the gunman's face, trying to guess a double meaning to his apologetic words.

Davoren merely smiled at his "friend's" suspicious look, then glanced amusedly at the dead mercenary slumped against the tree. He tilted the corpse with the tip of his shoe until it fell to the snowy ground, and lay lifelessly there. Davoren still smiled.

As Vincent watched the gunman standing there, a quick image flashed past his mind: thirty-one years ago...Davoren had shot a terrorist in the Reactor...but he wasn't smiling at all...he was very sad... he was...praying...

Davoren suddenly turned to face the two again. He glanced at Aeris, who cringed a step away, then fixed his malicious eyes on Vincent.

"I won't make the same mistake twice. I held back a lot last time, because I underestimated you too much. But not this time," the callous gunman assured, his happy smile turning to a vicious sneer, "This time, Sir, I WILL take the girl back to the Professor...she'll be all his again. I'll tear her away from you while I watch you die slowly and painfully. That I promise you!"

Vincent could sense poor Aeris shiver violently behind him. However, he made no reply to the venomous threat.

"You see, Vincent," Davoren explained amusedly, "I'm not going to use your claw against you. No, I'm going to use a much more effective handicap against you... I'll use the *GIRL*. This time, when I shoot, it's at her."

Silence.

Vincent stood rooted to his spot, his rigid gaze fixed on the insane man in front of him. He gripped his gun tighter, but did not raise it. He could sense Aeris' great distress turn to fearful alarm.

"I thought the 'Professor' wanted her alive," Vincent remarked calmly at last. His red eyes, however, darkened in unmistakable anger.

"Oh, he does. He won't have her otherwise," Davoren smiled back, delighted at the reaction, "And if I kill her, oh well. The Professor will just tear me to pieces (like I care). But, I'm still going to take the risk, Vincent. I know you've grown quite...protective of her, even more than before. I was just telling her that if she were to get caught in the crossfire, you'd lose a lot of concentration just to protect her."

Vincent's muscles tensed in redoubled anger. This man had predicted everything so accurately.

"So, you'll fight me on one hand, and guard the girl on the other. You have to be fresh, quick, and pretty alert to do BOTH tasks at the same time, right Mr. Valentine? Top form is the name of the game!"

No reply. Only a cutting, dirty look from Vincent.

"Oh, but you're tired, wounded, and ill!" Davoren sympathized mockingly, pretending he hadn't already noticed, "Aw, how unfortunate! Now what impact do you suppose THAT will have?"

It means I won't be as fast and sharp as I should be, Vincent replied angrily inside himself, he's right, I am exhausted after those two fights...and this damn coughing fit is getting worse....

He's forcing me to put the priority on Aeris' life instead of fighting him. He knows I'll take the bullet for her if I have to....but this time, he could kill me, not just disable my arm...

You're a cunning little bastard, Davoren. So *that's* why you hired all those mercenaries...to wear me down and exhaust me. Sure, then you won't have as much trouble fighting me...

"Stop it!! Why are you doing this??!!!" cried Aeris' tearful voice all of a sudden.

Both men looked at her in surprise.

The poor girl, with hot tears flooding down her eyes, stared straight at Davoren. Her limbs shook in agitation and twice as much anguish. She had listened to the relentless gunman, dumbstruck by his savage, almost sadistic, cruelty. The fear, distress, and anger had swelled inside her heart until it all burst forth with that desperate question.

Neither man interrupted her.

"You know what you're doing is wrong! Somewhere inside of you, you MUST know!! But why do you do all these horrible, evil things?! Vincent said you were a very, very good man...far better than he'll ever be!! He said that in the middle of all the crimes and bloodshed, you kept your soul alive!! And I...I'm sure you were a kind-hearted human being! So why are you doing all this?!! Why?! Why?!"

There was a heavy pause. Aeris gazed beseechingly at Davoren's expressionless face, expecting him to answer her anguished question. But Davoren made no reply. Vincent thoughtfully studied the tearful girl trembling some steps behind him. She looked so pitiful, sobbing and shaking all by herself.

Suddenly, Davoren burst out into wild, hysterical laughter.

"Oh, Vincent said all that about me, did he? Well, how generous of him! HA HA HA HA HA HA...."the maniacal man cried out. The lavish praise somehow seemed an excellent joke to him.

Aeris stared in absolute horror at Davoren as the merry laughter shook his very core. Vincent felt intense hatred boil his blood, but kept a stoic face. At long last, after many failed attempts, Davoren brought himself under reasonable control again.

"Ha ha..heh heh heh...don't think you know anything about me, honey," the cruel gunman forced out, breathless with his previous laughter, "If you think you do, then you should go to sleep. It's WAY past your bedtime, little girl."

Aeris was stunned into silence.

"Vincent has me confused with another Davoren," he added softly, addressing himself more than her, "That man he knew is gone...his 'soul', 'kind-heartedness' and 'goodness' all died a long time ago....such a long, long time ago. I can't even remember whether that man really existed at all..."

Vincent gazed at the insane gunman with peculiar scrutiny. For a split second, he thought he spotted pain flash across Davoren's eyes. But when Davoren finally recovered himself, Vincent found nothing but vicious malice and cunning ruthlessness in those pink eyes.

Gone the gentle compassion and righteous conscience of thirty-one years ago. Gone his veneration for any human life, his genuine pity for those who suffer, and his strict loathing of any injustice. It had all faded away like the colour of his hair.

"Now I'm just a slave to the almighty Professor," Davoren smiled weakly at the two, "I fulfill the commands of my master without question or moral judgment. My so-called 'soul', 'goodness', yadda yadda yadda is irrelevant to my duty. You WILL go back to the Professor tonight, and Vincent dies. It's all for the experiment. Everything else does not concern me."

The three stood still without a word. Realizing how futile her pitiful pleas had been, Aeris could only stare tearfully at Davoren. The smile remained frozen on the gunman's lips. His evil eyes gleamed lovingly at her, as if reassuring her he's keep his promise. He then turned to Vincent.

Vincent had nothing to say. He only gazed back at this cruel gunman...the once beloved leader of the Turks...his old best friend... and perhaps the kindest man he had ever met. The face, same as it had looked thirty-one years ago, slowly became cold again.

Davoren would definitely carry out his insane plan. He'll go all out, no mercy or hesitation in his brutal actions. All for this mysterious "experiment", he would kill Vincent tonight, and drag the poor girl away. That hadn't been an empty threat or any pompous bluff.

Indeed, it hadn't. Vincent gave a violent start when Davoren suddenly yanked out his own gun, and fired straight at Aeris.

-End of Chp.37

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.38

It all happened in a flash, far too fast for Aeris to comprehend. The very same instant Davoren opened fire, Vincent immediately lunged for the girl. Grabbing her with his claw, he sprang forward, just as a hot bullet whizzed past his head. It all happened in a flash.

Still holding onto Aeris, Vincent tumbled over once in the snow, but instantly recovered his balance. He gracefully flipped backwards, then landed on both feet again, his body crouched down in alert readiness.

He expected the insane gunman to automatically bombard them with wild, indiscriminate bullets. The expectation had been so strong, that when Davoren lowered his gun instead of firing, Vincent narrowed his keen eyes suspiciously. He remained crouched down. All his senses sharpened in anticipation of the enemy's next move.

For an awkward moment, neither man spoke or flinched a muscle.

A hateful scowl darkened Vincent's face as he beheld this gunman in front of him. He held Aeris tightly under his armpit, his whole claw encircled around her waist.

The poor girl, who stared in horrified shock, clung weakly to Vincent's coat. She scarcely understood what gruesome fate she had just narrowly escaped. Indeed, if Vincent hadn't reacted in time, that bullet would have undoubtedly ripped straight through her skull.

Davoren carelessly holstered his gun, which baffled Vincent further but also intensified his suspicions. Though Davoren returned the distrustful glare with a most pleasant smile, Vincent saw straight through that false visage. The bright gleam in those pink eyes betrayed all the evil amusement and baleful cruelty hidden inside.

Very slowly, Davoren began to advance towards the two. He didn't seem to mind being unarmed while Vincent gripped his own gun with stern rigidity.

"Oohhh...very impressive reflexes!" the callous gunman praised good-humouredly but with slight mockery, "Even when you're sick, battered, and weighed down with a handicap, you still manage to stay fully alert."

Vincent's muscles tensed at the playful words, but he would not be the first to attack. Davoren drew closer.

"But I wonder, Mr.Valentine," the man added as he deliberately reached for something inside his trench coat, "Hmmm....I wonder just how long you can keep it up before you let your guard down?"

Vincent instantly grasped his sinister meaning.

Davoren took another step before suddenly lunging forward at top speed, yanking out a cold semi-automatic gun from inside his coat. Vincent barely had time to react. He sprang back, then narrowly avoided the torrent of wild bullets by dashing to the side. He took shelter in the thick woods again.

He understood this ruthless gunman's strategy: a hard, non-stop shoot-out until Vincent would slip off his guard. It would be swift, and brutal. Only in this fight, every shot was aimed at Aeris.

Vincent knew Davoren had decided to chase them through the black woods. He could detect the enemy's unnaturally quick, light footsteps rushing after him. Vincent diverted to the side, then bolted forward at double speed: Davoren may be fast, but he was still much faster.

Black trees and shapeless bushes whizzed by as Vincent flew through the dark woods. The insane gunfire, thirsty for blood, angrily perused its target.

He held Aeris very tightly under his armpit as he ran through this crazy gunfire. In return, the girl hid her whole face against his body. Her trembling hands clutched his overcoat. Surprisingly, poor Aeris made no sound, not even one muffled sob. Perhaps in her terror, she simply lacked the strength to cry out.

A crazy game of "shoot and dodge" followed, the offense firing openly, and the defense miraculously avoiding the deadly shots. To confuse their path, Vincent darted amongst the trees, hopped over bushes, and very often changed direction. But the wild bullets followed him everywhere. They savagely pelted the poor trees, and pierced the unfortunate hedges. The two men raced through the endless woodlands at an incredible speed, with loud gunfire filling the air wherever they went.

The mad bullets rapidly closed in on Vincent. He forcefully mustered his dwindling strength, repressed his illness, and sharpened all his senses to full alert. He needed a sturdy shelter good enough for a counter-attack position. It would be a lot safer than fighting in the open, especially with Aeris involved.

Vincent bolted behind a throng of slender trees, stooping low as the crazy bullets tore at this feeble barrier. He tumbled forward a few times to avoid the gunshots raging after him. He dashed here and there; tripped but somehow recovered his balance. He returned fire only when his persistent enemy got too close.

Somehow, he could hear Aeris' frantic heartbeat pounding like crazy. Yes...she was frightened, her precious safety having been so cruelly shattered... he was quite surprised she hadn't burst out crying yet...

A stray bullet suddenly ripped through the side of his left leg. Vincent stumbled against a tree in suppressed pain, but instantly ducked down, just before more wild bullets (intended for his head) blasted the tree instead. He returned a couple of shots, then scurried back up to his feet to find cover.

Vincent zoomed through the woods faster than before. He never bothered inspecting his wounds or moaning about the agonizing pain. If he stopped for even a millisecond, the brutal gunfire would tear him apart.

His chest ached miserably. His entire body burned with fever. He sensed the coughing fit only a short time away.

I either fight back NOW or wait for the blasted seizure to get me, Vincent argued inside his battered mind, that Davoren sure picked the right time to attack...bastard of a strategist!

Suddenly, Vincent rolled to the side, then scuffled behind a stout tree. Outraged by this daring barrier, the violent bullets redoubled their attack. Each loud shot screamed for the two refugees. However, the brave tree stood undaunted by the savage gunfire.

The instant Vincent reached this sturdy shelter, he huddled down against the tree, his back glued to the tough bark. He protectively nestled Aeris against his chest, so that she sat huddled up between his legs. Her face remained buried in his coat.

Hot bullets whizzed through the air like sharp knives. They tore at the tree, sending bits of rotten bark and frozen dirt hurtling about. Vincent roughly concealed the trembling girl under one open end of his overcoat.

"Aeris, cover your ears," he ordered gently, protecting her head with his metallic claw.

She automatically obeyed. Without hesitation, Vincent shot out his arm around the tree, and opened full fire.

An all-out war instantly erupted.

The two sides exchanged fire at once. Vincent never dared peek around the tree (not with THIS insane crossfire raging on). At times, he emptied his entire gun in one round, other times, hid completely to avoid Davoren's crazy bombardment. He reloaded his gun with incredible quickness, and strained every nerve to hit the enemy.

Aeris sat still, hidden under Vincent's coat from wild bullets, bark chips, and flying dirt. She covered, or rather clutched her ears to shut out the cruel gunfire. Her heart pounded so frantically. A sickly faintness overpowered her.

She passively noticed Vincent's muscles grow more tense with each bullet. She felt his feverish chest heave in great repressed pain. His hard breaths had turned to gasps. Perhaps twice, he had to pause the fight and struggle violently against an internal agony. But in her overwhelming fright, poor Aeris could not grasp what these ominous signs meant.

She peered hesitantly at the wound in his left leg: a horrible tear through the side of his black pants, with a deep, ugly gash bleeding profusely. So far, this was Vincent's worst wound.

She wanted this madness to be another nightmare. She wanted to wake up safe in a warm, soft bed and say "it was just another bad dream". The girl wanted it so badly, hot tears streamed down her cheeks.

The brutal battle raged on for around fifteen long minutes, neither side giving in to the other. Vincent could sense Davoren dash amongst the trees, probably to confuse his aim. The gunman moved with such an incredible speed, and the crossfire grew so fierce, Vincent could barely detect which direction to shoot.

A wild torrent of bullets suddenly tripled their intensity against the tree, forcing Vincent to draw back his entire arm. As the gunfire continued, he quickly reloaded his gun, then prepared to rebuff this savage attack. This time, he had pin-pointed Davoren's position: rapidly closing in, firing away but still wide open.

But before Vincent could shoot, he heard Aeris scream tearfully, then clutch the front of his shirt with all her feeble might.

"Aeris! Aeris, are you hurt?!" he asked in alarm.

The girl had no strength to answer, not even lift her head.

Vincent grit his teeth in anger: he had to somehow push back this ruthless enemy, if only to buy himself a couple of minutes.

Therefore, Vincent furiously fired non-stop at the bleak darkness, most of his body huddled behind the sturdy tree. He gave Davoren no chance to retaliate or get any closer. He wrangled all his senses just to lock onto the enemy's movements.

On catching a glimpse of a black shadow dashing nearby, he doubled his fire in that direction until the gun emptied. Immediately, Vincent dodged behind the tree again, and reloaded his gun. The brutal gunman had been forced back.

For the moment, Vincent ignored the battle. Instead, he fell to quickly checking Aeris for any injury. Desperately trying to repress her tears, Aeris clung to the man's coat during the brief inspection. At last, Vincent discovered a stray bullet had grazed the very tip of her boot. Most likely, she must have thought it actually hit her.

He began soothing the tearful girl, whose efforts to control her terror were crumbling.

"Sh! Sh! Look, Aeris. It just hit your boot," Vincent comforted, wiping her tears with the palm of his hand, "You're all right. He didn't hit you."

"M-make it stop...," she begged through suppressed sobs.

Vincent gazed down at her, but found himself unable to reply. His face expressed no emotion.

"I don't want to go back there!! How many times do I have to tell them?! Why won't they leave me alone?!" poor Aeris raved, beside herself with angry despair, "..Davoren...Davoren says he'll kill you..he'll tear me away and t-take me back there....to the Professor! Torture...pain...so much pain...I don't want to go back!! But now..now he'll..I..I can't..and this crazy gunfire..it's just ripping my mind apart! Make it stop, Vincent! Please, make it stop! Make it stop!!!"

A heavy silence forced itself upon the two. Vincent stoically gazed down at the distraught girl. He did not move or speak, but studied her slender figure so pitifully huddled against his chest. Her shoulders shook violently. She covered her tearful eyes with both hands, as if to stop seeing this hectic fight.

He gently began stroking her hair, like parents do when their little children wake up crying from a scary nightmare.

For a brief moment, Vincent's mind strayed off: no doubt all her fears and torturous sufferings had exploded with that desperate outburst; who could blame her? Davoren had ruthlessly shoved the poor girl into the fight just to win the upper hand. She didn't want to return with the gunman. She didn't want to witness this battle either.

She wanted to be left alone...to be "safe", even if that little precious wish sounded so "stupid" to her.

Why should such an impossible, fantastic wish be called so? Every person had some pain, some fear, some anger to run away from. Why should it be so "stupid" to wish one could be safe from those emotions?

But Vincent suddenly cut short his gloomy reverie on sensing an unnatural movement in the bushes to the far left side. In that one moment of distraction, Davoren had snuck straight up to the two's shelter.

Instantly, Vincent grabbed Aeris and leapt away, just as a crazy torrent of bullets showered the spot to bits. One bullet aimed at Aeris grazed clean through his arm instead, several others blasted against his claw. He tumbled roughly to his side, but somehow scuffled back to his knees and returned full fire at Davoren. Vincent forced Aeris to keep her head down with his claw, while his other hand busied itself shooting.

He was much alarmed to find Davoren had crept so close, more annoyed with himself for almost slipping off his guard like that. Indeed, poor Aeris' violent ordeal had unintentionally distracted him.

The two exchanged a short but heavy bout of shooting. Davoren dashed quickly amongst the trees, firing away but hiding whenever the fight got too intense. Vincent, on the other hand, stood his ground in the open. He fired so fiercely at the enemy, sometimes driving Davoren back for a moment. His claw protectively covered Aeris' head as she lay flat on the snowy ground.

Vincent fired just as the gunman dodged behind a tree. Davoren heartily returned a couple of shots, then hid completely behind the barrier again.

All was silent, far too silent.

Vincent suspected some "trick" behind this unnatural stillness, so kept his gun rigidly fixed on that tree. He slowly forced himself up to his two feet (one felt a bit limp). He pulled Aeris up with him. She was pushed as far behind his back as possible, his metal claw keeping her in tact.

He waited for the enemy's next move.

"Don't you think it's strange...all this that we're doing right now?" asked Davoren's calm voice from behind the tree, "I mean, we used to be best friends. We shook hands the first day we met; we talked together all the time. I looked out for you, and you respectfully called me 'Sir'. I never would have dreamed, thirty-one years later, we'd be trying to kill each other like two life-long, bitter enemies."

Davoren suddenly emerged from around the battered tree. He stood a short distance away from the two. His semi-automatic gun, still smoking from the intense shoot-out, hung idly by his side. His face looked a bit dirty. His clothes, the trench coat in particular, had been tattered from bullets and bushes. He smiled very pleasantly, almost kindly, at the two.

Though Vincent did not shoot, he glared suspiciously back at the friendly gunman.

"We look exactly like we did back then (well, eye colour and my hair being the obvious exception)," Davoren joked, pushing back his snow-white hair, "But Vincent, look at us! The world around us changes, days come and go, people grow old, but we're frozen in our place. We're in a time our faces don't even belong in."

No reply. far from being annoyed by Vincent's scornful silence, Davoren thrust his empty hand into his pocket, and chuckled to himself.

"Heh heh heh...y'know, we should be wrinkly old geezers in some resting home, reminiscing about 'the good ol' days', just like two aging buddies always do. Yup, we'd have a couple of false teeth, grey hair (or maybe bald?), and walking canes too. You'd have weak eyesight from all that sharp-shooting, and lemme see...heh heh...I'd definitely have lung cancer from all the smoking I've done.....'Blind-eye Vincent' and 'Davoren coughin'-hack', that'd be our nicknames!!"

Not at all amused, Vincent narrowed his red eyes on the gunman's happy face. His instincts warned him of some upcoming attack, but could not specify what this man intended.

"But instead of that mundane, pointless little existence, here we are!" Davoren announced jokingly, "Here we are, in our strong young bodies of thirty-one years ago, killing each other, with a little girl stuck in the middle, and a crazy old coot using us for an experiment!"

With such carefree easiness, Davoren pulled out a small timer bomb from his pocket. The number read "5".

"Wha-hey! Talk about an alternate course to your life!" Davoren smiled innocently, flinging the bomb at the two. He instantly dashed away.

Vincent had immediately recognized the object before Davoren had even tossed it. Grabbing Aeriis with both arm and claw, he flew beyond top speed through the black woods. The violent pain in his legs were forgotten, all giddiness and exhaustion temporarily discarded. He never looked back.

A thunderous explosion suddenly blasted Vincent right off his feet just before he could clear the woods. He felt a mad force hurl him violently through the air, with both him and Aeriis spinning out of control.

-End of Chp.38

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.39

Vincent thought his back had slammed against a thick concrete wall. Instead, the violent explosion had merely hurled him at full force into a tough, knotted tree across the road.

He immediately lost all sensation in his body.

Surprisingly, Vincent had managed to hold onto Aeris, even as they spun wildly through the air. He had embraced the screaming girl tightly against his chest, so that on impact (and what impact!), only Vincent's back took the brutal blow. He never let go of her.

At the same instant Vincent slammed into the sturdy tree, Davoren came skidding clear across the gravel road, having himself just barely escaped the woods unharmed. Crouched down with bent legs set wide apart, the gunman at last came to a halt. He stood only a few yards away from the distraught two.

The earth-shaking explosion had also sent all sorts of debris flying out of the woodlands: burning tree branches, clumps of dirt and snow, even blasted bush tops. A huge fire roared some distance in the woods, lighting up the entire area in orange brilliance. That was the bombsite.

When he had thus been so ruthlessly slammed and all sensation lost, Vincent slumped weakly down to the ground. Still clinging onto Aeris as if to dear life, he lay wearily against the knotted tree. Aeris lay slouched in his lap, much shaken by the violent blast, but otherwise unharmed. Vincent's hand held the gun in a rigid, tight grip. His head bent sharply down, so that much of his lustrous black hair dangled before his face. He gasped loudly for air.

"Vincent!! Vincent!!!" cried Aeris in horrified alarm. She frantically pushed back his long hair, then held his haggard face between her trembling hands, "Vincent!! VINCENT!!!!"

The man simply lacked the strength to respond.

He found himself struggling against unconsciousness, with his head swimming around in a sea of confused chaos. The loud explosion still rang in his numb ears; he could barely hear Aeris' tearful voice. He could not move his aching limbs, not even flinch his finger. His head felt as heavy as lead, his eyesight far too blurry.

A splitting headache trampled all over his already battered brains. His lungs howled in pain.

Frantic beyond reason, Aeris immediately slipped out of his lap, then crouched down in front of him. She sobbed out his name repeatedly, patted his hot cheeks, anything to win a reply from him. Indeed, he looked like he would pass out any moment.

Vincent slumped to the side in exhaustion, but Aeris instantly grabbed him by the shoulders. The girl pulled him towards herself to steady his balance again. Vincent sat slouched forward, with Aeris' cold hands pressed against his cheeks.

"..V..Vincent..oh God, Vincent! Please, wake up!" she pleaded, completely at her wits' end.

"I'm all right..I'm..all right..," he whispered hoarsely to calm the tearful girl. With that lie, he pressed his burning fingers against his eyes. He needed to dispel this horrible dizziness somehow.

He wondered why Davoren hadn't attacked yet. He could feel those pink eyes laughing at his ordeal.

It took Vincent perhaps a minute just to gather his scattered senses again. He sat hunched over, his heavy head supported by Aeris' hands. Most of his hearing had finally cleared up. He finally realized the stinging pain tearing every inch of his battered body.

At long last, after many tearful entreaties, Vincent forced his blood-shot eyes open. Despite hazy eyesight, grievous injuries, and clinging weariness, he would not abandon this crazy battle; not with Aeris at stake.

Aeris' anxious eyes told him how haggard, sickly, and ghostly pale his face looked. It seemed Davoren would beat him within an inch of his life, then let the cruel illness finish off whatever remained.

"..ah..I..I'm all right, Aeris..I'm fine..," he reassured before the girl could burst out crying, "..you... were you hurt at all?"

"..I..uh..n-no..I'm..," Aeris faltered out confusedly. In her anxiety, she had simply forgotten about herself, "..I..I'm okay...but you, Vincent! y-you're.."

But Vincent abruptly turned his eyes to the side, at the same time touching the girl's arm to silence her. He glared hatefully at Davoren, who stood a short distance down the road. The gunman gazed back at him so mockingly, with one hand impertinently propped on his hip. His other hand held the semi-automatic gun by his side. He had been patiently waiting all this time for Vincent to recover.

The brilliant fire raging in the woods lit up one half of Davoren's face, while the other half remained obscured by darkness. His strange pink eyes blazed with an evil fire, even more intense than the one in the woods.

He looked like a demon just crawled out of Hell. The stray white hair strands dangling before his face only added to his sinister appearance.

Nobody spoke a word.

Vincent wasted no more time wallowing in his own ordeal. With a sharp grunt, he struggled to one knee, then up to his feet. He nearly staggered back down, but somehow steadied himself in time. He protectively shoved Aeris behind him, letting her hold onto his claw while his hand gripped his gun. He breathed hard. His eyes shone in crimson brilliance.

The two men stood face to face.

"Still able to move, huh?" Davoren marveled with malicious mockery, "My, what incredible endurance you have! I was hoping that blow would at least shatter your spine, if not knock you out cold for another thirty years."

Vincent made no response except scoff under his breath. He felt the tearful Aeris clutch his shirt from behind, then bury her face into his back. She seemed desperate for shelter from this horrific nightmare.

"But of course, I should have known you'd be tougher than to let a mere tree kill you," the ruthless gunman smiled amusedly, "Still, I've never seen anyone look so sick and beat-up. You look like a bloody pulp, Mr.Valentine."

Davoren told no lie. Vincent looked three times more battered than when this crazy shoot-out started. His black overcoat lay in filth and tatters; his pants and sleeves torn with bullet wounds. His whole chest, ravaged by the repressed coughing fit, heaved in agony; so much so that he still gasped for air. Sweat

poured down his feverish, blood-spattered face. His feet felt so wobbly, he himself wondered how he could stand at all.

"I'm surprised..you didn't kill me just now," Vincent remarked composedly but with deep resentfulness, "I was such an easy target...dizzy, stunned, and wide open for any attack."

"Oh now! We have the whole night ahead of us, so what's the rush? What fun would it be if I just killed you without watching you suffer a bit? Even blood-thirsty gunmen like me need some entertainment once in a while."

Vincent made no answer, completely disgusted with this man's sense of "fun". So, Davoren had only spared his life out of good-humour.

"But now that you mention it, I suppose I should end this and just kill you," the callous man playfully mused aloud, "The Professor's been getting on my case all this month, yearning for the girl again, screaming for your head, and how much he needs to finish his wonderful experiment. 'It's all for the experiment! The experiment!' he says. Geez, what a miserable old grouch!"

At the mention of the "experiment", Vincent narrowed his red eyes on Davoren's face very keenly, but said nothing.

In return, Davoren smiled at the piercing look. He carelessly ejected an empty cartridge of bullets from his gun, then shoved a new one into the hollow chamber.

"I'm impressed you've survived this long, Vincent. I know it's not easy fighting me all-out and having a little cry-baby weighing you down. But unfortunately, I fear your condition has deteriorated so much, you can barely defend yourself, let alone protect the girl. In case you didn't notice, you can't even stand straight."

The gunman slowly began advancing towards the two. Vincent tensed in his spot, expecting an attack any moment. Poor Aeris edged closer against his back.

Vincent internally agreed with the gunman. That last explosion had really knocked out what precious little energy he had. His senses dizzied by exhaustion, his agility reduced, his health plagued by the fit...he had no chance of surviving this fight with Aeris involved.

But nevertheless, he pushed the girl further behind him, while at the same time gripping his gun very tightly.

"I can't stand straight, you're right," Vincent replied, glaring straight back at the approaching Davoren, "...but there's still breath in my body. And as long as I have that, not you, your mercenaries, or even your mighty 'Professor' will have her."

"Defend to the death, eh?" Davoren pronounced viciously, a cold expression replacing the smile, "My, my! How chivalrous of you!"

He stopped. The two stood facing each other, with Aeris nervously tucked behind Vincent's back. The raging fire blazed on in the forest; the short crackles of burning wood and twigs filled the air.

"...chivalrous, yes," the gunman remarked before suddenly lunging forward at an incredible speed, "...chivalrous, but not very smart!!!!"

Vincent had anticipated this attack. Grabbing Aeris very roughly around the waist, he flipped to the side, just before a fresh surge of bullets attacked them. He tumbled over a few times amidst the wild gunfire,

but soon scuffled back to one knee. He dumped Aeris by his side, then returned full fire at Davoren, who easily dodged behind one of the trees.

Vincent knew better than to fight on an open road, with no shelter, and a frantic girl huddled by his side. Therefore, he furiously shot a round to push Davoren back, then immediately picked up the girl again. He darted away as fast as his feet could carry him, down the road, then straight into the woods.

He could hear Davoren's quick footsteps rapidly closing in from behind. Vincent flew past the trees along the roadside, perused by the ruthless gunman, who never hesitated to fire away. He avoided the deadly shots only by wrangling his hearing senses to the very extreme. Vincent dodged behind trees, skipped over bushes, and tumbled to the side as he ran to escape.

Aeris had embraced his neck and buried her whole face against his shoulder. Her trembling fit doubled with every shot that whizzed by her. Whenever Vincent returned a few shots, she gave a faint cry but immediately suppressed it.

Vincent's brain raced to form a plan, no matter how ludicrous or difficult. Escape was impossible: his leg injuries had significantly reduced his speed. He couldn't just turn around and fight all-out: first, he lacked the strength for a counter-offensive; second, he could never carry Aeris around and fight. Then what should he do? Abandon the girl? Never! Leave her someplace safe while he fought? She could be discovered, and if Davoren happened to be her discoverer, she would be killed.

He grit his teeth to restrain a violent curse: Davoren had him cornered in every direction. He couldn't go on running like this forever. There must be SOME way out of this wretched trap.

He narrowly escaped a crazy shower of bullets by dashing to the side. Vincent dodged behind a tree just as the savage gunfire tore the bark off the unlucky barrier. He tightened his grip around the girl (who was futilely battling hysterics), then dashed at full speed amongst the throng of trees, regardless of mad gunfire.

Davoren showed no mercy in his pursuit: either he killed Vincent, or died in the process.

The chase raged on through the woods. The two men raced along the trees, one perusing with such evil doggedness, the other struggling to stay on his feet. Vincent had no time to notice his new injuries. His mind fought for a solution to this dilemma.

Finally, Vincent reached the very end of the woods. He tumbled out onto the gravel road, dumping Aeris behind him again. At the same time, Vincent opened full fire back into the woods. He shot straight at Davoren with such fierceness, the gunman could only huddle behind a tree, and return a few shots.

Vincent wondered how long he could hold back the gunman; he was down to his last cartridge of bullets. He wondered more how long he could hold down the coughing fit. It raged inside his hot, tight chest, screaming for release.

Suddenly, Vincent detected heavy footsteps rushing towards him. Much to his alarm (and annoyance), three heavily-armed men emerged onto the road, then raced straight for him. They called to each other, shouting angrily "THERE!! HE'S THERE!!" and "SHOOT!! NOW!!!!"

The last three mercenaries had finally arrived to aid their leader.

"Yes, just what I need right now...more company!" Vincent muttered as he scuffled back to both feet.

He yanked Aeris off the cold ground with his claw, then bolted down the road. The mercenaries automatically opened fire on their target, hurtling curses and shouts as well as deadly bullets. Vincent only returned a few shots as he dashed away. Otherwise, he darted at top speed without glancing behind.

An insane torrent of bullets ripped through the air, straight at the running target. Vincent miraculously escaped by tumbling into a huge, thick forest along the roadside. He struggled back up to his feet immediately. Without hesitation, he ran further into the black labyrinth of knotted trees, brushing past bushes and frozen twigs.

The cries of the three mercenaries grew fainter until he could no longer hear them. They probably wanted to consult their leader before making any attack.

After perhaps five minutes of running and scuffling, Vincent slowed down. Gasping loudly for air, he made his way to one tree, then collapsed to his knees. He released Aeris.

His hard gasping nearly changed into an outright fight for air. His limbs twitched in pain. The fever burned him all over, from his forehead to his fingertips. Vincent's eyesight had blurred again; fuzzy grey objects and shapeless shadows surrounded him. He could hear his hot blood gurgling inside his aching lungs.

Just like their situation, the illness couldn't possibly get any worst.

Aeris forcefully repressed her fears again, and somehow withheld the urge to break down into tears. She immediately crawled over to Vincent's side to ease his ordeal. The girl rubbed his shaking back, whispering hurried words of encouragement into his ears. She steadied his balance again, then patted his cheeks and burning hand to restore his senses.

A whole minute dragged by.

When Vincent had recovered whatever remained of his strength, he looked around himself in silent curiosity. Thick trees and entangled bushes clustered around the two intruders, their barren branches and twigs stretched out overhead. Indeed, Vincent had stumbled into a very, very heavily-forested area.

It wouldn't be long before those men discovered this hideout. And with him in such a battered state, he'd never last long against their guns. In his anxious frustration, Vincent could only think of one plan.

"Aeris, I want you to run away from here," he ordered gently.

The girl gaped at him in astonishment.

"I'll distract those men, and hold them back for a while, you run away.... get out of this park," Vincent explained as he checked his ammo: only ten bullets left, "Now, I'm going to go back there, you run.."

"V-Vincent..how...w-w-what are..," Aeris faltered, horrified by his idea, "..I..I can't just leave you here! You're hurt, and sick! You don't stand a chance against Davoren and his men!! What if they..."

"Don't worry about me. I'm fine."

"But, Vincent..."

"I said I'm fine," he repeated sternly. He peered very intently at her frightened face as he instructed, "Now you go on further down these woods until you.."

"No! No, I won't go!!" the girl tearfully refused, shaking her head.

"Aeris, I can't handle this! It's too much for me," Vincent reasoned vexedly, "I can't protect you AND fight Davoren at the same time. He's not holding back anymore, so I have to focus all my concentration on him. But I can't, Aeris; you're a distraction. I have to watch your back as well as mine; and every time you cry and scream, I slip off my guard, like just now. Do as I say. Go to..."

"No! No! No!" she insisted stubbornly, "You either come with me, or I stay! but I won't leave you!!"

"You know I can't go. Somebody has to push these men back..."

"But you're hurt! Look! Look, you're bleeding!!!"

"Forget me. It's..."

"..and Davoren swore he'd kill you...slowly and painfully!! Didn't you hear him?!! You..you'll die if you face him again! You can't fight him in your condition! He'll kill you on the spot!!!"

"I'll be all right. Aeris, you..."

"No, I won't leave you!! because if I leave now, I know I'll never see you again!! He'll murder you in cold-blood!! I don't..."

"JUST SHUT UP AND LISTEN TO ME!!!!" Vincent shouted in anger, glaring furiously at the poor, frantic girl.

Dumbstruck by his angry words, Aeris stared back at him in mute shock. She had never heard him raise his voice like that, not even against his worst enemies.

Vincent paused a moment to soothe his enraged temper, then resumed with forced calmness, "If you stay here, you'll either die or get captured. I'm too battered...and the explosion knocked a lot out of me...I can't even see that clearly anymore. That's why I want you to leave. Because I can't protect you from the bullets and fight back at the same time. It's too much for me to handle. Now Aeris, do as I say, and don't argue back; I haven't the time to hear it."

The girl said nothing.

"Go through the woods, until you reach a little road. Run down the road, take the first turn, and you'll find the exit. Run as fast as you can away from here."

Poor Aeris covered her mouth to suppress her anguished tears. Her shoulders couldn't stop shaking. She bowed her head in pained submission. Cocking his gun, Vincent staggered up to his feet again. Both legs ached miserably.

"The minute you leave this place, go get help," Vincent instructed in a business-like tone, "find a policeman, a police station, a phone, anything. Call Tifa and Cloud. They'll help you right away."

Aeris only nodded her head, but did not stand or look up at him. Many bitter sobs escaped her. She only restrained them out of fear Vincent might lose his temper again.

"No matter what happens to me...no matter what you hear, do NOT come back for me. Do you understand?"

She feebly nodded her head again.

"Aeris, do you understand?"

"....y..yes....."

A very awkward moment of silence followed. The tearful girl sat trembling on the ground, overcome by wretched misery. Vincent gazed down at her very thoughtfully.

What he intended to do probably came very close to suicide. Against Davoren's ruthless brutality, he had little chance of survival, especially in his desperate condition. But he had to buy Aeris some time to escape, even at the risk of his own life. And at least with her safely out of the way, he could focus his attention on the fight better (and maybe actually survive).

Vincent helped the poor girl up to her feet, then turned around to leave. He avoided her eyes.

"Go now," he dismissed gently. His tone sounded much softer than before.

Immediately, Vincent dashed away back towards the enemy. He didn't look back at Aeris.

-End of Chp.39

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.40

As noiselessly as a cat, Vincent snuck along the many black trees and frozen hedges. He kept his head low; his back stooped over in cautious alertness. Despite the vicious pain tearing at his feverish chest, he had somehow managed to suppress his gasps into light breaths. His hot hand gripped the gun very tightly.

A mild dizziness still clung to him. Tiny blood droplets trailed after him as he trudged through the white snow. Indeed, he was bleeding badly.

He made his way through the black forest, sneaking hurriedly but quite cautiously. Every few steps, Vincent paused behind a tree to listen out for any suspicious noise or unnatural movement. When sure no mercenary lurked around, he resumed his stealthy path.

He caught himself worrying about Aeris again. Annoyed, he immediately pushed her out of his thoughts. The poor girl had been so distressed when he sent her away, especially after losing his temper. But it was for the best. She was safe, and without her weighing him down, Vincent had a better chance of fighting.

He had to buy Aeris enough time to escape this hectic park. Very "chivalrous", to use Davoren's mocking words. But what about *himself*? How will he escape this deathtrap, his condition so miserable, his ammo dwindling, and the fit already rattling his chest? Would he think up "something" during the battle, or did he intend to escape at all?

Again he shoved those morbid thoughts aside. Instead, he forced a most cool-minded concentration on the task at hand. Undoubtedly, those mercenaries had scattered themselves through the woods, probably with Davoren in lead of the final manhunt. Vincent had to fully keep his wits about him, and be careful how he fought: he only had ten bullets left.

He stealthily slipped amongst the trees and bushes, choosing the darkest paths possible. Though battered and a bit limp, he moved quickly. All his senses sharpened in readiness; he expected to encounter an enemy any moment.

A most unnatural silence loomed about these black woods. The dead tree branches hung in perfect desolation, not stirred by a breath of wind. The snow-laden bushes timidly watched this lonesome intruder prowl about. The still air stung with such bitter coldness. Everything was calm; the sort of calm that precedes violent storms.

To Vincent's suspicious mind, this peace seemed only a premonition to another brutal attack. He stopped dead in his tracks, and pricked up his ears to listen. His hot fingers tensed against the gun; his mistrustful eyes darted from one corner to the other.

He sensed a pair of evil, pink eyes staring at him from behind.

With deadly swiftness, he turned around and pointed his gun straight at Davoren. The gunman, indeed, stood some distance away from him. Davoren made no move to attack (at least not yet), but stood in his place, his semi-automatic gun gripped by his side. In the bleak darkness, he appeared as a tall, black shadow with two gleaming pink eyes. They flickered amusedly at Vincent's cold glare.

In all anticipation, Vincent awaited this man's next move. He did not lower his gun.

"I'm impressed. You actually managed to tear yourself away from the little girl," the gunman chuckled balefully, "Where did you hide her? Up a tree with the hibernating squirrels, or in some bushes all by herself?"

Vincent, of course, would not reveal anything. However, he took comfort in one fact: Davoren did not know where Aeris had went. Hopefully, by the time he would search for her, she'd have already fled this park.

"It would have been so much easier if you surrendered her to me, then just let me kill you. All this hassle and squabbling is really unnecessary," Davoren sighed, peering fixedly at his enemy, "At least your carcass would look presentable instead of getting it all beat-up like that."

No answer.

Ignoring the gun so rigidly pointed at him, Davoren looked his enemy bottom to top, then rested his piercing pink eyes on Vincent's cold, stoic face. The latter did not flinch a muscle at the contemptuous gaze.

Slowly but quite confidently, Davoren ventured towards Vincent, then stopped again, this time only ten steps away.

"Don't you know it's useless, o' dear friend of mine? No amount of fighting will make a difference. Hide that girl anywhere, I'll find her again. Kill me, I'll return three times more brutal."

Still no reply.

"There is nothing you, me, or anyone else can do to stop him. The Professor refuses to be deterred, no matter what the obstacles be, no matter what the consequences are. He MUST finish this experiment. This one, single experiment must be completed."

"What 'experiment', Davoren?" demanded Vincent sharply. His voice strained with tried vexation, but also a touch of desperation, "What does this 'Professor' of yours want? You and I...Aeris..everything... what's the connection??"

Though a thick veil of darkness separated the two men, Vincent could still see that vicious sneer playing on Davoren's lips.

"Hmph!" the gunman scoffed, "And what's the point wasting my breath explaining, when you'll die tonight anyway?"

Vincent's cold face darkened at the scornful reply. In return, Davoren's bright pink eyes only narrowed with further mockery; they betrayed nothing save cunning brutality. For an awkward moment, neither man moved, but glared at each other fixedly.

Without warning, Vincent suddenly leapt back, at the same instant opening fire on Davoren. As expected, the gunman dodged behind a nearby tree just in time, then heartily returned the attack tenfold. He sprayed the entire forest, sparing no tree or bush to kill his target.

Amidst all this insane gunfire, Vincent immediately fled the scene. Rather than waste any more bullets, he bolted towards the other side of these dismal woods. The bullets flew after him. They ripped the bark off trees, snatched twigs from bushes, and overthrew dirt into the air; anything to reach him.

Davoren had obviously decided to give chase through the forest. The gunshots came twice as savagely, each hot piece of lead screaming for Vincent's blood. This was the final shoot-out.

His speed a mad rush, Vincent darted through this forest without even glimpsing behind, never mind shooting back. The deadly rain mercilessly perused him wherever he went. At times, the wild bullets zinged by his ears, other times blasted right between his feet.

The woods stretched into a confusing maze of endless shadows and shapeless figures, all rushing past him with no meaning. His eyesight still bleared, Vincent could only rely on his sharp hearing to survive this madness. The light scuffling of Davoren's shoes in the snow, his rapid movements amongst the trees, all warned Vincent which direction to run, more importantly where to dodge.

Despite the chaos, he could feel the fit chew on his ravaged lungs. A bitter hot taste, much like blood, teased his throat.

Barely in time, Vincent sensed Davoren suddenly flank to his left. He instantly flew into an obscure thicket of trees, just before the maddest shower of bullets blasted at him. Vincent broke off in another direction, cutting his way through a tight throng of knotted trees. The angry bullets came after him.

Vincent grit his teeth: the gunman was beginning to catch up with him. Soon, he'd be able to easily outrun him and shoot from any direction he pleased. Not that Davoren had become any faster, rather Vincent had grown extremely slower, even after removing Aegis and focusing all his efforts on escape.

His wounds must have been far more grievous than believed.

Vincent's senses instantly forewarned him of danger up ahead. Much to his alarm, a mercenary suddenly jumped out from the bushes, thereby cutting off this escape route. With one big effort, Vincent swung sharply to the side, just as the man opened full fire. He rolled through some entangled hedges, where he somehow returned to his feet again and bolted away at top speed. The gunshots chased him.

He hadn't run too long when the two other mercenaries ran like madmen into the path. On catching sight of their target, they automatically sprayed the entire surroundings with hot bullets, as well as wild shouts and swears.

Ambushed this way too, Vincent scuffled to an abrupt halt, then instantly backtracked his path. He sought refuge behind the trees again. Though he fired twice to push them back, the two mercenaries persistently chased him. They returned his meek shots with torrents of bullets. The more Vincent dodged the bombardment, the angrier it grew.

Obviously, the three remaining mercenaries had rushed over on hearing the loud commotion. They would spare no bullet to kill Vincent first and attain the generous bounty on his head. "Free-competition", as they termed it.

Davoren had cleverly surrounded him from three sides, knowing well Vincent lacked the ammunition or strength to fight four men at once. Yet if Vincent did not escape this crazy deathtrap NOW, surely he wouldn't survive another minute.

The question was : how?

The first mercenary suddenly made his appearance again, this time right in front of Vincent. The path had been cut off from both ends: front and back.

But before the mercenary could open fire, Vincent lunged sideways, straight into some thick backwoods. He dashed past the crowded trees, followed behind by stray bullets and gruff bellows. No matter what, the mercenaries would hunt him down.

Vincent could hardly distinguish his path in such suffocating darkness, but heedlessly raced on. The voices of the three men gradually receded into the background the farther he plunged into the woods.

He knew for certain two bullets had seriously wounded his leg, one his arm, another his waist; that is of course besides the cuts and bruises. He did not bother noticing the wretched pain.

All of a sudden, Vincent detected a familiar presence close in on him from the far side. The ruthless gunman had found him again, and instantly moved in for the kill.

With a rough scuffle of the foot, Vincent darted away from his brutal assailant, just as a wild surge of bullets tore at the clustered trees. He kept his head low as the madness raged after him, blasting overhead and all around him.

A sickly sensation clogged his throat. His battered, beaten body could not keep up with this madness any longer.

The black woods ended abruptly. It immediately opened onto a rocky slope which led to the main gravel path down below. Far too distracted by the vicious gunfire, poor Vincent did not notice anything until he slipped. Before realizing it, he found himself tumbling very roughly downhill. Every jagged rock and brittle shrub in his path either poked, jabbed, or tore at him. Dirty snow and sharp pebbles flew into his face.

He spotted the gunman quickly skidding downhill right after him, one foot angled as a brake, the other applied for balance. Without a doubt, Davoren would not cease the hard attack until he had achieved his goal.

The rough journey finally ended at the foot of the hillside. Vincent rolled straight onto the stony road, where he somehow recovered his balance again. He instantly made a forceful lunge for one of the trees across the road, at the same time dodging a mad rain of bullets. The attack came so fiercely, with hot lead flying everywhere, Vincent had to finish his run for cover by scurrying on all fours.

He somehow managed to reach the sanctuary through all the crazy bombardment. Vincent tumbled behind the sturdy tree, then huddled against the bark. During the entire shoot-out, he hadn't stopped running until this moment.

Nearly an hour had passed since Vincent had forced Aeris away. The girl had probably cleared the hectic park by now. Perhaps she had somehow found assistance, maybe even phoned Tifa and Cloud. In any case, he had succeeded: he had distracted Davoren and his men long enough for her to escape (and saved as many bullets as possible). Nobody would know she had fled until too late.

The question struck him so bluntly: now what?

He had no more strength to run around, too little ammo to fight four men, and a murderous coughing fit squeezing his lungs.

Miserable hardly described his state. Hot blood soaked his wounds. His sleeves were torn, pants ripped, and long overcoat tattered from bullets and smudged in filth. A stinging fever burned his limbs, from the roots of his hair down to his toes. Every breath invited a fresh surge of pain. He felt drained, the very life beaten out of him; even blinking his eyes hurt.

So what should he do? Fight the gunman with...what...five bullets left and blurry eyesight? Run away, his agility so wretchedly reduced? Surely Davoren would not magically revert to his former kindness and spare Vincent's life. And those mercenaries would soon catch up to this place; he could already hear them approaching the edge of the woods. In all honesty, Vincent could barely fight unconsciousness, let alone three blood-thirsty thugs.

If he knew any solution out of this deadly dilemma, NOW was the time to act.

He wrangled his mind for an answer. Of all the little plans and desperate strategies he schemed out, Vincent chose what sounded the best one: disarm Davoren *somehow* before those men arrived. Five bullets of fifty, battered body or not, he simply had no other option.

Although seemingly an eternity, all this intense deliberation had only lasted a mere twenty seconds. Even the wild bullets hadn't calmed down during this brief time lapse.

Vincent decidedly shoved his gun into the holster. Disregarding the deadly bombardment, he rolled out into the open, where he immediately recovered to his feet again. Vincent lunged forward at top speed, straight for the ruthless gunman who stood some distance away. He had dived back into the battle.

Surprised by the unexpected move, Davoren changed the attack mode to a full-scale shooting frenzy. The gun vibrated angrily in his hands as he fired non-stop at this daring enemy.

However, Vincent rushed forward in such an incredible zig-zag path, feet scuffling sideways to direct him through this crazy madness. He strained his hearing to dodge the violent bullets. Every fiber in his muscles fought to keep up the momentum.

His speed and vigor, WELL beyond normal, resembled a demon's. He darted down the road so quickly, dashing here then there and back again, even the bullets could not keep up with such an insane pace (or rather, the gunman could not sway his aim that fast). Davoren grew more fierce in his attack, Vincent more determined in his charge.

Suddenly, Vincent was only two yards away, not just alive, but still charging at full force. The gunman could not conceal his shocked astonishment.

In the blink of an eye, Vincent sprang at his amazed enemy. With all his might, he forcefully rammed his metallic forearm right into Davoren's throat. The violent impact sent Davoren hurtling backwards through the air, until he crashed into a tree on the roadside. His whole back and head absorbed the brutal shock.

On the other hand, Vincent tumbled over several times to brake his mad speed, then somehow returned to his feet.

This last-ditch attack had only lasted a minute.

More stunned by the hard iron blow than anything else, Davoren slumped down against the tree, then hunched over. He rubbed his battered throat as his teeth grit themselves to repress a curse.

Suddenly, Davoren realized his gun had slipped out of his hands during the violent collision. Indeed, it lay rudely discarded in the wild shrubs some distance away. He instantly reached for his other gun (the silvery-grey one he had holstered inside his coat at the very beginning).

However, the gunman stopped short on noticing a gun pointed directly at his forehead. On looking up, Davoren met Vincent's cold, crimson eyes gazing emotionlessly down at him. The defeated man mechanically withdrew his arm from his trench coat down to his side.

Neither man spoke or flinched a muscle. One stood towering over his prisoner, the other sat humbly hunched over in submission.

A miracle. In one amazing sweep, Vincent had turned the tide to his favor. He himself scarcely understood how he had managed such an insane feat, his body in such a battered state. Most likely, a devil had taken pity on him, and flew to his aid.

Now he had the enemy at gunpoint. Unlike last time, the weapon had bullets. Vincent certainly felt no hesitation or a twinge of compassion for his vanquished enemy. One shot would end this long, hectic battle. One shot, and this ghost would return to the dark past where he belonged.

Yes, one shot. However, Vincent had a better idea.

A wild stampeding of heavy boots and loud shouts quickly filled the air. At long last, Davoren's followers had arrived. Nevertheless, Vincent did not take his eyes off the prisoner or waver in his aim.

The three mercenaries soon emerged out of the black woodlands, having finally found the end to that arborous maze. With guns flashing, they skidded down the rocky slope until they reached the foot of the hillside.

On spotting their target standing some distance away, they all aimed their weapons, ready to open full fire with a string of curses. But instantly, they fell into an alarmed silence, and no man shot a single bullet. Their eyes widened in horrified disbelief.

And for a good reason too. They had noticed their leader slumped down in front of the enemy, disarmed, and at his total mercy.

Vincent cast an indifferent glance at the three men, who stupidly gawked back at him, unsure what to do. Davoren sat motionlessly without a word. He stared at the ground, his face devoid of any expression.

With such an unexpected turn of events, nobody breathed a word. Vincent now had the ace. He would decide the next move.

-End of Chp.40

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.41

"All of you get back," Vincent ordered.

He addressed the three mercenaries very sternly, eyeing each man with icy contempt. His gun remained rigidly fixed on Davoren's forehead, as if warning them any wrong move would be fatal.

The defeated gunman, on the other hand, had succumbed to his fate in resentful silence. He sat against the tree, body slumped forward, and knees drawn up but wide apart to support his tired posture. Both gloved hands lay heaped between his legs where they could be clearly seen. He would have no part in this scene.

Their leader thus taken hostage, the enemy now dictating the orders, the three mercenaries fidgeted confusedly in their spots, exchanging nervous glances between each other. Their guns remained silently pointed at the enemy, which only added to their stupid appearance.

"Get back," Vincent demanded again, this time more forcefully.

They still hesitated.

Losing all his patience, Vincent tilted his aim slightly to the side just before firing once. Davoren gave a violent start when the loud bullet zinged right past his ear, and blasted the tree behind instead.

"NOW!!" Vincent thundered at the three ineffective men.

They dared not question this man's authority any further. The three mercenaries lowered their disappointed guns. Very deliberately, they began retreating backwards. The palms of their hands were raised to prove they intended no heroics or sneaky tricks.

Considering his scarce ammo, Vincent had decided not to waste it on these small-fry. Only four bullets remained; best saved for the prize prisoner instead. The mercenaries had seen their less fortunate comrades fall under Vincent's deadly gun. So by this stage, they knew better than to risk some "surprise attack" to rescue their captured leader. In short, they were no real threat; Davoren was.

Vincent silently watched them fall back, at the same time keeping his gun fixed on Davoren's forehead. Soon, the three men reached the end of the black road, where they disappeared behind the trees, and never returned again.

After so many brutal disruptions, the heavy silence resumed its formal course in the dark park.

Alone at last, Vincent gazed very pensively down at the silent prisoner. His gun stayed rigidly fixed on its mark. Davoren still sat in a slumped position, hands bare and head bowed. Rips and tears, some quite brutal, ruined his black trench coat. Several white hair strands dangled before his dirty face. His expression remained stoically cold.

Vincent stood towering over the defeated man, his forearm drawn up to hold the gun, the claw hanging idly by his side. All his clothes were tattered, especially his right sleeve, where the huge rip exposed an ugly wound. Filth, blots of frozen blood, and dozens of tiny scratches marked his haggard face. Countless wounds stung his limbs. Hot blood dripped off his hand onto the stony ground. The fever burned his eyes to their sockets.

Indeed, the battle now concluded, that last charge slowly began to take its toll on him. Such an insane attack under fire had taxed his sore muscles and depleted his strength. However, Vincent resisted the violent pain bubbling inside his hot chest. He would not have a coughing fit, not when he could he finally get some questions answered.

He had spared, or rather prolonged, Davoren's life for the sole purpose of interrogating him.

For a long time, neither man spoke a word.

"I always used to give you advice...how to handle open battles.. you were still a rookie back then...," Davoren remarked flatly without looking up, "...improve your hearing senses....keep all wits about you. I remember once I taught you how to counter-attack a grenade. Bravo. I certainly didn't expect you to go charging at me like that. You sure knocked me out back there."

The praise received no answer.

"But for God's sake, don't go shooting by my head like that," Davoren begged, slowly rubbing his ear, "Bullets are pretty loud, y'know. Last thing I want is a hearing aid."

Another awkward silence followed.

"What's Professor Hojo's experiment, Davoren?" Vincent asked.

"....'Hojo'?"

At the mention of the familiar name, the defeated man lifted his head up to his captor. He found Vincent's expression unnaturally cold, with deep crimson eyes steadily fixed on him.

"Now why would you think Professor Hojo is behind this? Is he the *only* Professor in the world?" Davoren mocked with a broad, insolent smile.

Vincent paused a moment before replying icily, "This whole business reeks with his....crafty handiwork."

Besides his instincts, he had no other proof. True, Hojo had supposedly been killed a year ago, yet the possibility he had somehow survived remained far too strong to be ignored. Vincent vaguely recalled that miserable night when fever had overpowered his sanity: for some reason, he had believed himself conversing with none other than Hojo. Also, the mysterious words "it's all for the experiment...I must finish the experiment" had echoed all throughout his delirium, and repeated again in his nightmare.

But if he needed material proof, then Davoren sufficed. Just like himself, the gunman hadn't aged a wrinkle in thirty-one years. He claimed to serve a "Professor", also his master. All reasoning led to the same conclusion: Professor Hojo. Who else could it possibly be but him?

The question persisted: what was this "experiment"?

Vincent gazed more intently down at his prisoner, as though he could perhaps guess the answer. The insulting smile remained frozen on Davoren's lips. He took no heed of the gun so rigidly fixed at his forehead. He hadn't changed his slumped posture, not had Vincent moved either.

A deathly stillness clung to the bitter-cold air. Countless black trees had clustered thickly along the road. Their branches, entangled and twisted around each other, arched overhead to bar out the beautiful moonlight.

A thick darkness loomed about the empty road, even though the feeble lamp posts struggled to disperse it. Both men could only distinguish patches of each others faces, the rest being obscured by shadow. However, their brilliant eyes shone through this black veil, and locked onto each other without wavering.

"You've been searching for me a long time, haven't you?" Vincent inquired, finally breaking the icy silence.

"Almost five months," Davoren replied.

"To kill me, obviously."

"Obviously."

"And when you got desperate, you contacted one of my old comrades from Avalanche. You hoped she might help you locate me." Davoren muffled a light snigger with the back of his hand. Mischievous cruelty flickered in his eyes.

"I see Miss Lockhart told you....hmmm...I knew I should've killed her that day," the terrible gunman joked, "Yes, I did contact her. Unfortunately, she was of no help. I thought I should....'interrogate' Mr. Strife too, since he was your group leader. But you didn't seem particularly close to him, so he probably didn't know either."

Vincent made no response except narrow his eyes down on this ruthless man. He hated to imagine what could have happened to Cloud or Tifa *had* they known his whereabouts.

"I spent three months wandering between towns and villages, just trying to track you down," Davoren recounted in a dismayed voice, "Of course, I didn't find anything, so I returned here to the Professor, and began searching Midgar. But y'know, it's a huge city. You could've been anywhere, or maybe you weren't in Midgar at all (how would I know?). Even your former comrades had no clue where you were. You had simply disappeared, and I just about gave up."

No reply.

"But then, that girl escaped the laboratory. The men we sent to catch her never came back, and the girl....she vanished without a trace. Therefore, the Professor ordered me to capture her, AND retrieve you (dead or alive..it didn't matter). Two missions at once. Huh! As if I didn't have enough responsibilities already."

The amused smile slowly faded off Davoren's face. He suddenly dropped his pink eyes to the ground as he expelled a tired sigh. The gun remained directly pointed at his forehead.

"It was a lucky coincidence we met that same day I found the girl. It meant I could kill two birds with one stone. Sure, then the Professor could finish his experiment. But as you remember, I failed, which really pissed off the grouchy old coot. Ah well. At least I knew you had the little girl. So if I found her again, I knew I'd find you too."

"Why, Davoren?" asked Vincent dryly but quite calmly, "Why is Professor Hojo so bent on Aeris and me? You keep on saying 'it's for the experiment', but what *is* it?"

The prisoner scornfully cast his eyes to the far side. The direct question received a most contemptuous silence. Not at all satisfied with this answer, Vincent forced the cold muzzle of his gun against Davoren's forehead.

"What is it, Davoren?" he demanded again, emphasizing each word with vexed firmness.

He had grown so weary, both physically and mentally. The cruel fit mercilessly clawed at his lungs; Vincent could only suppress the pain by sheer force. His chest had begun heaving, slowly but noticeably. Blood tickled his parched throat. His wounds stung his feverish, battered body.

The illness would not spare him, even though he barely had enough strength to stay conscious.

The stiff silence endured for a full minute. Vincent studied his prisoner very intently; Davoren remained stubbornly mute. His spiteful pink eyes insisted on the far corner, undaunted by the gun's deadly threat, or Vincent's cold, hard stare.

"You remember Sephiroth, don't you?" the gunman spoke at last, his voice quite serious.

"...S..Sephiroth?" Vincent repeated, somewhat taken aback.

"Yes, the fruit of the JENOVA Project. I believe you and your comrades had the honor of battling him a year ago....after he had summoned that meteor."

And how could Vincent ever forget? The image of Sephiroth immediately sprung to his mind: long silver hair flowing down his back; sadistic evil just brimming in those startling emerald-green eyes. His whole figure, tall, imposing, and muscular, had certainly struck awe into any heart. His insanity had exactly matched his swordsmanship: deadly.

Hard to believe Vincent had met the **exact** same Sephiroth in the ShinRa Mansion, thirty-one long years ago. Who would have dreamed that innocent, helpless little child would pave out such a bloody path of destruction, nearly sending the Planet into oblivion. Harder still to believe that was Lucrecia's son, the very same she had yearned to hug; that she had given birth to the same murderous, cold-hearted demon.

Indeed, fate moved in mysterious ways. Yet why had Davoren digressed onto such an unexpected, if not irrelevant, topic?

"What does **Sephiroth** have to do with any of this?" Vincent asked suspiciously when he couldn't guess an answer.

"Why, everything," replied the prisoner in a calm, patronizing voice.

A heavy pause followed. Davoren slowly turned his scornful eyes back up to his captor's. His face remained frozen cold under Vincent's sharp, quizzical scrutiny. He hardly noticed the gun glued to his forehead.

Vincent's muscles tensed as a horrible foreboding gripped his heart. He didn't like this silence one bit.

"The Professor....is going to revive Sephiroth," announced Davoren at last. His face expressed no emotion.

-End of Chp.41

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.42

Time itself stopped. The black woods held its breath to contain the shock. Vincent stared back at the gunman in horrified disbelief, his senses struck dumb by the news. He pulled his gun back an inch, but kept it aimed on its mark.

Davoren pushed back his snow-white hair before resuming coldly, "The Professor somehow got hold of Sephiroth...the *real* one....still trapped in that cocoon. He wants to bring him back."

Absolute, dead silence.

"..you and I...that little girl...he's planning on using our spiritual energies to breathe life back into the body...sacrifice us for him. And it's all to complete Sephiroth's ultimate dream: Planet annihilation."

When thus finished, Davoren gazed at his captor with perfectly stoic pink eyes. He seemed to expect some reply or reaction. However, words failed Vincent. His heart pounded loudly in his ears, thereby redoubling the pain in his hot chest. He could only stare down at the gunman, stunned and shocked.

Sephiroth's death alone had saved the Planet. Life, the precious lifestream itself, had been spared by killing that murderous madman. But if through some miracle (or experiment), Sephiroth returned, what would happen? Bloody carnages wherever he drifted; chaos and destruction with every footstep, until he'd wipe the Planet clean from existence. To Sephiroth, it would be so easy, hardly worth the flick of his finger.

So, what should...what COULD be done? Hundreds of ideas raced around, all crashing into dead-ends. In truth, Vincent was overwhelmed. Against the frightening possibility of a Sephiroth revival, unleashing all that terror once again, the man couldn't settle on one thought.

On noticing his friend's apparent anxiety, Davoren released an annoyed sigh, as teachers do when students don't grasp a subject.

"Aw geez, Vincent! You're so damn serious all the time!" exclaimed the gunman with friendly reproach, "You actually believed all that corny Sephiroth bit?! That was supposed to be a joke! Joke as in funny ha-ha!"

For a moment, Vincent did not understand. He gaped blankly at this carefree prisoner, completely dumbstruck by his good-humour. A "joke"? Held at gunpoint, and Davoren could still "joke"? And about *Sephiroth* no less!

Suddenly, Vincent's whole face darkened to an angry scowl. With full force, he ruthlessly struck the butt of his gun right against Davoren's head. The violent blow knocked the prisoner to the side, where he clumsily crashed onto his elbow. His head almost touched the ground; some white hair strands even dangled against the dirty snow. He did not speak.

Vincent's piercing eyes narrowed in icy contempt as he watched the man slowly steady himself again. Davoren slumped against the knotted tree. A cold, hard visage had replaced that good-humoured expression. His eyes remained shut, even with the gun only an inch away from his forehead.

"You've tried my patience long enough for one night, Mr.Davoren," stated Vincent restrainedly, "What is the 'experiment'? Tell me, *now*!"

"And what'll you do if I refuse, Vincent?" the gunman challenged, more sad than daring, "What, you're gonna blow my brains out like last time?"

No answer.

Davoren forced his eyes open again. He slowly ran them over the black, shadow-infested surroundings until at last, he met Vincent's cool gaze.

"Heh...your face...it looks exactly like it did that night...," the gunman noted humourlessly, "..and now that I mention it, this place.. looks a bit like that apple orchard..."

A heavy pause lingered in the chilly air. Both men gazed fixedly at each other, neither moving a muscle.

"What is the 'experiment', Davoren?" Vincent insisted again, his voice strangely softer this time.

"I'll never tell you. If you think I'll just blab it out, then think again. The disclosure of confidential material to unauthorized personnel is an unforgivable act of treason, namely to my superiors."

In other words, he would not reveal anything unless the Professor himself ordered him to. Davoren would not turn traitor on any account.

"You're awfully loyal to someone who has ruined your body for his own purposes," remarked Vincent under his breath.

"Not loyal...slavish."

Another long, painful silence.

Much to his annoyance, Vincent noticed himself gasping very softly for a whiff of air. The fever seemed to grow more intense with each agonizing minute. Though Vincent stifled many coughs, and fought valiantly to dispel the nauseating dizziness, he knew he couldn't resist forever.

But he couldn't afford a fit right now. He must somehow hold the illness back, at least until he escaped this crazy deathtrap.

"However, you'll find me fair man," conceded the gunman suddenly, his face brightening with a mysterious smile, "I won't betray my master, but for old times' sake, I'll let you in on a little secret. I'm being serious now, I swear!"

Vincent nevertheless gazed very, very mistrustfully down at this man, but did not interrupt. The gun stood ready between them.

"You've been having terrible coughing fits for a while, right?" Davoren began as he eyed his captor curiously, "What do you suppose they are, anyway?"

Vincent only tensed at the mention of the dreaded illness.

"Well, I'll tell you. It's not a disease, it's the brain device."

"... 'brain device'?"

"Yes. When he...Professor Hojo altered our bodies thirty-one years ago, he surgically implanted this tiny device in our brains. It's a small thing, really....flat, about the size of a pea."

Davoren took in a deep breath before continuing, "When it's inactive, nothing happens to you. But when it's activated, ah! It sends out all these crazy 'impulses' that mess around with your body, especially your lungs. Please don't ask for a technical explanation. I haven't a clue about all the neurology and electric jargon involved."

Vincent reflected a moment then asked coolly, "And Professor Hojo is the person who activates this device, I presume?"

"Correct. He's implanted the activator...or 'remote' into his own brain. So, he activates our brain devices mentally....with just one thought, completely at whim."

No reply.

"If you get out of line, he just cranks it up a notch, and you get a nasty fit. You splutter out blood, get a fever, throw up, or plunge into a coma. It all depends on how bad he makes the attack. If he makes it strong enough (I mean STRONG), you get severe brain fever."

Davoren paused to note the effect this news had on his silent captor. His bright pink eyes gleamed mockingly back at Vincent's icy, mistrustful gaze.

"See, the Professor wanted to make sure we all remained somehow yoked under his command, no matter where we went, no matter how much time passed. He wanted to make sure when it was time to complete the experiment, we'd be in his control (or at least under his thumb). We all have some brain device in our heads, but each serves a different function."

"What do you mean 'different function'?"

"You and I got one. It's to keep us under his control . A-25...that's the girl's specimen codename, she has one too in her brain. Not for the lungs, of course. It would have killed her instantly. She's not...abnormal like us. Hers actually is a kind of tracking device. The Professor can track her down mentally, but not everywhere. She has to be really close by, or out in the open, like here."

Davoren tiredly rubbed his temples as he concluded at last, "The boy has a brain device too, but it's activated with a damn brain scanner, not mentally like the rest of us. He's a rather....special case. See, we all have a little brain device inside our heads, each for a different purpose. It's a really complicated web, but everything adds up to the experiment in the end, just like a jigsaw puzzle."

Silence once more.

Vincent brooded over this new information: it all became so clear now. As long as Aeris had remained safe in the apartment, the signal could not be received; so they had no idea where to find her. Yet the minute she had stepped outside, Hojo had picked up her signal, and pin-pointed her location. Davoren wasn't psychic. The Professor had merely informed him of the girl's location. That explained how he had discovered her that miserable day, and how he found her again tonight.

"So, what you're saying, is that the Professor has been mentally causing my fits...to bring me under his control?" Vincent inquired, wearied of the lengthy interrogation as well as his illness.

"Hmmm...I suppose you could say that. He knows you'd never just give in to him like I did. The plan was he'd weaken you with coughing fits....make you so sick and helpless, so that when I found you, you'd be an easy target."

Vincent made no comment about the underhanded scheme, at least not aloud.

"Well, easy for *HIM* to say! I'm the one who does all the hard work here. But I didn't find you that quickly, and when I did, you beat me. Yes, your resistance and endurance have both FAR exceeded the Professor's expectations. You certainly got the old coot fuming around, screaming for your head. Heh heh..you two never got along that well, did you?"

Vincent frowned at Davoren's pleasantry, but remained morosely silent. His thoughts searched for a proper meaning to this madness: the interrogation had certainly enlightened him to many truths, yet had also created more questions without any answers. It all centered around an "experiment", into which all the puzzle pieces fitted to form a whole picture.

But what was this picture? None of the pieces made sense, just confusing, irregular shapes.

So brutally, so suddenly, the fit cut off his train of thoughts: it would no longer be suppressed.

A most violent, sudden surge of pain ripped clean through Vincent's lungs. The ruthless attack had completely caught him off guard, being ten times stronger and indescribably fierce.

In the worst possible timing, Vincent had finally lost control over the brutal illness. He staggered heavily to the side, coughing the life out of his ravaged chest while fighting for air. Hot blood gargled up his throat. The fever and dizziness instantly drowned his senses. He could not breathe, see, or steady himself anymore.

With a vicious sneer, Davoren embraced the opportunity.

The gunman immediately sprang to his feet, at the same time yanking out his grey gun from its holster. With one ruthless swing, he struck the butt of his weapon right under Vincent's chin. The savage blow sent Vincent sprawling onto the stony ground, where he tumbled over a few times, still coughing violently.

He had no strength to wrestle this fit or repress the pain. They both wreaked vengeance against his battered body. He lay there so helplessly on the ground, hacking and heaving in coarse, loud gasps.

The agony stretched into an eternity. Chaos swam around his numb head. He wondered why he was still alive; the gunman should have killed him by now.

At long last, the attack eased off a step to gloat over its success. Vincent found himself writhing weakly on his back, each gasp a stab to his bleeding lungs. The gun had somehow slipped out of his fingers, probably when he had been knocked down. His sore, wounded limbs burned in feverish flames. He felt faint to the point of nausea.

When his eyesight finally returned, Vincent found Davoren looking back down at him.

The triumphant gunman stood tall, vindictively watching his fallen enemy struggle in misery. His cold face expressed nothing but cruel delight. His shiny grey gun hung tightly by his side.

Indeed, the tables had turned most cruelly against poor Vincent once again. He lay at Davoren's complete mercy; a word which held no meaning to that man whatsoever.

A heavy silence.

"A few days ago, you had this murder of a fever, huh? Bet it even knocked you out cold for a while," Davoren remarked amusedly, "That was the Professor's way of helping me out. He gave you that nasty attack...just messed you up right to the point of brain fever. He wanted to make sure *next* time we met, you'd be in really, really BAD shape, like you are right now. I got...additional back-up this time."

Vincent only forced his head away in contempt.

"Aw, don't be so mad just because I fight dirty. Heh heh...well, I'd say I pretty much have you cornered: the girl from one side, those mercenaries from another, me another, and then the Professor hanging like a plague on top of you. Tonight just isn't your night, is it Mr. Valentine?"

No reply; Davoren didn't expect any.

A stampede of loud footsteps quickly rushed towards the scene. Though they had most certainly retreated, the three mercenaries hadn't abandoned their leader just yet (not with such a generous reward at stake). Instead, they had fallen back some distance, and anxiously awaited a gunshot, a cry for help, or any sound in fact. On hearing the loud skirmish, they had instantly raced over again, guns out and ready.

They found their leader standing tall over the fallen enemy, his back fully turned to them. The three men gaped a moment at the sight, then instantly thronged behind Davoren. They howled out rowdy cheers and relieved swears: victory had chosen their side! What mattered their dead comrades? The reward would compensate the loss!

Their joyous excitement, however, quickly died down with one wave of Davoren's hand. The three silent men lingered behind like hungry wolves, turning from Davoren's stubborn back then down to Vincent, who lay heaving in pain on the ground. None of them spoke a word, but anticipated the command to kill this prize prey.

All this time, Davoren had kept his eyes fixed down on Vincent, who in return, kept his diverted to the side. Both their faces maintained a hard, unnaturally stoic expression.

"Where is the girl, Mr. Valentine?" demanded the gunman icily.

Vincent understood why his life had been prolonged: Davoren still hadn't captured Aeris. No one except himself knew for sure where she had disappeared.

However, he remained silent.

"Where is she, Mr. Valentine?" repeated Davoren.

Still no answer.

The brutal kick came right into Vincent's side, just below his rib cage. He rolled sharply to the side as he fought to suppress the violent pain. He gnashed his teeth, and squeezed his eyes so tightly. Davoren watched on a moment or two before delivering another powerful kick, this time against Vincent's head.

With a sharp grunt, poor Vincent unresistingly rolled onto his stomach. He writhed on the ground, one hand clutching his injured side as though he could perhaps tear the pain away. His gasps grew coarse again. A stinging numbness buzzed around his head.

Davoren stood emotionlessly over the suffering man, while the three uneasy mercenaries fidgeted behind. When Vincent still insisted on his silence, the gunman squatted down beside him. Very callously, he lifted Vincent's head up by the hair, then twisted it up so that they could see each other.

"I'll ask you one last time, Vincent: where is she?" Davoren whispered softly. A vicious pink fire lit up his eyes.

Nevertheless, Vincent would not speak.

Scoffing contemptuously, the ruthless gunman flung Vincent's head back against the stony ground. The battered man lay flat on his stomach. His limbs trembled from fever and illness. He could hardly breathe.

Davoren stood up again. He forcefully implanted one foot against Vincent's back, taking no heed of the man's irregular gasps.

"Alright, girl! I know you can hear me!" he ordered in a loud, clear voice, "Mr. Valentine has done a marvelous job protecting you, and that's to say the very least. I truly am impressed! Unfortunately for him, he's fallen under my shoe, and here's my gun, pointed right at his head!"

In saying that, Davoren aimed the deadly weapon at its intended mark. Vincent had no strength to move.

"It's make no difference to the Professor," Davoren assured with a sneer, "He doesn't care if I bring back Vincent dead or alive, and sure as Hell, I don't care either. However, *IF* you'd prefer him alive, then come out and we'll....negotiate his life."

A long, dead silence answered the proposition.

Vincent kept his scornful eyes lowered to the very ground. His chest heaved up and down, trying to squeeze in a breath under Davoren's heavy foot. The terrible gunman scanned the black surroundings suspiciously. He kept his gun rigidly fixed on his victim's head without wavering.

No one appeared; not a sound stirred.

"Uh...Mr. Davoren, s-sir?" suggested one of the mercenaries hesitantly, "...maybe she ain't here...maybe..she ran away..."

"Yeah! She probably did!" voiced another mercenary, rather stupidly, "This bastard sure kept us busy long enough for..."

"Run away?" snorted Davoren in a spiteful but calm voice. A most sinister smile curled his lips, "Run away, and leave her precious guardian angel alone in the hands of a devil like me? I think not. She's here, no doubt about it."

The mercenaries fidgeted in an uncomfortable silence, casting nervous glances at each other then at their leader.

"I...I don't think she's here, Sir," ventured one of the men, trying his best to sound brave, "We all got caught up with chasing this freak around. The girl must've taken off by herself in the middle of the fight..."

Davoren gave all three men one sharp look behind his back to strike them silent again. Frightened by the malicious stare, they fumbled awkwardly in their spots, but dared not open their mouths anymore.

Vincent hadn't lifted his vacant eyes from the ground during this entire time. His face, haggard from illness and exhaustion, remained expressionless.

The gunman glanced around one last time, then announced sternly, "I'll give you to the count of three to come out, my dear, then I'll shoot him."

Vincent shut his eyes. He knew the threat would go unanswered. The mercenaries spoke the truth: Aeris had fled the park long ago. She would never return. To be sure, Davoren was mistaken in his notion. He was only talking to the empty woods.

"One," began the countdown.

Nothing.

"Two."

Still nothing.

"Three!"

Tense apprehension, anxious expectation, but no gunshot.

Strange, a heavy silence had followed instead of a loud bullet. Vincent slowly re-opened his eyes, confused by this unnatural stillness. He still lay pinned under Davoren's foot; the gun still pointed at his head. Then why hadn't there been an ear-splitting gunshot? What did this silence mean?

His eyes happened to stray over to one of the trees right across the road. Vincent stared in absolute shock, as if struck by lightning. He had found the reason.

There stood Aeris, breathless and on the verge of tears. She hadn't run away after all.

-End of Chp.42

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.43

In his moment of triumph, Davoren smiled to himself in delicious self-satisfaction. Playful malice lit up his pink, evil eyes.

"Ah! So there you are, my dear!" he greeted amicably.

Aeris stood some distance away from these men, rooted by a stout, knotted tree along the roadside. The feeble lamp light fell on her face and figure, while the surroundings remained in pitch darkness.

She did not speak, but gasped hard for air, at the same time trying to repress her tears. Evidently, she had flown here at top speed; small beads of perspiration gently trickled down her forehead; her bosom heaved up and down.

Her whole face expressed painful distress, if not tumultuous horror, as she stood witness to this brutal scene. Both fear and alarm had gathered into her green, tearful eyes. A pink flush coloured her cheeks, making her appear quite distraught but all the more beautiful. She trembled non-stop.

Without a doubt, this horrible gunman terrorized her to the bottom of her heart. Nevertheless, she faced him fully, eyes anxiously fixed on his.

It took Vincent a long moment to realize that Aeris had actually returned instead of escaping as believed. Still pinned flat under Davoren's foot, he stared in disbelief at the shaking girl. All his muscles had frozen solid. He hardly noticed the terrible pain clawing his lungs. Indeed, this new shock had struck him dumb.

Davoren, on the other hand, stood triumphant over his prize catch, one foot riveted into Vincent's back, the gun unmistakably aimed at the man's head. The calm yet smug look on his face gave him a most sinister appearance, especially with his black trench coat dirtied and tattered from the previous battle.

The three mercenaries, much impressed with their leader's incredible foresight, lingered behind in a forced silence. Each man eyed the distressed girl too curiously, with an inane smirk or meaningful nudge to his comrade. Their guns were lowered, their demeanor at total ease.

The heavy silence endured for a whole, painful minute.

"Heh! All this time, you had the perfect opportunity to escape. Now if you had run away, I wouldn't have been able to find you again," Davoren laughed. He lifted his foot from Vincent's back, then scraped the dirty sole of his shoe into the man's head, "But then, I knew you'd never tear yourself away from Mr. Valentine. Well, I'm not complaining! You sure saved me the trouble of searching for you all over again."

Aeris clasped her hands over her heart, but said nothing.

"Now then. Let's get down to business, shall we?" invited the cruel gunman. He stepped away from his fallen victim.

Grabbing Vincent by the collar, Davoren roughly yanked him off the stony ground. He held him upright from behind, so that poor Aeris could behold "her guardian" in his worst state.

Vincent had no choice but to succumb to this rough treatment. The fever, dizziness, injuries, and nausea had wrecked him to the brink of unconsciousness. If Davoren had released him at that moment, he would

have undoubtedly collapsed down like a rock. Coarse gasps escaped his raging chest. He felt so weak, so heavy.

Yet Vincent still stared fixedly at Aeris as though she were a ghost. The girl, however, avoided his look at any cost. It seemed all her painful misery might explode if she ever met his eyes.

Davoren waited another moment before suddenly yanking Vincent slightly to the side, so that Aeris could now see him too. The gunman still kept a tight grip on his prisoner, holding him close from behind to prevent any escape.

Vincent hung by the collar without a breath of resistance; he had none to offer.

"Y'know, I've just about had to with this guy," Davoren remarked playfully, "I've been trying to kill him all night, and haven't quite succeeded yet. I certainly didn't expect Mr. Valentine to survive this long, especially in his sick condition."

Saying that, Davoren shoved his gun into the back of Vincent's head, then cocked it loudly. Aeris gave a horrified start, nearly crying out something.

"I suppose now that I have the chance, I should just finish off this tedious business. It'll only take one bullet," the gunman joked, all the more amused by her frightened reaction.

Aeris' ordeal only grew worse.

"But instead, we'll compromise and save each other the heartache: if you surrender without any fuss or tears, I'll spare Vincent's life. I won't release him; the Professor still wants him, but I will not kill him."

The proposal frightened the poor girl. She cringed a step back in spite of herself.

"You come over here quietly, everything will be nicey-nice. You refuse, we'll shed more blood, and it'll only be Vincent's," Davoren warned sternly on noticing her hesitation. He pressed the muzzle further into Vincent's head, "Trust me, girl. If I shed his blood, it'll be all over this park in one long, messy streak."

Vincent angrily scoffed under his breath at this "compromise". Aeris could not speak.

"His precious life rests in your hands, my dear," concluded the gunman icily, "It's all up to you now. You decide."

A long, stiff silence followed.

All eyes rested on poor, tearful Aeris. The girl stood alone, overwhelmed by fear and wretched anguish. She stared so imploringly at the gunman. She silently begged for pity, even a tinge of compassion, in her distress.

Yet she found nothing save ruthless cruelty in those gleaming pink eyes. Davoren gazed back at her with icy sternness, unmoved by her pleading look. He had dictated the terms, and would not on any account have them otherwise.

He held Vincent upright, the gun stubbornly fixed against the man's numb head. His finger twitched on the trigger: that threat had been no idle bluff; he would shoot if need be.

Aeris dropped her miserable green eyes to the ground. She still made no reply, nor did anyone interrupt her lonely moment of despair. Here she stood at the crossroads, which path to choose? Her freedom, or his life?

Trapped in this choking grip, Vincent could only await Aeris' choice in anxious anticipation. He found it impossible to breathe. The fit mercilessly tore his ravaged chest from one side, this prolonged silence from another.

He didn't want to hear her say it. Whatever happened, he did not want to hear her say.....

"...if I surrender...you...you won't kill him..?" Aeris asked quietly all of a sudden.

On hearing her, a painfully intense emotion seized Vincent by the heart. His eyes froze on the girl's face. To contrast, Davoren smiled victoriously.

"I won't," he reassured.

"You swear...*swear* you won't kill him?" insisted the suspicious girl, looking him straight in the eye, but herself looking so frightened, "You'll just...stop all of this...you won't kill him... if I let you take me?"

Davoren's wry smile twisted into an evil grin.

"You have my word of honour as a gentleman. I will not kill him," he promised. The malice blazed ever so viciously in his bright eyes.

For one moment, the two dealers gazed intently at each other. Aeris stared at the gunman, who kept a firm hold on Vincent while patiently awaiting her final consent. The three mercenaries still lingered behind. They chuckled under their breath or smacked their lips in delight: the victory grew sweeter every minute!

Vincent only stared at her in suppressed silence, as a prisoner awaiting his death sentence.

At last, the girl decided.

Crushed to total desperation, Aeris heaved a most pitiful sigh to the heavens above, then hung her head. Slowly, she stepped towards the gunman. She had surrendered.

The violent emotion swelled further inside of Vincent. He tore his eyes away, then bowed his head down in silent resentment. The dangling hair strands obscured his face in shadow.

Aeris walked straight to captivity. She crossed the gravel road without looking at anyone. Both hands rested on her bosom.

Davoren watched her approach until she stopped only three steps away, exactly in front of him. He looked her top to bottom, then let his evil pink eyes linger on her tearful but lovely face.

"There now. You're a good girl," he praised, quite pleased with her choice. He did not lower his gun or release his victim.

Aeris stood petrified in her spot. Her eyes, a green ocean of sorrow, remained lowered. The gunman had her now, trembling, helpless, and completely under his control.

Vincent neither spoke nor lifted his head. He was silent.

The victorious Davoren nodded behind towards one of the men, to the one with the rather large, muscular build. Instantly, the mercenary marched over behind Aeris, and dropped both heavy paws on her shaking shoulders. The poor girl only squeezed her eyes shut. She did not resist.

After a long, hard battle, the mission was done. The two had finally been captured without a hope of escape.

"I'm touched by your sacrifice, my dear," Davoren admired, his voice dripping in venomous mockery, "You've fought so hard to escape the Professor. And all this time, you've managed to stay out of his reach."

A bitter sob escaped the hapless girl, but she immediately pressed her hands over her mouth to suppress it.

"And yet, she'd return to all of that just for *you*," marveled Davoren amusedly. He jerked the morose Vincent closer, "Ah! What a soft-hearted little darling she is to trade herself for your life, Mr. Valentine."

No reply; only a contemptuous silence.

The three mercenaries burst into coarse laughter. They praised Lady Luck to the skies, and cheered themselves for a victory well-earned (even though Davoren had fought the most). Nevertheless, the gunman chuckled in with them, far more composed but equally as pleased at the outcome. After all, they had won.

Aeris kept her head bowed in total submission amidst this rowdy rejoicing. However, on sensing a pair of burning eyes pierce into her, she peeked up. She discovered Vincent gazing so fixedly at her face. He had lifted his head again.

A most peculiar fire set his deep crimson eyes ablaze. His expression was hard and ice-cold, as if chiseled from marble.

He had dived straight back into this desperate battle for her sake. He had fought all night long against so many enemies, himself sinking into this weak, wasted state. All his strength and concentration had been expended to buy her time to escape, even at the risk of his own life.

And after all of that, she still returns? After all that sweat and blood, she openly surrenders herself, and right in front of him no less?

Suddenly, the red flame in Vincent's eyes burst into rage.

"...forgive me, Aeris," he apologized coldly, "but....I don't want your sacrifice!!"

A demonic power exploded inside of him, far too fast for anyone to even expect it. Even Davoren was caught off guard.

Regardless of the gun or this tight captivity, Vincent forcefully rammed his whole elbow back into Davoren's stomach. The gunman instantly doubled over in sharp pain, stunned by the powerful (and most unexpected) blow. Vincent immediately followed up the attack. In one violent motion, he swung his full metal claw around, right against the side of Davoren's head.

The astonished gunman staggered sideways against the heavy blow. With one forceful yank, Vincent tore himself free of the grip, at the same time snatching Davoren's gun from his own hand. So swiftly, without hesitation, he swung around, and opened fire.

Vincent shot Davoren's head, neck, and heart point blank in one deadly sweep. The entire breakout, start to finish, had only lasted an unbelievable five seconds.

Vincent did not bother to see Davoren stumble violently backwards then crash to the ground, nor would he wait for the thunderstruck mercenaries to react. In the blink of an eye, he reached for the astonished Aeris, who shrieked on being so roughly yanked forward. At the very same instant the girl was snatched, the mercenary behind her was shot twice, both times through the skull.

"AARGH!!! YOU DAMN BASTARD!!!" roared one mercenary wildly. The two men opened full fire in a mad frenzy.

As quickly as he had pulled her forth, Vincent ruthlessly shoved Aeris far away from himself. He instantly dodged the crazy gunfire by rolling over to the opposite side. His agility was unreal, as if possessed by the maddest demon. Vincent immediately recovered his balance, and returned fire before either enemy realized it.

He killed another mercenary on the second shot, but hit the last man's arm when suddenly, the gun ran out of bullets. Vincent spat out an angry curse: not only had the ammo finished, but his eyesight had deteriorated; he had initially aimed for that mercenary's head, not arm.

Vincent instantly reacted without even thinking. Mustering all his strength into one final effort, he hurtled the useless weapon straight at the screaming, wounded mercenary. The gun spun wildly through the air, where it flew like a bullet into the man's face, right against his forehead. The violent blow sent the last enemy sprawling onto the ground. He tumbled over, then lay face down on the ground. He did not move anymore.

It had all happened so quickly. Aeris, who had huddled down on the ground during this brutal shoot-out, lifted her head again. She found four dead bodies scattered around, with Vincent the victor of this bloodbath.

Yet he didn't wait a moment to catch his breath, not even to wipe the sweat off his face. After killing the last mercenary, Vincent immediately dashed towards the girl. Without stopping, he swept Aeris off the ground, then slung her over his shoulder. He happened to spot his own gun discarded in the way. He snatched it up while running at top speed.

Vincent rushed through the park. Black shadows, twisted and horrible, zipped by. The roads wound into an endless maze, under arbors or snaking around thick undergrowths. Nevertheless, he kept up the mad pace without thought or heed. Vincent dived through the darkest paths possible, trampling straight through brittle bushes or staggering over sharp stones. He never slowed down, not even a step.

Slung thus over his shoulder, Aeris could hear the fit inside ravage his wasted lungs to pieces. On the other hand, Vincent hardly took notice of the violent pain. He seemed to derive all his furious strength and speed from a demon within. Hard stubbornness, if not sheer anger, separated him from unconsciousness. He only saw the escape route, and would not be thwarted.

The run lasted an unbearable eternity, down narrow pathways, through a labyrinth of forests, until suddenly it all ended. Vincent fled through the main gateway straight across the empty street, where he dodged into the blackest, dingiest alley he found.

They had escaped the park at last.

-End of Chp.43

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.44

Darkness spread its horrible wings across the vast sky, proving itself still ruler of the night. The pearly moon and a bright sea of diamond stars all swirled into this black void. Against such a dark canvas, they tried in vain to light the haunted, grim land below.

The city of Midgar remained silently humble under such a majestic canopy. Not a light flickered through any window; not a soul stirred anywhere. Emptiness re-echoed through the streets. Every shop lingered in bleak shadow. Darkness and tranquility, always the best of friends, wandered the city hand in hand.

The old bridge just beyond the city centre hung in desolate shadow too, even though the glass lanterns on opposite ends fought to light it up. A plain, stony structure, it overlooked an open train-tunnel down below. The stiff iron tracks ran under this bridge and straight through the open tunnel, where they then disappeared underground again. A huge signal gantry arched high over the tracks. Black cables and three orange lights, all dead, festooned this metal framework. Everything was quiet.

When all his strength had crumbled again, and most of the fury calmed once more, Vincent came, or rather staggered to a halt over this bridge. He tiredly slipped Aeris off his shoulder, then slumped back against the stone parapet.

That frenzied rush half-way across the sector had wrecked him. He had spent the last fifteen minutes racing like a madman through deserted streets, at the same time carrying Aeris, and wrestling his wretched illness.

Many times he had nearly stumbled over, or sometimes lunged into alleys he did not know, yet rushed on all the same. Finally, when he believed they had escaped far enough, he had decided to pause a minute on this bridge, if only to catch his breath.

Once Vincent had stopped, the exhaustion crushed him to the point of total unconsciousness. His body writhed against the stone parapet. He covered his mouth with his trembling hand, desperately hoping to control the coughing bout. Fit and fever revealed the delicious flavour of his pain. The poor man could not dispel this sickly giddiness from his head.

Needless to say, Aeris was by his side in a second. She rubbed his heaving chest to ease his breathing, or patted his hot cheeks to keep him awake. He couldn't lose consciousness; not now, not when they seemed so close to safety.

The torture continued a few more minutes.

Dizziness had so entangled his battered senses, Vincent's wobbly legs suddenly failed him. The distraught man almost collapsed under his own weight, but luckily, Aeris caught his arm in time. She frantically tried to steady him again.

Yet much to her shock, Vincent angrily shoved her away, then turned his back in cutting resentment. A cold wall of silence immediately sprang up between them.

Aeris gaped blankly at him, bewildered to confusion by that hostile repulsion: he had pushed her away as if loathing her very touch!

Vincent struggled to regain balance by himself, while poor Aeris watched on without a word. He heavily leaned his side against the parapet, but still remained aloof to the anxious girl behind him.

Time dragged by. At last, the fit quenched its vivacious thirst for blood, and slowly receded to a dull pain again. Vincent eagerly smuggled a few breaths through his gasps, which soon died away with the trembling. His heavy head, bowed down up to now, gradually lifted itself up. Sweat poured down his face; blood dripped off his battered arm onto the cobble-stone pavement.

The violent storm had passed. Feeling a bit of strength trickle back into his sore muscles, Vincent finally steadied himself again. Though he stood on both feet now, his claw held onto the parapet for support. Indeed, he still felt slightly dizzy from the hellish fever (not to mention that bloody fight).

He did not turn around, not even a glance to ease the girl's anxiety. The unnatural silence stretched into a long, agonizing minute.

"Why didn't you escape like I told you?" the man asked dryly at last.

Aeris cast her guilty green eyes down. She said nothing.

"Aeris, when I ordered you to run away, why didn't you obey?" he repeated sternly.

More hesitation without a reply.

"Answer me!"

"...I c-couldn't..," she faltered, startled by his sharp tone.

There was another awkward pause. Both remained silent, one struggling against a turmoil of emotions, the other coldly detached.

"Do you want to go back to that laboratory?" Vincent asked bluntly all of a sudden.

Aeris started at the strange question, more at the vexed tenseness of his cool voice. She fumbled nervously.

"Do you want to go back to the Professor?"

"...n-no...I...."

"Then why did you come back?" he interrupted coldly, the irritation suddenly turning to restrained vehemence, "He almost had you, Aeris. He was going to return you to the laboratory...right back to the Professor."

"..but he..," she protested meekly, "..he promised not to kill you if..if I..."

"And you *actually* trusted his word?!" Vincent retorted aloud. Without warning, he swung around, and glared at the frightened girl straight in the eye.

Poor Aeris shrunk a step away, torn by grief and shame. She found his face unnaturally cold, especially in this bleak shadow: his eyes flashed like rubies under knit brows. An ominous scowl darkened his haggard face. Vincent towered over the guilty girl, his anger drilling right into her shaking heart. In return, Aeris hung her head without a word.

"There was no room for compromise..none!" Vincent scolded quite severely, "He would have killed me in either case, whether you surrendered or not. He'd never spare my life. He wants me dead, and ONLY dead!"

Aeris couldn't defend herself against this bitter rebuke, nor would the anxious tears stop from flooding her eyes. So many emotions tumbled inside of her, yet failed to turn to words.

"I told you to run away," Vincent insisted, "I said I couldn't protect you anymore. I left you back there, all that time sure you've escaped. But then not only do you return, you give yourself over to him! Why did you come back?"

Though his voice was neither loud nor wild, the girl could not bear his resentful tone any longer.

"Because I didn't want to see you die!!" she cried as she buried her misery into both shaking hands. Aeris turned slightly away, then sobbed out, "When...when Davoren said he'd spare your life...I didn't really believe him. I saw the lie on his face. But..inside of me, I hoped he'd keep his word. I'd have done anything he asked....I.. I just didn't..."

Rage seethed inside of Vincent as he listened to this woeful outpouring of tenderness. Without heed or pity, he cut her short by grabbing her arm, the roughly yanked her towards him, where only a few inches of air separated their faces. Aeris blinked confusedly back at him, her wild distress growing all the more obvious. Her arm trembled non-stop in his tight grip.

"You've certainly got nerve, little girl," Vincent murmured in such a low, cold voice as he studied her face, "You spend your nights crying in bed about how much you never want to go back...how badly you want to feel safe. And then, when you get the chance, you rush straight back to get captured."

"I DON'T CARE!!!!" she angrily screamed back.

A surprised silence followed.

She stood in his tight grip, breathless with her own passionate outburst. Vincent withdrew his face an inch away, then silently watched her fight a futile battle against tears. In truth, the violence in her voice had somewhat surprised him.

"..y-you had no right to push me away like that..," Aeris reproached him bitterly, feeling the misery pour from her bosom, "..back there in the forest..you had no right to shout in my face, and tell me to leave, when you knew I wanted to stay."

Vincent only loosened his grip on her arm as a response.

Aeris swallowed a heartful of sobs before continuing in a soft, quivering voice, "I..tried to run away like you ordered me..I really did.... but there were all these gunshots in the air..they were all so loud. And..and all I could see was Davoren murdering you...ripping you to pieces, with those horrible pink eyes of his just laughing at you.."

The vivid picture redoubled her wretched ordeal. Aeris suddenly looked up at the man, her whole face contorted with pain.

"That's all I saw...and I couldn't run anymore!!" She cried in anguish, "You were asking too much of me, Vincent! I had to come back!!"

Vincent said nothing. His expression was perfectly stoic, betraying not a twinge of emotion. However, his thoughtful eyes dwelled very keenly on the girl's miserable face.

"I don't want to go back to the Professor....I never want to go back there ever again," Aeris whimpered to herself softly, "But Vincent, I'd rather go back there than lose you.....you mean much more to me than...than anything else I...."

He did not let her finish. Vincent gently drew her closer, and embraced her all to himself. Aeris buried her face into his chest without any resistance. She immediately dissolved into hot tears.

Both Vincent's arm and claw pressed her dearly, with his head bowed down against her shaking shoulder. The more distraught she became, the more protectively he hugged her, until he could feel her pitiful heart pound against his. He even began to cradle her in hopes of soothing her tearful agitation.

"Shh...it doesn't matter anymore, Aeris," he whispered as he stroked her hair, "It doesn't matter. He's dead. he's dead."

Yes, Davoren was dead. It meant she could rest a bit easier now, knowing no white-haired monster would ever hunt her down again. It meant, at least for now, no one would try to drag her away. Davoren was dead, himself alive, and the girl here and safe.

Yet at the same time, some vague, troublesome feeling pestered Vincent as he beheld Aeris weep in his arms. His fingers paused midway through her hair; his eyes became engrossed in some obscure, gloomy contemplation. However, he soon shoved this ominous thought far away from his weary mind. They were safe now; nothing else mattered.

Though surrounded all around by ghostly darkness and death-like silence, the two lingered a long time on this lonely bridge. At last, when Aeris had calmed down again, Vincent slowly released her. The mollified girl rubbed her tearful, downcast eyes with many soft snuffles. She was exhausted, but nevertheless soothed after her cry.

Vincent checked her another moment just to make sure she was alright, then tiredly slumped sideways against the parapet again. He too felt wretchedly drained and tired.

"Let's go home," he suggested gently.

Aeris glanced up at him, then smiled in consent. She helped steady Vincent back onto his feet, who now found it painfully impossible to walk without her support. When ready, they turned around to finish the long journey homeward.

No sooner had they turned than they both froze solid, as if struck by lightning.

No words could describe Vincent's blank shock or Aeris' dumbfounded horror. there they stood rooted to the spot, gaping back at a vicious pair of pink eyes.

Not an illusion, not a ghost. Davoren stood at the very head of the bridge, only a short distance in front of them.

-End of Chp.44

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.45

Davoren was alive.

The gunman's face, though dirtied and quite pale, expressed cool composure. To contrast, his eyes glared like a wild pink fire. His black trench coat and suit were torn, especially at the bottom. His silvery-grey gun, the same Vincent had "borrowed" then flung away, now hung tightly by his side.

There were absolutely no marks where Vincent had shot him, not even the smallest scratch.

The heavy silence endured for a long, awkward minute.

Vincent's mind raced to find some explanation to this impossible sight, all the while gaping incredulously at the gunman: he could not guess when Davoren had crept here, more importantly, how he could have survived. He *knew* he had shot this man. The range had been too close for him to miss, even with his blurry eyesight. Then how could Davoren possibly...

"...I...I shot you," Vincent whispered hoarsely to the gunman.

Davoren lifted one eyebrow quizzically.

"I shot you!" Vincent choked out, as if doubting his own words, "I shot your head, neck, and heart! I didn't...I *couldn't* have missed!"

A wry smile slowly twisted Davoren's lips, making him appear all the more sinister in the bleak shadow.

"No, you didn't miss," he affirmed calmly.

He took one step forward, at the same time jamming a cartridge of bullets into his empty gun. However, he did not lift the weapon, but instead gazed so menacingly at the stunned pair.

Vincent became aware of Aeris' body shaking behind him. Indeed, the poor girl had hid again, desperately clinging to his stiff arm. Wild terror marked her whole face. It seemed death itself could not thwart this monster's dogged pursuit.

"You got me all three times. But y'know, Professor Hojo played around with my body too," sneered Davoren, "Don't think you're the *only* one here with the abnormalities."

The move was swift and totally unexpected. With such carefree simplicity, Davoren pressed the loaded weapon into the side of his own head. Before either Vincent or Aeris realized it, the insane man pulled the trigger.

The loud shot rang out through the still air, shattering the silence to pieces. Slowly, it faded away into the night until all was deathly calm again.

Vincent could only gape in mute shock. Aeris remained huddled behind him, her green eyes wide with horror.

Davoren still stood before them, his head slightly tilted sideways, but otherwise unharmed. At his feet lay the fired bullet.

It had literally bounced off his head.

"Infinite resistance to physical injury, high tolerance to pain, that's my little secret," the gunman scoffed at last, "I can raise my level up whenever I want....sorta like a shield. That's how I survived when you dropped the wall on me, and the explosion, and the gunshots. I just raised my level up in time."

It took Vincent a full moment to actually grasp this man's words. Aeris now realized what Davoren had meant when he described his skin as "really, really, really tough". He hadn't been joking at all.

Davoren pushed back his snow-white hair in one sweep, then added rather haughtily, "See my abnormalities are better than yours, Mr.Valentine. Oh sure, you're far more agile and sharp than me. And you got all the raw power hidden inside. But of course, we both know once you tap into that power, it explodes. You automatically lose control of yourself....you'd probably end up destroying everything in your path...even those you're trying so hard to protect."

At here, Davoren glanced briefly at Aeris, then smirked, "The risk is too high for you, so you avoid it all together. I, on the other hand, can control mine so easily. No fuss, no claws or ugly wings. Just one thought, and hoop! Invulnerability!"

Vincent made no comment to the vicious mockery.

"Now, I know what you're thinking!" laughed Davoren, as if telling a funny joke, "You're thinking 'Well, if he's so damn resistant, why'd he bother going through all those nasty tactics and underhanded schemes, when he could have just fought straight out from the beginning', right?"

No one answered.

"Ah! But see, I can only maintain my level up for a short time.... fifteen minutes max, then it starts to crumble down again. And I know from out last encounter, Mr.Valentine, killing you would take much more than fifteen minutes. So, you'd understand why I wouldn't want to just waste it all away in one go. I save it...only use it when I absolutely must. The only person who can kill me outright is the Professor. Now do you understand?"

Vincent understood. Those petty small victories had meant nothing to the final outcome. All the odds had been in Davoren's favour from the very beginning.

They had fought hard throughout the entire night, Davoren simply raising his level whenever necessary. True, Vincent had taken him hostage for a brief time. Yet that he attributed to sheer luck; he had probably attacked Davoren just when his "shield" crumbled. And in all likelihood, the gunman had only succumbed to interrogation to buy himself time: either to rebuild his fallen level or until the coughing fit would aid him (or maybe just to satisfy his sick sense of humour).

In any case, the cunning man left no hope for escape. He had shoved Vincent into the tightest corner: the mercenaries had wearied him; the battle had ruined him; the Professor had wrecked him with fits; Aeris had worried him to near distraction; and of course, when no more strength remained, Davoren would simply finish the rest.

Cruel fate had decided against him.

Drowned by such overwhelming misfortune, Vincent only glared hatefully at the triumphant gunman. He huddled Aeris further behind him: whatever be the consequences, he would not surrender.

The cold air hung in haunted stillness.

Davoren suddenly diverted his attention over to the frightened girl, who cringed away on meeting his hard gaze. He grinned at her through the shadow, his pink eyes savouring her delicious fear.

"Well my dear, we've just about had enough of this running around, "the gunman noted maliciously, "Now, what say we end it all, and I take you back, hm?"

Vincent instantly anticipated the next move.

In the blink of an eye, Davoren lunged at the two, straight for the terrified Aeris. He charged like a mad demon, eyes fiercely set on his target: he would not fail this time.

Vincent barely reacted in time. Snatching the frantic girl by the waist, he instantly flipped sideways onto the stone parapet, then leapt high over the gunman's head. With luck, maybe he could pass overhead then dash away, at least before the assailant could turn around.

Yet much to his alarm, Davoren ruthlessly cut off this escape route. Without heed of hesitation, the terrible man hopped onto the parapet too, then sprang high up into the air, right into the astonished Vincent.

Vincent did not understand until a savage pain suddenly tore clean through his stomach. the blow, swift yet quite powerful, cut his breath short. All sensation of his surroundings shattered to numbness.

Indeed, it had happened only in a moment, while still suspended in air. Davoren, on leaping up, had rammed his entire knee straight into Vincent's stomach.

Though Aeris saw everything, her mind couldn't grasp the meaning at all. She saw Vincent's red eyes constrict in violent pain. She even felt his arm tense around her waist. Everything then swirled around in total chaos. They both seemed to be plunging down, down to a black abyss.

Yet suddenly, Aeris felt a rough force tear her away. She saw Vincent crash shoulder first into the ground, while she just stopped without the slightest injury. In fact, her whole body hung suspended above the ground.

Bewildered by the enigma, Aeris blankly watched poor Vincent tumbled over a few times across the tracks before rolling to an abrupt halt. The man curled up on his injured side, trying in vain to suppress the wild agony. He lay only a short distance away from her.

Strange. Hadn't she been with Vincent just moments ago? Hadn't both of them plunged down? Then how had she...

Aeris at last noticed herself trapped in between arms that felt so unfamiliar. On looking up, she found Davoren's face, only a few inches away, smiling so pleasantly down at her.

The horrible shock struck her speechless.

That brutal blow had sent both Aeris and Vincent flying clear over the stone bridge, down towards the train tracks below. However, Davoren had snatched the girl away moments before impact. So while Vincent crashed onto the iron rails, the gunman had landed gracefully on both feet, with Aeris safe in his arms.

Davoren had remained squatted down after landing. He gazed quite kindly, almost lovingly, down at the girl, who in return blinked back in total confusion. He held her very closely against himself, one arm wrapped around her back, the other around her two slender legs.

Aeris felt paralyzed, her body so weak in his strong grip. In truth, she had never seen Davoren's face this close.

He had captured her. That meant a return to the torture and never-ending pain; her body trembling on a cold dissection table, with invisible hands fumbling at her from every side. No safety in the night, no light in the dark maze. He had captured her.

Unable to speak, Aeris turned her head over to Vincent's direction again. A terrible trembling bout seized her.

Though fully aware of the desperate situation, Vincent found himself crushed by weakness. Savage pain tore him inside out as he lay helplessly sprawled on the iron tracks. He squeezed his eyes shut. His hand clutched his battered stomach. With each grunt, Vincent gnashed his teeth then writhed over in further agony. He could taste bitter hot blood in his mouth. Total unconsciousness fingered his weary mind.

He thought he heard Aeris scream out his name. If she did, her voice had sounded far too muffled.

It took Vincent a long time to finally force his eyes open. Blurry shadows and grey shapes danced before him. He felt nauseated beyond endurance.

He easily sensed those vicious pink eyes glaring so vindictively at him. He also felt the wild turmoil storming inside of poor Aeris.

Davoren had torn her from his arms. Yet there remained the grand finale to this long, bloody fight. Vincent knew only too well what it would be: his death.

He waited another moment before deciding to move again. Mustering all his feeble strength one last time, Vincent weakly lifted his head up, rolled onto his stomach, then struggled to his knees. Only through a miracle did he manage to stagger back up to his feet.

He now stood slouched up in his spot for both Davoren and Aeris to behold. His hand dropped off his stomach. Soft gasps, whispers of a hectic fever, escaped his tight chest.

Vincent stared straight at the gunman, crimson eyes darkened to cold, unforgiving hatred. His clothes were soaked and tattered. Dirt, scratches, and blood spatters marked his pale face, with loose hair strands hanging all around. Yet Vincent's face maintained an unnaturally calm, stoic expression.

Davoren only erected himself up from his squatted position. He slipped one arm just under Aeris' bosom, then released her legs, so that she now dangled helplessly by his side.

His strong arm squeezed the poor girl to tears, drawing her so close to himself, almost into his open trench coat. His height seemed all the more impressive now; Aeris' two feet hung at least five inches from the ground.

The two men remained silent for a rather long time.

The empty train tracks stretched to infinity through this open tunnel. The concrete walls rose high up on both sides, while a narrow steel platform for electricity cables ran along the side. Sooty pebbles and dirty snow covered the black ground. The signal gantry, on the other hand, towered high above. Dismal shadow infested the place.

The stillness lasted another minute.

"Well, what now, Vincent?" mocked Davoren at last. His cool, clear voice so nearby startled the poor girl.

Vincent, however, made no reply.

"Heh heh...aren't you going to save your precious little girl? What, are you finally giving up?"

The playful words only received a cutting silence. Vincent's expression remained stone-hard, his brilliant gaze fixed on this brutal man.

Yet far from irritation, Davoren grew all the more amused, especially by this bitter resentment. He suddenly yanked up the horrified Aeris closer, then bent his head down just by her lovely, frightened face. Their cheeks touched.

She swallowed a violent sob as she felt his gentle breath tickle her neck.

"You've fought so hard, killed so many, and wasted yourself away to this sorry state," hissed Davoren, peering so vehemently at the man, "...all to protect her...all to keep her safe from the Professor."

No reply.

"And yet don't you know, Vincent, the Professor won't stop until he has her in his claws...shaking and at his total mercy. That's what she is to him....his darling little specimen."

Still keeping his malicious eyes locked on Vincent, Davoren slowly kissed Aeris' cheek. Her whole body shivered at the loathsome touch; his lips felt icy cold against her skin.

"Hmm....soft as peach and twice as sweet," the terrible gunman breathed playfully into her ear.

Aeris could not endure this torture any longer. Hot tears began to tumble down her cheeks. In her wild anguish, she stared straight at Vincent.

Yet he never once dropped his eyes off Davoren, even as he witnessed the girl's kiss of doom. He remained rooted to the spot, leaden by exhaustion and illness.

The bitter cold air grew heavy under this long silence. The darkness seemed to grow thicker each second.

"I know...you have me right where you want me, Davoren," admitted Vincent with marked coolness, bowing his head slightly, "You've cut me off from every possible direction...I can't fight anymore...I can barely..stay conscious. I know any moment now, you'll kill me...splatter my blood, and drag my dead carcass away."

Davoren did not interrupt.

Vincent gently drew in a breath of air, then added more tiredly, "...you'll take Aeris back to Professor Hojo. She'll be tortured for some 'experiment'...and she'll never escape again. She'll be locked in that nightmare forever."

Poor Aeris stared in horror at the prediction. The gunman still said nothing.

"But mark my words, Davoren, I won't let him, or you, or anyone else have her," vowed Vincent, his calm voice suddenly seething to bitter hostility. His fiery eyes pierced into Davoren, "Kill me and take her if you

will, but I will never let anyone torture her again. If I have to crawl back through the very Gates of Hell, I won't let it happen!"

Another heavy silence followed.

Vincent could say no more. The fervent vow had exhausted him, every word an agony to push out. Yet he still glared fixedly at no one except the gunman. He now awaited whatever may come next.

At last came the final verdict. Davoren mocked those brave words with a most cunning sneer. The grin stretched across his face as his terrible pink eyes narrowed in delight. Not even the devil himself could have matched his evil appearance.

Davoren yanked out his gun, then stretched his arm fully out, with the deadly weapon aimed straight at Vincent.

Aeris gave a violent start on spotting the gun thus outstretched beside her. Vincent, however, faced it without flinching a muscle.

"Now let's see....where to shoot...where to shoot..," mused Davoren aloud, unable to conceal his amusement, "I suppose the head would be appropriate. An eye for an eye, and a brain for a brain, eh?"

No answer. Aeris continuously darted her horrified eyes between the weapon and Vincent. Her hands trembled like mad.

"..but then again, you'd die too soon, and I promised you a painful death. Hmm...so Vincent, I guess I'll just shoot your heart, and watch the life pour out of you...nice and slow!"

Davoren instantly reached for the trigger.

"NO!!!!!!!!!" shrieked Aeris.

Much to Davoren's great astonishment, the frantic girl kicked his forearm up with her knee, just as the loud bullet rang out.

In an instant, Vincent felt a violent pain suddenly rip straight into his left shoulder, sending him sprawling backwards. He saw a wild fountain of dark red liquid gush out into the air. It was his own blood.

The bullet had missed his heart, and hit his shoulder instead.

He crashed onto the iron rails again, then began writhing weakly on his side, all the while clutching his wounded shoulder. Hot blood soaked his entire hand immediately. The savage pain drilled through his flesh into the very bone.

"AAH!!!! V-VINCENT!!!!!!!!!" screamed Aeris in tearful hysterics. She struggled wildly for freedom, tugging at her captor's unrelinquishing arm.

"Goddamn it!!" snarled Davoren at this unexpected interference.

Indeed, Davoren had had enough. He dropped the frantic Aeris, where on snagging her collar, ruthlessly struck the butt of his hard gun clean across her head. Without looking at her, he flung her far away behind him, then marched over to Vincent: the tedious business must be concluded tonight.

Poor Aeris crashed heavily onto her side, where she lay sprawled against the train tracks, unable to lift her head from the dirty ground. The blow had stunned her to painful numbness. She saw the gunman advance quickly towards Vincent, who still writhed in pitiful agony.

She saw the deadly gun in his hand, thirsting for more blood. She wanted to warn Vincent, to stop this madness, yet could not even squeeze out the softest whisper.

Soon, Davoren stopped at his fallen victim. Vincent had curled weakly onto his side, gritting his teeth while his hand fought the profuse outflow of blood. Already, consciousness began slipping into darkness.

The callous gunman eyed Vincent for a brief moment, then rolled him flat onto his back with one kick. Reveling this tasty cruelty further, Davoren forcefully drove his heavy foot against the man's shoulder, right into the bullet wound.

Vincent twisted violently in wild pain, yet somehow stifled his scream down to a hideous, sharp grunt.

"What's wrong, Vincent? No more revolvers up your sleeve?" scoffed Davoren sarcastically.

Vincent could not distinguish between his voice and all the other mad chaos. They both buzzed into his numb ears at once.

He now lay spread out over the train tracks, battered beyond hope. No life remained save a feeble breath.

Without another word, Davoren aimed his gun at Vincent's head: no misses this time.

From her place far behind, Aeris had witnessed this horrifying scene until wild despair overpowered her. She shifted her body around, somehow pushed herself onto all fours, and feebly crawled her way towards the two men. The pitiful girl only managed three inches before collapsing again. Yet she persisted by literally dragging her heavy body across the tracks.

She did not know what she could possibly do, nor did she care. In her mad anguish, she only saw Vincent.

A very, very faint rumbling, like that of thunder, seemed to fill the still air. Aeris paused a moment: she thought she had felt the ground shake. Yet so distraught and confused, she could make no sense of these mysterious signs.

The sadistic gunman, on the other hand, found this victory far too delightful to notice Aeris or anything else. Like his deadly gun, all his attention remained fixed down on Vincent.

Vincent never moved a muscle. Instead, he wearily forced one bloodshot eye half-open. His blurry eyesight lingered a moment on the black muzzle of the gun, then on Davoren's cold face.

Both eyes locked onto each other. One glowed in crimson brilliance, like fresh blood set on fire. The other pair shone in no less brilliance, as pink as sparkling jewels. Neither man spoke.

Aeris still struggled in vain to pull her lifeless limbs forward, if only to stop this hellish nightmare. The rumbling seemed to grow louder. Small pebbles on the ground began to vibrate lightly.

The moment came at last: Davoren reached for the trigger again.

She opened her mouth to scream, when instead a thunderous, booming clamour interrupted the execution. Davoren shot his head back towards the source in alarm; Vincent forced his eye to the far side.

The whole ground shook as a loud surge of rumbling drowned the air. Darkness was obliterated. On looking behind, Aeris felt a brilliant white light blind her eyes. All the chaos seemed to race towards her.

A train suddenly burst through the black tunnel at top speed. It shot forth like a mad bullet, devouring the iron tracks as it headed straight for the three, firstly Aeris.

Davoren instantly reacted. Forgetting everything else including Vincent, he made a headlong dash for the petrified girl. He lunged into the blinding light, where on sweeping Aeris off her feet, immediately sprang high up into the air, just as the wild train zoomed underneath. He had saved her in time.

Still sprawled flat on the ground, Vincent felt the brilliant light plunge him into painful blindness. The insane rumbling deafened his ears. His bleary eyes saw the sharp wheels tearing straight for him.

And that was all he saw.

The heedless train flew down the iron tracks, stretching its full length down the open tunnel. Anything in its way was destroyed.

On leaping up, Davoren had grabbed hold of the signal gantry arched high overhead. He had gracefully flipped on top of the broad crossbar, and there remained crouched down, with Aeris safely tucked under his armpit.

They both watched the speedy train rush by, the gunman in silent irritation, the poor girl in mute shock.

A wild gust of wind blew against the two as this madness whizzed underneath. The hem of Davoren's torn trench coat flapped wildly in the air. His white hair swayed in front of his face. He gripped the girl very closely to himself, while the other hand held onto the bar for balance.

Aeris saw nothing save the loud, mad chaos. Though now clinging to Davoren's coat, she gaped in stupefied horror as the train rushed on below. It zoomed at such an insane speed, one car after another, until she could no longer tell them apart.

The torment lasted an eternity. The clamour suffocated her to tearful madness. There seemed no end to this long metal snake, the wild lights, or these booming noises. They only intensified the turmoil in her mind.

At long, long last, it ended. The train zipped away under the stone bridge, sweeping all its chaos into a dying echo. Soon, shadow and silence returned.

Aeris' frantic eyes searched the tracks up and down, yet found no trace of Vincent. There was the spot where he had lain, even the small pool of blood from his wound, but nothing more. He had disappeared.

The train must have swept him away, shredding his body under their cruel wheels, savouring the flavour of his torn flesh. Davoren had emerged the final victor, she his prisoner, and he dead.

"...no...V...Vincent...," Aeris whispered, pitifully reaching her hand out towards the empty tracks.

Only silence answered. He was not there.

A violent pain swelled inside until her whole heart burst.

"VINCENT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Aeris heard herself scream through the mad turmoil, then suddenly, everything went black.

-End of Chp.45

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.46

The black haziness gradually dispersed from Vincent's eyes, leaving him in a whirl of confused blurriness. A dull pain teased his dizzy senses. He felt cold, numb, and so weak.

He wondered where he was.

Vincent found himself lying flat on his stomach, sprawled weakly over an uncomfortable bed of soot and sharp stones. Most of his face was buried deep into the ground, so that the pungent smell of burnt ash filled his nostrils. Exhaustion pinned him down under its heavy hand.

Without moving his head, he strained one eye around to inspect these unfamiliar surroundings.

It seemed he had somehow fallen into some ditch or gutter below ground level. Hard concrete walls squeezed this filthy place to a long, narrow tunnel. Sewer pipes intermingled with stiff cable lines, all fitted into the rough stonework. Soot, stones, and crushed coal blanketed the entire ground.

Darkness in all its cruelty suffocated this empty ditch to bleak shadow. However, there seemed to be an upper opening along one side of the wall, thus smuggling some moonlight inside. Most probably, Vincent had fallen into this gutter through that opening.

Yet **from where** had he fallen? Try as hard as he may, he could not remember, not even wager a guess.

Vincent at last tried to move. First, he twitched his stiff fingers, then painfully drew up his hand. With one soft grunt, he struggled to get up, at least lift his heavy head, yet soon collapsed back down again. Twice the poor man tried, each time sheer weakness foiled his pathetic attempts.

Finally, after much sweat and effort, Vincent managed to push himself up to one elbow, then miraculously onto all fours.

Though quite trivial, such a laborious task had exhausted him well beyond endurance. He paused a moment to snatch a whiff of air. Vincent's head bent down sharply, where his long black hair dangled against the ground. His arms trembled under his heavy weight. A horrible sickness choked him again.

He suddenly felt a mad surge of pain burble from his chest up through his parched throat. Vincent hardly fought the nausea. He instantly twisted his head aside, and squeezing both eyes tight, heaved out all the vomit and rotten blood in one giant effort. He could not help but grimace at the disgusting, sour hot after-taste in his mouth.

Fortunately however, the whole ordeal soon passed. Vincent huddled weakly against the cold wall, gasping and groping for his muddled senses. That "unpleasant release" has actually removed some of the sickly dizziness and stinging pain. At least he knew he wouldn't faint again.

He waited in this darkness for a few more minutes.

When he felt meager life revive his lifeless limbs, Vincent decided to move again. He wiped his mouth against his torn sleeve, then staggered up to his wobbly feet, all the while supporting himself against the wall. He glanced once more around this dark, dingy tunnel-way, yet still could not recall what had happened.

Rather than fight his befuddled memories, Vincent feebly climbed up the pipe lines towards that opening in the upper wall. He slipped through, and slowly crawled his way under some low, steel platform. When he at last emerged into the open, he found himself back on the main train tracks.

He looked around in tired amazement: there stood the signal gantry, haughtily posed high above all else. The stone bridge hung in its same dismal loneliness. The iron rails extended all the way back into the yawning tunnel, just as always. Emptiness re-echoed in the air. No one was here.

Vincent climbed up to his feet again, then leaned sideways against the wall, gasping so softly to himself. Slow memory floated back: he recalled the brilliant light blind his eyes; the wild rumbling hammer his ears. He then vaguely remembered making one final effort to move. Indeed, he must have rolled himself off the tracks just as the train had passed.

Vincent passively inspected the electricity platform again: he guessed he must have rolled all the way under this steel structure and into that underground ditch, where he instantly lost conscious. No one would have suspected such a gutter to even exist. It lay completely hidden under the platform, well concealed by darkness and other pipe lines.

So if Davoren had peeked under the platform, he wouldn't have guessed any such underground tunnel-way to be there.

Suddenly, Vincent remembered Aeris. His anxious eyes searched the entire place again. They ran from one end of the tracks to the other, up the signal gantry, and under the bridge: nothing. No girl; no gunman.

Davoren had taken her back.

He cast one last wistful glance all around. When sure he would not find Aeris here, Vincent tiredly shifted himself around, then staggered his way along the tunnel wall. Soon, he discovered a ladder. Its russet rungs being built into the concrete, this stiff ladder led straight up to the main street above. Thus began the slow, painful journey upwards.

It took him a long time to reach the top. Wearing by the tedious climb, Vincent heavily tumbled over the parapet, then crashed his back onto the pavement with a sharp grunt. After another miserable struggle, Vincent managed to sit up. He slumped back against the wall, both legs drawn up and head bent low.

He looked the truest picture of despair in his gloomy, forlorn loneliness. Vincent expelled a stiff sigh, then tiredly pressed his fingers against his closed eyes. He did not lift his head.

Davoren had taken her back.

The long, bloody war had stretched far into the night, one hard battle after another, yet what had he to show for it? The one person he had fought so hard to protect had fallen prisoner again. For all his brave efforts, not one had matched Davoren's cleverness; not one had saved Aeris from that brutal deathtrap.

So now, when the victory had been claimed and the dust had settled, what remained? Here he sat, alone, completely crushed, and the girl forever gone. the Professor had swallowed her again, back to that nightmare she dreaded to tears.

Indeed, wasn't it only *yesterday* Aeris had been weeping in his bed, wishing for herself total safety? Just *yesterday* Vincent had embraced her away from those terrible fears, and lulled her to sweet sleep.

Yes, though it seemed ages ago, it was only yesterday.

Then tonight, she is dragged back to her dark dungeon of torture and pain. Against all pitiful pleas and struggles, her simple wish is cruelly dashed aside. For what?

An "experiment".

Vincent scowled coldly on recalling Aeris' miserable, tear-stained face; her frightened expression as the gunman had tormented her in his tight grip. The words "Davoren has taken her back" churned about his head until he could almost hear the gunman's mocking voice whisper them into his ears.

Yes, in the end, Davoren had taken her back.

Hot rage swelled inside Vincent's heart. He angrily released it all by slamming his clenched iron fist straight into the stone pavement. Yet he suddenly writhed aside on feeling a sharp pain gnaw through his left shoulder. The bullet wound would no longer be ignored.

With a soft curse, Vincent attended to this injury. He tore off his tattered overcoat, unbuttoned his uniform-like shirt, and roughly pulled down the left side. He examined the wound for a moment.

The deadly bullet had hit him clean into the main muscle. Dark blood seeped slowly out of the black, swollen hole. It smeared his pale skin in sickly redness, and soaked through his black undershirt.

At least he could rejoice in *one* fact: being "abnormal" also meant he could endure wounds and blood loss far better than ordinary humans.

Vincent turned his immediate attention to dressing this injury. He tore off a long, broad strip from the inner hem of his coat, then stiffly stretched out his other arm. He began to wrap the cloth around the wound, using his mouth in the painful procedure. When he had finished, Vincent buttoned up his shirt, and fumbled his torn coat back on.

That should keep the pain down to a tolerable level, at least until he found a way to get himself proper treatment.

Vincent slumped back against the wall again. Fever, exhaustion, but mostly weary despair weighed on his soul like a heavy rock. He cast his hallow eyes down to the pavement, where his gaze strayed far into thoughtfulness.

A deathly silence hung in the chilly air. Vincent sat alone in his dismal place, stoic outside, yet brooding so intently inside.

What to do now? He knew not where Davoren had taken her. He guessed he had lost conscious for at least an hour, so following the cold trail now would be quite impossible. Then what? Without an idea of her whereabouts, how could he possibly find her again?

Suddenly, an idea struck Vincent: he recalled killing all the mercenaries except *one*. After shooting that man's arm, he had hurtled the empty gun straight into his face. Hopefully, neither the blow nor the wound had killed him. So perhaps, this mercenary could be of some use after all.

Vincent snatched this last hope immediately. He staggered up to his weary feet again, and limped his way back to the park.

-End of Chp.46

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.47

A ghostly silence haunted the eerie battlefield. It floated through the darkness, brushing past frozen tree branches or rolling over the brittle undergrowths. The bullet-ridden trees mourned the cruel disfigurement of their beautiful trunks. The cold corpses lay wherever they had fallen, life having parted the flesh long, long ago. Nothing moved; night oppressed all.

At last, the sole survivor of the bloodbath stirred. The mercenary slowly re-opened his bleary eyes. He found himself lying face down in the frozen stone ground, his arm twisted by his side.

No sooner did he attempt to move than a fierce pain tore at his bloody arm. Instantly, a thousand curses and angry oaths exploded against the wound. The man writhed around onto his back as he groped this battered limb. His eyes happened to glance up.

He froze solid on finally noticing a tall, black figure towering over him, with a keen pair of ruby-red eyes set fixedly on his face.

The wounded man stared back a moment in blank shock, still dizzy and quite confused. However, frantic fear instantly seized him when he recognized Vincent ("the freak with the claw"). The man feebly edged away by beating his two feet back, yet the effort crumbled to a painful grunt. Obviously, it hurt him to even move. So, he curled up on his side in quiet, nervous anticipation.

In return, Vincent gazed down at the frightened man in ominous silence. His face, haggard and filthy, bore an incredibly stoic expression. Not a twinge of emotion marked his calm face, not even the mildest displeasure.

On returning to the park, Vincent had found the wanted mercenary sprawled unconsciously along the side of the gravel road. His less fortunate comrades, the two other mercenaries, lay dead some distance away.

Soon, the wounded man had begun to wake up, whereby Vincent decided to start the interrogation. Therefore, he had stood patiently over the mercenary until at last noticed.

For a long time, neither man spoke.

Vincent coolly looked over the cowering mercenary: the man appeared around his mid-thirties. A hideous scar ran clear across the bridge of his crooked nose. He had light flaxen hair closely shorn, and wore one bandoleer across his broad chest. A thick trail of blood streamed down his dirty face, marking where the gun had struck.

The mercenary curled further under such cold inspection. He peeked up at Vincent from the corner of his eye, clutching his wounded arm in a protective grip. He dared not open his mouth.

Vincent deliberately drew out his black gun, and aimed it straight at the hapless mercenary. The man stared wide-eyed at the muzzle. Sweat broke out.

"Where has he taken her?" demanded Vincent in a cool, toneless voice.

The mercenary blinked in total confusion, as though he hadn't understood the simple question. He tried to grunt out some muddled reply.

"Where has he taken her?" Vincent repeated.

"I..I don't k-know..," fumbled out the frightened man at last.

Vincent only narrowed his cold eyes at the unsatisfactory answer. The gun remained fixed on its deadly mark.

"..I..I don't know nothing, man! I don't!!" insisted the frantic mercenary again, "If y'mean where Davoren took that little girl, I swear I don't know!!"

"You're lying."

"Like shit, I am!! I ain't lying!! I don't know nothing!!"

Vincent did not reply, but instead listened stoically to the incensed mercenary rant over the same claim. The man grew increasingly violent as he struggled to sit up. His thick brows knit through the sweat. Hatred raged in his fearful expression.

"I tell ya, you freak-assed bastard! I know nothing! Nothing!!" he spat in hot scorn, "I know nothing!! Not about Davoren, that girly, or..."

Suddenly, a loud gunshot turned the man's angry insistence to a shrill scream of agony. He crashed back against the ground, howling like a madman while clutching his thigh. Dark blood spurted through his fingers; the bullet had hit quite deep.

Rather than argue, Vincent had simply shot the man's thigh point blank.

At least three whole minutes passed before the mercenary managed to reduce his wild screams to angry groans. He lay slouched on his side, one leg drawn up while his weak hands blocked the blood flow. Both eyes were squeezed shut.

"Where has he taken her?" reiterated Vincent in the same flat tone.

"..argh...Goddamn shit...I.. ugh..," spluttered the wounded man. He grit his teeth, then writhed flat onto his back with another curse.

Vincent waited another moment. When his question passed by unanswered again, he aimed the gun at the man's other thigh. Luckily, the mercenary acted just in time.

"Alright!! Alright!! Shit!!!" he screamed, waving one hand out to signal his surrender. Pain and terror shook his body. He was breathing hard.

At last, Vincent lowered the weapon, and waited in silence. His stone-hard gaze fixed down on the moaning victim. His face remained devoid of any emotion.

After another disgruntled curse, the wounded mercenary began in a shaky voice, "..look...it's..it's this run-down hideout...some junky old lab facility...w-way over in that ghost sector...s-sector 7."

No comment; only the same dispassionate gaze.

"..it's...(ugh! Shit!)....," he grunted through heavy gasps, "The lab facility is hidden under some demolished, old house. You wouldn't think it at first, but the lab's actually under the house... under all the damn rubble 'n junk."

Vincent weighed down each word, but said nothing to interrupt.

The mercenary gulped some air. Sweat mixed into his blood. A sickly paleness discoloured his anxious face.

"S-some days ago...about a week ago, Davoren sauntered into our hang-out," he writhed out weakly, "..said he had this special job for us.. some kinda 'kill and retrieve' mission. He wanted men... lotsa men for the job!"

Vincent did not speak.

"Well, I never heard of him before, and sure as Hell, none of the other boys did. So I wasn't too ready to strike a quick deal with him. But then, the guy said he'd pay us real nice if we took up the job immediately....he said he needed the men now....offered us a friggin' five million gil!!!"

The mercenary squeezed out another horrible oath as the pain stung his limb again. He rattled on with a nervous chuckle in his tremulous voice, "You can imagine, we all laughed in his face! I mean, shit! Five million gil?!! Sure, we get expensive missions once in a while, but FIVE MILLION?!! No one ever offers ****THAT**** much money!!! We all thought he was bullshitting us!!"

He glanced at his silent captor, then gasped out, "..but then, the bastard pulls out his fancy cheque book, and damn! he actually writes down 'five million gil'!!! He wasn't screwing around!! He goes flashing the paper around for everyone to see, saying he'll give it to whoever kills you first. So of course, I jumped at the job!! Hell, we all did!! We just figured he was some hired hitman who needed back-up... or mebbe a wealthy business man on a vendetta. I didn't care! I just wanted all that money!!!"

Vincent listened to the story, growing all the more thoughtful: he agreed Davoren could pass for a rich business man or an assassin. And to be sure, the payment had sounded far too good to be ignored, yet if only true. The clever gunman had merely tricked these fools for his own purposes. Not only had he known Vincent would kill them all, he never had such money from the beginning.

"Davoren...he then led us all over to that damn run-down old lab house...and ordered us to stay there for a while. He said he'd tell us when to attack. We just needed to wait for the right time. I dunno...he seemed to be getting his orders from some 'Professor' or something like that, but that wasn't any of our business. We just waited like he said," here the mercenary stifled a violent grunt, then hurriedly added, "..tonight, Davoren finally signaled the go-ahead. He gave me the orders, and we all moved out."

The mercenary paused a moment as his hard gasps overpowered his hoarse voice. He squeezed out at length, "..but if you go to that lab house now, you won't find anyone there. They...they all m-moved out. Davoren and his Professor-boss...t-there was this other mercenary group too....they weren't with us and we didn't know them....they also moved out with Davoren. Everyone left."

"Where?" demanded Vincent calmly.

"I haven't a shit-ass clue!! I dunno where the Hell they went or why! They just moved out! Gone!!!"

He looked up at Vincent to check his reaction, and shivered on feeling those horrible crimson eyes burn into his face.

"That's all I know!! I swear to God, man!!!" exclaimed the frantic mercenary in pain, "I know nothing more! Shit, if Davoren even finds out I told you all this, he'll friggin'..."

"You were the leader of your group, correct?" commented Vincent very meaningfully. He assumed so based on the fact that Davoren had given him the orders.

"Ah?! Uh..y-yeah...I...," the man stumbled in bewilderment.

"Tell me where has he taken her."

"I just told you! I don't know where they went!! They all left that damn lab house!!"

"You're not answering my question," warned Vincent with such unnatural coolness.

"I am, dammit!! I tell ya!! I don't know!! I don't!!!"

"You say you were leader of your group."

"Yes!!! But..."

"Then you'd obviously know a bit more than you otherwise claim"

"I..ugh...I d-don't..."

Vincent did not wait to hear the rest. He aimed the gun at the man's forehead, and prepared to fire.

Wild, almost insane, terror contorted the mercenary's face as he cringed away on the ground. His bloodshot eyes were wide with fear.

"S-SOME SHINRA LAB!!! A LAB!!!!" he instantly shouted at the top of his lungs, "A SECRET SHINRA LAB HERE IN MIDGAR!!!! THAT'S WHERE THEY ALL WENT!!! SHE'S THERE!!!!!"

"...another lab?" asked Vincent. He still kept the gun aimed.

"I don't know!! Shit!! Shit!! I don't know!!" raved the distraught man, confused by his own violent outburst, "I heard this f-f-from the other mercenary group...they mentioned some secret lab..with all the state-of-the-art science technology and equipment... it used to belong to ShinRa...it's still somewhere a-around Midgar, even after the company went down. It's the secret lab! That's probably where Davoren took her!!"

Vincent said nothing, but instead cast one long, dubious look at the sweaty man.

"I *swear* I don't know where this lab is!!" bellowed the man against the cold scrutiny, "Our mission was only to kill you!! we weren't told anything more!! I just happened to overhear this!! I swear! Dammit, I swear!!!"

A prolonged silence followed this intense cross-examination. The mercenary broke off into a heavy bout of gasping, moaning whenever stung by pain. Vincent stood tall over him with the gun still pointed.

So far, the interrogation hadn't been too successful. When he had discarded all the useless information, Vincent found he hadn't much, at least not enough to answer his simple question. He reviewed his interrogation of Davoren. He scanned through every word spoken in hopes of somehow stumbling across some hint or clue. Unfortunately, Davoren hadn't revealed anything.

"...who is 'the boy'?" inquired Vincent all of a sudden.

The mercenary blinked stupidly back up at his captor.

"Wha?!..b...boy??!" he re-echoed, bewildered by the question.

Indeed, while recalling that last interrogation, Vincent had remembered Davoren mention some "boy".

"What...what boy?!" cried the mercenary again in wild alarm.

"A boy on...a 'brain scanner'."

"What the Hell?! I...I don't know no boy!!"

"And yet, Davoren mentioned one," interjected Vincent rather sternly, "Who is he?"

"B-boy? I...," the man fumbled like a madman, evidently wracking his brains to answer the riddle, "I tell ya, I never...ah!! He...he p-probably meant that loony Rufus kid!!!"

"...'loony Rufus kid?'" muttered Vincent under his breath. His ruby-red eyes narrowed down so sharply on the man below.

"Y-yeah! He's an absolute crack-head of a bastard! Totally nuts!!" spluttered the mercenary, "he goes into all these weird spasms.... just way outta control! I dunno, he's always garbling out this shit about burning up or getting blown apart."

Though Vincent made no comment, his eyes gleamed in deep interest.

"NO ONE can hold that stupid kid once he starts talking crazy like that. He gets too violent and won't listen to anyone! But for some reason, D-Davoren....he's the only one who can calm the kid down again. He just knows how to handle him..."

Another heavy silence followed. Vincent asked no more questions.

The mercenary lay sprawled on his side, exhausted and completely crushed. He lifted his weary eyes one last time to Vincent, as if raising them up to the merciful heavens.

"T-that's all I know," he whimpered out in such a pathetic moan, "I swear, man...I told you everything.....p-please..don't..don't kill me..."

Vincent hardly flinched a muscle. The gun remained fixed on the man's forehead. His cold eyes lingered on the mercenary's pleading anxious face.

He believed him now. Vincent had squeezed all information out until nothing more remained. Yet in the end, he hadn't found any answers, only more questions. This whole "experiment" remained enshrouded deep in mystery. But more importantly, Aeris had disappeared, with only a scrap of information of her possible whereabouts: a ShinRa lab in Midgar.

Slowly, Vincent lowered his gun down to his side, then turned to walk away. The cross-examination had ended; he would spare this man's life after all.

Vincent limped away with his entire back turned towards the mercenary. In return, the humble man huddled his head down in silent thanks, all the while watching his merciful captor stagger away.

However, his frantic fear soon returned to scornful hatred. The treacherous mercenary tactfully reached for something hidden along the side of his bandoleer. In an instant, he yanked out a small revolver, and aimed it straight at Vincent.

He wasn't fast enough. Before the mercenary could even reach for the trigger, Vincent suddenly swung around again and shot him point blank, straight through the skull. He had foreseen this treacherous stupidity.

Vincent coldly flipped the gun back into its holster. He did not bother inspecting the dead corpse, not even a contemptuous glance. He resumed his slow journey down the winding road.

Bluntly speaking, he did not where to go now.

His heavy feet dragged across the ground. His whole face darkened to morose gloominess, almost bleak despair. Soon, Vincent strayed into an entangled web of deep thought and musings. They all clashed against each other for some answer.

A ShinRa lab in Midgar...but *where*? The city was far too huge for a simple search. And this lab, if indeed it be top secret, would be quite impossible to find. Then what to do? The desperate question instantly crashed into a dead-end. In truth, he did not know.

During his unfruitful meditation, Vincent stumbled across that name "Rufus" again. He found himself revolving that particular name over and over in his mind. It sounded quite familiar, as though he had somehow crossed that name several times before. Yet for a long moment, memory failed him.

At last, the answer came in the form of a huge, rather impressive red banner. On it read the words "New Age President of ShinRa", followed by the bold, confident signature of "Rufus".

Of course. Rufus ShinRa, the President's only son.

Vincent lingered in complete surprise: he distinctly remembered hearing that Rufus had died just over a year ago. One of those dangerous WEAPONS, while attacking Midgar, had in fact blasted the ShinRa Headquarters, with President Rufus at its very centre. The young man *should* have perished.

But then, had Professor Hojo somehow.....

Vincent's mind seemed to drift in the same mad circles: the "boy", according to the treacherous mercenary, usually raved about "burning up or getting blown apart". Was this the same explosion that had supposedly killed Rufus? Could this be the very same Rufus ShinRa, only the second worst enemy of Avalanche?

And even if it was, what possible connection had *Rufus* to any of this madness? As far as Vincent could guess, the young man couldn't have any part in the mystery, so why should the Professor drag him in? Aeris, Davoren, Hojo, himself, and this new surprise, where was the connection? Nothing seemed to have any logic or meaning!

It all ultimately led up to the "experiment". Davoren had described it as a complicated jigsaw puzzle, which in the end formed a whole picture.

But for the last time, what was it?

Vincent's thoughts returned to this mysterious lab again. It seemed the only place to lay all his suspicions and vexatious questions to rest.

Yet he still hadn't the vaguest idea where this secret lab might be found. Vincent had broken off his affiliation to the company thirty-one years ago. To be sure, ShinRa Inc. had changed dramatically during that long time. Its technology had reached the very pinnacle of achievement. Services, facilities, all fields of modern science and industry had been incredibly developed.

Therefore, it wouldn't be too improbable that within the long space of time he was gone, some "secret laboratory" had evolved somewhere. The question repeated: where?

He obviously needed someone who had had a more recent involvement with ShinRa Inc. than himself.

In desperation, Vincent turned for help. Cloud first popped into his mind: the man had been in ShinRa's service for a few years, perhaps he had heard of such a "secret lab".

But Vincent instantly abandoned the idea. Cloud had only been a mere trooper. Such information would have been strictly confidential, *well* beyond his reach. Besides, Vincent did not want to involve any of his friends in this danger, not while they could remain safe from harm and out of his way.

Then who, for God's sake? He needed someone who would have easier access to ShinRa's classified information, data, and facility locations. Any whisperings amongst the higher hierarchy of the company's important executives, this person would have heard it. Any business conducted, this person would know of it. But who?

Suddenly, Vincent knew exactly who to ask. It would be neither pleasurable nor easy. It would take many, many inquiries and diligent searches. Yet if he wanted a final answer to this ominous "experiment", he would take this last chance.

His thoughts returned to Aeris. If he ever wanted to pull her out of that tortuous nightmare.....to shelter her again in warmth and safety, then he would take this last chance.

-End of Chp.47

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.48

At the far corner of some narrow side street stood "The Fleetwood", one of the many bars dedicated solely to the nightlife in Midgar. A flight of stone steps led down to the main entrance, where a broad, impressive guard stood watch.

The sign by the entrance read "The Fleetwood" in golden, rather elaborate letters. Past these oak doors and down two more steps, the corridor opened into a large, luxurious hall. Round tables of all sizes scattered across the spacious room. A hazy sea of smoke hung overhead.

All lights had been dimmed greatly, if only to attract everyone's attention to the entertainment up on stage. Some young singer in a skin-tight, glittery dress basked under the spotlight with a hand-held microphone. She sung some sentimental love ballad in an overly-sweet voice, smiling or winking many times to her admiring audience.

Not surprisingly, most of her audience comprised of men: lonely bachelors for a night out; bitter husbands on the run from their nagging wives; even old men who fancied themselves still as young as before. They smoke and drank deep, some murmured about any idle topic, others simply enjoyed this pleasing sight (or the music, whichever they preferred).

The magnificent bar spread itself down the middle of the hall, with many high stools outlining its shiny, wooden counter. Plenty of customers lounged around for drinks or a friendly chat. The old bartender, a respectable gentleman nearly 60 years old, bustled about like a bumble bee. He served up the alcoholic beverages, replaced filled ashtrays, and hustled the waitresses to work faster.

Indeed, nightlife thrived so wonderfully at "The Fleetwood". An oasis for anyone seeking respite from the mountainous troubles outside, be they work, debt, loneliness, women (or men).

One particular young man sat slouched back against the bar counter, swirling what little remained of his drink around in a glass. He was of medium height, gaunt, and slovenly dressed in loose slacks, and an untucked shirt. He had an amazing shock of pink hair, with a thin, long pigtail dangling behind. One neat scar marked each cheekbone, not only accentuating the leanness of his face, but also the cynicism in his sea-green eyes.

Another man sat on the stool on his right. This man lay slumped over the counter, his bald head tiredly buried in both arms. He appeared taller, older than his lean companion, certainly more muscular. Yet despite the noisy bustling around him, the weary man never lifted his head. He was either drunk or asleep.

The pink-haired man glanced a moment at his bald companion, then turned his narrow eyes back to the dazzling singer on stage. He coolly finished off his drink, while one foot beat along with the sweet music.

He hardly noticed anything else until a nervous voice nearby suddenly addressed, "....Mr. Reno?"

Reno cast a languid look to the side. He found the entrance guard standing there, his sweaty face red with evident irritation.

"Uh..Sir, there's someone who insists on seeing you now," informed the vexed guard, "I tried my best, but..."

The man hadn't finished his complaint when suddenly a blond young woman popped out from behind him. She glared so angrily at Reno, who almost choked out his drink on recognizing her.

"So there you are!!" she exclaimed aloud, "I have just wasted the last half hour trying to get this idiot to let me through!!"

"Hey! This is a private club, Missy!" retorted the incensed guard at once, renewing the argument yet again, "You can't just barge in here, bothering customers, like you're queen of the castle!! I oughtta..."

The young woman opened her mouth for an immediate rebuttal. Luckily, Reno intervened in time. With many assurances like "Sorry, she's with me" and "Yeah, yeah, I know her", he managed to appease the furious guard. So the man reluctantly retreated back to his post, leaving Reno to handle this infuriated woman by himself.

The argument thus settled, Reno slumped back into his stool, then leaned forward against the counter. He casually signaled the bartender for another drink.

"Elena, what the heck are you doing here?" he frowned disapprovingly at the woman.

Elena wore a smart business suit, with a posh handbag slung over one shoulder, which gave her petite figure an air of immediate importance. Her blond hair, carefully parted on one side, reached down to her chin. The haircut, coupled with her impeccable make-up, suited her attractive face perfectly.

She peevishly folded both arm across her chest. Anger marked every feature of her face.

"I have been searching every bar, casino hall, and nightclub in Midgar for you!" she scolded the lazy Reno, "You were supposed to come home early tonight, remember?"

The man merely scoffed the obligation aside. When the drink had been delivered, Reno picked the glass up to his thin lips.

"Ah...gimme a break, Elena," Reno dismissed so casually, "Can't a guy enjoy a little drink out once in a while?"

"Not tonight! You were supposed to get the groceries, pick up that payment bill from the bank," she angrily snatched the glass from between his fingers, then cried, "...AND pay for this month's rent!!"

Reno blinked back at her, as if he'd never heard of the word.

"...rent?" he repeated.

"Yes! For the landlady!"

Reno thought a moment.

"Oh! Is it my turn already? Seems I just paid her and already the old bat's screaming for more," he rubbed his temples, then sighed out, "Alright. Whatever. I'll pay her later."

Elena slammed the glass onto the counter, at the same time giving Reno such an angry look. She found his easy-going attitude far too unbearable.

"You'll pay her tomorrow," she decided, "C'mon! It's midnight now! I'm taking you home before you really get drunk!"

She began tugging at his arm to drag him away. All in vain; Reno easily yanked his arm out of her grip. Not only did he lean further against the corner, he picked up the glass again to show he would not leave just yet.

"Now looky here, Elena. I've had a bad day, okay?" Reno complained as he sipped his pleasant drink, "Everyone's been at my throat, hassling me around for no reason. First that silly sales clerk, then this sourpuss customer, then my boss. I just need a break."

"Hmph! They're probably hassling you because you never...what's wrong with Rude?"

At last, Elena had noticed the older man slumped forward against the bar counter, which instantly caught her concern. Indeed, Rude hadn't flinched a muscle during the entire conversation.

Reno glanced askance at his slouched friend, then explained with another sip, "Oh, Rude's had a pretty rotten day too."

"What happened?" Elena asked worriedly.

"His paranoid little boss-man was convinced (again) that someone wanted to kill him today. So, he made Rude accompany him on every single meeting he had....fifteen in all."

With a kind pat against his friend's heavy shoulder, he chuckled out, "He was so damn tired in the end, he just fell asleep on the table. He didn't even drink anything."

"Oh, poor man! That's horrible!" The tender Elena sympathized.

"Hey! How come HE gets all the sympathy here?" retorted Reno sourly, "I had a bad day too, y'know!"

He pouted at her in feigned anger, the perfect resemblance of a jealous child. In an instant, Reno had won her favor again. But rather than let him see her defeated smile, Elena tossed her head to the side.

"He's a hard-worker, you're just a silly slacker!" she accused playfully, "Thanks to you, that 'old bat' will probably have us all kicked out by...."

"Hey there, sweet thang!!" cut in an arrogant, gruff voice all of a sudden.

Elena started at this rude interruption. On turning around, she found a hulk of a man towering over her. He had a dirty black beard, and wore a beaten leather jacket torn at one elbow (some sort of fashion statement, perhaps?). An insolent smile stretched across his ugly face, showing off the wide gap between his two front teeth.

Two other men, evidently his companions, lingered behind. They chuckled like idiots or passed on a rude comment amongst themselves. They all reeked of sweat and alcohol.

Elena, on the other hand, seemed quite perplexed.

"I been watching you from across the room over there," he announced with a cocky motion of the hand, "Never seen you here before but damn! You look hot!"

All three men exploded into coarse laughter, the drunken leader giving her another meaningful wink.

In return, Elena blinked back in confusion. She glanced back at Reno for help, but he merely shrugged his shoulders and looked away.

"Name's Wallace," introduced the bulky man. He grinned more stupidly as he shifted his impressive weight to the side, "but everyone calls me King Wally, leader of the Fire Fang Gang. We own the whole sector! And you are...?"

When he casually dropped his hairy paw on her slender shoulder, Elena at last understood. She instantly brushed his hand off with a curt, "Not interested"

However, the drunken man would not be so easily refused. Much to her alarm, he roughly grabbed hold of her arm, then yanked her forward.

"What say you ditch scarecrow and baldy over there? Enjoy the company of real men," Wallace invited with a drunken guffaw, "C'mon baby! Don't you be playing no hard-to-get!"

"Ow! Let go of me!" cried Elena angrily. She squirmed in this painful grip, "I just said I'm not interested! Let go!!"

"Hey, babe! you better show respect to our King!" demanded one of the drunkards.

"Yeah! No one refuses King Wally!" laughed another.

"Let go! Let go, I say!" resisted Elena.

"Say pal," called Reno's cool voice suddenly.

Everyone looked at him, the stupid drunkards with a hateful glare, Elena in surprise. Reno sat slouched in his high-stool, at complete ease with this situation. A somewhat crooked smile twisted his lips as he addressed Wallace.

Rude, however, remained slumped over the counter.

"What the hell do YOU want, little man?" thundered the brawny man. He flung poor Elena aside, and faced the intruder in full view, with both fists propped against his hips.

"The lady just said she wasn't interested," Reno remarked cuttingly, "Now obviously, if she had wanted an *ape* for company, she'd have went to the zoo. At least the ones over there smell better."

All three drunkards gaped stupidly at the insult until at last Wallace understood. He bared his teeth in a raging fury.

"CAMERA, YOU GODDAMN...", he roared out.

The drunkard hurled one huge fist straight for Reno's face. However, not only had Reno anticipated the attack, but had already decided the counter-move. In the blink of an eye, he gracefully flipped back onto the counter, just as Wallace savagely punched the stool instead. No sooner had Reno touched onto the counter, than he grabbed hold of a heavy ashtray nearby and swung it clear into the shocked assailant's face. The blow knocked a tooth out of Wallace as it sent him flying to the side, right into an empty table.

The violent commotion brought the entire hall to a confused halt. The beautiful singer, who had been singing an encore, stumbled over her words. The music stopped. Many customers turned their heads around towards the ruckus. Even the entrance guard peeked inside to get a look.

Reno stood on top of the bar counter, hardly bothered by the odd stares he received from every direction. The scornful smile had changed to a most cold frown. His deep sea-green eyes were narrowed in cool indifference.

Elena looked on in anxious concern. Surprisingly, Rude remained slumped over the counter, right by Reno's feet. Nothing it seemed could awaken him.

For a moment, Wallace's two drunken companions stared at their fallen leader. He lay thrashed against the floor, the broken table and chairs all heaped on top of him. A blind rage suddenly seized them.

"Asshole! Year gonna pay!!" swore one man.

"No one does that to Fire Fang!!" thundered the other.

"With a cheesy name like that, I'm not surprised," remarked Reno coolly.

This second insult would not go by unanswered. They both lunged straight for him, roaring at the top of their voices for vengeance. With such easy nimbleness, Reno dodged the double attack by cart wheeling aside along the counter.

One of the furious drunkards lunged at full speed right after him, hoping to grab hold of this slippery enemy. However, Reno had foreseen this attempt too. Therefore, he simply sprang high over the man's head, which caused the latter to tumble wildly over the counter, and crash into the wine bottles behind.

Reno, on the other hand, landed on the ground again, unharmed.

Outraged to insanity, the last drunkard charged like a bull straight for Reno. But this time, Elena would not be an idle watcher. With a loud "Reno, look out!", the woman swung her expensive handbag right against the attacker's face, then flipped him up into the air by one incredible sweep of the hand. The astonished man crashed head first back into the floor, where he lay fully sprawled out without moving.

During the entire brawl, Rude hadn't lifted his head once.

Both Reno and Elena stood the victors, he in cool composure, she more worried about the damage done to her precious handbag. Everyone gawked in amazement at the spectacle. Some simply watched on, others muttered faint exclamations like "cool!" or "What happened?"

In any case, Reno carelessly flicked his long pigtail back. He seemed quite bored by the drunkards pathetic attempts.

"Honestly! Ganging up on a poor man like me," he drew out lazily, "You guys are lucky I'm in such a generous mood, otherwise I would've killed you."

The silly squabble thus concluded, Reno returned to the bar counter. However, he stopped short when Wallace suddenly scrambled back up to his feet in a perfect fit of rage. To him, this fight hadn't finished yet.

He savagely grabbed hold of the nearest chair, screaming out, "C'mere, you scrawny little punk-ass!! I'll kill ya!! I'll kill ya!!"

Reno turned his head around. He only dignified the threat with a composed, rather indifferent expression, then turned away again. Not at all bothered, he stood at the bar counter to finish up his drink.

That was the final snub. Wallace charged straight at Reno, swinging the chair around in a mad passion.

The old bartender, who hadn't dared speak all this time, suddenly intervened from behind the counter.

"Hey!! Hey!! Wallace!!" the old man cried out in alarm, "Don't go messing around THOSE guys!!! They're damn TURKS!!!!"

Wallace instantly halted, and stood agape at the warning. The news spread like wild fire from mouth to mouth. The more cautious people backed away; others crowded around for a closer look. Faint mutterings broke out. Indeed, that one word "Turks" had caused a noticeable stir amongst the shocked spectators.

Nevertheless, Reno remained at the bar counter with his back to the crowd. Elena stood by his side, very discomforted by the dozens of curious stares. Rude stayed slumped over as always.

Wallace stared another moment before suddenly exploding into the coarsest, most loud bout of laughter.

"Turks?! HAH! Gimme a break, old man!!" he roared all over the hall, "Turks ain't nothing no more!! Just a buncha wussy, push-over bums without a job!!"

"What did you say?!" Elena snapped back at once. Anger instantly boiled her blood.

Reno merely picked up his glass again in perfect easiness.

"Turks! Whadda joke!!" the drunkard spat out, glaring more venomously at Reno, "Yeah! Not so hot now that you can't hide yer ass behind ShinRa, huh? Yeah, on top of the world....doing anything you want, then bam! Suddenly, you jes' low-life worms!! Huh! You must be the worst piece of shit on the whole damn planet!!"

Amidst this insolent laughter, Reno gulped down the rest of his drink without the least care. He didn't need to look behind. He could discern the spectators' nervous stares change to hateful glares.

Wallace hurtled a few more drunken oaths, encouraged onwards by two or three other spectators, until Elena could not bear it any longer.

"Ooh! How dare you, you...you...JERK!!" she retorted, "Why I.."

Much to her surprise, Reno gently grabbed her arm.

"Elena, let it go," he dismissed gravely.

"But..."

"Every underdog will have his day; every sewer slime will have his say," he replied, indicating Wallace with a nod of the head.

The drunken man did not need to understand the wise proverb to realize he had just been insulted.

He instantly resumed his mad charge with the wooden chair, shouting, "Who you callin' sewer slime, you turkey!!! I'll friggin' rip ya ta..."

Everything ended in a flash, far too quick for anyone to expect. Before the aggressive drunkard could even finish the threat, Rude suddenly sprang off the stool for a swift rebuff. In one powerful sweep, he kicked the chair out of Wallice's two hands. Without pausing, Rude swung himself around once to deliver one mighty elbow clean into the man's ugly face, thereby sending him flying back into another table. Wallice did not get up again.

Reno stood in his same spot, totally indifferent to what had just passed. Elena blinked in surprise, while all spectators lingered in silent awe. Indeed, no one (except perhaps Reno) had expected this sleeping man to leap up like that, much less for him to be such an effective ally.

Imposingly tall with stern brown eyes, Rude studied the unconscious Wallice another moment, then turned away in sour resentment.

"Bad enough you wake me up with that silly hollering," he muttered tiredly, "..but to go on and insult the Turks?"

The old bartender, always a strong advocate of peace, had been quite upset by the brawl, more by the disturbance of his customers. The entrance guard had been equally as furious, especially when he discovered two tables, a chair, and countless wine bottles had been destroyed. The guests had all muttered amongst themselves, and glared so fixedly.

Elena, Reno, and his friend Rude had no choice but to leave.

It was one o'clock in the morning, dark, and extremely cold. The shops and cafes had closed long ago. Houses stood in darkness. No lights shone through their windows, the doors having been securely locked and the inhabitants retreated to bed. The side streets stretched into empty bleakness.

The three strolled down one deserted alleyway in total silence. They were heading home.

Elena led the way, while both men trailed behind a few steps, their pace being far more relaxed. Reno walked with one hand thrust deep into his side pocket, the other had slung the jacket over his shoulder. Rude marched by his side, still rubbing the bit of sleep from his eyes.

Reno flexed out one arm, but instantly twitched it back in sharp pain, "Owch! Damn it, I think I pulled something when I flipped backwards (must be getting old)..."

Rude glanced at him. He remained silent for a moment.

"...we won't be able to go back there for a while," he stated softly. Indeed, they had created too many enemies.

"Yeah. Thanks a lot, Elena."

"It's not my fault!!" she retorted against Reno's sarcasm, "I only went there to look for you! And besides, that jerk deserves what he got! I'm glad Rude broke his nose!"

Elena tossed her head away in silent vexation, refusing to have any share of the blame. However, she had only taken two steps when Reno suddenly skipped up to her side. With such friendly easiness, he dropped one arm around her shoulder.

"Now Elena, I would've flung him off a cliff for you, but then, there're no cliffs here in Midgar," he joked with a meaningful wink.

Elena's frown lifted into a reluctant smile, not at all bothered by his arm. He had soothed her bad temper again.

For a long time, nobody spoke a word. They reached the end of this bleak alley, where it led into a wider street outlined on both sides by bleak shops. Soon, they emerged onto the main boulevard.

"But Elena, you shouldn't be wandering around Midgar by yourself," Rude finally reproached in fatherly disapproval, "...it's getting pretty dangerous now."

"What do you mean?" she asked him.

"Didn't you even hear about that big park shoot-out?" commented Reno as he slipped his hand off her shoulder, "It happened like four..five days ago. It's been all over the news!"

Elena turned back to him. She obviously hadn't heard of it.

"There was this really brutal shoot-out in the Midgar Public Park...y'know, 'Snow Fields' Park. Bullets flying all around, and there was even a bomb somewhere. So far, they've found eight bodies, but think there's still more around."

"I heard it was some gangster shoot-out," Rude added, "...some kind of criminal war between two rival gangs. Of course, there's no way of knowing for sure. They're all dead."

"That's awful," Elena mumbled sympathetically.

Reno thrust both hands deep into his pockets, with the jacket tossed under his armpit. A contemptuous frown marked his face.

"Sheesh! These gangsters are getting crazier every time!" he scoffed out in scorn "First, they made that huge gas explosion at the ShinRa Haunt...now this! And the police here are so damn stupid...can't even put two and two together. Now if this had happened with the US around, ah!"

They both watched Reno flick back his long pigtail, then cast his narrow eyes down to the ground. They knew too well what he had meant, yet neither the uneasy Elena nor the silent Rude cared to comment.

The three marched down the black road, past empty office buildings and dingy side streets. Nobody spoke for a long time.

The long path led across a stone bridge which arched above some gravel street down below. On reaching this lonesome structure, Reno suddenly hopped onto the broad parapet, and walked along with his two silent friends. However, he soon stopped in his spot. With hands still buried deep into his pockets, he watched the grim skyline of Midgar from the top of the parapet.

"But y'know, it's kinda funny what that guy back there said... about us," he remarked coolly at last.

Both Rude and Elena stopped, then looked back at him.

"I mean, we used to be Turks, right?" Reno asked the bleak skyline beyond. A touch of bitterness marred his playful voice, "The secret service of ShinRa Inc. Watch out! Nobody messes with *those* guys. They're damn Turks! They're professionals!"

Neither one of his friends spoke. Rude, in particular, seemed rather uneasy with this man's strange tone. He ventured up towards Reno, while Elena remained in her spot.

"But now, that's all changed. Everything's changed so much in such a short time," Reno sighed out to himself, "It seems we pick up more dirty looks and trouble once people find out who we were. It's like, they want to get revenge on the company by taking it out on us. And he's right. This time, we don't have any company to hide behind."

Rude stopped at the parapet, and leaned against it so that one elbow lay next to Reno's feet. He fidgeted in an uncomfortable silence as he listened to the strange soliloquy.

He happened to glance up at his friend. Deep solemnity marked Reno's entire face. His narrow sea-green eyes had strayed off into the far distance.

"Sometimes....just sometimes...I wonder what Tseng would say if he could see us now," Reno muttered softly into the air, ".or better yet, what the President would think of us. His secret servicemen...one of the highest-ranking jobs in all of ShinRa Inc., look at us now: an electrician in a small-time company; a bodyguard for some high-strung loser; and a secretary in some unknown law-firm."

No one replied.

"It's just....not the same, is it?" he smiled weakly. His voice had sounded almost regretful.

Elena beheld the two men from a distance, one perched up on the parapet, the other standing by his side. They had always struck her as rather....different. Neither of them possessed Tseng's "no-nonsense" attitude or his cool professionalism. She recalled their first meeting. She had thought Rude "too quiet" and Reno "far, far too carefree". Yet in time, they had proven themselves quite capable. They were life-long friends, both dedicated heart and soul to their job.

It came as no surprise to her if they occasionally sunk back a moment into their old memories. After all, they had shared so many precious years of friendship as Turks.

After the historical fall of ShinRa Inc., these three friends had somehow managed to still stay together, driven more by need than anything else. All of them had been forced to seek new employment and residence elsewhere, "turn a new leaf and start again".

Unfortunately, not only had their new jobs been disappointing, the salary had been too meager for a new, separate life.

Therefore, the three had wisely decided to share the costs amongst themselves, thus cutting the expenses by a third. They lived together in some medium-sized apartment, snuggled in one of the back streets. They alternated paying the rent and buying necessities. Each had a separate bedroom and a private life. This was how they had lived for the past year.

A very strange "family", to use the term loosely. To Reno, Elena took too long in front of the mirror, even longer in the bathroom. She showed ghastly poor culinary skills, and had absolutely no knowledge of tax budgets or credit balances. She hassled him too much to do his chores. Her mother, though a

respectable gentlewoman, annoyed him with her snobbish airs (she always referred to him as "that horrible street-punk").

To Elena, Reno could switch from silly to serious regardless of the situation. He never tidied up his room or folded his clothes, yet surprisingly, stacked his beer cans into such neat piles. He forgot too many things, like rent and chores. He always found some occasion to drink, or if not, made one up himself.

Poor Rude seemed the only flawless one. By nature, he was quiet, tidy, and so kind to his friends. He worked hard, and did his share of chores without complaint. Of course, he too enjoyed a good drink with an occasional cigarette or a poker game, but never to excess. He knew his own limit.

Yet for all their differences, they were content enough. Both men were quite protective of their Elena, Reno always being the quick one to disperse her bad temper. He calculated all the complicated bills and tax accounts for her. Rude repaired any problems around the home, from the mysterious clog in the drain to the scary mouse under her bed.

In return, Elena tended to Rude whenever he had too long a day (like massaging his sore back while he watched T.V). She reminded Reno if he forgot, set his unsightly room into *some* reasonable order, and defended him against her mother's vicious tongue.

How greatly this life differed from their old lives. Everything had changed too much. Indeed, what would Tseng or the President think if either could see them now?

The three had resumed their journey down the boulevard in complete silence. They soon turned into some dimly lit side street, down a few more stone steps, then onwards into another narrow street. At last, they reached an apartment building, their home.

They silently entered the square reception hall, where one of them signaled for the elevator. When it arrived, they all shuffled inside, and Elena pressed the appropriate button.

For an awkward moment, no one spoke.

"A..anyway," stammered Elena at last, "..are you boys hungry?"

"Kinda," admitted Reno.

"Do you want me to make you some lasagna?"

"No thanks. I wanna live a bit longer."

Elena's eyes instantly flared up at the cutting remark.

"My cooking isn't THAT bad, you jerk!!" she defended, flashing one fist into his dubious face, "I'll have you know, *Rude* loves my cooking! Right, Rude?"

The direct question sent poor Rude into a flurry of confusion. He dared not contradict her; then again, he dared not risk tasting her food.

"..er...well, Elena..," he fumbled out, "..uh...it's just, we hate to bother you with cooking. It's late, you're tired. Why not just give yourself a break and order some take-out instead?"

"Sweet-talker," mumbled Reno under his breath.

Nevertheless, Elena accepted the kind suggestion with a defeated "hmph!"

The elevator soon came to a chimed halt, and withdrew its metallic doors. They marched down the long corridor, where they stopped at one particular door. Elena fumbled in her handbag for her keys.

"Fine! We'll order ramen noodles for tonight," she decided as she opened the door, "But Reno, don't forget! First thing tomorrow, you must pay the landlady and..."

Yet before Elena could step inside, Reno suddenly grabbed her arm to stop her.

She looked at him in surprise. She found his deep eyes glaring so suspiciously into the black apartment. All his muscles had tensed. Rude glanced from his friend's face, then towards the source. His face too grew icy stern. They stood in unnatural stillness, reflecting the deathly silence inside the dark apartment.

"..w-what is it?" asked Elena.

Reno, however, hushed her by placing one finger against his lips

"There's someone inside there," he whispered ominously.

-End of Chp.48

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.49

The door stood half-way open, a threshold between the light outside and the thick darkness within. The apartment echoed in heavy silence. Nothing inside stirred.

And yet, no mistake: Reno felt certain "someone" was there.

"What? Don't be silly!" Elena laughed nervously at his unreasonable suspicion, "The door was locked the whole time! Nobody's inside!"

But Reno seemed to grow all the more sure of this mysterious presence. He glanced over at Rude, who instantly gave one meaningful nod in agreement. Neither man breathed a word.

Elena found herself effectively pushed back out of harm's way. She wondered at their odd behavior. But rather than protest anymore, she lingered behind in a very uneasy silence.

Both men glued their backs against opposite ends of the door. With one quick movement, Reno slipped out a short metallic rod from his sleeve, which instantly elongated into his nightstaff weapon. Rude cautiously pushed the door open, then motioned his head towards the inside. After another moment, the two stealthy men snuck inside.

The empty hallway stretched into obscure blackness. An eerie silence haunted the air. Each man slowly slid along opposite walls of the corridor, stern eyes riveted on the darkness ahead. Nothing so far; no thief or intruder.

They decided to split up. Rude signaled towards one bleak room to indicate he would investigate inside. Reno nodded in consent, then continued his noiseless journey until he reached the living room. He listened a moment: nothing except the monotonous tick-tocks of the clock. Gripping his nightstaff into defense mode, Reno ventured inside.

He could barely make out the outline of the room in such suffocating darkness. His sharp eyes strained through this obscurity: there stood the wide couch in the middle of the room, the lonesome T.V and coffee table propped up in front. Elena's piano snuggled against one wall. The thick curtains were drawn across the window. Everything was in perfect order. Indeed, no one seemed to be here.

Yet Reno still clung onto his suspicion. Tightening his grip around his weapon, he cautiously drifted deeper into the pitch-black room. His footsteps sounded so loud against such silence. His narrow eyes darted from one corner to the other in hopes of discovering this invisible presence.

He checked by the piano, then the coat closet: nothing. He peeked into the kitchen: empty. At a loss, Reno blindly groped his way towards the couch.

Suddenly, mad chaos shattered the silence. There was a wild, unearthly shriek, a hideous crash, followed by confused struggles in the dark and weak moans.

Rude rushed into the black living room at once. He found Reno clumsily sprawled on the floor, one leg twisted up on the couch, with the whole coffee table overturned against him. Elena, who had up to then anxiously waited outside, bolted straight for the commotion.

She pushed past Rude, where on recognizing that wailful moan, instantly cried out in horror, "Ah! Simon!! My poor baby!!"

Simon, of course, was Elena's beloved tabby cat, the fourth member of this odd little "family". Elena immediately found her way to the crushed Reno. She shoved the heavy table aside, heedlessly rolled him away too, then groped around the floor. At last, she picked up a soft, furry object into her arms.

"Oh Simon!" she sobbed out, nestling her limp cat so tenderly against her bosom, "Oh! Did that big, bad Reno squash your paw? Did sweet'ums get a nasty boo-boo on his paw?"

The cat let out a long-drawn meow to complain of its agony.

Apparently, while searching near the couch, Reno had stepped on the cat by accident. Its sudden shriek had startled him so badly, the poor man had stumbled over the coffee table, and crashed thus.

Reno struggled to sit up, while Elena tended to her distraught cat. She took absolutely no notice of his painful grunts or clumsy attempts.

"Reno! I told you no one was here!!" Elena scolded severely, giving his pigtail one vicious tug, "You just HAD to scare everyone with your crazy imagination!! Now look what you did! You hurt my poor kitty's paw, you brute!!"

"Ow! Stupid refugee from the fiddle factory!" Reno spat back against her cat, "I'll hurt more than his paw!"

Amidst more such angry threats and bitter rebukes, Reno staggered up to his feet again. It seemed he had either imagined an intruder, or mistook poor Simon for one. In any case, Reno limped away, groping blindly through the heavy darkness for his way.

"Damn it! Rude, turn on the lights, will ya?" he called out.

Rude, who had remained at the entrance in silence, fumbled to obey. He groped along the wall until he found the switch, then quickly flicked it open.

But no sooner had the lights emerged, than Elena sprang back with a most terrified shriek, startling her cat and the two men into confusion. Reno instantly shot his eyes around, and stared in stunned shock.

There stood Vincent in one corner of the living room. *That* had been the mysterious presence he had detected but not found.

"OH..OH MY GOD!!" Elena screamed more hysterically, "IT'S A THIEF!! A KILLER!!!!"

She did not wait another minute. Much to everyone's alarm (including Vincent's), the crazed woman yanked hold of a ceramic vase and hurtled the whole object straight at the intruder. Vincent barely managed to duck down, just as the vase smashed violently into the wall behind, then he stood up again.

Frightened out of her wits, Elena grabbed the lamp nearby for another try. Luckily however, both Rude and Reno acted in time to prevent any more damage. One grabbed her arm, the other blocked her way.

"Elena! Elena, calm down!" begged Rude, wrenching the hapless lamp out of her grip.

"Whoa! Hold it! Just hold it!" Reno tried to reason out, "I've seen this guy before! He was in Avalanche! Right, man? You were in Avalanche!"

He looked back at Vincent for some confirmation. Vincent uneasily affirmed with a calm, "That is correct."

The stunned Elena gaped a full moment at the composed intruder, in particular his sharp, metallic claw. Vincent coughed under his breath to ease her tension, at least show he intended no harm.

"What? You..you know this....man?" she faltered out to Reno.

"Of course! Don't you even recognize him? He's one of those Avalanche losers! Y'know, the blood-sucking vampire with the crippled arm!"

Vincent only frowned at the inaccurate description, but restricted all comments to himself.

"Lemme see now...," Reno delved back into his memory, snapping his fingers at the intruder, "Your name..it was.....Vinnie, right? ..uh...Vinnie...Vultine?"

"Vincent Valentine," he corrected very, very curtly.

Yeah. Something like that."

A long, uncomfortable silence followed.

Vincent remained in his spot, the sole subject of all present scrutiny. He stood slightly turned away, with one hand thrust deep into the pocket of his long overcoat. Yet he seemed hardly bothered by this tension. His face expressed stoic coolness, that of strict business.

The others stood their ground too, Reno up front in cold defiance, his two friends behind in nervous restlessness. On picking up her precious cat again, Elena hid behind Rude's broad back, peering so apprehensively at this intruder. Rude felt very awkward in such silence. He scratched his bald head, then rubbed his light goatee.

It seemed Reno alone had assumed the position of speaker. He stood before Vincent, arms loosely folded across his chest, chin turned up to measure this tall, dark man.

No one spoke for another minute.

"Pretty impressive break-in skills you got there, pal," remarked Reno at last, "You didn't even set off the burglar alarm. And you sure picked a good spot to hide. I couldn't see you at all."

Vincent easily detected the note of mistrust in Reno's calm voice. Indeed, not only had he snuck into their secure apartment, but had also evaded notice. Nevertheless, he remained silent.

Reno merely scoffed outloud, a bit vexed but still retaining some good humor. For the moment, he ignored Vincent, and instead set about to restore some order to the room. He turned over the upset coffee table, heaped the magazines and ashtray on top. He finally picked up his nightstaff, where it was slipped back into his sleeve again. He seemed at total ease with this awkward situation.

Rude fidgeted in evident uneasiness. Elena nervously hugged her cat, glancing between the two men but saying nothing.

Vincent silently watched as Reno walked towards the kitchen. The man only disappeared a moment inside. When he emerged again, he had a cold can of beer in one hand, and a scornful smile on his lean face. He stood in front of Vincent as before.

"I'd love to ask you how you snuck in here," he began, "...more how the heck you managed to find us out, but instead, we'll skip all that and cut to the chase: what do you want?"

A most suspicious glare accompanied that blunt question. Reno narrowed his eyes so intently on Vincent, as if he could perhaps guess a reason. Vincent, however, did not answer.

"Company's dead, you guys won," Reno added, "What, are you guys going after all the employees too?"

"Far from it," replied Vincent calmly.

He took one firm step towards the centre of the room, where Reno stood in total defiance. Vincent glanced at the two friends in the background, then turned his full attention to the speaker.

"Ill-mannered as my entrance may be, I have only come to speak to you," he addressed in a cool, businesslike tone, "Rest assured, once I am finished, I will leave."

"Oh yeah? What's up?"

"It is a question, actually."

"So ask away."

The two men stood face to face, Reno so casually poised with an icy can of beer in hand, Vincent in perfect composure. Their gazes fixed on each other.

Five days had already passed, during which time Vincent had exhausted all efforts to find these former Turks. He had spared no query, no hidden information or possible whereabouts until at long last, he had uncovered the address. He hadn't, for obvious reasons, expected a friendly reception nor to win over their favor. He himself had found the task laborious and quite frustrating. In addition, his health, utterly ravaged after that miserable night, still hadn't recovered completely.

Yet these Turks were his last hope to finding *her* again. That thought alone had kept his determination so fiercely alive.

"I have received some information concerning a 'secret ShinRa laboratory' built by the company. It is supposedly somewhere here in Midgar," stated Vincent in a cool, clear voice, "I would like to ask if you perchance would know of such a lab?"

The direct question received a long, heavy silence, far too suspicious for Vincent to discount. He noted Rude fidget very uneasily, but turned his keen eyes back to Reno.

In return, Reno lingered at perfect ease, taking his time before granting a reply. He sipped his cold beer, then swept his fingers back through his pink hair. Both Rude and the anxious Elena gazed at their carefree friend, yet no one dared intervene.

A smile suddenly crossed Reno's lips, simply beaming with scornful cynicism. He cast one languid look at Vincent, then scoffed out loud again.

"Heh. Excuse me? A 'secret ShinRa lab'?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"Hmm...there WAS that big lab at the old ShinRa Headquarters, but it was...."

"I am not referring to the main lab in the ShinRa Headquarters," Vincent cut short tightly, "I am asking about a secret laboratory hidden somewhere within this city."

Reno merely took another sip from his beer.

"If you would happen to know it's location, then I ask you to kindly tell me."

At this dry conclusion, Vincent awaited in a patient silence. His cold tone had indicated he expected an answer.

All eyes rested on Reno. Rude fumbled about in his spot, far too discomforted by this entire situation. He continuously looked back at his carefree friend, as though he could perhaps transfer some invisible thoughts over to him. Elena huddled further behind her shelter. She too said nothing, but instead studied the guest from a safe distance.

At last, Reno began to carelessly swirl his beer can. His sly sea-green eyes gleamed back at Vincent in intent scrutiny.

"...and *if* there were such a lab, why do you wanna know about it?" he stalled.

Vincent paused a moment, then rebuffed coldly, "Pardon my bluntness, Sir, but my reasons do not concern you."

"Ah! So it's like that, huh?" Reno laughed, but there was no humor in his voice.

Vincent narrowed his keen eyes straight on this man. He had come here with one question, and it would not be evaded.

"I am simply asking your help," he repeated tonelessly, "Please, tell me where to find this lab. Answer my question, and I will leave immediately."

Rude let out a soft uneasy cough. Nothing else interrupted.

At this request, Reno measured up Vincent bottom to top, from the tip of his heavy leather boots up to his stone-hard, crimson eyes. The crooked smile, so insolent with scorn, twisted his lips. After one loud gulp of beer, Reno ventured towards his stiff guest.

"Well, I only help people I'm sure about," he lazily admitted, peering so sharply back at Vincent, "Call it gut-instincts, maybe just plain suspicion, but I got a bad feeling 'bout you, pal."

Vincent made no reply.

"I mean, you just pop outta the woodwork, and ask us about some 'secret lab'? C'mon, get real!"

Still no reply. Reno halted directly in front of Vincent, where the mistrustful gleam in his eyes grew all the more sharper.

"Why'd you *really* come, hm?" he demanded, turning it into an interrogation, "That Cloud set you on us? You working for somebody else? Enough of this 'lab' crap. What're you really after here, Vamp-man?"

Vincent turned slightly away to escape the many questions. He would not be cross-examined.

"Mr. Strife has nothing to do with this, I assure you," he stated very clearly for everyone to hear.

Vincent gazed askance at Reno as he added, "...and as for what I am 'really after here', Sir, I have already said my reasons do not concern you."

An awkward silence followed. Reno glared at this curt evasion to his questions. Vincent returned the look with double the coldness, his crimson eyes a stern barrier of ice. Soon however, that same crooked smile lit up Reno's face, whereby he turned away with another derisive laugh.

"Ah well! So much for that then!" he dismissed Vincent, "You snuck in, I'm sure you can sneak your way back out."

In other words, he would not answer the question. To him, this "visit" had ended.

Reno swaggered away without looking back once. The break-off had left a noticeable silence in the room, one which poor Rude seemed to feel the most.

Vincent's morose face darkened as he watched this man drift so casually across the room. Indeed, Reno made this task neither pleasant nor easy. He behaved too suspiciously, always turning his questions around. And if he knew of this lab, he'd never speak. Yet Vincent had no alternative. One way or another, he **must** find the answer.

He plunged deep into his own thoughts for a moment, as if debating some grave matter. At last, Vincent spoke again.

"You'll find this quite hard to believe, but I think of all people, you three have the right to know."

All three turned their quizzical eyes to him. Reno carelessly stood with his back to Vincent, his head twisted around to the side. He lingered in wait.

"Rufus ShinRa may still be alive."

Though so simple, the statement had quite a noticeable effect on all present. Both Elena and Rude gave a surprised start at the most unexpected announcement. Even Reno had tensed in his spot on hearing the news. His sea-green eyes, ever so mistrustful, locked onto Vincent's solemn face. For a moment, no one could speak.

"Are...are you sure??" Rude faltered all of a sudden. He took one hesitant step forward.

"I can only guess this based on the information I have received," admitted Vincent, glancing briefly at the nervous man, "But I believe he too may have some connection with this 'secret lab'."

Rude's expression grew extremely grave. He asked no more.

The original question hung in the stiff air: did such a mysterious 'lab' in fact exist? If so, where? All eyes rested back on Reno. He seemed the only one who would determine the answer.

Reno slowly turned to face Vincent again.

"Fuh! You know, somebody must've pinned a sign saying 'I am stupid' on my back," he joked in cutting sarcasm, "You're now telling me Rufus ShinRa...*THE* Rufus ShinRa is still alive?"

Rather than affirm, Vincent gazed stoically back at this mistrustful man.

"And just how DUMB do you think I am, Vampy?!" snapped Reno at once, propping one fist against his hip in real irritation, "In case you were unconscious all last year, Rufus ShinRa died in an explosion! Killed! Gone! Dead!"

Elena lingered behind, clutching her cat amidst this uncomfortable scene. Rude seemed to hesitate between interrupting and holding his tongue. He chose the latter.

"In all likelihood, yes. Rufus ShinRa is probably dead," agreed Vincent very composedly, "but, have you ever recovered his body?"

"Body'? What 'body'?! You think there was anything left after that blast? His body was blown to bits and buried under all the rubble!"

"Then did you uncover his remains?" Reno scoffed to the side.

"Anything at all?"

A hateful scowl darkened Reno's whole face as he beheld Vincent, his voice so calm yet so persistent. He took one firm step forward to put this debate to a final rest.

"President Rufus ShinRa is dead," he insisted for everyone to hear, yet glared at Vincent alone, "Some WEAPON blasted him in his office. The fire burned him up, and the rubble crushed whatever remained. He-is-dead! So quit bullshitting us. You're not very good at it!"

Vincent said nothing.

"And as for your little question, Red-eyes, the answer is...NO! Wherever you got your 'information', it's all wrong. There is no 'secret lab' ShinRa Inc. ever made, not in Midgar, not anywhere else. The end!"

No one interrupted.

Reno angrily guzzled down the rest of his beer, then swung one finger towards the door, "Now get the hell outta here, before all three of us gang up on you and kick your butt clear down the stairs!"

Both Rude and Elena fumbled awkwardly in their spots. To be sure, neither of them wished to revert to violence (at least not against *this* guest).

Nevertheless, Vincent remained unruffled by the violent threat or boisterous voice. Instead, he gazed back at Reno, ruby-red eyes narrowed down so piercingly; he seemed to have spotted some hidden secret behind that angry look.

Reno found himself put on full guard against such a strange gaze. He instantly turned away to show he had no more to say: the answer to the question was no.

The stiff silence lingered another moment.

"I see. Then, I thank you for your time," concluded Vincent at last. He too had nothing more to say.

And with that dry gratitude, he made his way to the door.

"Miss, I apologize for the intrusion. It will not happen again," Vincent paused to bow politely to Elena, then resumed his way as before. He never looked back.

Everyone watched him leave, Reno in particular disdain. Vincent's footsteps died down the dark corridor. They heard the front door gently closed behind, and all was silent again. He had left.

They stood in their spots, overwhelmed for a moment by what had just transpired.

"...damn freak! Gives me the willies!" spat Reno after the departed guest. He hadn't liked that peculiar look in his eyes at all.

"Actually, he was so polite!" marveled Elena after Vincent, enchanted by that gallant bow. She had forgotten she had flung a vase at him, "...and now that I notice it, he's kinda cute! In a gloomy sort of way..a bit too pale, but still..."

Luckily, she spotted Reno glare so hard at her, which effectively cut short any further admiration.

"Uh..oh yeah! I'd better order those ramen noodles," she suddenly remembered. Elena placed Simon back on his dainty feet, then hurried into the kitchen, "I'll clean up that broken vase later. Don't let Simon go near it or he'll cut himself."

The two men remained in the living room, the resentment still evident on Reno's lean face. Rude lingered near him in an uneasy silence. His tense brown eyes were fixed on his vexed friend.

"That stupid chalk-faced weirdo," growled Reno as he tried to appease his distemper, "...should've just chucked him off the balcony."

Rude hesitated a moment.

"...Reno, why'd you lie to him?" he muttered gently all of a sudden.

Reno paused at the meaningful question. He cast a long pensive look down to the side, far away from Rude. His scowl changed to a grave frown as he pondered some troublesome thought.

Suddenly, Reno broke away from this dismal atmosphere.

"Ah, everyone's been pissing me off today," he complained rather cheerfully, "Hey! I know what'll restore my good mood: T.V!"

The previous unpleasantness was abandoned to the new suggestion. With a good-humoured "C'mon!", Reno bounced over into the couch. On finding the remote, he flicked through the many channels until he settled on some comedy show. Reno relaxed back into the comfy couch.

The cat gracefully hopped onto the arm of the couch, where it curled into a furry ball for another nap. Rude lingered in his spot. He glanced towards where Vincent had just left, then moved over to the couch. He silently sat by Reno.

They watched T.V. for a while. Reno seemed immensely amused by the funny show. He laughed without a single care in the world. Rude, on the other hand, never spoke. An entirely different matter occupied his pensive mind.

It didn't take Reno too long to notice his friend's glum mood. He glanced askance at him.

"What's with you, Rude?" he asked.

"Huh? Oh..uh...n-nothing," Rude instantly replied. He watched the T.V., pretending to find it quite interesting.

Reno, however, narrowed his sharp eyes. He saw straight through that feeble attempt. Therefore, with one click, he turned off the television.

"Okay, Rude. I know that kinda silence only too well," Reno cut to the point, "Something's bugging you and I wanna know what."

The man, discomforted by this blunt confrontation, fidgeted in his spot. He cast his eyes down to his lap.

"C'mon! Spit it out!"

"It's just..I was thinking about what that guy...Vincent..said"

Reno paused before asking curtly, "Rude, did you believe him?" Silence. "YOU DID!!"

Rude fumbled to organize his thoughts into some order.

"Ah, fer God's sake, Rude!" declared Reno vexedly, "I swear, if some crack-pot told you the moon's made of ice-cream, you'd ask 'What flavor?'. I can't believe he actually got to you!"

"It's just that, he had a point," Rude agreed, "President Rufus's body was never recovered from the blast site, not even his remains."

Reno frowned.

"We were told he had died in that blast, and accepted it. But that was only *assumed*. No one could say for sure unless..."

But he stopped short when Reno expelled one annoyed sigh through his nose, then glared straight at him. This tired argument had lasted long enough.

"Okay! Re-cap time!" Reno exclaimed in resentful sarcasm.

He suddenly grabbed hold of his empty beer can, and propped it on the table for Rude to see.

"This is the ShinRa Headquarters. Here is little President Rufus in his cozy office on the 70th floor," Reno tapped the top of the can to indicate the office, "In comes a mega-sized blast that not only destroys the entire office, but also tears havoc through the floors below. Now, YOU tell ME, (simple mathematics here), what chance had Rufus of surviving?"

Rude only fidgeted at the question.

"Oh, about one in a gagillion chance!" Reno answered himself. He crushed up the can, then flung it over to the thrash basket, "Hmm.. yeah! I'd say he's pretty much dead, just like his old man!"

Poor Rude glanced uneasily at his vexed friend, then looked down again. He hesitated to speak.

"I don't know or care what that freak hoped to find outta coming here," scoffed Reno with a sweep back through his hair, "But that Rufus bit isn't gonna work on me! He could just mosey back to ol' Cloud and tell him that!"

"..I.."

"What?"

"I..don't think he's with Cloud."

Reno listened in silence.

"I'd think this guy would never speak unless he had something important to say. He doesn't look the type that just blabs for show," Rude debated softly, peering at his suspicious friend. His voice sounded very steady, almost stern, "And Reno, I don't think he'd have bothered looking for us unless he really needed to. He said...the President could still be alive, and could have some connection with the ShinRa secret lab. Isn't there also a chance he could be actually telling the *truth*?"

"Bullshit!" Reno snapped back at once, "Hey, I'm not buying this 'Rufus is still alive' crap, not for one minute! He'd dead!"

Rude kept his deep brown eyes fixed on this distempered man. He said nothing.

"And besides," Reno added sourly, "Even IF Rufus were somehow still alive, what do I care! Sure, we were loyal to him. Sure, there was a time I would've given my life to protect him. But it's like I said, Rude, that's all gone. He's not our boss anymore. We don't have any obligations to him. So just drop the subject already!"

They did not speak again. Out of respect for his friend's wish, Rude looked away to show he'd say no more. Reno returned to the T.V. He leaned back, and watched the show.

Yet, unlike before, he never laughed, not even cracked a smile. Indeed, when Rude happened to glance at Reno again, he found his friend engrossed in some deep contemplation. His mind had strayed elsewhere.

-End of Chp.49

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.50

She sat there huddled up in one bleak corner, cold, frightened, and all alone. Around her loomed the darkness, an endless void to which she found herself its sole prisoner. She had been swallowed by the abyss. Night had selfishly drawn her back into its horrible black wings, and would never release her again.

Time had long lost its meaning. Hours or days, she could not tell the difference anymore. They simply slipped by unnoticed.

A gentle but bitter-cold breeze always blew through this dungeon. It loved to caress her body, to feel her weak limbs shiver so pitifully. A sickly dankness suffocated the air to the brink of nausea. Cruel silence oppressed her to total stillness. Sometimes, the stiff steel walls let out a creak, or the quick skitter of rats echoed across the stone floor. But instantly, the sounds disappeared back into the same dull silence.

Aeris was prisoner here, yet the nightmare was not new. She had lived it many times before.

There had been pain too, well beyond anything else she had ever tasted. So brutal, it always left her voiceless, totally crushed under its claw. Her entire body ached non-stop. The hungry agony savoured the taste of her delicious, slender limbs.

Aeris was prisoner here, yet the torture was not new either. She had lived it many, many times before, far too many to count.

She hardly had any recollection of the surroundings or events around her; only flashes of blurry pictures, muffled sounds, or odd sensations, all rolled into one hazy moment of consciousness.

She somewhat remembered feeling her coat and sweater literally torn off. She vaguely recalled huge black figures, all strangers, drag her away somewhere against her will. They handled her so roughly; their brash voices sounded pure nonsense to her numb ears. Everything plunged into darkness afterwards. Whenever she woke up again, she found herself flung back in her black hole, so utterly broken on the cold floor.

Aeris had no memory of what happened during the actual torture, only the devastating, savage pain it left behind. In her cloudy mind, she had seen a blue computer screen type out some hazy jargon. She had seen blood-filled test tubes. Sometimes, there was this strange feeling of hanging in limbo, like her whole body had been immersed into some thick liquid. She remembered screams. The horrible shrieks and tearful cries always re-echoed through her ears. She guessed they were hers.

She could only recall the dreaded operation table once: she had been stripped naked first. Her bare body had been spread flat over an icy-cold table top, with a bright light and ominous machinery hovering overhead. She had felt hands, grubby yet so nimble, fiddle along her body, stuffing sharp needles into her skin. Bleeping sounds had droned into her ears, that and faint hissing. Only once, she remembered opening her eyes. A brilliant pair of yellow eyes, ablaze with vicious insanity, had glared back at her.

That must have been the Professor. Aeris did not know. When she woke up again, she found herself in the dungeon, all her clothes carelessly flung back on her. She never recalled more than that.

The girl guessed she had resisted this nightmare at first. She had probably screamed for help, struggled madly, or begged for pity. If that had ever happened, she assumed someone had struck her unconscious or drugged her. Indeed, either her head throbbed in dull pain, or she felt nauseous.

But now, she doubted whether she resisted anymore. The torture never ended, it only grew worse each time. Aeris always found herself sprawled on the cold floor again. She felt too weak, too helpless. Yes, she had probably succumbed to the nightmare and torture long ago. There seemed no use resisting it.

The horror saw no end. The girl found no place to hide, no succor in the darkness. Some invisible, evil force hovered around her, watching her, laughing at her.

So she sat huddled up in one bleak, filthy corner. She simply waited for whatever may come next.

Nothing new. She had lived it all before. But she always found herself broken, frightened, lost, and so alone. Every torture felt like the very first time.

Sometimes, while overwhelmed by wretched misery, her troubled mind unconsciously drifted back to another world. Faces floated by, their voices too faint to understand. She wandered through many places, marveling at each tiny detail. It all seemed such a strange dream world now, ages old, one she hardly recognized anymore.

Had she really hoped to escape to there?

As Aeris sailed away through this dream, she wondered at these strange sensations tingling her cold, pitiful body:...kind warmth.. unlike anything ever felt before..... shelter from night and fear...

..safety...total safety from all harm....

At that moment, Aeris caught herself lingering over one particular face; one face she associated all these strange words with. It seemed so dear to her, so much her cold fingertips ached to touch it again. But instantly, she shoved that face far away. It always aroused such a violent turmoil in her heart. It always choked her, made her eyes swell with so many hot tears. Indeed, she found the pain in her body far more tolerable than that inside her heart.

She struggled to not think of him. It hurt her too much, his name almost on her lips, her aching heart ready to burst with such inconsolable grief. Yet all in vain; her mind always clung to that same face. In final desperation, Aeris tried to stop thinking altogether.

The cruel question prickled her torn mind: why had she escaped in the first place? She belonged *here*...in this bleak hell called "the Laboratory". What had ever convinced her otherwise? Had she really hoped to escape to there..... to that strange dream world far, far away?

The Professor would never release her, not when he could enjoy her on an operation table instead. She meant too much to him; his darling little specimen. What had made her believe she could ever escape him? There was no safety anywhere. He'd torture her to madness in her nightmares. His ghost would forever haunt her. And at last, he'd send his best hound dog after her, never to return until it had retrieved her.

Another face appeared, filling her whole being with bitter hatred but equal terror. The dreaded "hound dog" had white hair and pink eyes. A demon in a trench coat, smiling so viciously back at her. He had stopped at nothing to capture her. He had torn her away from her only shelter, and cast her back into this horrible nightmare. To her, this "Professor" seemed an ominous presence with Davoren for a body.

And where lay everything now? All burnt to ashes. Her warm shelter, her peaceful safety, all trampled to the ground. The demon had wrenched her out of those protective arms, into another that felt so cold, so unfamiliar.

Aeris remembered that moment so vividly: when she heard the loud bang of the gun, then witnessed Vincent crash to the ground. He had lain so helplessly sprawled on the tracks, gasping, writhing in such pain. She could still see the ruthless gunman standing over his victim. She saw him triumphantly reach for the trigger.

She wanted to scream "stop!"

In her tormented mind, Aeris had repeated the scene at least a dozen times. How often she covered in the darkness, languishing over that one scene. Every time, she wanted to stop the madness: clutch the gunman's coat and beg for mercy; embrace Vincent to protect him from any more harm; anything, anything but lose him.

But in the end, Aeris always crumbled back to the same desperate conclusion: What did it matter *now*? Vincent was dead.

Dead. The word crushed her. It rang through her ears each time she remembered him lying there on the iron tracks.

Vincent was dead...dead...

Again, Aeris desperately shut out all thoughts and emotions. She did not want to think. It drove her mad. It hurt her too much. Many times, she had burst out crying until unconsciousness took over. She did not want to think! She did not want to think!

Yet the poor girl never succeeded. Every time she remembered Vincent's face, the nightmare grew darker, colder, and more frightening. And this time, she found no warm arms to shield her away, or any soft voice to lull her to sleep.

Vincent was dead.

-End of Chp.50

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.51

Aeris sat huddled up in one corner of the black dungeon, both slender legs drawn up with arms folded across her knees. Her entire body shivered against the icy steel wall. Her weary head rested in both arms, while her loose hair flowed in thick long curls behind her back and over her shoulder. Complete loneliness isolated her.

She guessed she had sat thus for three, maybe four hours. On waking up, she had found herself (as always) flung against the stone ground, with a cold bowl of slop placed nearby. Most probably, the Professor had decided to grant her some respite before another round of torture. Therefore, she had crawled back to her usual corner, huddled up, and did not move since then. She never touched the food.

The wretched girl only awaited more torture. The silence around her endured for a long time. She seemed to have sat there an eternity, feeling bleak despair grind her soul to dust. Many times, she had wished herself dead.

Suddenly, a loud "click" broke into the silence. The dungeon door had been unlocked.

The stiff door budged a tiny crack, then opened with a hideous, long-drawn creak. Aeris hardly stirred at this rude disturbance. She remained huddled up so piteously in the corner, as if unaware of any intrusion. She discerned two men conversing at the doorway, but the dull pain clogged her ears so badly, the miserable girl could barely understand their words.

"It's too dark in here," commented one man, his calm voice sounding very muffled, "Isn't there a light or something?"

"Sorry Sir," apologized the other respectfully, "But there's barely any electricity in the entire place. The main generator's pretty much busted up...something wrong with the connection cables or step-up transformers...nothing we can do 'bout it."

"So I'm stuck with candle, hm? How primitive. Very well. You wait outside until I am finished."

One voice mumbled some respectful consent, then the heavy dungeon door slammed shut again. The stiff silence returned.

At first, Aeris believed the two mysterious strangers had left. But soon, she vaguely sensed someone venture through the room, the scuffles of his shoes against the stone ground. Apparently, one of the men had entered her dungeon.

The footsteps grew closer until they stopped abruptly by her side. Yet the poor girl remained in her same pitiful position, head bowed and legs drawn up. She sensed the visitor crouch down in his spot, probably to inspect her.

Aeris wondered who it could be.

"So there you are, sweetheart!" greeted a friendly voice at last, "Good heavens, it's so dark, even I couldn't see you there. How are you?"

The voice so near sounded somewhat familiar. On pulling up her weary head, Aeris found herself momentarily dazzled by a warm, bright light. She moaned out a weak "ah". Her hand instantly twitched up to block this pain from her bleary eyes.

In the light, one could easily trace the torture marks on this poor girl. The lovely rosiness of her cheeks had been drained. Her pallid, haggard face, disheveled hair, and vacant eyes all showed her pathetic state. Aeris had grown quite frail, on the very brink of a feverish illness. Sore bruises marked her limbs. Mud and murky water dirtied her clothes and shoes.

Indeed, the vicious Professor had totally crushed her to the same miserable, frightened creature she had been before.

Aeris strained her eyes through the light to meet this stranger's face. A hazy blur at first, the feature's gradually sharpened until she beheld a man's face: he had squatted down by her side, at the same time holding a lighted candlestick up to her face. The warm, orange light lit up his handsome face, making his happy smile appear all the more affable. He wore a heavy black trench coat over his suit. The man had such incredible white hair, loose strands dangling before his gleaming pink eyes.

It took Aeris only a moment to recognize Davoren.

The pitiful girl blinked back in bewilderment, as if he had materialized out of thin air. Indeed, she could not remember seeing him since that miserable night.

But the confusion only lasted another moment. In an instant, both terror and intense hatred flared up inside. Aeris immediately cringed further into her black corner. She rested her chin down against her crossed arms, yet kept her tense eyes obstinately fixed straight ahead. She would not look at this loathsome gunman.

"Tsk! You shouldn't be sitting on the floor. You could catch pneumonia," remarked Davoren. He indicated a stiff pile of wooden boxes, all heaped into another corner, "There're some dry old storage boxes over there. You can sit on them if you like...."

Aeris did not speak, nor would she even grace him with a brief glance. Her huddled up appearance, though still wretched, also expressed extreme aloofness.

The good-humoured Davoren, nevertheless, kept his amicable smile. When the kind suggestion passed by unanswered, he stood up again, and walked over to the mentioned pile. He returned with one large wooden box for himself. He noisily propped it near Aeris, sat on top, then placed the candlestick by his side. Both gloved hands hung in his lap, his back slumped forward at total ease.

The silence endured another minute.

"I trust you're comfortable enough with your new accommodations," began Davoren again, "It's not like that dirty hovel you used to live in. See, we've moved out of that old dump to another laboratory..well, actually, it's a laboratory hidden within an old Mako Reactor."

He hoped the news might have some effect on Aeris. On the contrary, her cold face from the side showed not the slightest response.

"The laboratory itself is pretty advanced, but the whole place is so run down," he chatted on, "These Reactors sure crumble fast once they stop maintaining them: no heat, rats everywhere, and practically no electricity. We have to use those special generators just to get the essential lab equipment running."

Davoren paused as he peeked at Aeris again. The girl sat oblivious to all his friendly words. Never did she pull her eyes from the stubborn focus.

The weak candle light flickered in the gentle breeze. Darkness loomed about this lonely spot, just waiting to swallow all it contained, firstly that feeble light. The whole dungeon reeked of sickly dankness and bitter cold.

Davoren waited moment before pulling out a cigarette from its packet. He stuck it between his lips, then flicked on his lighter.

"Mind if I smoke here?" he asked politely.

Aeris made no response.

The gunman interpreted her silence as consent, whereby he lit his cigarette at once. He enjoyed a few easy puffs, then returned to this obstinate girl. He obviously wanted *some* response.

"I should tell you, the old Professor was just ecstatic when I brought you back," Davoren recounted in good-humour, "The very first hour he got you, he began laughing like crazy, then started up work right away. He must've spent at least three days non-stop on you alone. He's in a bit of a rush. After all, your little escape cost him a month's worth of work."

She ignored him.

Davoren muttered sourly to the side, "He was pretty pissed off when I told him about Valentine though.....feh! There's no pleasing that old grouch. Well, he let me live, so I guess it's not too bad."

Still no answer.

"Anyway, I'm just here to check on you...make sure you're cozy 'n comfy," he announced cheerfully, "One of my chief responsibilities is keeping the Professor's specimen's alive."

At this noble concern, Aeris shrunk further into the corner, turning her head away in such cold resentment. Neither his pleasantry nor his amicable smile could ever win an ounce of her favour.

The gunman waited, cigarette in hand. He rubbed his chin a moment, then scanned the bleak room for an object of interest. The untouched bowl of food instantly caught his eye, whereby he picked it up from the floor. He stirred the brown grainy slop twice with the rusted spoon.

"You should try to eat a bit more, honey," Davoren scolded in gentle disapproval, "I know it's just bland oat mash, but even a few spoonfuls would do you good."

The gunman propped the cold bowl back on the ground. He remained slumped forward, elbows as support, legs slightly parted. His keen eyes fixed on Aeris.

"Do the men here treat you properly? No....'ungentlemanly conduct'?" he inquired very meaningfully.

The wretched girl only hugged her legs more tightly against her bosom. Her face remained turned away to the wall.

"If you like, I can have them keep a candle here...have a bit of light for a change. Would you like that?"

The girl gave no reply.

"You're not very talkative today," he remarked.

Still no reply.

Davoren was silent.

All his kind offers and cares had been spurned. The heavy stillness felt too awkward, what with Davoren apparently chatting to himself, now no one talking at all. There seemed nothing more to say; every attempt to break through this cold treatment had failed.

His smile faded to a cool, stoic expression of defeat. The callous gunman puffed his cigarette again without looking at the girl, as if waiting for something else to break this ice.

Aeris remained huddled up, scornfully avoidant of his face. She persisted to stare at the wall.

For a full three minutes, no one spoke. Absolute silence stared between the odd pair, one seated so comfortably on the wooden box, the other degraded to misery on the ground.

"...you killed him," Aeris whispered suddenly.

Davoren glanced askance at her, cigarette held up to his lips. Of course, he knew exactly whom she meant.

"..you...killed him...m-murdered him in cold-blood," the pathetic girl whimpered out, "You didn't even fight fair. How could you...how could *anyone* be so cruel?"

Poor, distraught Aeris buried her sorrow back into her arms. Her weak voice began to quiver.

"I hate you!" she sobbed bitterly, "I'll never, ever forgive you! You killed him! Murderer!!"

The accusation, so pathetically presented, stood bare in the gunman's face. But he hardly appeared bothered. Instead, Davoren smoked on in perfect composure. He did not look at her.

A painful surge of emotions wrangled Aeris' broken heart, reducing her to more hot tears. She looked the epitome of misery.

Davoren listened to this outpour of anguish without interruption. The pitiful scene endured another minute.

"You don't actually believe he's dead, do you?" he asked at length.

Aeris froze at the question. Apparently, it had never once occurred to her Vincent could have somehow survived.

"I spent twenty minutes checking around, but never found his body," the gunman continued as coolly, "At first, I thought maybe the train had swept him away. But then, the wheels would've torn him up, and I'd have found his body parts. I found nothing...not one trace..."

The girl slowly lifted her head from her arms, then twisted her head around to the gunman. She did not speak.

Davoren exhaled another hazy puff of smoke without looking at her. His calm voice, far from playful, sounded dead serious, "Besides, didn't you hear what he said? He said he'd never let anyone take you

away. Even if he was killed, even if he had to crawl back through the Gates of Hell, he won't let it happen."

She remembered those brave words, so fervently declared with his last strength. In her mind, she could see Vincent standing there, tall, ravaged, crimson eyes fiercely resolute. But he had been shot, and the gunman had....then the train.....how could he possibly have...

"He's alive, I know it," Davoren broke into her thoughts at once. He smiled so smugly at his pleasant cigarette, "And I also know he'll come for you; just give him time. Take my word as his ex-best buddy. Valentine would never make vow unless he fully intended to keep it."

Confidence in its surest form. He sat slumped forward with marked ease, puffing at his cigarette while staring into the empty distance. Through the white smoke, he seemed almost able to visualize his prophecy.

Aeris knew not what to make of this news. She reflected a long moment upon herself: rejoice! Not only could Vincent be alive, but perhaps he'd come rescue her from this nightmare. Hope still glimmered after all. She should smile, it not at least be comforted.

But no. Instead, a most pained expression overshadowed her whole face, casting her heart into deeper despair. She drew her sight to the far side.

"...if he's really alive, then I hope he'll never come for me," the wretched girl muttered sadly.

"Now THERE'S a surprise!" exclaimed Davoren, turning his head to her, "I thought you'd be happy!"

"..no..."

The gunman studied her quite keenly.

Intense sorrow gently sealed her eyes shut, at the same time squeezing out such a heavy sigh out of her bosom.

"If he comes, you'll trap him again...rip him apart, then shed his blood just...just like that night," she paused, overwhelmed by her own torn emotions, then whispered out more miserably, "..I don't want him to come here...not to die....I don't want to see him die all over again..."

Another silence befell the dungeon. The gunman, ever the sharp observer, beheld this pathetic girl in the feeble candle light.

A cunning smile gradually crossed his lips.

"...do you love Vincent?" he asked all of a sudden.

The unexpected question startled Aeris, as though he had just revealed her deepest secret. She instantly turned to the man, much confused by his bluntness.

"Oh, c'mon! Not like you ever try to hide it!" Davoren laughed light-heartedly at her reaction, "It's in everything you do! You nearly surrendered yourself in exchange for his life, and broke out into hysterics when I shot him, remember?"

Aeris felt her cheeks grow uncomfortably hot under his meaningful scrutiny. Thus cornered by all these sly observations, she huddled back against the cold wall, half her face buried in her crossed arms. She gazed down at her dirty boots, but said nothing.

"Yes, you *are* in love with him. Your silence only proves it," Davoren assured again.

She didn't argue, which caused the gunman to smile all the more cunningly at himself. He took another easy puff from his cigarette, then dispersed the white smoke with one elegant wave of the hand. He still sat bent over the wooden box, elbows as support against his knees. He gazed thoughtfully into the dark void ahead.

"I watched you two on the bridge....the way he hugged you while you cried your eyes out," Davoren observed in a voice far too sly, "Just from the way he held you, one could tell you meant a great deal to him. And then..that vow. There was something in his eyes....real anger, maybe hatred when he said he'd never let you be taken. His reasons for protecting you go well beyond simple duty, or so it seems to me. I'd say he also has very.....strong feelings for you. Dare I say...*love*?"

Aeris was silent. On glancing askance, she found Davoren's pink eyes fixed on her in keen curiosity. The smile remained on his face, adding a cunning intelligence to his appearance. He seemed to have uncovered all secrets (or so he claimed).

Soon, however, she tore her cold sight back down to her boots. A spiteful glow sparked in her green eyes.

"...you're so stupid," she remarked softly but quite scornfully.

Not at all insulted, the cool gunman asked, "In what way do you find me stupid?"

"You think Vincent actually loves me."

"Well, why else would he come for you if he didn't?" he chuckled like a parent amused by a silly child.

Aeris hesitated a long time.

"...if he comes, it won't be for me. It will be for *her*...Lucrecia.."

She re-buried half her face back into her arms, as if crushed by her own words. Huddled there so cold and alone, she found her heart struggling against a whirlpool of painful, most strange emotions. She shut her eyes to block them out.

"...you're so stupid to think Vincent would come all this way and risk his life for me," the girl sighed tragically, more to herself, "He doesn't want or love me at all, he loves Lucrecia. He loves her..so much..he.."

Her sad voice trailed off into another long, reclusive silence. She wondered at these strange new emotions tumbling inside, more at herself for confiding them to the gunman (of all people).

Her mind unconsciously reached back to another night long ago, that night when delirium had robbed Vincent's sanity blind. His raving words floated back to her, in particular one sentence he had shouted clear in her face for her to hear. So short, yet so cutting.

A strange pang of pain stabbed her heart when she finally remembered that sentence: "It's Lucrecia, not you! Not you!!"

Indeed, how many times during his mad fever had she heard him desperately rave out that one name? If he sat by himself, gazing so gloomily into empty space, couldn't she for once guess who occupied his mind? Lucrecia. A ghost who held him in thrall; an invisible presence only he somehow felt. Every time Aeris looked at him, there was Lucrecia...

"And do you hate Lucrecia for that?" Davoren suddenly cut into her contemplation.

Aeris gave a start at the intrusion. She immediately darted her shocked eyes to the man. He still sat bent over, smoking so coolly while smiling back at her. Not only had he seemingly read her mind, but had also tried to identify that strange emotion.

Aeris listened in silence. For some reason, a dreadful fear seized her by the roots as she gazed into his startling pink eyes.

"It must hurt to be standing there all alone with your heart in your hand, while he's still pining for a woman who (heaven knows) has been dead for thirty-one years," the gunman noted calmly, "I know he was madly in love with her. It wasted him away and made him miserable, but he still held onto her. That kind of love doesn't feel time. It never fades, no matter what happens. Do you hate Lucrecia for having all his love, while you have none?"

Whether his question was in jest or earnest, Davoren peered so intently at the girl as he smoked his cigarette. Aeris' blood ran cold. His cool voice, sharp gaze, all seemed to pierce deep into her soul, to somewhere she herself had never consciously wandered.

But subconsciously, in the darkest depths of her heart, is that how she felt about Vincent's beloved Lucrecia? Hatred? More than resentment, did she actually hate that woman for having all his love, while she had none?

Suddenly, Aeris cut off these thoughts. She felt immense disgust at Davoren's words, twice at herself for entertaining them.

"That's terrible!!" she instantly cried out in a passion. Her eyes glared so hatefully at him, "For you say...for me to *hate* a woman I don't know or even seen.... and who has suffered in her own life, probably far more than me...for me to hate her....no!! That's simply terrible!!!"

Her angry outburst amused him, or perhaps he found her incensed face too charming, especially her green eyes and loose flowing hair. In any case, Davoren cast his sight back down to his own feet, and took another smoke from his cigarette.

"Once, I tried to kill her," he recounted.

Aeris stared dumbstruck with horror.

"Oh, Vincent never told you why he shot me, hm?" Davoren chuckled, even though he didn't look at her. His voice lingered between vicious mockery and bitter sadness, "It was because I tried to kill Lucrecia....no, not kill. 'Kill' is too fast, too simple. That night, I wanted to murder her... just riddle her top to bottom in bullets...spill her blood all over the orchard..."

A most evil smile curled his lips, making his face from the side appear so sinister, perhaps even a touch of insanity. He seemed to stare down into an abyss only visible to his brilliant eyes.

"But Vincent shot me before I could shoot her...one clean bullet in the head, then all goes black. Strange, I never once wanted revenge on him. I don't care. Life...death..it's all the same to me. I guess I just... enjoy it for some reason...the sight of blood. Fresh blood flowing out, even better when it washes my hands....that's the only way I know I'm still alive....."

The terror-stricken Aeris listened to this deranged reverie, herself growing frightened and angry at the same time: could this stone-hearted madman be the same Davoren Vincent had praised at the Snow Fields? Vincent had spoken so reverently of his dear old friend, calling him a "very, very good man", one who miraculously kept his soul alive, despite all the crimes...despite all the bloodshed...

Yet how could compassion thus turn to sadism? Could one simply cast off his humanity, and twist into *this* form, like the gunman had?

"You're a monster," Aeris accused in a harsh whisper.

Davoren seemed to find the word quite strange. He looked askance at her.

"A 'monster'?" he echoed coldly.

"Yes!" she cried aloud, "You murder people! You shed their blood! You love to watch helpless people suffer, and laugh when you do evil things!! It's impossible! You could never have been a human being! You're just a horrible monster! A monster!!"

He looked down at his feet again.

"Vincent's a monster too," he argued calmly.

"No he's not!! Vincent's not a heartless animal like you!! He doesn't enjoy bloodshed and murder or.."

"My dear, it doesn't matter whether he enjoys it or not. He's still done the same things I've done. We're both the same breed...the exact same animal."

"No! No! You're wrong!!" she shouted in tearful despair, so overwhelmed by his unnatural tone, "Vincent would NEVER do any of the horrible things you do!! It's YOU who's the monster! You alone!!"

A heavy silence followed.

Aeris glared at him, half her heart cold with fear, the other half seething with hatred. She loathed him beyond any possible description.

The argument had apparently irritated the gunman too, most probably her bitter stubbornness. He breathed out a final puff of smoke through his nose, at the same time giving her such a sharp look, unlike anything she'd ever seen.

Davoren flicked the cigarette butt away, then stood up. Much to Aeris' wild alarm, the gunman walked towards her, as if he'd murder her next.

"Ah! G-get away from me!!" she cried at once. She scrambled up to her feet, then glued her whole back against the wall, "Don't come any closer! No, get away!"

Davoren did not. Instead, he stopped directly in front of her, hands loose by his side, pink eyes narrowed down on her alone. He did not speak.

His presence so close, less than a step away, reduced poor Aeris to a frightened silence. She pressed back against the icy wall, tense eyes lowered for fear of meeting his terrible face. Her whole body trembled in Davoren's tall shadow. Indeed, his height was quite impressive, more so measured against hers.

They stood thus for full minute. Neither spoke or moved. The air grew stiff under the heavy stillness. Darkness edged closer to the meek candle light.

"Tell me, what makes a man a monster?" asked Davoren dryly, almost like a challenge.

The question struck Aeris as so strange, she immediately shot her sight up to him. A deep solemnity marked his face.

"I'm the horrible fiend that spreads all evil...the villain.. the devil," Davoren remarked in ice-cold composure, "And Vincent, he's the good human being...the hero...your beloved guardian angel. What makes us so different from each other?"

Aeris stared back, perplexed by those mysterious words. His tone, too detached to be natural, frightened her. There wasn't a trace of that playfulness in it.

Suddenly, one gentle whiff of wind whisked all light away to oblivion. The dank dungeon plunged back to its formal state: a pitch-black void of endless shadows.

Aeris found herself transfixed by a bright pair of pink eyes, gazing so ominously down on her. In this stuffy darkness, she could not even distinguish the outline of Davoren's body, let alone his face; only eyes.

Under such keen scrutiny, a violent bout of shivering seized the girl. She felt trapped, helpless.

Her ordeal suddenly worsened. Aeris gave a most horrified start when she felt the gunman take her hand. The touch, though quite warm, aroused such revulsion in her anguished heart. Davoren nevertheless pulled up her trembling hand, and pressed it against his left cheek.

"See for yourself. He and I, we're both made of flesh and bone, both covered with skin," he ran her delicate fingertips along his face, the forehead down the side, "We both look human, have our little 'abnormalities'. We're both criminals with blood on our hands, and a long string of crimes tagging behind. So why? Why call me a monster, and insist he's not one too?"

"..he...Vincent is not a monster..," Aeris heard herself deny weakly. She could say no more.

Another deathly silence followed.

He released her hand at last. Aeris instantly clenched it hard against her bosom. His unbearable gaze seemed to pierce more sternly into her now: she **still** clung to her obstinate belief.

Davoren spoke again, this time his voice rigidly cold, "Vincent has killed people just because they disagreed with his boss. It was so easy: there was the target. Simply aim the gun, and shoot. He has spied for his company, threatened deserters, kidnapped and interrogated opposers, all to please his superiors."

Aeris froze solid as she felt the man place his hand against the wall, right by her head. He stooped towards her, thus bringing his brilliant eyes so close to peer into hers.

"My dear, that man you love....the one you call 'human' was one of the company's finest Turks...ShinRa's little demons who dress in slick suits. He had never once....not ONCE stopped at anything to obey orders, even if it had meant killing...no, *murdering* an innocent, little child."

She still stared into those solemn eyes. His tone, so strange, seemed to drill into her very consciousness without pity.

"You only see us from one view: your selfish view," the gunman accused, his cool voice not above a hushed murmur, "Vincent protects you from danger. He hugs you when you cry. And for that, you disregard all his crimes, and call him 'human'. I'm the one who tries to return you to the Professor. And for that, you throw all my crimes in my face, and scream 'monster'."

She said nothing.

"So in your eyes, is that all that separates men from monsters? Petty kindness? If I were to right now become...'kind' to you alone, would I suddenly become human too?"

"...no..," Aeris faltered. Her frantic heartbeat drowned her ears.

"Then what?" whispered Davoren so softly, "If crimes and bloodshed don't make a monster, and kindness alone won't make a human, then what is it?"

Her tense eyes, already brimming with tears, begged him to leave. Her frail body ached in distress.

"..I don't know...I...," Aeris forced out, "...Vincent's done his share of crimes too...he's shed blood like you and done so many evil things....he told me himself.....but.."

"But...?"

"..inside...there's something *inside* of him that makes him so different from you.....underneath it all, there's something else..."

She suddenly remembered those beautiful snow fields.

"And what's 'inside' that makes him so different from me?" Davoren asked.

The riddle baffled her to confusion. For a long minute, their gazes interlocked without either flinching a single muscle. A deep curiosity lit up the man's eyes, cold yet quite solemn. He seemed to expect an answer.

But Aeris could not bear this torment any longer. She crumbled.

"Damn you! You've returned me to the Professor, what more do you want?!" she sobbed out in redoubled misery, "You've seen me cry and suffer, what else do you want to see? Did you just come here to torture me more?!"

The broken-hearted girl struggled against a fresh surge of tears, shivering between the cold air and her own fears. Davoren beheld her until slowly, his eyes softened.

"Of course not. I came here to check on you," he reassured gently, almost kindly.

He withdrew one step away, leaving the girl in a pitiful state of anguish. As Aeris stared back through her tears, he heard Davoren grope at his side pocket for something.

With one soft "click", a feeble light emerged again. Davoren had flicked on his cigarette lighter.

They stood face to face in total silence. Davoren's gloved hand had cupped over the weak flame to protect it from the cold breeze. His handsome face, only high-lighted to grey shadow, maintained the same solemn visage. His cool eyes gazed down on the mute girl, meditating over the details of her beautiful face.

Aeris wondered at that peculiar gleam in his eyes. If she did not know better, she'd have sworn there was...pain....

Suddenly, a loud bleeping sound interrupted the scene.

The gunman mechanically thrust his free hand into his pocket, and pulled out the rude radio transmitter. He fitted it into one ear.

"Go ahead," he demanded after tapping the device.

"Sir, you better get here quick!" begged a man's voice at once. He sounded quite perturbed.

"What's wrong now?"

"..it..it's Rufus again. He's having another spasm attack."

"Give him a sedative then."

"They're not working. They're only making him worse. He's getting so damn violent, we can barely hold him down. Please Sir!"

Davoren thought a moment. Clear annoyance marked his face.

"Alright. I'll be there in a minute," he consented very dryly. He yanked the transmitter out from his ear back into his pocket.

The same irritation pestered him for another moment. However, Davoren broke off his contemplation when he suddenly glanced again at Aeris, who hadn't spoken during that brief conversation. Without a word, the gunman marched back to the wooden box, and re-lit the forsaken candle.

Aeris watched him in silent suspicion. She stood an inch away from the wall, both hands still clasped against her chest.

The candle light now restored, Davoren returned to Aeris again, for some reason slipping off his heavy trench coat.

"Try to get some sleep now. This should keep you warm enough," he said quietly.

Aeris could not conceal her blank amazement as Davoren wrapped the coat around her. It was quite large for her slender figure, yet the pleasant heat inside warmed her stiff, frozen limbs greatly. Such warmth she had long lost in this hellish nightmare.

When done, Davoren gave Aeris one friendly pat against the cheek, then whispered more softly, "I still say Vincent loves you. And when he comes, trust me, he'll come for you alone."

The visit ended. He walked away.

Aeris' haggard eyes followed him until he reached the stiff dungeon door. One loud knock instantly signaled for the guardsman to open passage. The silent Davoren walked out without once looking back, whereby the door slammed shut again. Silence returned.

Though she was alone now, though he had left, Aeris could still hear his words echo through the dungeon.

-End of Chp.51

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.52

Confusion could not grapple these strange emotions. They all slipped through his numb senses, fluttering about in the dark. There was no sound in this empty existence, no movement, no surroundings; just the darkness.

"It's very cold here...am I all alone?" he wondered to himself.

Suddenly, a burst of brilliant white light exploded into his haggard eyes. He did not understand its meaning, only that the flash has pierced clean through his torn mind.

An insane fire instantly engulfed his body head to toe. The pain started its murderous rampage...again.

The little boy sprang up in bed, panting loudly for air, small hands both atremble: a nightmare. He had just escaped the most horrific nightmare.

Intense fear shook him to the very core. His eyes gaped wide into the darkness ahead. Without even a tinge of sight, he instantly groped around for his stuffed mog. On discovering it burried under the blanket, the distraught child embraced the precious toy all to himself. He even burried his tear-stained face against its soft head.

"..N..Nana?" he whimpered weakly. Nothing stirred in response.

The child waited a long time. He peeked through his tears in a vain search for someone. Utter emptiness haunted the bedroom. In his anxiety, he cast another futile look around when the door finally caught his notice.

It stood ajar. A meagre light smuggled through the crack, and cast a thin, long strip of yellow across the black ground. Strange to say, nothing else could be seen in this darkness except that one shred of light.

The child stared in bewilderment at that door, his sole gateway out of this void. So, mog in hand, he quietly slipped out of bed, then pattered up to the door. He opened it half-way.

Rather than wait outside, the greedy light flooded in all at once, drowing his sight to total blindness. He didn't resist. Instead, he simply surrendered to a fate which left him in limbo.

Yet the dazzlement only endured another moment. The boy, through a strange twist of events he could not remember, found himself wandering down a deserted corridor in search for someone.

His little feet made no sound against the cold marble floor. He crept along the wall, darting his anxious eyes from corner to corner in suspicion. Darkness stretched to infinity. The horrible monsters of his vivid imagination eyed this child from the shadows. They would have devoured him whole had he not that brave mog to ward off all danger.

As the frightened boy roamed through this huge labyrinth of silent halls, he gradually discerned a single voice not too far away. It sounded like a man's, deep and quite gruff.

The boy neither recognized the voice nor understood any of the actual words. Nevertheless, he found himself drawn towards that one voice, like a stray wanderer to a warm fire.

He noiselessly pursued the mysterious echo further down the hallway, where it led him up a flight of broad marble steps, and around some obscure corner. The hunt ended at some large oak doors farther down the hall.

The ornate doors had been left ajar against each other, with a bright light flickering through the narrow crack. A deep voice boomed within. It ranted to itself in some heated conversation. The little child cautiously snuck up to these ominous doors. He peeked through the bright crack into the room inside.

Vague blurriness marred the interior: patches of hazy colours and obscure shapes barely recognizable. Yet the boy's eyes soon fell on some stout man in a loose robe. He stood at his impressive desk, directly in front of the doors, so that only his broad back could be seen. This man furiously rummaged through a disordered stack of papers, at the same time heckling into the phone. Irritation marked his every movement, from his stern voice to the way smoke fumed from his cigar.

Struck by such a curious stranger, the child edged a bit closer to listen.

"..yes...yes, that's right...20%," agreed the angry man as he flicked through some sheets, "...increase the arms sale..artillery shells and rifles...12.9 and 6.4...that's 19.3% on the export tax...what?"

A long pause followed, during which the busy man found enough time to smoke then scribble some brief notice on one paper, all the while listening attentively to the phone. The silent boy marvelled at the triple task.

"Ah, wake up, man!" the incensed stranger cried suddenly, "It's war! Of course they'll pay that much!.....if Sephiroth's the general, then it's sure guarantee....alright, alright! You double-check those figures again, then I.."

So interested in this scene, the little child tilted his weight further forward, when much to his alarm, he suddenly lost all balance. To prevent a fall, he clumsily stumbled against the door, which at once swung open to reveal his hideout.

Before he realized it, the speechless boy found himself in plain view of the entire room.

The conversation was effectively cut short. At this most insolent interruption, the angry man turned around to confront the intruder. Yet on spotting a child there, whose height barely reached the doorknob, he froze in absolute astonishment. He still held the phone up to one ear, cigar shoved aside in his twisted mouth.

The little boy stood rooted at the threshold of the door. In his sudden fright, he had dropped his precious mog, where it now lay face down at his bare feet. His countenance betrayed pure terror.

Both seemed totally shocked by the other. However, it only took the man another moment before a most ominous scowl overcast his face. Obviously, he would not take this intrusion too kindly.

"I'll call you back in a minute, Heidegger," he dismissed curtly into the phone.

No sooner had he he slammed it shut, than the man instantly demanded, "Who the hell are YOU, boy?"

The sharp voice startled the poor child. He fumbled for some reply.

"How'd you get here? Speak up!" thundered the man again.

"..I..ah...I don't k-know," the boy faltered against perturbed tears, "..I woke up...it..it was cold...Nana..she wasn't there..."

Anxiety reduced his tremulous voice to meek silence, one in which he stood trembling under hostile scrutiny. From his place over at the desk, the man surveyed this petrified child top to bottom. He was not pleased at all.

"Ridiculous! Just Ridiculous!" he broke off. The exasperated stranger stormed away behind his desk, where he buzzed one button several times.

"I'll fire them! Servants now tagging along their brats like my house is a damn nursery!" he growled through his fuming cigar, "Yes, the whole western front's ablaze in war, and I waste my time on a stupid rugrat!"

The pitiful child shrunk away at this bitter anger, especially that hard, cold glare he received from the furious man. Fear shook his limbs.

"What's your name, boy?" interrogated the man at once.

He struggled for his voice again.

"I said what is your name?"

"Rufus"

"Rufus what?"

"Rufus ShinRa"

An awkward silence followed.

Strange enough, the name stuck the man harder than a bolt of lightning. He froze solid on this little child for perhaps a full minute, his whole face the picture of shock in its extremest form.

Yet the boy only stared back. he did not understand the significance of his own name.

Finally, when the man had overcome enough of his astonishment, he beckoned the boy forward with a curt "Come here". His voice, however, sounded far more composed than before.

The child, after much mistrustful hesitation, induced himself to obey. Rufus slowly trotted up to the man, where he stood statue still.

For his part, the man showed such peculiar interest in this child, totally contrary to his previous vexation. He loomed overhead to examine every detail. Nothing escaped his keen notice.

Suddenly, a broad grin stretched across his face, thereby revealing his good-humoured surprise.

"Hah! Well I'll be damned!" he exclaimed aloud, "You've grown up quite a bit, eh? Ha ha...no wonder I didn't recognize you! How old are you now, boy?"

"..n..nine..," the child stammered confusedly.

"Nine? Nine years! You've been around here for nine whole years and I never saw you once? Amazing!"

Rufus only tensed in his spot. The presence of this stranger filled him with such discomfort, almost a loathing dread.

"Heh heh...why the scared look, kiddo?" laughed the man, bestowing a clumsy pat against the child's head, "Don't you know me? I'm your father! Your daddy!"

The foreign word escaped the child's simple comprehension. He gaped up at the stranger, his expression blank to the joyous announcement. Yet Rufus could not distinguish this man's face. Every feature had been smudged over by a hazy blurr.

"And here I thought you were some dirty kitchen boy. Now then, let's have a look at you," the man scanned him over for a second inspection. He picked up the boy's little chin, then twisted it aside, "Oh! You're gonna be taller than me! Hm..hm...my! Aren't you gonna be the handsome young man once you've grown up! It already shows, by Gaffrey!"

The man heaved another laugh at the predictions. The confused boy hardly understood one word, but succumbed to this awkward treatment all the same.

The scene soon ended on the arrival of rushing footsteps. There followed a hurried knock against the door before someone ventured inside.

"You called, Sir?" asked a woman's voice, very respectful but equally breathless.

Rufus turned his eyes to the new speaker, and recognized "Nana", his governess.

All events strangely melted into a swirl of confusion, at which the child found himself trapped within its mad centre. He remained rigid in his spot while the man had scolded the ever apologetic maid; that she must keep this child in check; that he wanted Rufus removed at once, and would not tolerate any future interruptions. Rufus then felt himself roughly dragged away. The huge doors slammed shut the instant he cleared the threshold.

He hadn't understood anything. He fumbled for his beloved mog but found it no where. He must've forgotten the poor toy back at that room. Suddenly, it ended. A strange darkness descended whole upon him. Sensation was lost, awareness erased, only scraps of some torn conscious left adrift in mayhem.

~...."father"?...~

~...it doesn't matter...~

~...Nana was very angry at me...she said I'm always a bother. She put me straight to bed, and left me alone in the dark. She wouldn't go back for my mog...~

~...I was having a nightmare...the room was so dark...~

"It's very cold here...am I all alone?" wondered one flat voice through this black fog. It sounded like his own.

The image of a haggard young boy, no older than fourteen, struck him blank until he realized it was his own. Rufus found himself face to face with a rectangular mirror, hanging so neatly above a clean, white bathroom sink. Silence hammered his ears to deafness.

He stared an eternity at that face. A sickly pallor coloured his sallow skin. His vacant eyes shined through his hair strands, clear evidence of a raging turmoil inside. Yet nevertheless, the expression remained as hard as chisled marble; perfect stoicism.

Rufus gazed a long time at the mute image on the opposite side. At last, he reached for his side pocket, and pulled out a small razor blade.

The boy examined this curious object. He flipped it between his graceful fingers in complete fascination: so clean, without a single stain. So sharp, its edge smooth and blemish-free.

~...oh, that's right...I remember now...~

Rufus deliberately rolled his sleeve up to the elbow, then clenched his fist tight. In one steady movement, he slit his wrist; one cut clean across the skin.

~...I tried to kill myself that day...~

The boy marvelled at this grievous deed. Dark blood seeped through the wound. It trickled down his arm, where it dripped so neatly off his elbow.

Crimson red, such a wonderful colour for his empty eyes to behold. He held his arm up, idly observing the red droplets plunge to their doom, each one stealing another ounce of his life.

Shards of broken thoughts raged around, inhuman and totally unfamiliar. Each one tugged at him in a different direction.

~...I really wanted to kill myself that day...~

~...I was angry...~

~...why? Why be angry?...there's money...so much money...servants... land and wealth....people...they all flock around...they worship me to the very ground....~

~...I see through them!! Everyone lies! They just want more...more land ...more power...more money! They're all alike...greedy leeches... hypocrites and liars!!...~

In the midst of that venomous outburst, Rufus slowly dropped his distraught eyes down to the ground. His lifeless arm hung dead by his side. The blood tumbled off his cold fingertips onto the neat tile floor below.

"So why be angry?" he asked himself, his voice too dispassionate to be normal, "I was born here...amongst them...it doesn't even matter anymore. I'm already one of them...no...no...! I'll be the worst one...."

~...is that why I was angry?...~

"It's too late...it doesn't even matter anymore..."

His weak voice soon trailed off into the far distance. Sight faded. Sound was overpowered. In one final breath, his conscious collapsed to darkness again, and he felt no more.

Yet the madness went on. A dozen little torotous thoughts squeezing past his lonely voice.

~...I guess someone found me later....I remember...I woke up in a white room, in some strange bed. My wrist was wrapped up in a bandage, and a tube stuck in my arm...I felt sick for days...

"When I woke up, no one was there."

~...no. Not even him. I think...he had an important business conference that day, then a big dinner party. He was too busy to come...or maybe he just never found out...that's okay. I didn't expect him to...~

"When I woke up, no one was there."

~...I was cold...~

It started again. Brutal pain seized his entire mind by the roots, wrenching out a flood of strange flashes he couldn't grasp. Each wild light shocked his eyes. Yet at the centre, he glimpsed writing: texts and texts of mindless drivel all scrawled out before him. They made no sense at all.

Then just as suddenly as chaos broke out, it ended again. Everything, including his ravaged conscious, disintegrated to oblivion.

When his eyes shot wide open, he found himself trapped amidst a huge crowd of people; their empty chatter rang through his ears. He also discovered a crystal wine-glass held between his fingers, filled to the brim in the luscious, purple drink.

Rufus beheld this festive pandemonium in silent awe: the people had no faces, just grey shades smudged onto their obscure visage; ghosts of no substance, loud and chaotic. They were dressed in the best fashion, men in smart suits like himself, ladies in elegant dresses. They never ceased talking.

He knew not where he was. He recognized no one. The place appeared to be some grand ballroom, amidst some sort of party.

He drifted amongst these strangers, nodding here, smiling there. Clever wit to prove one's worth; speech intended to impress, with a confident sweep back through the hair. It's form that counts, not content.

Despite his estrangment, he fitted in perfectly. He belonged among these silly spirits. Yet while part of his being haughtily dictated the proper actions, another half seemes to observe him from afar, invisible but still detectable. He didn't find this torn feeling new at all.

"Now then, Mr.Rufus," suddenly called a merry voice from behind, "Enjoying the banquet, I hope? It's not everyday you drop by from busy Junon to see us!"

Rufus turned around to face a short, corpulent old man. Though his flabby face had been blotted over by a cloudy haze, this stranger bore an appearance of prominent importance, from his impressive suit up to his filthy cigar.

"Yes, Sir. Thank you," Rufus replied most graciously to the question. He paused a moment, then added, "The music is particularly nice."

"Ah! You like music, eh?" the gentleman asked with sly interest, "Nothing like a man with a musical ear. I've been told you yourself can play the piano."

"Only a bit, Sir."

"Hah! No, I've been told (from a reliable source too) that you're an *excellent* pianist! Why, I'll bet my bank notes you can play better than him!"

He indicated the spry middle-aged musician who played the grand piano over by the window, at the same time winking encouragingly to Rufus. The young man, however, fidgetted in mild discomfort.

"I fear the source is too kind, Sir," he declined with forced politeness, "I'm not nearly that good a pianist."

The man gave him a long, disappointed look.

"Still, I'd love to hear you play," he regretted aloud. He eyed Rufus very meaningfully from the side.

The wish was interpreted as an order. Rufus wisely desisted any further protests.

The man, beaming with triumphant delight, bustled away for the preparation. Therefore, in no time flat, Rufus found himself seated in front of the grand black piano. The ivory white keys gaped back at him in patient wait.

"What would you like me to play, Sir?" he inquired dryly.

The man, who hovered over Rufus' shoulder from behind, merely laughed the question aside, "Anything! I don't care! Let's just see those graceful little fingers of yours dance with the sweet music. Ha ha!"

The clumsy poetic attempt strained Rufus' eyes into a sour, cold gaze, but it remained locked down on the keys. He slipped off his gloves, then flexed his fingers a moment. Rufus hardly thought. His hands lifted up, and played the first song that came to his mind.

He never once lifted his eyes, even though he discerned the attentive gentleman linger behind, as watchful as a vulture. Instead, Rufus watched his own fingers glide along, sweeping out an allegro of sweet-sad music. Both hands moved in graceful elegance, every movement timed perfectly with each note. Indeed, he knew this famous piece too, too well.

~...I don't like this song...in fact, I never liked the piano either... it reminds me of my mother...~

~..."mother"?...~

Rufus nevertheless continued to play, listening to the music swirl into this ghost monologue. They both haunted the abandoned corners of his brain alone.

~...I've only seen her once. One night, there was this big dinner party at our house...so many people...so much talk, food, and wine. I guess I was five. I was supposed to be in bed, but instead, I snuck out of my bed-room, and tip-toed to the ballroom to peek inside. My mother... she was playing the piano for all the guests...this song, I think. That was the only time I ever saw her. I don't even remember her face. I just remember her there, at the piano. I know I watched her for a long time....~

He could not hear the music anymore. His hands slid across the keys, all ten fingers in an incredible sweep downwards, hardly aware of any effort. Yet to him, there was no sound. Only tiny whispers of insanity.

~...there was quite a scandal later on. That same night, after all the guests had went away, my mother left the house, and never came back. She took all her money, and disappeared forever...~

~...I wasn't sad she left...maybe a bit hurt for a while....~

~...why?...~

~...because my mother took her money, but didn't take me....~

"Ah! BRAVO!!!" bellowed the man's loud voice so suddenly, scattering the fragile thoughts to oblivion.

Rufus was startled out of the strange trance. He found both hands frozen on the keys, with the last musical note still echoing into the air. All this time, he had been unconscious of his own movements.

"Very, very beautiful!!!" praised the impressed gentleman. He clapped his flabby hands together, "Ha ha! I *knew* you were an excellent pianist! Well done!!"

"Thank you, Sir," Rufus acknowledged.

His tone lacked any emotion. However, inside his head, if he listened carefully, he could hear a lonely child wailing.

The banquet had been impeccably prepared. Dozens of tables dressed in their best finery: elegant silverware polished to perfection; white table cloths spread out beneath the cutlery. The air was abuzz in idle chat. Celebrity dignitaries, important businessmen, fashionable ladies, all faceless, sat at their tables. They laughed at anything, or talked of nothing.

Rufus was alone again with the same portly gentleman, this time at one table in some private corner. An overly-eager waiter, probably the head butler, served their dinner in the most gracious manner. Each steaming dish was a beauty to behold. Dainty delicacies and rich sauces (only the finest, to be sure) laced the sumptuous main course.

"And one Bolonga-Vanier wine," the gentleman selected majestically from the wine trolley, even though he had mispronounced the entire name.

The honoured waiter nevertheless replied "Yes Sir! At once!" Indeed, if he had been asked to kiss their shoes, this man would have undoubtedly still obeyed. The expensive bottle was uncorked, and the dark drink poured out. When thus finished, the attentive butler retreated away with a string of bows.

"I tell you, Mr.Rufus, music and good wine are the only solution to all troubles," declared the good-humoured gentleman, "Food for the soul, and drink for the mind, eh?"

Rufus nodded his head in agreement, but hardly smiled at the clever wit. His face was marble stoic. The man, however, laughed all the more heartily before turning to his delicious dinner. Rufus lingered a moment over his plate, then followed likewise.

They spent a long time at the table, discussing many "important" topics while eating. Yet for all his attempts, Rufus could not grasp the events: the food eaten literally had no taste; the words spoken made no sense. Everything rolled by without waiting for him.

Between this inconsistency, Rufus felt a wild tempest of pain wreak havoc through his mind. Insane flashes came crashing into his sight. Again, he spotted that mindless drivel at the heart of the storm: mountains of texted jargon, strange geometric diagrams, and snippets of faces he'd never seen before; all zipped by like mad.

But the turmoil only raged inside. Outside, he sat unaffected, almost unaware, of anything save this conversation.

Rufus was surprised to discover that the dinner had somehow finished. The empty plates had been removed, and the wine-glasses refilled. The corpulent gentleman had shifted his weight back against the chair in complete satisfaction. He held another cigar in between his fingers.

Rufus sat back in his chair too, both legs and arms crossed in cool composure. He watched the easy man enjoy his cigar without a word.

"And then you must have a taste of the dessert here," invited the pleasant gentleman after a few easy puffs, "Pure heaven! Why, I could never.."

"I'm afraid I can only stay for dinner, Sir," apologized Rufus in a voice that left no room for compromise, "I must return to Junon City tonight. I'm scheduled to meet the ambassador tomorrow morning."

"Leaving so soon? Oh, what a pity! You only arrived yesterday."

The abrupt news of departure rather dispirited the man. Rufus nevertheless gestured to one of the passing waiters, who instantly scurried away to fulfil his command. Soon, the waiter returned with some fancy brown-leather file, and placed it square in front of Rufus.

After sending for his coat, Rufus began flicking hurriedly through this file, at the same time saying, "If it would not be too much a bother, Sir, I just ask your signature on some papers before I leave. A mere formality the ambassador requires, I assure you."

"Paperwork, paperwork," sighed the fat gentleman in knowledgeable defeat. He drew out his elegant fountain pen, and clumsily signed wherever indicated.

Rufus shuffled quickly through the many papers and dull formats, explaining any necessary details. Never once did he lift his eyes up, as if rummaging through this file occupied his sole interest. Nor did the gentleman ever interrupt him. On the contrary, he seemed far too silent.

"I've already reviewed the details of the lease contract with the head lawyer," informed Rufus as he ran his finger down a list of numbers, "...that's the final tax account for the next five years...plus the investment shares of the Sea Reactor...a total of 78.75%, and of course the..."

"Mr.Rufus?" cut in the man.

Rufus dutifully stopped, and looked askance.

"Mr.Rufus, are you aware that I am your father?" asked the gentleman, himself bemused by this sudden discovery. His bulky weight leaned forward against the table for a closer, more shrewd inspection. No doubt, he had been studying Rufus' face all this time.

Rufus held his gaze in cold silence. He said nothing.

"I'm your father, you're my son. It just occurred to me right now, when I remembered your last name," though quite subdued, his voice still brimmed in true fascination, "Amazing! I look at you, and wonder to myself 'A son? I have a son?! By heaven, when did THAT happen?'"

A wild chorus of sensations tingled Rufus' mind. He thought he glimpsed a word...some bold title...those same unfamiliar faces again...that same jargon scrolled out bare...

Yet that storm was inside. Outside, he was stone-cold.

The hefty man released another cloud of dirty cigar smoke with a sigh. He then leaned backwards again as his sight reached up to the majestic ceiling.

"Ah youth! I remember way back when I first started this company," he reminisced in fond nostalgia, "People laughed at me: the idea of using Mako... a stream of glowing 'stuff'...they all thought it a fool's dream. Hah! Well, look's who's laughing now! I rule the world and all those lowly saps beneath! My vast Mako kingdom, from the highest mountain peak to the deepest ocean."

~...yes...mako and more money....in a kingdom of leeches and liars...~

Rufus did not flinch. His eyes remained locked on the faceless man.

"But suddenly, one realizes how many years have past by since then. I'm sitting here, listening to my clever little Vice-President, then realize he's also my own son!"

The amazed man exclaimed heartily at Rufus, "All these years, all this time, there was no one! Then one day, poof! Magic! You were just there to become my Vice-President...my business partner!!"

~..your business partner...~

~...no...the turth is, I was always here...you just never noticed.... or maybe you just forgot...~

~...that's okay...I never expected you to remember anyway...~

"But you're still my son...*my* son," pronounced the man. He shifted aside in his chair as he eyed Rufus very keenly, "Outside, it doesn't show. You'll be glad to know you don't look ONE BIT like me. Heh, you probably look just like your mother. That's where you got all you looks and high-class refinement: mommy."

~...yes...mother...she forgot me too...~

"But inside, you're exactly like me. You think like me, see the world like me, and ambitious, Sir, just like I was at your age. Heh heh...ShinRa blood! That's what it is!"

~...like you?...no...I'm much worse....the blood is so rotten, it stinks all over....~

~...but it's too late now...~

~....it doesn't matter...~

~...and I don't care anymore....~

Pain again. Agony ripping through his skull in a murderous path. The wild dance of insanity restarted. Intense lights, faces, heaps of texts, all swooped down upon him, one after another, until they tore his conscious apart.

He grasped the title at last: JENOVA Project: AdM-Genesis Retrieval Expt.

Then all plunged to blackness.

A glass pane.

Rufus could see his own reflection clearly against this mute facade. He stood rooted in front of the large window, both hands dangling loose by his sides. His eyes, cool as a calm sea, gazed stoically at the grim horizon far ahead.

It was much darker inside here than outside. The view opened onto an eerie battlement of haunted buildings, their tops raised in vain to the night sky high above. Not a single light in sight. Not a sound stirred the dead-calm air. All creation lay in silent anticipation of some event.

Strange enough, Rufus didn't care to move. He saw no need to.

The same madness ranted on through his ears. It pounded hard against his head, a merciless succession of stabs all into his brain. The thoughts became too scattered; erratic whirlpools beyond control. Nothing made sense.

Over and over it flashed: JENOVA Project: AdM-Genesis Retrieval Expt..... JENOVA Project: AdM-Genesis Retrieval Expt...JENOVA Project: AdM-Genesis Retr...

~...they say it's a tragedy...~

~...what is?....~

~...that man...when he died, everyone was saying to me how sorry they felt...it was a horrible tragedy....a painful loss I must bear...~

~...liars..I see through them...they just want more...~

~...a pain? It doesn't hurt. A loss? I never lost anything. Why be sad?...why be angry?....~

~...no...when he died, I was.....happy....~

~...to see him there...dead...to have him rot in that grave.. in the dirt...with nothing....that made me happy...~

"It's very cold here...am I all alone?" peeped his muffled voice into this mad ramble.

~...but that's not enough...I want more...~

~...more?...~ "It's very cold here...am I all alone?"

~...yes...I want his hatred...I want him to hate me..to suffer by hating me...~

~..why?...~

~...I don't know....~

~...maybe because I hate him too...~

The texted jargon, printed shapes, unknown faces, all crashed upon his mind like a waterfall. Dozens of falshes tugged at him from each direction.

It never ceased: JENOVA Project: AdM- Genesis Retrial Expt.... JENOVA Project: AdM-Genesis Retrial Expt.....

Suddenly, it came.

His sight raced straight into a mad pool of light. The rumbling stampede shook the room. The window pane rattled wildly to warn of an eminent catastrophe, with the insane heat shooting high up to the ceiling.

Yet Rufus didn't move. He saw no need to.

One explosion. That was all.

The ear-splitting blast screamed through his head. One mighty force hurtled him away through wild shrapnel and torrents of glass daggers, at the same ripping his limbs apart.

Fire. The hellish inferno swallowed him whole, every hungry flame eager for delicious flesh.

His conscious crashed into another darkness far more absolute than any other. No emotion, no senses, no surroundings. All incinerated to ashes.

"It burnes me up, but it's still cold inside...am I all alone?" trailed his voice from a distance.

No one replied. All he heard was the lonesome wail of some child, lost forever in this black mist.

His head hurt unbearably.

-End of Chp.52

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.53

The paradox fascinated him: outside hellish hot, inside icy cold.

At the brink of where reality yielded to lunacy, Rufus lingered somewhere in between the two bitter extremes. He was numb to all surroundings except these raw sensations: heat and cold.

Though wide awake, his mind still groped through blind stupor, an inferno where lonely conscious lay shattered on the floor. It seemed doubtful whether he even retained an awareness of his own body, let alone the obscure world around. Indeed, he had strayed miles away from this spot.

The echo of approaching footsteps grew ever closer upon the dungeon, accompanied by some strange muffled voices. The young man, however, hardly flinched a muscle. Most probably, he didn't even hear anything.

Soon, a loud double "click" resounded. The heavy steel door belligerently swung open to admit visitors. Annoyed yet well-restrained, Davoren marched straight into this dingy cell. Two other men followed close behind; the mercenaries who had called for his immediate assistance. The three were in the heat of some discussion.

"...he's been screaming away for at least an hour, Sir, pacing around the room non-stop!" declared one man nervously, "We tried to hold him down, but...."

"And how is he now?" Davoren cut short.

"That's why we called you, Sir. He's just been swinging between so many moods so fast!"

"Even with the sedatives?"

"Huh! We can't even manage this nutty kid anymore. One minute dead quiet, the next stone-crazy!" scoffed the other mercenary aloud to answer.

In other words, drugs only aggravated the young man more.

The awkward silence fell almost immediately upon the company on halting. Davoren stopped in the middle of the cell, while the two men lingered behind. He glanced a moment at these two uneasy guards, then turned his attention the filthiest corner in sight.

There stood Rufus, with his whole back turned to the present visitors. He was locked in rigid stupor.

The dungeon appeared to be the tragic remnants of some surveillance room, now totally devastated by decay and neglect. All sorts of artifacts lay smashed along the walls: broken mainframe computers, their ravaged interiors on display; dead, dusty screen monitors, and abused electric equipment. An ominous darkness hung in the chilly air, challenged only by the bravery of a single gas lamp lynched overhead. The only furniture consisted of a low steel table and some beaten chair, both heaped near the wall.

The three silent visitors lingered in rather tense anticipation. Davoren stood at the head of the awkward company. Both gloved hands hung loose by his side. His face expressed pensive solemnity as he beheld Rufus' stubborn back. He wore no trench coat, only his suit.

Similarly, the two mercenaries waited. The nervous guard had a rather lean appearance, tan, with his woolly hair tucked under a grey skullcap. He fidgetted behind at the spectacle, always fingering his

strapped assault rifle in evident discomfort. The other guard merely watched from the doorway. Both arms were folded across his wide chest, with a most contemptuous frown on his bristly face. He seemed to find this entire scene ridiculous.

All attention remained rivetted on the young man, yet no response ever came.

Absorbed into his lonely trance, Rufus stood rooted in this dingy corner. His head hung down as if shunning both light and sanity altogether. His hands dangled like dead weights by his side. He had been clothed in the shabbiest attire, which only accenuated the frailty of his slim yet tense body: an old (but decent) pair of blue jeans; a wrinkled black turtle-neck sweater rolled up to the elbows, and beaten winter shoes. Despite his turned back, he still struck a pittifully ruined appearance.

The uneasiness endured another long minute. When it seemed that neither the two mercenaries nor the young man would act, Davoren finally ventured to break the silence.

He assumed the most relaxed, non-threatening demeanour possible. Very, very deliberately, he called, "...Rufus?"

His voice fell on dead ears. The boy did not flinch.

Davoren paused a moment, cleared his throat, then tried again, "Rufus, please turn around."

The gunman waited for some response. The guards witnessed the tense scene from afar. They dared not interfere, as if all hope hung on their leader alone.

Nothing.

It seemed uncertain whether Rufus could even hear. Indeed, he hadn't spoken or moved, not even for these three men who anticipated any reaction. A minute passed by. When still nothing came, Davoren slowly edged closer, obviously to draw the boy away from that corner.

"Don't come near me," ordered a curt, strained voice suddenly. Rufus had spoken at last.

Davoren stopped dead on the spot. His peaceful demeanour never wavered.

"...the fire...it'll burn you too...," mumbled the distraught young man in gentle derangement. He refused to lift his head or even face the visitors.

The strange warning certainly puzzled Davoren. He glanced behind at the two mercenaries for some explanation.

"He's been like that all damn night," commented the distempered guard about the lunatic, "he won't let anyone come near him...thinks he's standing in a fire."

Davoren frowned at the news. A deep troublesome expression overcast his face as he returned to the insane young man. Yet despite the warning, he edged another cautious step forward.

"Rufus," he repeated gently, "Boy, please turn around."

At long, long last, the second plea won a response. All movements slow and tired, Rufus lifted his head up, then brought himself around to face Davoren.

The insane tempest shone within those ocean-blue eyes. His unnaturally glazed look stared right through the silent gunman, and into empty space instead.

Rufus stood statue-still amidst the torment of this hellish hallucination. Many orange-brown hair strands dangled before his wan face, a dishevelled haircut which nevertheless suited him quite nicely. His haggard expression betrayed fatigue, resentment, but mostly pain: both physical and mental anguish.

"...it's so cold inside...," Rufus raved quietly. He hugged himself by clutching opposite sleeves, then withdrew further into the corner, "...but the fire's all around...it burns me up...burns me to pieces...."

Davoren, who had thus far stood silent witness, studied the boy's mad face quite keenly. His demeanour remained calm, his expression ever firm but tinted by some concern.

The young man's ordeal suddenly swung to intense anxiety. The wild signs contorted his whole body, in particular his eyes. He seemed beleaguered by forces detectable to his senses alone. Gasps broke out.

"..I don't know...it...doesn't matter...," he muttered weakly, squeezing both eyes shut, "..it's so cold here, am I all alone?...there's a fire...it..."

Davoren tried to reason, "Rufus, there is no..."

"DON'T COME NEAR ME!!!" the lunatic suddenly exploded against an invisible enemy, "THEY TEAR ME UP!! ALL OF THEM!!!"

It started again. Pain and insanity blinded all reason, fuelled onwards by his own traumatic derangement. Much to both Davoren and the guards alarm, Rufus suddenly clutched his head with a stifled cry of agony. The next moment, he reeled over sideways at a total loss of balance.

The reaction came at once. Davoren managed to reach the madman just before he could collapse. On encircling Rufus' weak arm around his own neck, he forcefully dragged him away, at the same time angrily ordering the two ineffective mercenaries to bring over the table. The boy's ordeal worsened; his struggles grew more violent, his words more incoherent, and the pain more obvious.

Amidst the confusion that followed, the gunman kept a cool head, focussing all his efforts on just calming the delirious boy. With one of the guard's help, Davoren sat Rufus down on the steel table. He sat right by his side, then forced the madman to face him.

Rufus persisted to clutch his head as though to the last shred of reality. He writhed on the table in violent irritation, held in place only by the joint effort of the gunman and guard. He didn't respond to any plea.

Finally at his wits' end, the gunman tore Rufus' hands from his head, and began to vigorously massage both sides of his head in strong rhythmic movements.

The boy at first resisted. In vain, he tried to wrench off those unfamiliar hands, himself still flustered by blind anger. Yet Davoren continued on. All ten fingertips heedlessly kneaded through the hair, with his calm voice trying to reach the disorientated young man. The two mercenaries merely watched the scene without a word. They let their skillful leader handle this trouble alone.

The last-ditch technique finally had the desirable effect. Drained of strength at last, Rufus gradually subdued to tired delirium. He stared emptily into his lap. His weary posture was hunched towards Davoren, letting him massage his head without any more protest. The spasm attack had eased off.

"...they're inside...they won't leave me...," Rufus whispered sadly to no one, "...they won't be silent...they won't be silent...and..the fire..it.."

"Sh.Sh.It's okay, son," comforted Davoren, "It's okay.Just take it easy."

He continued the repetitive task while Rufus' heavy head hung down in numb misery. The broad-chested mercenary silently indicated to Davoren whether to give Rufus another sedative (now that the situation was under control). The gunman, however, shook his head.

"Tell me, when was the last time this boy got some decent sleep?" he asked the two guardsmen.

"God knows, Sir," one man shrugged his shoulders, "He usually raves on 'till he drops. These attacks just come 'n go without warning."

"Seems to me they *come* more often than they go...this boy needs rest more than anything else," Davoren frowned, "What's the scan level on his brain?"

Both mercenaries exchanged a meaningful look before the lean one with the skullcap admitted, "...ten degrees, full-scale power, Sir."

"Ten degrees?! That's the maximum level!" started Davoren in astonishment, glaring most significantly at the two.

"The...the Professor ordered us to keep it at ten."

Davoren thought a minute, if only to bring his rising displeasure under control. He hadn't liked that answer one bit.

"Shut it off," he commanded sternly.

"Wha?!"

"I said shut it off. Shut that damn machine off."

"B-but..the Professor...," protested the other man fearfully.

Yet Davoren would not bicker. He sprang up to confront the nervous mercenary, pink eyes ablaze in real vexation.

"I don't give a rat's ass what the Professor ordered. He's also left ME directly responsible for keeping this boy alive!" stated the gunman. A cold tightness strained his tone, "If he dies, *I* get all the blame. Do as I say. Shut that infernal scanner off, or you'll FRY his brains!!"

The mercenary fumbled between the two contradictory orders. So nervous under that harsh glare, he could only stutter, "..ah, well, S-Sir...I..."

"Argh! The kid's a damn half-wit retard!" thundered the foul-tempered guard instead. He hurtled another horrible oath at Rufus, then suggested contemptuously, "We oughtta just stuff him with a few more drugs 'n chain him up somewhere! That'll keep that bastard quiet! I say..."

"I say you'd best restrict such idiotic remarks to yourself before you wind up dead," Davoren advised. Though he didn't look at the brazen man, his icy countenance from the side was enough to win silence.

Remarkably, Rufus still sat slouched over on the table top, muttering soft nonsense to himself. One hand covered his wan face, with wild hair strands hanging over. He never took notice of this conversation. He didn't even seem aware of his surroundings.

The lean mercenary still lingered in uneasy hesitation until Davoren at last lost his patience; he'd settle the problem now. Therefore, he reached for his sidepocket, and tossed his precious cigarette pack, lighter, and a few gils over to the astonished guard.

"At least reduce the intensity," Davoren compromised, "Make it three degees."

The silent man examined these generous gifts for a moment. He peeked at the gunman's grave face, then softly said, "...y..yes, Sir."

At last, an agreement. The bribe had worked.

The corrupt mercenary acted immediately. Slipping these treasures into his own pockets, he marched straight out of the dingy dungeon, presumedly to fulfill his end of the bargain.

Davoren's cold eyes followed the man until he had departed, whereby he then turned over to the other guard.

"You wait outside," he dismissed with a curt nod, "I'll handle the kid."

The scornful mercenary grudgingly obeyed. He walked out, then slammed the heavy door behind, leaving the gunman alone to handle the bothersome task.

The instant the door shut, Davoren expelled one tired sigh, pressing his temples to disperse the irritation. He then turned to Rufus again. The prisoner's state hadn't changed; not even his weary posture, with his bowed head, and the position of his legs (one folded up on the table, the other supporting him from the floor).

"...there's a fire everywhere...," he whispered away to madness, "...it blasts through the sky...the glass...into my face...it burns me up until there's nothing more... but it's still so cold here...so cold..am I all alone?"

Davoren beheld the pitiful sight quite keenly. He walked back to Rufus, then bent over to inspect him. The young lunatic, however, raved on unaware and uninterrupted.

"...they're inside me...I don't want to listen...it hurts too much to listen...but they're so loud..and so many..."

"Rufus, there's no one here," the gunman persuaded very patiently. He placed one hand over his shoulder, "You were just having a bad dream, kid. It's okay."

The gentle prsuasion must have reached somewhere through the blind delirium. For the first time since this visit, Rufus brought his dazed eyes to look at the gunman. They fastened hard on his face.

Confusion never showed more than when those dull, vaccant eyes looked one straight. Deep weariness intermingled with the haziness inside, reducing his gaze to hopeless despair.

Yet gradually, reason prevailed. One sharp headache pierced clean through Rufus' skull, dispersing the mist away with a soft grunt. Indeed, when it had passed, the boy found himself thus seated on the table,

in his black dungeon, with Davoren looking over him. He tiredly blinked back at the gunman as though just awakened from some troubled sleep.

The madness had stopped. Dull reality began to gather his torn senses together.

"How's your head now? Any better?" asked Davoren.

It took Rufus another moment before he found his voice.

"...D...Davo..re..n..," he identified after some difficulty.

"Ah, good!" beamed the man with a relieved laugh, "Heh, what with all that was going on, I was worried you'd forgotten me. It's been...what..two weeks since I last visited you?"

Silence came the reply. Though exhaustion lay bare on his face, Rufus could not hide his genuine bewilderment. He didn't seem to understand what events had dumped him here.

But Davoren nevertheless appeared quite pleased with this mental change. He gave the boy a friendly pat before he turned away again, "There now. You behave yourself."

Rufus said nothing. He cast his weary sight down to his lap, and waited for nothing. Davoren soon pulled up a chair for himself.

"I would've visited you sooner, but I've been swamped in work like mad this whole past week....unbelievable!" chatted Davoren to the mute prisoner. He propped the wooden chair nearby, then sat down so that both elbows leaned against its hard back, "So now that I've got some extra time, I may as well check up on ya, eh?"

Whether depressed or simply indifferent, Rufus did not flinch a response. His eyes, a blue pool of gloom, gazed down into nothingness. His withdrawn countenance looked so dejected, more so compared against his youth; quite contrary to his guest's easy-going demeanour.

Again, Davoren found himself lingering in hopes of some reaction. Though the wait soon proved futile, he never lost his good-humour.

"Oh! I got you something while I was out. You'll love it!" he suddenly remembered. Davoren began to grope inside his suit-jacket; Rufus watched him.

At last, the gunman pulled out some small, swollen paper-bag. He ripped the top open, then held it out to Rufus at arm's length.

The young man apparently did not understand this gesture. He peered into the mysterious bag to discover it filled with flat, round cakes, their texture grainy-white. He looked back at Davoren in slight puzzlement.

"They're rice-cakes, boy," the patient gunman explained, "Haven't you ever seen any before?"

From the tired blank look he received, Davoren guessed not.

"Well, go on. try one. They're really delicious," he encouraged, shaking the crinkly paper bag ahead, "At least better than that pig-slop they feed you here."

Rufus beheld the dainty cakes rather sourly, as though another disgusting taste had already clogged his throat. More tired than resentful, the prisoner turned his cheerless sight away.

"I'm not hungry," he muttered weakly.

"The guards tell me you haven't eaten anything in days. You MUST be hungry," insisted Davoren. The bag still hung wide open.

"I'm not hungry."

An awkward pause followed.

The curt refusal rather disappointed Davoren. He dropped his outstretched arm to the side.

"Alright. I'll just give them to the guards then," he sighed aloud, slyness detectable in his disheartened voice, "...and I roamed the whole city at 1 a.m to find a decent bakery that sold these....seems such a waste to buy them only to give 'em to those merceanary pigs..."

Rufus returned his dejected eyes back to the gunman.

"But I'd be really happy if you ate at least *one* rice-cake," Davoren admitted, "That way, it wouldn't be a total waste.....please?"

There was such childlike simplicity in the gunman's bearing; an incredible friendliness that disarmed any mistrust or doubt. He held out the humble paper-bag not ordering, but inviting the prisoner. Rufus reflected a moment upon this man (no doubt he thought him very strange), then down at the bag.

He took one cake.

The young man sat with both legs squared on the cold table top, quietly munching the crisp cake in his mouth. He swallowed it by force.

"...good?" smiled Davoren.

Rufus found the taste quite so. He nodded his head, then silently took another cake.

The once tense, rowdy scene had certainly subdued to some form of tranquility. Davoren watched the famished boy appease his hunger without a word. Rufus chewed the food in complete silence. He took one cake only after swallowing the first.

He stopped on his twelfth. When sure the boy did not want anymore, Davoren finished off the remainder, then tossed the crumpled bag away.

"...Davoren?" called Rufus in a hesitant undertone.

"Yup?"

"...he...came again...."

The stark anxiety on Rufus' face caught Davoren's notice more than those ominous words. He studied the boy's expression from the side, himself quite solemn.

Rufus' wan face darkened to fearful confusion as some shadow overcast his memory. Intense disgust stiffened his muscles. He sat hunched on the table top, both legs folded loosely and fists bare in his lap.

"...that man...he came again...," Rufus confided below an ominous murmur, "...his voice is so loud and rude...and when he looks at me, his eyes just drill into me...I don't know him, but he knows me...and everywhere I go, he follows me...he won't leave me alone..."

Davoren listened without interruption.

"...it gets so cold...I feel numb all over...it's always dark, but there's a fire...it covers me..and those voices...they..."

"Boy, listen to me," reassured the gunman gently, "I tell you, it was just a bad dream. There is no fire, no voices, no 'man' who follows you around. It wasn't real."

Rufus' face grew scornful, not at the kind comfort, but at the hot turmoil inside.

"..no...it *was* real..I felt it all...," he insisted, his quiet voice strained by resentment, "...the glass exploded in my face...the fire...the voices always danced around me...but I couldn't stop them...they tore me up to so many pieces...so many, I got lost..."

The gunman ran his fingers back through his snow-white hair, uneasily searching for something to say.

"...there was so much hatred there...I hate that place...those ghosts..all of them..."

"But it's just a nightmare, son," reasoned Davoren against this gloomy preoccupation, "You shouldn't let it upset you this much!"

Unfortunately, it did. Rufus sunk into his former seclusion. His deep-blue eyes wandered far into thoughtful morbidity. He spoke no more.

"Ah, I swear Rufus! Like it would kill you to maybe smile more often!" declared Davoren, himself dampened by this depression.

He wouldn't let the boy sink any further. Instead, Davoren reached for his breast pocket, and carefully pulled something out.

"Here," he offered Rufus his closed hand.

Rufus confusedly looked at him.

"It won't bite you. Just hold out your hand."

Rufus obeyed. To his great puzzlement, Davoren dropped some sort of trinket into his palm, then calmly said, "Now hold it up to the light. Go on."

A closer examination revealed the ornament to be some small, dull-green stone, chipped unevenly into a round piece. A narrow chain pierced it from one end. It looked quite faded and old.

Rufus sought some explanation from Davoren with a quizzical look. But the gunman only indicated the feeble gas lamp which hung overhead. At a loss, Rufus obeyed again. He fit the dirty piece between his thumb and index, then held it high up to the light.

His tired eyes widened in genuine wondrousment at the beauty of this simple phenomenon. The hazy lamplight showered the entire stone. But incredibly, the colour had kindled from dirty-dull to a brilliant green glow. It resembled a pure emerald set ablaze in between his fingers.

Rufus turned his amazed sight back to the gunman.

"How...how does it do that?" he marvelled.

"Magic," smiled Davoren mysteriously, fixing his thoughtful gaze up on the glowing stone.

"..see, MANY years ago, back when I was a little kid, I didn't live in this city," he recounted to the silent prisoner, "My folks and I...we lived in another town far away. Now, this village was a bit run-down...y'know, on the poor side. There wasn't much to do, and I never had enough money to buy any toys. But there was this old Mako cavern nearby...just brimming with this stuff. So for fun, I used to sneak into that cave, and dig around."

Rufus listened in complete silence. In truth, the amicable, plain manner of Davoren's speech struck him as most strange.

"Heh! I guess I was pretending to be a famous archeologist...maybe uncover some hidden treasure, then I could buy myself lotsa toys!" the gunman chuckled at the childish fantasy, "Heh heh...but of course, all I found were those stones. They were all over the place in those days...so easy to find."

He looked at the prisoner rather cheerfully, "Well, one day, I stumbled across that piece in the dirt. It looked so different from all the rest...they don't usually come in that shape. Then I discovered that neat trick it did with light. So, I made it into a chain...sorta like a little lucky-charm."

Rufus reflected a moment upon the simple anecdote before returning to the beautiful stone piece. He began to roll it from side to side, marvelling at the green colour change shades in the light. He was certainly fascinated by this antique.

Davoren smiled at his success. Indeed, another depression bout had been averted. He sat elbows against the chair's back, with hands interlocked over his chin. He looked so carefree.

"...what is this stone?" inquired the curious Rufus at last.

"It's materia."

The prisoner slowly lowered his hand away from the light. The green brilliance of the stone died at once.

"Oh, it can't do anything else besides glow in the light," laughed Davoren with a wave of the hand, "this thing is just a useless piece I picked off the ground...just for a little ornament. Nothing more!"

"...materia...," pronounced Rufus in a hushed undertone. His eyes riveted hard on the dirty stone.

The simple word bewildered his mind. He seemed, while churning it about, to discern some threat: an invisible presence sneak up from behind with a sharp dagger of pain; quick flashes of blurry nonsense, faces, words, all swirl into one hellish flame.

"Rufus? You alright, kid?" called Davoren in apprehension. The boy's face had paled quite noticeably.

However, whatever trouble pestered him, Davoren's voice had somehow dispersed it. Startled out of his reverie, Rufus blinked confusedly at the dull stone, then back at the worried man.

"..it's..very beautiful," Rufus quietly admired the trinket. After a final look, he handed it back.

"Well actually, it's not mine *per say*," corrected the gunman as he slipped it into his pocket, "It's only mine for...safekeeping."

"...safekeeping?"

Davoren paused a moment, then answered, "....yes."

A heavy silence befell the two men, Davoren more in particular. Yet soon, the reopening of the dungeon door effectively shattered the peace. The tan-skinned, corrupt mercenary poked his head inside.

"Sir?" he called aloud.

"What is it?"

The guard couldn't help but marvel at the subdued Rufus, then hurriedly informed, "...the...uh...the Professor wants to see you. He says now."

A cold scowl darkened Davoren's face on hearing the command. Nevertheless, he shuffled out of the wooden chair.

"Right. Right. I'll be there at once," Davoren dismissed. He motioned the nervous guard outside, which the latter instantly obeyed.

Silence lingered another moment in the grim dungeon; Davoren still seemed bothered by some petty thought. However, he soon returned to Rufus.

"I'll make them keep the scanner down for a few hours," he muttered softly, as if revealing some secret, "You're very tired. Get some sleep, alright?"

Rufus nodded his head in consent. The gunman gave the boy one comforting pat on the shoulder before turning away. He marched out of the dungeon, where both mercenaries stood waiting for his final reappearance. The door slammed shut behind.

Rufus heard their footsteps die away, one stunned voice still exclaiming, "...dunno how you do it, Sir! This kid gets so outta hand, we can't even..."

Soon all was quiet again. Ghostly tranquility in perfect solitude.

-End of Chp.53

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.54

The Mako Reactor.

If desolation ever had a face, then this place fitted the description perfectly. It stood barren, utterly abandoned to decay. The ancient fortress, built of metal instead of stone, mourned the demise of a glorious era, when emerald-green life had flowed through its veins. Alas, no more. Time had stripped away all its dignity.

The Reactor was a labyrinthine cavern of brick and metal. The fortified walls reached up to black obscurity high, high above, its iron roots grappled deep into the ground below. The large platforms extended out like shelves. Hefty girders supported their majestic weight, while metallic bridges cross-linked them to ominous passageways through the walls. The empty staircases winded down through the ruinous site. Their railings had been broken, some steps even torn off.

Indeed, the ravaged Reactor resembled a junkyard museum. Myriads of pipes clung onto the crumbling walls as if to dear life. Large pumps shot up along the brickwork high to the darkness above. The smaller, more timid ones formed a network of connections, all fitted around the dead electricity cables.

Yet this hungry horde of metal would have more. The main Mako ducts arched magnificently overhead like flying buttresses. Sooty air-ducts snaked all along, held in place by russet crossbars. Some ended at stiff iron grates, other hung onto the ceilings in wretched misery.

Dull droning echoed through the dank, cold air; a discordant chorus of machines humming away. There was only a tinge of light to liven this dingy fortress, thanks to those dusty glass lanterns of pale-yellow. Otherwise, darkness reigned supreme.

The place was dirty, haunted. The remains of a fallen empire; this knotted jumble of metal bars and twisted pipes. Nothing more.

Rufus wandered through these desolate ruins, totally oblivious to the surroundings. Instead, quiet insanity had plunged him into another trance. He walked without any particular destination, perhaps not even aware of his own movements.

All he felt were them; those horrid ghosts who raged inside his head. They burned him up, but left him so cold.

The young man drifted across the iron bridge, his dull eyes rolling over the black pit below. Suddenly, it came again. So violent, Rufus stifled a hideous grunt, at the same time clutching his head from both sides. His temples throbbed in agony. Already, he was gasping for air.

"There he is! Up there!!" cried a faint voice far below.

"Move it! C'mon!!" barked another gruff voice.

Rufus heedlessly continued his journey to nowhere. However, his gait soon crumbled to unsteadiness until at last, drained and delirious, he collapsed to his knees. The sharp headaches never disappeared. They simply squeezed further into his skull.

"...they're inside...here...inside..." he raved to himself, "...so many...it hurts...ah! It hurts too much!...there's just the fire..."

The tormented prisoner groped through this madness, gasping for sanity yet finding none. At last, he found the iron balustrade. He climbed back up his wobbly feet, just as another headache stormed his brain. Again, he clutched his head, this time only with one hand. His entire arm clumsily held onto the rail for support.

He didn't hear the loud footsteps stampede up the winding staircase. Soon, two guards, the same who had called for Davoren, stormed across the bridge towards him. On finding the distraught boy thus, they both paused to catch their breaths. They seemed to have been running around for a long time.

"Ah, stupid brat!" muttered the angry mercenary as he wiped the sweat off his face, "How the hell'd he get outta his damn cell?"

"..I must've forgotten to lock the door after Mr.Davoren left," the lean guard faltered, " When he gets these spasm attacks, he tends to...roam around... he must've opened the door by accident, and wandered...."

"I thought you turned that weird machine down or sumthin!"

"I did! That don't mean the attacks stop *altogether*! He still..."

"Argh! Whatever!!" the furious man threw both hands into the air. He obviously didn't care for a proper explanation.

All attention turned to the madman, who remained utterly oblivious of their presence. Rufus still supported himself up against the railing, head bowed down into one hand, with loose hair strands all around.

"Fuh! Let's just get this bastard back to his cell before ol' Davo blows his top," decided the distempered man. He approached the lunatic.

The other guard, however, drew back in alarm.

"H-hey, man!" he warned outloud, "You shouldn't walk up to him like that! No tellin' how he'll react. He can get pretty violent!"

The stark warning sounded ridiculous to the other man. He merely dismissed it with some violent curse. He continued onwards until he stopped directly in front of Rufus. A most contemptuous scowl twisted his bristly face.

Yet Rufus made no indication he even saw this man. Indeed, he resembled a wild animal, tense and quite unstable.

"...maybe we should call Mr.Davoren again," suggested the nervous guard, "..he always knows how to handle..."

The foul-tempered mercenary completely disregarded the reasonable suggestion. He roughly grabbed the front of Rufus' sweater, then yanked him up to the very tips of his shoes.

The savage man rattled him a few times just to assert his authority. Rufus struggled, not against this abusive treatment, but against the insane pain throbbing inside his head. His eyes were shut tight.

The other mercenary only looked on in extreme uneasiness.

"Y'know, I've just about HAD it with this damn retard 'n his crazy talk!" spat the incensed guard, "Whatta load of crap!!"

The boy forced one eye open. He looked straight at this man, but seemed to see another person; a phantom conjured up by sheer insanity.

"...when I woke up...he wasn't there...," Rufus whispered softly to the confounded guard, "..he didn't even...know I was alive....but that's okay... I never expected him to remember anyway....."

The move come so unexpectedly, just as madness seized full control. In a sudden wake of violence, Rufus shot one foot hard into the man's inner thigh, delivered at such an angle it reeled the howling guard aside. Rufus followed up the kick at once. Claspng both hands together, he swung them up clean into the underside of this man's chin.

Both mercenaries were stunned, one with horror, the other with blunt pain. The hard-hit guard clumsily staggered backwards to absorb these blows, at the same time dropping Rufus from the iron grip. The insane boy collapsed against the balustrade again.

The madness had only wanted release, even though it now left him depleted of all strength. He found it impossible to even balance himself.

"ARGH! YOU LITTLE BASTARD!!" roared the mercenary for vengeance. Acting on fury alone, he grabbed the boy more savagely than before, then rammed his whole fist into his stomach.

Rufus choked aloud on the murderous pain. The jagged knuckles had went clean into his guts.

Still holding onto his hapless victim, the enraged men punched one side of Rufus' face, then struck down against his head, all the while hurtling out every curse known. Rufus succumbed to this ruthless bombardment without resistance. He simply had no more to offer.

"Hey! Hey! Whoa!!" shouted the alarmed the mercenary, "You kill this kid, 'n Davoren will friggin' MURDER us!! Stop!!!"

"You really piss me off, you shitty asshole!!" bellowed the guard, deaf to his friend's urgent pleas. He aimed one huge fist straight for Rufus' face, "I swear, I'll beat ya to a bloody..."

Suddenly, one loud clamour from above interrupted the brutal scene.

All sight instantly shot to the overhead ventilation duct, just in time to witness the iron grate crash down under one forceful kick. Much to their astonishment, some man gracefully swung out of this new entrance, and landed on both feet for all to behold.

He stood slouched up in a very relaxed battle-stance, only a short distance away: his shoulders drooped slightly forward, legs set apart, and a long metallic staff held slanted behind. A crooked smile twisted his lips aside, one so full of scorn.

It was Reno.

The two astounded mercenaries gaped at this unexpected sight. Still held thus captive, Rufus could only blink in wide bewilderment at the brave (or foolish) man.

"Who...who the hell are you?!!" exclaimed the tan-skinned mercenary.

"Would you believe, I'm the air-duct inspector," announced Reno in a complete show of bravado.

"IT'S AN INTRUDER!!! GET HIM!!!!" thundered the other guard.

The raucous battlecry stirred up instant chaos. The tan mercenary automatically bared out his loaded assault rifle, just as Reno's whole demeanour turned dead-serious. In the blink of an eye, he lunged straight for his enemy.

A loud hailstorm of bullets tore through the air, with the angry assailant roaring for blood. However, Reno had already swung behind the guard in an incredible maneuver. The single attack was fatally swift. Reno encircled the man's neck with one arm, then jammed the nightstaff clean into his back.

It ended in an instant. The brutal surge of electricity ripped through the man's entire body, wild sparks mixed into his insane screams. Reno then ruthlessly swung his stunned victim across the iron balustrade. The latter stumbled over the railing, and plunged down to his doom.

"DAMN YOU!!!" bellowed the other mercenary. He flung poor Rufus aside, at the same time yanking out his own gun.

But before a single shot could be fired, Reno had already acted. He quickly twirled the metal staff right up against the man's wrist, which effectively knocked the weapon out of his grip. The guard was absolutely shocked: everything happened too fast!

His surprise doubled when two strong arms suddenly cut his breath short. Rude, who had snuck up from behind, held the struggling man upright in a tight headlock. With one powerful twist, he cracked the whole head aside. The mercenary's struggled ceased at once. His neck had been broken.

Rude dropped the dead man to the ground.

"Took ya long enough!" greeted Reno, slinging the nightstaff onto one shoulder, "I was beginning to think you got lost."

Rude gave him a sour look of disapproval, "What's the idea crashing into a fight like that? Are you crazy? Those men had guns."

"Well, that bastard was throttling him! Crashing through the air-duct was the quickest way!" Reno gave his reddish-pink hair a fine backsweep before adding, "...besides, it made a cooler entrance than yours."

Rude dared not discuss his difference of opinion. Instead, both men turned their attention around to Rufus.

The young man gaped back in pure astonishment. He sat slouched on the floor, having just been shoved against the iron balustrade. He did not speak a word.

"Mr.President...are..you alright?" asked Rude at last. He gently touched Rufus' arm to help him up.

Shock turned to stark alarm. The boy instantly struck that friendly hand away, then scrambled up to his feet. He retreated a few steps from these two men, who couldn't help but give him an odd look.

His anxious eyes darted between his two saviours: Reno was slovenly dressed in a black pair of jeans and a short, open jacket. His shirt was (of course) untucked, with an unbuttoned collar and sleeves rolled

up over the jacket's. Rufus paused to note Reno's unique hair-style before turning to the other man. Tall as ever strong, Rude wore simple winter pants, with a brown leather jacket zipped half-way.

The young man spent a rather long time absorbed in mute scrutiny, which put the two men at further discomfort.

"...who...who are you?" he asked them at last.

An awkward silence followed. The question had caught them both completely off guard.

"Heh, are we THAT hard to recognize without our suits?" joked Reno, "It's us, Sir!"

Rufus gave him a blank look.

"Reno, remember?"

No reply.

"..and..uh...Rude," he paused, himself growing a bit uneasy. Indeed, neither name seemed to stir any memory.

They lingered in silent embarrassment. Reno scratched the back of his head, unsure what to make of this situation. Rude looked over the boy in evident discomfort.

"Don't you...recognize us, Mr.President?"

"..Mr...President...??" echoed Rufus, perplexed by the title.

"Yeah. President!" confirmed Reno impatiently, "Y'know! Of ShinRa Inc.! And we were your Turks, the.."

"My what??"

Both men exchanged a significant glance before Rude re-tried, "Sir... don't you even *vaguely* remember us? Not even our faces?"

Rufus' expression told it all: he obviously did not.

This scene was the epitome of awkward encounters: Rufus haggard by depravity, the two men searching in vain for an answer from his face. Rude took his friend aside for a private conversation.

"Think it's really him?" he muttered nervously.

"Of course it's him!" insisted Reno outloud, gesturing towards the young man, "Look! same exact face! Same voice! Same everything! It IS Rufus ShinRa!!"

They both peered over at him a moment just to make sure, then resumed their discussion.

"But if it is him, how'd he survive that blast?" mused Reno. He folded both arms as his gaze strayed downwards, "It's impossible. No one could've walked outta THAT mess unhurt, let alone alive. And why the hell is he HERE, at the lab?"

Rude rubbed his goatee in deep thought, "..maybe...somebody saved him after the explosion, and brought him here..."

"...e..explosion?" interrupted Rufus suddenly.

Their solemn attention turned back to the boy. Confused apprehension marked his entire face as he glanced between them.

"..and how do you...know my name?" he asked further, yet edging one step backwards. He had become suspicious.

Rude looked to his friend to answer, but Reno only frowned: this conversation was getting no where.

"You're telling me you don't remember ShinRa Inc.? Nothing at all?" he interrogated rather sharply. His keen sea-green eyes fixed into his.

Rufus said nothing.

"No Avalanche, no Turks, no Mako, no 'Promised Land', nothing???"

The boy blinked back in a whirl of amazement.

"You're very strange," he commented bluntly, "I didn't understand a single word you said."

The simplicity of this answer struck Reno point blank, in which he could only gawk wide at Rufus. Rude was quite shocked too.

"...you're not the guards...I don't know you..."

The matter thus settled, Rufus simply shuffled around to leave.

"What about old man ShinRa?" demanded Reno after him, "Now you GOTTA remember him! He was your father!"

The word brought Rufus to a halt. He tiredly turned his head back to these persistent strangers. His dull eyes sunk into morbid confusion as his thought strayed far away.

"...there is this...man...", he murmured, as if lost in a dream.

"...'man'??" repeated Reno.

"...he follows me around...he doesn't have a face...and when I'm there, with him, I can see myself...and be myself at the same time. Davoren says it's only a nightmare, but..sometimes...I feel that it's not at all...that man... he told me he was my father..but..I never..."

His sad voice trailed off into another blunt headache. Rufus pressed his throbbing temples to stifle the pain, or perhaps shove some violent emotion away. Both men, on the other hand, beheld this bizarre sight in a mixture of amazement and worry. In truth, they couldn't make much sense of those mad words.

Rude tugged once at Reno's sleeve, then muttered aside, "You suppose that explosion...sorta...messed up his mind?"

In other words, had Rufus ShinRa lost all sanity in that hellish fire? It seemed quite so, judging from his unpredictable mood swings and odd behavior. Yet Reno only narrowed his eyes more keenly. Some bothersome thought troubled him.

Rufus looked at the two men again.

"You'd better run away," he warned them tiredly, "...he'll know you're not the guards...he'll discover you're here."

The riddle baffled both men further, especially this ominous "he" person. However, a sudden rush of footsteps and rough cries from behind effectively raised their alarm peak-high: that brief skirmish had attracted plenty of unwanted attention.

-End of Chp.54

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.55

It was only another second before a horde of mercenaries came charging down the bridge, weapons ready for action.

"THERE!!" one man hollered.

"INTRUDERS!!" shouted another.

"Aw, shit!! Rude!" Reno instantly signalled.

They both acted at the same time, fast and without pause. Much to Rufus' great shock, Rude forcefully swept him under his armpit, then darted away at top speed. Meanwhile, Reno thwarted the advance. The nightstaff twirled through his nimble fingers into a fiery ring of brilliant electricity. In an instant, Reno hurtled this charged blaze at the charging enemy, then bolted away right after Rude.

Neither man looked behind, not even as the thunderous explosion rocked the whole bridge end to end, with the harsh clamour of metal collapsing behind. Instead, they both rushed to escape, Rufus angrily struggling (in vain) for freedom. They had just fled the bridge when fresh bullets tore after them: those surviving mercenaries had stumbled out of the wreckage, and already resumed pursuit.

"Where's the way out?" demanded Rude as they flew down some bleak corridor.

"How should I know?!" snapped Reno.

"I thought you said you've been here before!"

"Gimme a break, will ya? I've only been in this rat-maze ONCE!!"

They ran a long time through this outstretched hall until finally emerging into open space again. The wild uproar stormed ever closer from behind. They followed another corridor, across the platform, then down some winding staircase. Rude lead the way, Reno guarded his rear.

Escape was their sole objective. They had only cleared the first flight of steps when two mercenaries came charging up at them for a brutal confrontation.

Again, neither man spoke; they simply acted: while Rude rushed onwards, Reno gracefully hopped over the railing down to the next flight below. He landed just in time to intercept the two astounded guards, whereby he lunged straight into instant-attack mode.

Reno hit hard and fast, granting neither enemy a chance to retaliate. He pumped a brutal electric shock right into one man's stomach with his staff, switched hands from behind, only to slam the weapon up into the other man's jaw, then hard against his left shoulder. Both hefty blows sent the stunned mercenary tumbling wildly down the stairs.

The remaining guard, though blind from shock, nevertheless groped for his gun. By then, however, Rude had reached the scene. Keeping the still enraged Rufus safe under his armpit, he ruthlessly twisted the guard's arm in some amazing move, which somehow flipped this enemy headfirst over the balustrade; all this while still running.

They continued downwards, with the angry storm hot on their heels. On clearing the staircase, both men miraculously swung a sharp turn sideways, just as more bullets blitzed down.

They dodged straight through a throng of metal supports, where the path ultimately led across an open corridor: one side overlooked an ominous pit of massive compressor-pumps far below, the edge was outlined by stiff railing. The wall side, on the other hand, lay hidden behind a hard curtain of pipes and metalwork.

"Left! Left! Turn Left!!" shouted Reno.

He referred to an upcoming passageway which diverged off this main path. Rude automatically lunged aside into this dark refuge, gagging poor Rufus with his whole hand. Reno followed in right behind.

Blessed darkness obscured them completely. Both men glued their whole backside against the cold concrete wall. They neither breathed nor spoke. Even Rufus had ceased his futile struggles (probably because he couldn't breathe anymore).

As hoped, the incensed mercenaries rushed straight past this bleak hideout, and instead headed farther down the main corridor. Soon, their heavy stomping trailed off until they disappeared altogether.

There was a long, silent wait.

When absolutely sure of their escape, both men heaved one huge sigh, then broke down into soft gasps. They seemed to have been running forever. Reno vexedly wiped the sweat off his face before turning to his friend.

"This place is crawling with goons. What the hell are they doing here?" he whispered in keen suspicion, "This is a top-secret facility. It's supposed to be abandoned."

Another silence befell them. Each man found himself revolving a hundred frustrating thoughts around for some explanation. Rude in particular seemed quite discomforted by this grievous situation.

"...Reno, what should we do now?" he asked at last. "

Why do *I* have to do all the thinking here?!"

Rude replied as a matter of fact, "Well, YOU were the one who woke me up at two in the morning, told me we were going to 'investigate' someplace, then dragged us into this broken Reactor. I thought you said yesterday you didn't believe the President could be alive."

Though Reno begrudged it, the simple truth stood undisputed. Indeed, it had been noticed that last night's scene had left him ever since in sour preoccupation. Reno had hardly spoken afterwards. His take-out ramen had been gobbled up, whereby he had then retreated to bed with a brusque "good night". Such uncharacteristic distemper had certainly baffled both Rude and Elena.

However, Rude had later discovered what trouble pesetered his moody friend: that same night, the man had been startled out of his sleep by a fully-dressed Reno, who insisted they go investigate the secret laboratory this minute. Rude, of course, had understood, and complied at once. It was agreed Elena would be excluded from this "mission". So, she was left asleep, while they had stealthily slipped out.

And then, Reno had flung both caution and scerecy aside for an impressive entrance.

"You couldn't have been more sensible and done a sneak-attack from behind," Rude accused, "No, you had to be 'cool' and crash right in the middle of it. *You* made this mess, *you* figure a way out."

"Oh sure! You 'n everyone else...just blame it on the punk!" Reno grumbled. He tossed his head away.

Silence again. They listened absent-mindedly to the dull drone of distant machines fill the chilly air. They waited within this dark sanctuary, yet knew not for what.

"...what about...*him*?" ventured Rude suddenly.

"I dunno."

Their attention turned to Rufus. The boy glared mute rage at these forceful kidnapers. Yet the hand remained stiff over his mouth, the grip ever tight.

"...maybe we should...take him with us..," suggested Rude timidly.

"Rude, do you even realize what this MEANS?! If word gets out Rufus ShinRa is still alive, there will be riots in the streets! Every lunatic with a grudge will be crashing through our doors to kill him!"

"But we can't just leave him here," he protested, an anxious firmness in his tone, "Maybe we can hide him somewhere until we figure out what to...OOF!!"

The abrupt sentence was thus cut short when Rufus suddenly rammed one elbow hard into his captor's stomach. The unexpected blow effectively loosened the loathesome hold, whereby he wrenched himself free.

"Get away from me!" Rufus snapped as he scrambled some steps away, "Who.. who do you two think you ARE, anyway?!!"

Poor Rude rubbed his stomach, more troubled by the boy's evident agitation than the pain. Reno beheld the angry outburst in silence.

"You can't just 'take' me away like I'm some stray animal!" Rufus exclaimed indignantly, "I..w-what do you want from me?!!"

Rude tried to calm him, "Please Sir, just..."

"I said get away!!"

"Alright! Alright! Just take it easy!" intervened Reno, who had grown a bit irritated, "Look, we're not gonna hurt you, Sir, we just.."

"My name isn't 'Sir' or Mr.Presu-presi-whatever! It's Rufus! just Rufus."

Yet both men found this sudden drop of formality too hard to accept.

"You...you want US to call YOU...just 'Rufus'?" echoed Rude in disbelief.

The boy's face darkened to a frown, as if to say "and what's wrong with just 'Rufus'?"

"Okay, okay...Rufus..," agreed Reno, pronouncing the name with cautious emphasis, "Let's try this again. We didn't come all this way to harm you. We actually came here to help you. See, we kinda knew you from before."

He edged a step closer to Rufus, fastening onto his blue eyes despite their harsh, suspicious glare. He had even lifted both palms slightly to prove his sincerity. Amazingly so, Reno looked quite serious.

"Now, I know you're all confused, and we've been dragging you around, but you gotta believe us. You're..were President of a mega-sized company called ShinRa Inc., right after your old man was murdered. We were your..ah, how do I put this...'special task' team..sorta like personal bodyguards."

The words had a rather peculiar effect on the boy. His expression tensed into muddled confusion; one marked by a vague sense of familiarity, yet that stems from a distant dream, not reality. He said nothing.

"It happened 'round last year. You were here, in Midgar. This huge...thing... this monster attacked the city. It blasted you while you were still in your office...blew everything to smithereens. Everyone left you for dead, and well...things pretty much fell apart after that."

Reno brought his clumsy explanation to a conclusion, "But last night, we got a tip that said you might be alive here. So, we came to check it out. Just relax, okay? We're not gonna hurt you."

They stood face to face, Rufus torn between suspicion and deep pondering, Reno awaiting some reaction. The uneasy Rude lingered behind without a word; this rocky encounter caused him the most consternation.

In the end, however, Rufus conceded to suspicion.

"I don't believe you," he hissed, glaring straight back at Reno, "All of what you said...it's nonsense!"

"It ain't nonsense!" retorted the man at the very end of his patience, "You don't remember 'cause your memory's screwed up! Or maybe living in this dump's made you a loony! but it's true!"

"I don't believe you!"

"Why would I lie to you?!"

"Why should I believe some stranger who comes crashing through an air-duct?"

The tone was too insolent to let pass. Reno's eyes flashed real fury, whereby he rebutted instantly: he slapped Rufus clean across the face.

It cracked like a whip against his cheek. The hard blow sent the boy's whole head to the side. Rufus was struck mute, his expression blank. Needless to say, Rude was horrified.

"You sure got a gratitude problem, you arrogant piece of snot!" snarled Reno at the boy, "We risked our asses TWICE to save you! The very least you can do is be POLITE!!!" "

Hey, Reno!!" cried Rude in a rare show of outrage.

Reno (who never suspected Rude could raise his voice) blinked back at him, "What?"

"You...you can't just SLAP him like that!!! He's the PRESIDENT!!!!"

"...*WAS* the president, you idiot! What's he gonna do, fire me?!"

"But still!! He's right! You can't expect him to just magically believe everything we say! Calling him a...a...!! And hitting him! That's..."

"No...it's okay...," defended Rufus.

The unnatural calmness of his quiet voice brought the dispute to an immediate halt. Both men beheld him in absolute amazement. The boy gazed back with a look so sad, his empty eyes haggard by fatigue. His unkempt hair dangled loose; a very light redness marked the slap on his cheek.

"Aren't you gonna snap back..or even get mad?" marvelled Reno.

"...no...I'm used to it..."

His melancholy eyes dropped to the side, "...I lose control of myself a lot. I never mean to...it just comes. When that happens, the guards here give me some...medicine...but it makes me feel worse. So if that doesn't work, they beat me up. It's okay...getting slapped across the face is nothing."

Both men listened to such atrocious treatment in complete silence. Reno glared at his guilty hand, then scratched the back of his head rather uncomfortably. Though Reno did mumble something which sounded like an apology, Rude still held onto his anger (at least for a few more minutes).

"...the only person who's never hit me, or even got angry at me... is Davoren," Rufus sighed out.

"'Davoren'??" repeated Reno, struck by the unfamiliar name, "Who's that?"

"I don't know, really. He visits me from time to time. He's a very strange man...he talks about strange things too," the tired boy pressed one side of his temples, "...but Davoren always makes the pain in my head stop."

Neither the puzzled Reno nor the nervous Rude could even venture a guess to solve this mystery. Rufus sunk into silent dejection, gaze downcast by wretched exhaustion.

The tense awkwardness lingered a long time.

"Shit. This is starting to freak me out," mumbled Reno. He felt too conscious of their grim predicament.

"You'd better run away now," warned Rufus.

"Huh?"

The boy's eyes remained fixed on the ground. But a dull haze had clouded their blueness, contorting his entire face into intense anxiety. His muscles stiffened; his breaths quickened.

"..go...before *he* finds you," Rufus whispered to no one, "..he'll be very angry if he finds you here..."

The distraught boy hobbled backwards, away from the two baffled men. he didn't see them; he saw some other presence, ominous and ugly.

"Whoa, hey!" started Reno, "W-where are you..."

"..go..or the fire will burn you too...they'll tear you...inside out... and you'll be all...all alone..."

Unmerciful derangement swept over his battered sanity. Rufus suddenly seized his hair by the roots, at the same time trying in vain to stifle the screams of pain. He collapsed to his knees, where he slouched over to hold down the painful spasm. Of course, both men had dashed over at once.

"Sir! Sir!! Are you alright?!!" cried Rude, frantically supporting the boy by the shoulders. Poor Rufus only writhed more.

"What is wrong with this kid?!" exclaimed Reno, "He keeps on..."

"DON'T MOVE!!!" thundered one harsh voice from behind.

Discovery had come too sudden. Both men darted their alarmed attention to the source, Reno preparing for an instant retaliation. However, he stopped short at once: the stern mercenary had locked his deadly gun right on Reno's head, ready to fire at any movement. He had caught them completely off guard.

Reno's face darkened to submissive hatred. He wisely (and slowly) lowered his staff. They surrendered.

It didn't take too long before the rest of the mercenaries made the scene. The two intruders and their unfortunate kidnapee were dragged out into the open. The angry guards, eight in all, surrounded them from every direction, their guns aimed right on them.

They had fallen prisoners: Rufus lay doubled over on the ground. He still clutched onto his head, groping for some sanity amidst each sharp pulse. He didn't seem quite aware of the grievous situation. Rude had assumed the protective role. He had crouched down by the boy's side to bar off those guns, but also in an attempt to ease Rufus' agony.

Therefore, Reno was the sole spokesman. He stood upright, palms held up, but expression stone-hard.

The leader of these mercenaries, a bushy-bearded man of scruffy appearance, stepped forward. His rifle was pointed straight at Reno's forehead.

"Who the hell are you? How'd you find this place?!" he interrogated sharply, "And what do you want with that crazy kid?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

"Don't smart-ass me, punk!!"

Reno bore his position with hardened dignity. Rude glared all around.

"Damn bastards!" spat one guard, "They killed five men in one run!"

"Argh! Just shoot 'em both!" bellowed another.

"Yeah! They've found us out anyway!" Neither prisoner spoke, even though they had already guessed the verdict. Indeed, the cry for vengeance was too great. Without further ado, the bearded mercenary reached for the trigger.

"Hold your fire!!" boomed a coarse voice from no where.

If God himself had spoken, the effect wouldn't have matched the one this terrible voice had. The mercenaries obeyed at once, their silence a visible sign of tense nervousness. Some lowered their disappointed weapons, others (out of caution) kept it loosely aimed at the prisoners.

Both Reno and Rude wondered at such absolute authority. On noticing that all sight had turned over to the side, they followed likewise.

Their eyes led them up a complex network of pipes and girders, which altogether supported a balcony on the upper level. The balcony held this entire scene in full view. It hung in such obscurity high above, barely distinguishable amidst the metalwork and grim darkness.

Yet through the black void above, there peered an ominous pair of yellow eyes, their glare as brilliant as the sun. A closer look revealed some black figure poised at the balcony's edge. It seemed more a phantom of shadow than any human form. But even without a definite shape, its sheer presence there evoked a sinister fear deep within.

Poor Rufus, who lay doubled over in dull pain, somehow managed to peek far up to that ominous figure. He writhed his head back down again, while Rude concernedly crouched further by his side.

"...that's him..." whispered the boy weakly.

"..who?" asked Rude.

"...the Professor..."

No name, no face; simply a title. Reno felt his blood run cold, but nevertheless retained a stern expression. Rude could barely contain his anxiety: events went from bad to worse to hopeless.

"What is the meaning of this commotion?" demanded the Professor icily.

"These two intruders somehow busted in here, Professor," explained the bearded mercenary, "They tried to take the kid with 'em...and killed five men!!"

The Professor's horrible eyes gleamed over to the two brave prisoners. His figure seemed to grow more shapeless, more hideous in that darkness.

Reno, however, would not be intimidated.

"Hey you! Flash-eyes!" he angrily addressed, "You the ring-leader of this little circus?!"

The Professor was silent. One of the mercenaries threatened Reno with the muzzle of his gun, but the prisoner still persisted.

"You hiding out here in a top-secret ShinRa facility, with a kid who SHOULD be dead, 'n a bunch of thugs! What the Hell's going on here?!"

No reply.

"Who ARE you, anyway?!"

The angry questions hung in the stiff air. Reno glared up at those bright eyes in expectation of answers. Rude only looked on very nervously, with the distraught boy held down between his arms. Their situation did not look good.

In the end, the Professor was hardly impressed by this outspoken prisoner, much less bothered by his questions. He turned to leave.

"Kill them," he croaked the verdict, "...and dispose of their bodies."

Too glad to oblige, the mercenaries locked onto their two alarmed targets, and prepared to open fire.

The single bullet rang loud in Reno's ears, so sudden it startled his eyes shut. But the gunshot hadn't hit him at all. Indeed, on opening his astonished eyes, he witnessed one mercenary reel aside against a wild gush of blood, then crash face down to the floor.

Someone had saved them just in time.

Instant chaos broke out amongst the stunned mercenaries: loud swears, mad scurrying about until one man screamed "Up there!!".

Thunderous gunfire erupted at once. Their bombardment blitzed the far end of the ceiling, where a framework of metal girders and supports arched high overhead. No bullets were spared, no cry or curse stifled.

The prisoners found themselves amidst some mini-battle. Rude had immediately huddled over the confused boy, while Reno crouched down on the other side. Though he kept his head ducked low, Reno's eyes darted up to find their mysterious saviour.

All at once, he glimpsed some black shadow dash amongst the upper support girders, too fast for even these crazy bullets. The figure lunged into the darker end, where the enraged mercenaries blasted more fiercely. Yet this sniper had chosen his position too well: he was in darkness, high above; they were in the light, down below.

Another bullet hit a guard dead on; it sent him sprawling onto the floor. Two more gunshots blasted another enemy, one the shoulder, the next bullseye into the skull. The quick sniper never remained still too long, which made it impossible to pin-point his exact location.

It wasn't until a third man had been killed that the crazed mercenaries broke into disorder. Each one scurried away for cover, all the while blasting away.

"Stop shooting! Hold your fire!" roared their leader savagely, "Bastard's hid himself damn good!!"

The useless bombardment stumbled to a halt. Each gun remained rigidly pointed up at that ominous framework, but none opened fire.

All fell quiet again. An eternity of tense anticipation.

There was great wondrousment at what devil had come to their aid. Reno slowly ventured up to his knees. Rude looked around in amazement, then checked the bewildered Rufus for any injuries. He found none.

During this brief shoot-out, the Professor hadn't retreated from the balcony. Instead, he had stood silent witness from the dark depths of his metal cavern.

However, amidst this eerie tranquility, the Professor slowly twisted his head up to that battered framework. His yellow eyes, two narrow slits of evil, hunted for this brave sniper.

The search didn't last long. As if sensing that keen glare, the sniper finally stepped out from behind his shelter, enough to only reveal half-himself. Through the grimness high above, he appeared a tall, black figure. The deadly gun hung tight in his hand.

Vincent's crimson cold eyes were riveted down on the Professor's. At long last, events had brought the two to meet.

-End of Chp.55

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.56

This tense silence only forewarned of a violent storm. It weighed down upon the entire Reactor: the entangled webwork of pipes and supports; the timid pumps dumped far below in the bottomless pit; all viewed events in mute anticipation. The air was too stiff, too unnatural.

From his position high above, Vincent stood bare across one girder beam for all to behold. Darkness enshrouded his whole body, imposing such cool deadliness to his tall figure, especially that sharp claw. Yet his eyes, a hardened barrier of ice, were fixed straight down on the Professor, and none other.

This Professor. The same whose sheer name evoked sinister dread and wretched misery; a phantom of nothingness. At long last, Vincent could meet him.

But most importantly, he could finally retrieve *her* from this nightmare. That one desire, to get Aeris back, has always fuelled his fierce determination onwards, more so now that he had met her notorious tormentor.

Those firey-yellow eyes glared evil back up at him. The Professor remained ever rigid at the metallic balcony, misshapen in black obscurity. Though silent, his malicious aura alone told it all: he did not like this intrusion one bit.

The four surviving mercenaries huddled behind their own shelters on high alert. Their guns were aimed at that brave sniper above, but none dared fire, not with four of their comrades already dead in the open. They simply waited.

The rescued prisoners, on the other hand, gazed at their saviour in wide awe. Reno had finally climbed back to his feet. Rude stayed squatted on one knee by the boy's side. Still troubled by a milder headache, Rufus sat hunched over with both elbows as support. He gaped up at this unknown figure.

Indeed, all attention rested on that one intruder perched high overhead; a black demon descended from the darkest night sky.

But in return, Vincent's ice-cold gaze remained fixed on the Professor alone.

"Well, well!" suddenly greeted a voice from nowhere, "Look who's crawled back through the Gates of Hell!"

The voice came clear, dripping in playful malice, but no sign anywhere of the speaker. Nor was there any need. Vincent instantly recognized Davoren's voice.

"But frankly, I'm disappointed in you, Vincent," mocked the gunman, "It took you almost *six* days to find this place. Tsk...too slow!"

The source seemed to emanate from the ceiling metal-joists higher above. Vincent could discern Davoren somewhere up there, almost see that evil grin spread across his face. However, he still could not find him.

"Oh, you want to see your little girl, eh?" chuckled the invisible gunman.

Vincent's muscles stiffened at the mention of Aeris.

"Tell you what then," bargained Davoren, "Hop down from there, and I'll show her to you."

The proposal went by unanswered.

"You DO want to see her, don't you?"

His crimson eyes, bright as two fiery rubies, glared so narrowly at the unseen gunman. As much as he hated to admit, he **did** want to see Aeris very much, if only to reassure himself of her safety. On the other hand, he would have to descend to the danger zone below. It was his own decision.

The final choice was too obvious.

Although everyone could hear this transaction go on, no one ever interrupted; not even the ominous Professor, who patiently awaited the outcome with cruel eyes. Both Reno and Rude were left to wonder at this mysterious new speaker.

But for some reason, Rufus had been a bit startled to hear Davoren's voice here, more so that venomous tone. His confused eyes searched in vain for the man.

After another moment's reflection, Vincent shoved his reluctant weapon into its holster. Soon began his quick descent downwards, him hoping down rusted pipes or leaping across to lower scaffoldings. All eyes followed him.

At last, the man gracefully landed on both feet directly in view of the high balcony. He stood some steps in front of the three prisoners. Vincent's entire countenance bore such frigidity, his eyes hard-set on the haughty Professor above.

The Professor only glowered back. He would not speak.

"Whoa, Vinnie! Talk about excellent timing!" exclaimed the much relieved Reno from behind, "That was...wait a minute. I thought you said you didn't know where this lab was!"

He glared for an immediate explanation. Without looking back at him, Vincent coolly replied, "I didn't. I followed you." "

Wha?... 'followed'?" Reno paused until it suddenly dawned on him, "Hey you!! You KNEW we'd come here if ya told us about Rufus!!"

"I thought if I...caught your interest, you'd somehow lead me here."

Indeed, their first encounter had been less than amicable. Yet Vincent had easily seen through Reno's hostile denials that there **was** a secret laboratory somewhere. Nor had he mentioned Rufus ShinRa for no reason either. Therefore, after feigning departure, he had simply waited outside in the shadows. When the two ex-Turks had snuck out to investigate, Vincent had followed them here.

In other words, he had tricked them.

"Fuh! You're a lot sneakier than ya look," mumbled Reno resentfully, "...damn cripple-vampire..."

Vincent ignored that last comment. Instead, he stole one brief glance back at the boy, who of course tensed on meeting those stone-hard eyes. Something in this dark stranger aroused deep confusion.

However, Vincent instantly returned to the invisible gunman high above: he had fulfilled his part of the agreement, now Davoren must keep his.

Where was Aeris?

"Ho ho! Not to worry, Mr. Valentine," reassured the gunman, too amused by that glare, "Your sweet girl...she's right here."

All at once, Davoren dropped from the bleak darkness above onto a lower beam-joist, where he remained squatted down; Aeris was held safe in both arms.

The poor girl was torn to tears between her fear of this great height and this torture. So frightened, she had clung around the gunman's neck, and buried her face against his shoulder. Her frail body trembled non-stop. She never opened her eyes, but kept them squeezed tight.

Davoren's vicious gaze mocked Vincent alone: it clearly amused him too much to have this tearful girl in his strong grip, while Vincent watched on.

Neither the uneasy Reno nor the anxious Rude spoke, even though they were put on full guard against so malicious a presence.

"Is that man... 'Davoren'?" Rude asked the boy nervously.

Rufus seemed to grow all the more perplexed by these events. He nodded once, his muddled eyes always fastened on that terrible gunman.

But the scene belonged to those two men alone, one perched high above like a fiend, the other poised in upright determination. Vincent's cold scowl betrayed all his hatred for this monster, his eyes all his concern for Aeris.

He'd probably never forgive Davoren now. Not after that miserable night; not for drawing him into this Hell-hole with the girl at stake.

This time it would end; one man the victor, the other dead.

And from that guileful smile, Vincent knew the gunman shared his sentiment too.

Terror wrangled the poor girl's senses. She clung all the more to Davoren's neck, fearing she may fall any moment. Gentle sobs escaped her bosom.

"Shh, honey," whispered Davoren evilly as he stroked her loose hair, "Go on. Take a look. Your beloved angel's down there."

The mysterious words floated like a dream past her ears. In her confusion, the distraught girl peeked from his shoulder down to the scene below.

She froze on Vincent at once. That one face, so precious dear to her, stirred too many emotions inside: Intense anxiety, distress, fear; all showed clear on her expression, with tears still fresh on her pallid cheeks.

"Heh heh...told you he'd come," Davoren breathed into her ear, "When that man makes a vow, he never breaks it."

So true. Not only had Vincent somehow survived, but had ventured straight into this peril. There he stood below, tall in his long black overcoat, face marble-cold, crimson eyes fixed back on her.

She wished he hadn't come. In her mind, she still saw him crash to his death, even blood sprout out against a cruel bullet. She could never bear it again. Instead, she silently implored he escape before this hell swallowed him too.

Vincent read her every thought. But then, just as Davoren had predicted, he had pledged his solemn vow, and would *never* break it.

For a moment, Davoren scanned over the other prisoners lingering behind their saviour. Reno tensed; he didn't trust that look.

"..hello? And who might those two be? New friends?" the gunman wondered aloud. He didn't look at Rufus, even though he probably discerned those troubled eyes riveted on him.

"Davoren," called the Professor suddenly.

"Yes Sir," he obeyed.

Davoren acted at once. Gripping the frightened girl more securely, he lept off the beam-joint, far down onto a rigid airduct. As gracefully as a monkey, Davoren hopped another level downwards, where he landed feet first in front of Vincent.

A few meters separated the two enemies. Vincent glared at Davoren, whose grin still retained good-humour. He propped poor Aeris onto her shaky feet. Yet far from releasing her, the callous gunman held her ever close inside his open trenchcoat. One whole arm lay casually dropped over her shoulder and down across her tense bosom.

Though quite relaxed, this loathsome captivity nevertheless terrified Aeris to tearful silence. Her miserable green eyes stared straight at Vincent.

The three remaining mercenaries and their bearded leader scurried out of their shelters. They surrounded these brave intruders immediately. Every gun was aimed in alert readiness.

Vincent's cold glare remained on Davoren alone. From their place behind, both ex-Turks uncomfortably watched events unfold. Rufus still remained slouched on both knees, his troubled gaze fixed on this gunman. He seemed to implore an explanation.

Yet the gunman never returned his look. Nor would he speak anymore. He stood the perfect hound dog, meek prey in his grip, and his master perched high above.

"Mr.Valentine," came a venomous voice.

All attention turned up to that hideous figure at the balcony, the satan of this inferno. The Professor finally shuffled from his spot. He strolled along the ballustrade, never once lifting his glare off Vincent.

"..Mr.Vincent Valentine..," he hissed out as if tasting that name.

Vincent's back stiffened, yet he held himself firm. No one breathed a word.

The Professor soon reached the end of the balcony, where he descended a broken staircase to the scene below. His steady footsteps echoed nearer as he approached the prisoners. Those yellow eyes shone malice at Vincent.

"Yes...it *is* you," confirmed the Professor, "...after all these years...Mr.Valentine."

What emerged from that darkness resembled a nightmare stepping into reality. The Professor stood in plain view for all to behold, with scrawny arms tied behind his back, and chin turned up.

A long, stunned silence followed.

Vincent delved back a moment into his memory: he saw a madman there, cackling wildly as that bio-poison diffused through his blood. An ingenious lunatic in life, a complete demon in battle. That man had perished long ago.

Yet here stood that same fiend, worse than any foul corpse arisen from the dead. It was him:Professor Hojo.

The beastliness shone through despite his loathsome human demeanour. Hojo was sickly gaunt; a skeleton wrapped in slimy-green skin that twitched under each breath. His narrow, reptilian eyes gleamed over cracked spectacles. Those wild black forelocks exaggerated his high forehead too much, with a ravaged ponytail behind.

Age certainly showed on Hojo. He was a withered old man now, face all creased by wrinkles, especially around the eyes. Both his dirty whiskers and bristly chin looked as though nibbled by rats.

Putrid fumes of chemicals clung like a disease to his body. He wore an open tattered lab-coat. His collar had been torn open to reveal a purple vein branching up along his neck, while the tragic remains of a tie hung loose.

Such a grotesque creature. Its presence evoked deep dread, if not ominous disgust. This monstrosity was Professor Hojo.

Aeris gaped in horror at the scientist from behind. The sight sent shivers down her spine. Davoren hadn't reacted to Hojo's appearance. Instead, he maintained his position as Aeris' captor. Similarly, the guards remained fixed on their targets.

Needless to say, both Reno and Rude were dumbstruck by this unexpected revelation. But Rufus had already shrunk back in visible tension.

"..P..Professor...Hojo??!" fumbled Rude in shock.

The scientist cast a cool, almost bored, look towards the three prisoners.

"Ah yes. I seem to recall your faces from somewhere," he acknowledged. His terrible gaze then fell on Rufus, "You've renewed your acquaintance with the boy. Quite a mental mess, eh?"

The two ex-Turks stiffened. Rude automatically crouched further by Rufus' side to protect him from those sinister eyes. However, Hojo soon lost interest in these men. He turned to Vincent again.

Vincent's entire countenance had assumed such frigidity. Even after thirty-one years, there still remained a hostility between these two men; so bitter everyone could feel it.

"I see you have survived, Professor Hojo," greeted Vincent, his calm tone colder than ice.

The Professor's mouth twisted into a smug grin, one that fully revealed his jagged fangs. He adjusted his broken specs.

"Indeed, Mr.Valentine. That confrontation had left me in a grievous state for some time afterwards," he conceded, "But JENOVA cells have proven themselves to be far more...resilient."

He grinned all more, obviously pleased with his survival.

"And so, Mr.Valentine. Here we are..thirty-one years later"

Vincent suppressed any reply least it might be a curse.

"Heh! I must admit, Sir, you've managed yourself quite well thus far...considering your feeble condition and such. Very impressive."

At those mocking words, Vincent felt an evil force caress his lungs just once; an ominous reminder that despite his determination, Hojo still reigned over his "illness". Nevertheless, Vincent stood his ground.

"I was quite displeased with Davoren's dismal failure to capture you. However, he did assure me you'd eventually come here. He also assured me you'd prove yourself to be rather... unco-operative."

Hojo's mean glare narrowed as he hissed out, "But you will soon discover, Sir, that all your efforts would have been in vain. You cannot fight your destiny."

It was a warning for all to hear: that no one could ever thwart *his* plans. The gunman stood poised some distance behind his master. He held distraught Aeris against himself without a tinge of emotion. On the opposite side, the prisoners lingered silent spectators.

Vincent's ice-cold visage never wavered. With calm firmness, he stated,"I did not come here to fight you, Professor."

"Ah then! You've come here to surrender?"

"No. I've come to take Aeris back with me."

Those resolute words somehow sounded better than any joke. The Professor exploded at once into cruel cackling, his whole head tossed far back. Even Davoren couldn't help but smirk.

Vincent, however, was silent amidst this uproarious laughter. Aeris shivered to the very core from fear.

"Ha ha ha! You have the audacity to make such foolish declarations, Mr.Valentine, especially to my face!!" exclaimed Hojo outloud.

A stern arrogance replaced his good-humour. He glared hard at this brave man, "This specimen belongs to *me*. I will never relinquish my hold on her. Her place is here...to fulfill her part in the experiment. As is for you, Mr.Valentine. You and Mr.Davoren: both my specimens..my creations. All for my experiment!!"

Vincent had expected such stubbornness. But before he could reply, Rufus' tense voice suddenly interrupted, "..experiment??"

All sight turned to the boy, who had hitherto remained slouched on the floor, stone-mute. He now stood up.

"Yes, Mr. Rufus, have you anything to say?" demanded Hojo.

Stark anxiety strained the boy's face as he forced out, "...this experiment...jeh...JENOVA Project: AdM-Genesis Retrieval Experiment?"

"Correct. That is its proper title."

The amount of confusion in the two ex-Turks could not be described, nor the keen interest in Vincent's eyes as he beheld this young lunatic.

"Okay! Time out!!" cried Reno, thereby winning everyone's attention, "Would someone like to maybe explain what is going on here?! There are THREE people here who're supposed to be dead, one of them's a friggin' green zombie! And what's this 'Geni-Retro' thingie?!"

"It is an experiment I have designed...my ultimate gift to science advancement," answered Hojo self-importantly, "JENOVA Project: Genesis Retrieval."

"What 'experiment', Professor?" Vincent cut short, "JENOVA Project finished long ago."

"Hah!"

That brusque snub, spat with such venom, enforced a stiff silence upon all present, especially Vincent.

"But why should I bother explaining?" scoffed the scientist as he folded both arms, "I could talk all night, and none of you would understand a single word..what with your pathetic knowledge of biochemistry, cytology, neurology, genetics, anatomy, and a string of other advanced fields."

No one spoke, except for Reno who mumbled aside, "..I can't even spell half those words..."

"Davoren, explain it to them," commanded Hojo.

"Yes, Professor."

Such absolute obedience. Davoren's whole demeanour dropped at once from pleasant to cool business. His gaze locked on Vincent alone. Never once did the gunman look at Rufus.

Thus began the recital of Professor Hojo's experiment.

-End of Chp.56

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.57

"JENOVA Project: Genesis Retrieval Experiment- class AdM (highly classified). Since the dawn of human history, man has been too aware of his inferiority compared to God. It is forever engrained into his conscience: man is insignificant, weak, ignorant, and flawed."

The strange introduction had its listeners leaden by heavy silence. Vincent's mistrust of this entire situation intensified further, especially whenever he glanced at Hojo's wily grin.

Davoren continued on. His flat tone showed how well he knew this topic, "God, on the other hand, symbolizes what man dreams of but can never attain: omnipotence, knowledge, mastery. An entity of perfection fit to reign above all creation."

"Though man may struggle an eternity, he will never reach the supremacy of God. The gap is far too wide; the power too great to grasp."

"But if such a gap could somehow be traversed...for a worthless human to ascend to an almighty God...then this supreme being will be true master of the Planet and all heavens above. The superior human."

"Professor Hojo has designed an experiment that would elevate man to such status. Hence the name 'Genesis', or birth of a God."

"However, such a feat has already been performed thirty-one years ago. There has been a human who ascended to a God."

Vincent's cool voice tightened as he breathed, "...Sephiroth."

"Correct. The fruit of the JENOVA project," agreed the callous gunman, "A creation in the image of man, yet brimming with the powers of a God, moulded by science alone. That creation deserves to be master."

Indeed, JENOVA project had spawned a heartless demon thirty-one years ago: Sephiroth, "the son of JENOVA". A god in his own right, who destroyed life in the name of eternal power. Yes, all these mad words sounded familiar to Vincent.

"But the JENOVA Project finished long ago. It was Sephiroth's birth," argued Vincent.

"No, it didn't," intervened Hojo haughtily. All eyes turned to that green-skinned monstrosity, "That experiment was merely to test whether human and JENOVA cells can co-exist in one organism. If the dosage is made correctly, then it becomes possible. Sephiroth and myself are the proof. However, that experiment was only a vital springboard to the *true* goal of JENOVA Project."

Then there was *more* to this hateful project?

Though Vincent dreaded the reply, he nevertheless inquired, "And what may that be?"

"Why, the same purpose it always was, Mr.Valentine," patronised Hojo, "We try to create an almighty God. We've done it once, we'll do it again. This is 'Retrial'."

At last, the final answer to this twisted riddle. Every muscle in Vincent's body stiffened; that sinister answer sent a chill down his spine. His suspicious eyes tensed keenly on Professor Hojo.

Yet it seemed only these two bitter adversaries understood each other. Poor Aeris, silent in her tears, stood held back against Davoren. Up till now, none of the other prisoners had spoken a word.

"...um...what does all that mumbo-jumbo mean in normal language?" the confused Reno pleaded. He spoke for his group.

Without even glancing behind, Vincent obliged one concise explanation, "They want to create another Sephiroth."

Straight to the point, spoken with such composure, yet what impact! Neither Reno nor Rude could retain their stark shock at this sudden revelation. So great, their wide eyes darted in between these two enemies.

Vincent stood his ground against this hateful creature so arrogantly perched in front. His dark demeanour had already shifted from stoicism to stern contempt.

Professor Hojo had enough hatred to show. The evil words slithered out of his twisted mouth, "Very good, Mr.Valentine. That is the purpose of 'Genesis Retrial': to make another God. However, this next Sephiroth will be the 'perfected' version."

"...'perfected' version?"

"Yes!" he retorted, "Yes..but instead of combining human and JENOVA cells...we'll fuse Cetra and JENOVA together. If my theory proves correct, the end result will be **phenomenal**!"

Vincent could say nothing; deep disgust clogged his throat.

"Combining those two races will yield a godlike creation," resumed Davoren, thereby attracting attention again, "But still. There will be certain flaws. That's where WE come in. Professor Hojo has altered our bodies to be 'correcting fragments'. We'll fine-tune this next Sephiroth to his full potential."

Davoren's face lacked emotion save strict business. His pink eyes held Vincent's gaze in cool reserve, "Sephiroth certainly possessed unparalleled strength and ability. But even HE would age with time, and eventually lose his youthful strength."

"Whereas we never age," Vincent completed the sentence.

"Correct. We're both blessed with the full strength of youth as long as we live. Thirty-one years have passed, neither of us has aged a wrinkle."

The three prisoners behind, especially the mute Rufus, gaped in open disbelief. "...th..thirty-one years'?" fumbled Rude.

"That's nuts!!" exclaimed Reno aloud, "You'd have to be.... I dunno...sixty right now if you..."

"Sixty-two, actually," the gunman smiled weakly. He continued despite that interruption, "Another flaw of Sephiroth: despite his great power, he could still become vulnerable to physical damage, as well as pain. Both factors have detrimental effects on ability. Finally, Sephiroth most certainly possessed enormous powers hidden within himself...an untapped reservoir of uncontrollable, raw power he couldn't access."

Davoren's whole face lit up to cruel pleasure; his devilish grin showed it all, "Think of it, Vincent! Just imagine: when JENOVA and Cetra merge into one, with us to perfect the union...what kind of supreme being will it create?"

Vincent hated to imagine. Indeed, a demon more powerful than Sephiroth would emerge; its veins flowing with both JENOVA, a destructive alien life-form, and Cetra, the long-extinct masters of the Planet. This same devil would never age, remain invincible, and house an explosive source of monstrous power behind a human guise...power well beyond control.

Finally, the puzzle pieces fitted into one whole picture: a God. Vincent recalled his interrogation of Davoren that miserable night. The artful bastard had joked about reviving Sephiroth, he just didn't mention *which* part was the joke.

But now, the most obvious question hung in the stiff air.

"And how do you plan on merging all these components into one?" inquired Vincent dryly.

"Oh that. That's the easy part," chuckled Davoren with a wave of the hand, "We're killed, and our cells are all assimilated together into one. It's all genetics, my friend."

Somehow, Davoren found this news quite humorous. His pleasant smile expressed such affability, even though his strong arm had never fell off the frightened Aeris. Yet far from any amusement, Vincent's expression remained stone-hard. His keen mind still sought to fully grasp this insane "experiment".

He just happened to glance over at Aeris, who all this time had stood trapped within Davoren's coat, her tearful green eyes strained by anguish. Doubtful the poor girl had understood much of this lengthy discourse. All she grasped was that this nightmare of a Professor would never release her, and that if Vincent did not escape now, he would be killed.

His resolute eyes told her: whatever be the consequences, I will not leave here without you.

"Okay! Lemme get this straight!!" boomed Reno suddenly into the discussion, "Professor Screwball over there has an experiment he wants to try. First, he messes up two guys, then does himself, and then grabs hold of that Cetra girl. Now, he's gonna fuse all those different cells into one person, and make some 'God' or another Sephiroth. Is that it??"

Davoren and the Professor exchanged a meaningful look before Hojo conceded, "In such crude vocabulary, yes. That is roughly the experiment."

When his simple summary proved correct, Reno's fury exploded at once, "Man, what kind of sick-minded psychopath ARE you?!! You can't go screwing around with people like that!! 'Ultimate gift to science advancement', my ass!!"

His anger then shifted to the calm gunman, "And YOU, Albino-man! You just blindly obey this bastard? Didn't you just hear yourself? He's gonna kill ya for some warped experiment, and you still.."

"I don't care."

Davoren's curt rebuttal struck Reno dumb.

"Once my body was altered, it automatically became full property of this experiment," stated the gunman indifferently, "My life belongs to the Professor now. Whether it is taken or spared does not concern me."

He paused a moment before adding rather contemptuously, "And for your information, sonny, I'm not an albino."

Silence fell again. Vincent beheld this man; that expressionless face and empty pink eyes. The picture of a slave well accustomed to lowly servitude.

This absolute obedience pleased Professor Hojo. A smug grin creased across his face. He held Vincent alone in imperious contempt, with both scrawny arms folded across his chest. His aura reeked of malice.

Vincent's icy visage never faltered, not even as he pleaded, "Professor, if such an experiment were carried out, it could spawn a devil more destructive and unstable than ten Sephiroths combined."

"You think I will stop *NOW* after all these long years of toil and preparation?!" fumed Hojo, "Our course is clear! It is time to prove we were all MEANT to merge into one ultimate entity..one GOD!!"

No one spoke.

"Yes!! A creation moulded by MY own genius...MINE ALONE!!" the crazed demon spluttered against an invisible audience. His eyes bulged wide with choler, "They all deemed that fool Gast the greatest scientist! But let this experiment be my testament: I am ten..no...a HUNDRED times the better scientist!! **I** have created a GOD!!!!"

By the time Hojo finished, his brash voice had crackled into a breathless bellow. Unforgiving fury raged through his entire demeanour. Stern brows knit his brilliant eyes together. That purple vein had popped further up his neck until one thought it would burst.

Vincent gazed back unaffected by the outburst.

It took Hojo another moment to subdue his rageous gasps. He licked the purple saliva off the corner of his mouth, then faced his main enemy again.

"And so, Mr.Valentine," he hissed with forced calmness, "You appreciate the reason I've altered your body. Be as wise as Mr.Davoren, and fulfill your true purpose to the experiment."

"I refuse," came Vincent's reply loud and firm.

The Professor regarded this resistance as an open challenge to his authority. His frown darkened into an ominous scowl. Not like it bothered Vincent. Hojo may have control over his lungs, but he had enough determination to match.

"I have no interest in fulfilling any purpose in your 'experiment', Professor Hojo. Nor have I come here to fight you. I have only come here to take Aeris back."

Vincent's tone dropped to deadly iciness as he added, "Restore her to me *now*, and I will leave."

In other words, he would fight if need be just to get the girl back.

Tense anticipation lingered upon this awkward moment, everyone too aware of its presence. Stragely however, a mocking smile crept across Hojo's thin lips as his reptilian eyes narrowed down.

"Aeris', eh?" he snorted outloud, "I see you've given her a name. How charming."

He tied his two arms behind before starting a slow pace towards the much affrighted girl. His thoughtful gaze, however, flickered their evil on the ground.

"Yes, Davoren has informed me how...fond you've grown of protecting this girl. But I fear, my good Sir, you've been wasting your efforts on an image."

The word certainly struck the listeners as quite odd, especially to Vincent, who felt another ominous suspicion creep up. Had he seen Aeris, he would have noticed how greatly alarmed she had become.

"What do you mean 'an image'?" demanded Vincent.

Hojo took his time to answer. He haughtily adjusted his broken specs as he twisted his head aside, if only to cast a derisive glare behind at the man.

"This isn't the real 'Aeris'," he scoffed, "That girl is long dead. This one is her clone."

-End of Chp.57

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.58

This was her clone.

Her clone.

Clone.

What did that mean?

Despite all her pitiful attempts, poor Aeris could not grasp that one word. It sounded so simple, but now her whole world seemed to hang on its meaning. The premonition was far too strong. In her frantic anxiety, she fixed on Professor Hojo (even though her own mind implored she cover both ears and look away).

A new light had been shed upon her mysterious origin. Now it emerged as a most ugly truth: the real Aeris had always been dead. That girl over there, held by a stoic Davoren, was only her clone.

Silence weighed a ton upon all those present. The two ex-Turks simply gaped at a loss for words. Vincent stood rigidly overwhelmed. Indeed, it took some struggle just to grapple this new revelation.

Hojo still faced away from the prisoners. However, his head remained twisted aside just to cast that insolent glare on Vincent. His superior air snubbed him to the dirt.

".clone..," Vincent mumbled the distasteful word.

"Yes," affirmed Professor Hojo, "I have created a clone of that Cetra female. This is her."

To further assert his claim, the cruel scientist returned his attention to Aeris, who gave a violent start as he slowly approached her. This gaunt waste of an old man only towered a few inches above her. But his sheer presence, with those reptilian eyes, pierced her to the core. He now stood right before her.

Hojo derived a cruel pleasure from studying her meek figure. Heedless to her alarm, he lifted Aeris' delicate chin with one scaly hand for a closer inspection; so close she could smell his foul breath.

"A true beauty, eh?" leered the monster at her while addressing Vincent behind, "She's the *perfect* image of 'Aeris'. Everything has been duplicated to the last gene...a flawless re-creation of the last Cetra."

The sight of Hojo's filthy touch on Aeris' lovely face angered Vincent more than those words. Luckily, Hojo flung her back against Davoren's chest, then faced the prisoners again.

"Oh, come now!" he laughed, "Surely you didn't think this was the *real* Cetra-female!"

Vincent reflected a moment. His memory raced back to that first night this girl had come crashing into him, lost and frightened out of her wits. It had never made sense. For this girl to rush out of nowhere, when in fact she should be lying dead at the bottom of a lake.

"I admit...at first, I doubted this girl could be the same Aeris," mused Vincent more to himself, "Aeris had been stabbed clean through the chest by Sephiroth's sword. There simply was no chance of her survival."

His gaze narrowed, "However, how could this girl be a clone? My knowledge of genetics is quite limited, but I do know you cannot clone someone without a sample of original cells."

"Who says I didn't have an original sample?" sneered Hojo through a hideous grin.

Though Vincent's interest heightened to ominous dread, he nonetheless listened on. All eyes followed Hojo as he began to pace around again.

"Back when I still worked for ShinRa Inc., the company had once managed to capture that Cetra female," he recalled, "I took a sample of her cells: a fully-detailed genome analysis, with ample quantities of cells frozen in bio-stasis for...'special purposes'"

He propped one hand on his hip as his pace deadened to a halt. His cracked glasses flashed yellow malice at Vincent alone.

"Naturally, I intended to use the real female for this experiment. However, she was later rescued by her friends, and much to my further annoyance, killed. This meant I had no Cetra anymore...that is until I remembered those cells."

"So you cloned her," Vincent spat resentfully.

"Yes."

Vincent felt his blood boil under his cool visage. This monster stooped to any level for his experiment, even if it meant disgracing the dead. It all made sense now. Professor Hojo had no Cetra, so he created one, and kept her thus until needed.

Then this girl was not "Aeris". It was not the same vivacious girl whose smile had always uplifted those around her; not the same who had bravely sacrificed her own life for the Planet, or who was lain to rest at the bottom of a crystal-blue lake.

No. Vincent had not come for Aeris. He had come for her clone.

"...c-clone..??" fumbled a soft, weak voice. All sight instantly shifted around to Aeris. She had hitherto remained stone-silent.

The pitiful girl stood petrified with fear. Behind her, Davoren kept a loose grip around her without any expression. Her eyes, a turbulent green sea of confusion, gaped wide at Professor Hojo. Her frantic heartbeats clogged her ears. Too many emotions skittered about her bosom.

She only understood one thing: this mysteries word "clone" bore enough significance to shatter her.

"..but...what...what does that mean??" she pleaded. Only Professor Hojo could answer.

"It means you are not the real 'Aeris'. You're just her image."

"...image..."

Anxiety sickened her senses to near faintness: an image. How often in her darkest nightmares had that word chased her until she woke up crying? Whenever she had peered into that horrible mirror, she never found herself, only an empty silver facade.

Aeris' ordeal swelled further amidst this mad whirlpool. Her clasped hand trembled above her heart.

"An artificial memory was developed for you," continued Hojo, "For example, you can read, speak, and express ideas. It makes everything easier. But you have no personal memory of your past, because you never had a past."

Her identity hung by a very fine thread, one which would be cut any moment. Hope clashed against hope as she battled for an alternate explanation; some way to prove this news false: she couldn't be some filthy copy of another person! It was impossible!

When reason failed, she clung to denial.

"No!! That's not true!!" she cried, "...I'm not an image!"

Hojo's icy gaze belittled her, "You are an image my dear. I created you. I breathed life into your body."

"No! No! I AM Aeris!!"

"You are not."

"I AM!!" she shrieked just to block out his hateful hiss, "I have a scar on my chest!! When I first met Vincent, he had to change my dirty clothes! He saw it!!"

"...'scar'?" echoed the baffled Hojo. He glanced at Davoren for an explanation.

"I believe she is referring to the tube marks...from the Accelerator, Professor," guessed the gunman.

Aeris blinked, completely dumbstruck by this strange observation. Neither words nor concept took meaning in her stunned mind. Regardless, Professor Hojo expelled one contemptuous snort, then turned his head back towards Vincent.

"Mr.Valentine," he demanded loudly, "You say Aeris was stabbed through the chest with a sword."

No reply.

"Have you seen this girl's 'scar'?"

He paused before muttering, "...I have."

"Tell me, Sir, is her 'scar' from a sword?"

Here came the moment of truth. The entire Reactor braced itself for the answer. Everyone's focus centered on him: Hojo poised upfront in mighty haughtiness; both prisoners and the boy mute in the background; and Davoren's frigid gaze fixed on the scene. Vincent alone would finalize this tedious matter.

But inside, the man only felt Aeris's turmoil. She just wanted the truth.

"No," Vincent forced out softly, "Her 'scar' was far too small...too neat to be from a sword. It looked more like...a closed slit."

Aeris' blood ran cold, with wretched eyes still locked on Vincent. Her fate was sealed now. The proof had worked against her.

Vincent's eyes darkened to an embittered glow, but it remained cast down. He had spoken true, however much he despised it.

Hojo, on the other hand, beamed delightedly at his easy victory. He returned to Aeris. His gaze mocked her pain outright.

"You see, my darling," he chuckled, "you were developed inside a special amniotic incubator known as a 'Growth Accelerator'. While you were developing, tubes were hooked directly to your body: muscles, heart, brain, spine, lungs. Those tubes administered chemical substances that sped your growth rate to adulthood. Of course, those tubes left marks ALL OVER your body, but soon faded away."

So many revelations overwhelmed the poor girl, "...b..but.."

"that 'scar' on your chest has already disappeared. It just took a bit longer to fade. After all, you are only ten months old in *real* time."

The final blow. Aeris' face paled to ghostly whiteness. Horror seized her by the roots. It mocked her whole existence as one hilarious joke. Could she really be a misshapen creature of no substance?

She still clung to the futile hope this would all be a nightmare. She couldn't bear this: not the fiendish Professor dissecting her ugly past before her own eyes; not Vincent listening to every loathsome detail. She wanted everything to just disperse into the night.

But the thoughts hammered her non-stop: no wonder she couldn't remember "her" past. Those precious memories belonged to another person...a *real* person. She was just her clone...a clone...not real...a clone...

"...I don't believe you!!" Aeris exploded in a passion against the Professor, "This can't be true!! It can't!! I don't..have any memories..but..but..I couldn't have been living a lie this whole time!! I AM Aeris!! All of what you say are lies!!! LIES!!!"

The Professor would not tolerate her pitiful outburst. In one violent swing of the hand, he struck Aeris across the face, so hard it knocked her to the ground with a sharp shriek. Vincent's muscles tensed under stifled rage. Yet now she lay sprawled upon all fours, down by Hojo's dirty shoes, while Davoren stoically watched on.

"You are a hollow piece of cellular *garbage* I constructed for an experiment!!" snarled the vicious scientist over her sobs, "That's not your face! That's not your body! That's not your life! It all belongs to another person!!"

His brash voice stabbed her heart like daggers, every word a curse upon her existence. The pitiful girl struggled to get up, with her loose hair dangling in thick curls on one side. She dared not glance up: she feared to see Vincent....how hideous she must appear to him now!

"Aeris' isn't even your name! You HAVE no name!!" bellowed Hojo mercilessly, "Your specimen code is A-25! A random letter and number! Nothing more!!"

The longer he beheld this broken-hearted girl, the greater Hojo's irritation grew. To degrade her further, he thrust one heavy foot against her shoulder, then shoved her hard to the ground, where she lay curled up on her side. Poor Aeris never resisted, not even opened her tearful eyes.

"You belong to *me* and no one else," the Professor staked his claim for all, especially her, to hear, "Mine and mine alone! I brought you into existence for one purpose: the experiment! otherwise, you're worthless! Garbage!! An image!!!"

He had destroyed her beyond redemption. His terrible voice had shattered her entire dreamworld to broken fragments. It all collapsed around her. Now cruel reality laughed loud at her misery. All gone...nothing but darkness.

She was a clone. She had robbed another girl's identity to suit herself, when in fact she had risen from some horrid machine stuffed with tubes. What an abhorrent creature she was! She *deserved* every torture she got!

"...for an experiment..," Aeris acceded to defeat.

Another easy victory. Most contemptuous of her sad ordeal, Professor Hojo stepped away from Aeris. Both arms were tied like a knot behind his back. His stone-hard visage never winced.

Davoren automatically pulled the shattered girl up to her shaky feet again. However, this time he held her closer against himself. Devastated to numbness, Aeris simply nestled her pale face against this man's chest, and started into nothingness, as if watching "her" life fade to oblivion. Hot tears flooded her eyes.

"..th..then..all this time...I've been pretending to be someone else?" she whimpered.

The girl cringed further against the gunman, "When I thought I was real...when I looked into the mirror...but saw no one there...it's because I was the image?...for an experiment?"

"I see you understand at last," commended Hojo scornfully.

Pain heaved upon her all at once. A cascade of bitter emotions to drown her forever. So much grief, all too heavy for this fragile soul to carry. Now she understood: she was nothing but Hojo's rag-doll, a toy for him to enjoy however he pleased.

And of all people, Vincent had witnessed her pathetic degradation. No doubt she disgusted him now, an empty piece of garbage like herself; she disgusted herself!

At last, Aeris burst into loud, hysterical tears. Her pitiful wail filled the Reactor.

This ridiculous display enraged Hojo more than the first. He swung around to strike Aeris again, this time with redoubled force. She hid her face immediately. However, the reaction came at once: Davoren not only stopped Hojo's hand midway, but had also hugged the frightened girl tighter against himself. The Professor glared in a mixture of anger and surprise.

"Pardon me, Professor," intervened Davoren, "If you strike her again, you could damage her skull."

He was, after all, in charge of the Professor's specimens. But whether that reason alone had motivated Davoren or not, he held Hojo's icy glower with perfect composure. Aeris was nevertheless terrified into silence. She peeked over her trembling shoulder at this monster.

Though resentful, Hojo conceded to his henchman's reasonable protest. He wrenched his hand free as he returned to face the prisoners. Soon, his bad mood uplifted at once.

"Well, Mr.Valentine," he mocked cruelly, "Perhaps now you see your stupidity for protecting such a miserable wretch..... hehehehe..."

Vincent had borne himself with stiff calmness throughout the entire scene. But now, dark hatred overcast his whole face; a harsh crimson glare under knit brows. If looks could kill, Hojo would have dropped dead.

There seemed nothing more to say. So, the scientist turned to leave.

"Professor!" cried Rufus' tense voice suddenly. Hojo automatically stopped. He cast a long, indifferent look behind at the boy. In a sudden wake of realization, Rufus had ventured some steps ahead of the two ex-Turks (who were quite alarmed by his bravery). He now stood near Vincent's side. Both anxiety and dread troubled his face.

"Ho, Mr.Rufus. You've been very quiet all this time," remarked Hojo, "What is it?"

"Those two men told me...that I was supposed to have died in some explosion," fumbled the boy with eyes hard-set on the scientist, "Am..am I like that girl? Am I a 'clone' too?"

The Professor let out an insolent guffaw, "No. You are Rufus ShinRa, former President of ShinRa Inc. The fact that you have a memory proves it (however enfeebled it may be). You should have perished in that explosion, but I saved you."

"If that's true, then WHY?"

The question certainly opened another mystery. Vincent's ice-cool gaze beheld the young man from the side for a moment, then returned to the Professor.

"Yeah!" voiced Reno from behind, "You blabbed on about your screwy experiment, but never mentioned Rufus once! If he's not part of this, then why'd ya.."

"Oh, but he IS very much part of this," interrupted Hojo. His vicious gaze shone brighter on the confounded boy, "Rufus ShinRa is the one who links this whole experiment together. He holds the key to its success."

"What the hell does that mean....'key'?" demanded Rude coldly. He mistrusted that look.

Vincent reflected upon himself in rigid silence.

But Reno reached one possible answer. It literally startled him to fury, "Ah! Y-you bastard! So *HE'S* the guinea pig!! You're gonna infuse all that cell shit into RUFUS!!!"

Perhaps yes, perhaps no. In either case, Hojo left them with an enigmatic smile. He would not reply.

The Professor decided to end this discussion. With incredible nimbleness, he leapt back up onto the metallic balcony high above, as Satan would ascend his hellish throne. He left everyone to wonder below, while he stood cross-armed at the balustrade.

"I've wasted enough precious time on you miserable lot," sneered the scientist, "...Davoren!"

The gunman understood the command. He snapped his fingers once.

Vincent anticipated instant danger.

The prisoners suddenly became too aware of their situation. That snap had signaled their execution, whereby all four mercenaries now shuffled to obey. Soon, they prepared to fire.

Poor Aeris raised a pitiful cry of horror. Maddened to more tears, she tried to rush towards Vincent, if not at least reach out towards him: she saw him dead in a pool of blood...just like that night! The same murder all over again!

But every effort proved futile. Davoren easily swept her against her will, and dragged her away with him. Vincent's intense gaze rested on her alone.

No sooner had the gunman began his retreat, then Rufus called after him, "Davoren, wait!!"

But Davoren ignored him without even glancing behind. Instead, he coldly ordered, "Don't shoot the boy. Take him back to his cellar when you're done."

"Yes Sir!" snapped the obedient guards.

The brusque dismissal troubled Rufus' even more. Something seemed horribly wrong here.

It didn't matter now. Gruesome death awaited them, with both ex-Turks searching in vain for some possible escape. Under such grim doom, Vincent's quick mind raced to formulate any plan... some distraction...perhaps then he could make a break for it.

Suddenly, his focus narrowed over on Rufus again.

"Run for it," he muttered to the two confounded men behind. The move indeed shocked everyone enough to win Vincent a few precious seconds. With such deadly-swiftness, he struck hard against the base of Rufus' neck, knocking the stunned boy unconscious almost instantly.

Vincent hardly waited for the reaction: not for Reno to yell "HEY!!" or Davoren to swing around at peak alarm. All his demonic speed exploded at once. Vincent darted away from the scene, at the same time slinging the lifeless boy onto one shoulder.

In short, he had kidnapped Rufus.

All Hell broke loose. The uproarious mercenaries opened full fire after this slippery fugitive. Insane gunshots blasted the floor under his feet; they sparked off the iron railings into the cold air. But over all this crazy bombardment, Vincent perused one headlong dash straight for Davoren. His stern resolve never wavered off the mark.

The incredible charge caught Davoren completely off guard. He was so stunned by Vincent's mad speed (and of course the unconscious Rufus), the gunman hadn't time to even yank out his own gun. Likewise, Aeris gaped wide-eyed.

It only took another blink before Vincent was right in front of him, still lunging at full force. Davoren simply blanked out.

Yet far from any attack, Vincent instead made one unbelievable leap high, high over their heads up into the air, with angry mercenaries still rushing after him. Davoren barely recovered his shock, at least fast

enough to narrowly evade the wild gunshots. He hid Aeris safe within his trenchcoat. His suspicious glare followed Vincent upwards: why hadn't he attacked?

The frenzied bullets zinged after their graceful target, even as he flew up the iron pipes faster than a monkey. He held onto Rufus with his metallic claw.

Hojo's erratic screams for blood mixed into the chaos. Vincent nevertheless leapt up straight past the metallic balcony, then flipped across onto a rusted pipe. It shattered just after he rebounded off it, whereby he flipped again further up onto a bulky tank fitted against the brick wall. He landed right on top.

From their positions down below, the mercenaries blitzed the rusted tank in hopes of killing their enemy, while Professor Hojo fumed inside his lair. Yet Davoren still clung to his suspicion. On noticing *which* tank Vincent had chosen, he immediately foresaw the fatal danger.

"STOP SHOOTING, YOU IDIOTS!!" he bellowed in alarm, "YOU'LL HIT THE GAS TANK!!!"

Too late.

Vincent exerted full strength to spring high up out of harm's way. Another moment, then one ear-splitting explosion rocked the whole Reactor by the very foundations. The tank, now a roaring meteor of fire, plunged downwards, destroying many pipes and two monstrous girders in its path.

It all crashed like Heaven's rage down upon the balcony, which sparked a second explosion more thunderous than the first. Soon, everyone found themselves under the shadow of a collapsing platform.

Aeris' entire body froze solid; her mind went numb.

However, Davoren reacted at once. Before poor Aeris realised anything, she felt him shove her as far away as his might allowed. Through wild debris and raucous clamour she tumbled until one deafening crash ended the chaos.

Heavy swirls of dust choked the air amidst the crackling fires. Aeris sat sprawled back upon the ground, trembling wildly as she beheld such total destruction. She had been pushed away from danger. There was no sign of Davoren. Most probably, he had fallen beneath the rubble.

"AERIS!!!" she heard someone cry her name aloud.

The frightened girl shot her eyes far up towards the ceiling. There, she spotted Vincent dangling from a stiff crossbar, with an unconscious Rufus held under his armpit.

"RUN AWAY!!NOW!!!" Vincent shouted at the top of his lungs.

Rattled by frantic terror, Aeris' mind fixated upon the command. She didn't spare another thought, but seized upon that desperate urge: escape!

Therefore, she scrambled back to her feet, and turned upon her heels. She never looked back.

In one clever sweep, Vincent had escaped that execution and broken Aeris' captivity. He had taken the chance Davoren would protect "Hojo's specimen" as duty dictated. Now both captors lay below mountainous rubble, and the girl free again.

Only two mercenaries had survived the explosion. Though chaotic, they both persisted hard: one man shot at Vincent. The other, on noticing the girl, tried to capture her.

However, Vincent had already swung off the crossbar onto a higher delivery pipe, where he unholstered his gun at once. His ruthless rebuttal came too swift: he first shot the guard chasing Aeris. Next, he turned his deadly aim towards the last guard: one bullet clean through the skull, and the mercenary crashed to his death.

Vincent did not wait to count the spoils of this victory. What mattered was reaching Aeris now that she has fled the scene, and getting her out of here. He found neither Reno nor Rude anywhere below. With luck, they too should have escaped.

In the meantime, he had this boy. Vincent dragged the lifeless boy down the pipe, where the journey ended at some ventilation grate. He tore off the grate, stuffed Rufus inside, then slipped in after him. Grabbing the unconscious boy just above the waist, Vincent began a noiseless crawl through the air-duct. Soon, darkness engulfed both figures.

Though Death lingered master above this devastated site, Life miraculously still throbbed below. By shoving a giant girder away, Davoren at last crawled out of the rubble. He staggered up to both feet.

"Ah wonderful," he grumbled as he beheld his now tattered trenchcoat, "That's another one ruined."

Davoren appeared dirtier, with his face smudged by dirt, but otherwise, he had emerged unscathed. He reluctantly slipped off the ragged garment, and dumped it aside. He straightened his fine suit, then cast a long look in search for someone.

Those two explosions had destroyed the place. At least three bridges and an entire platform had collapsed here, besides the beam-joists which had supported those structures: twisted pipes, metal and stone; so much burnt garbage. Silence haunted these ruinous hills.

A stiff rattle not too far away attracted Davoren's immediate attention. He scurried up the mountainous debris towards the source, where the balcony lay demolished. He arrived just as Professor Hojo stood up from under some stone slab.

No beggar could match Hojo's rags. His green skin twitched from stern rage. The hideous monster scanned the dismal surroundings. When he found nothing, his glare shot straight to Davoren.

"Where is the girl?" he barked at once.

"I pushed her away before the platform collapsed. She must've run off," came the calm reply.

The Professor scoffed out his irritation, then checked his glasses; one lens was cracked beyond recognition.

"Don't worry. She can't get too far," assured Davoren knowingly, "Well Sir, I'd better go catch her again. You can have your fun mutilating Vincent."

"No."

Davoren watched the monstrous creature prop his specs back on in haughty composure. His distemper seemed to have subdued.

"I have her location. I can track her down faster," Hojo hissed. His vicious eyes flared yellow towards the gunman, "*You* kill Valentine, and bring me his bloody corpse."

Fair enough, as far as Davoren saw, "Okay. Suit yourself."

"...those two other men..kill them too before they become a nuisance."

"Yes, Professor."

Everything thus settled, Davoren marched away to fulfill the command.

"...and Davoren?" called Hojo suddenly.

He stopped to peer over his shoulder at the scientist.

"When you find Rufus, kill him too."

No answer. Instead, that last order struck Davoren into what appeared as blank shock: his pink eyes had tensed to a bright gleam, his body so rigid.

"...but...why, Professor?" he asked. His voice sounded dry.

"I've already taken what I need from the boy. He's useless now. Kill him."

For a moment, Davoren plunged into deep thought. Something flashed across his face; an intense emotion which dispersed too fast to be identified.

"....yes, Professor," he muttered.

However, Hojo had not liked that look, much less that awkward pause. It struck Davoren dead on: he suddenly reeled over against a murderous pain in his lungs, so violent he crashed down with a stifled grunt. There he lay convulsing on the debris. His eyes squeezed tight. Both hands clutched his heaving chest.

"What was that?" inquired Hojo in a tone cold enough to shatter ice.

Davoren could barely open one eye. He lay at the scientist's feet, struggling to hold that stern glare while suppressing a fierce coughing fit. Indeed, Hojo's glare alone seemed to pin him under an invisible, brutal force.

"There was resentment," Hojo hissed, "I saw resentment in your eyes, Mr.Davoren...possibly *betrayal*?"

He emphasized the ominous word by pressing fresh pain upon Davoren's ravaged lungs. The man writhed violently.

"..ugh!..y-you know I would..n-never betray you, Sir..," Davoren hacked on his own blood. It hurt him to even speak.

His assurance passed by unanswered.

"It's just...ah!..it's just..I've always b-been ordered to keep the boy alive...for you to suddenly order me to kill him..it..."

Professor Hojo had heard enough. He released Davoren from pain with one scornful kick against the head, which rolled the gunman onto his other side. Davoren's hoarse gasps wheezed through his chest. It took another moment of struggle before the ordeal eased.

"You have your orders. Go," dismissed the scientist.

"..of course..Professor..," gasped Davoren respectfully. He climbed back to his feet. He steadied himself with a good shake of the head, then made his way downhill. Soon, Davoren left.

Hojo found this second reply more to his liking: nothing pleases tyrants more than the full submission of people once themselves in command.

-End of Chp.58

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.59

One word described this situation: ironic. Thirty-one years ago, Vincent's job had been to protect President ShinRa against attackers. Today, just moments ago, he had kidnapped that same President's son.

Vincent never stopped for a breath, not even after that acrobatic escape from the execution. Nor would he stop to hear the dozen of thoughts buzz about his head. For now, he must reach safety.

He had long lost his way inside this desolate labyrinth of ducts and shafts. Nor did he care; Vincent followed whichever path led farther away from the explosion site. He refused to notice his gentle gasps, let alone the fever. Neither were good signs.

Vincent dragged the unconscious boy along as if a potatoe sack. His hard metallic claw was wrapped around Rufus just above the waist, so that his head hung low, and his dead feet trailed behind. He never stirred.

There seemed no end to this balck maze. One path led upon a darker one, with too many side-vents to choose. Indeed, Vincent had his sharp eye-sight to thank. At least he could *see* some path ahead.

He heard frightened rats skitter away to hide. Ghostly creeks and other mysterious sounds echoed like a sigh throughout these filthy, hollow ducts. By pure luck, Vincent at last discovered a small grate. Strained to exhaustion, he dumped the unconscious boy nearby, then slumped himself against the wall opposite the grate. Ribbons of faint light streaked across his face. Soon, his pensive eyes strayed far into deep contemplation.

The last few events had been enlightening, but more frightening than any nightmare. For years until this day, Professor Hojo had slaved for a twisted "experiment": to elevate man to God. Every person here connected in some way to create one ultimate entity, with powers well beyond Sephiroth's.

His next thoughts turned to Rufus. the Professor had pulled this boy half-dead from the wrckage of an explosion, then saved his life. Why? What "key"? How could this young lunatic link everything together?

Then was Rufus really the "guinea pig"? Would Professor Hojo infuse all the different components into this boy's body to prove this insane theory?

Too many questions, not one answer. From Hojo's wily smile, Vincent strongly suspected *more* to this "Genesis Retrial" madness...but what?

At a loss, he turned his meditative gaze down to Rufus.

The unconscious boy lay heaped upon his side, both lifeless hands loosely cast out. His dishevelled hair hung across his wan face. He looked dead.

So THIS is President ShinRa's notorious son, mused Vincent to himself: he had heard a lot about him (nothing good), but had never seen him until now.

He took a moment to indulge his curiosity: Vincent was instantly struck by how little son resembled father. In fact, he could not find one similar trait between them. The boy looked quite young, at most twenty-three. He certainly had a handsome face; a dignified touch of aristocracy, the opposite of a father with vulgar features and uncouth manners.

Yet Vincent cautioned himself not to forget: this young man was still Rufus ShinRa. The same who, in a bid to restore public confidence, has ruthlessly sentenced both Tifa and Barret to death. The same spoilt brat who would not be satisfied unless he had dominated everything and everyone.

President ShinRa's son, once the sole heir to a vast empire, now an insane, degraded prisoner for some experiment, without a shred of memory. What possible significance could this young man bear?

As if answering, Rufus suddenly stirred to consciousness. He winced an eyebrow, then forced one blurry eye half-open. At once, the dull headache pounded his senses. The boy grunted a soft "ugh!" before even attempting to move.

Confusion and fatigue marred his haggard face. Rufus' dizzy sight just happened to stray up, where they immediately froze upon a cool pair of bright red eyes.

It only took Rufus a moment to realize what had just happened; another to spring up at peak alarm. But Vincent was by far the faster: before Rufus could even speak, Vincent pointed his deadly gun straight in the boy's shocked face.

A rigid silence followed. Both gazes fastened on each other, one a crimson glow of stoicism, the latter intense ocean-blue strained by anxiety. Between them, the muzzle gaped only three inches from its mark.

"Don't speak above a whisper," commanded Vincent under his breath.

The boy blinked. He had expected one loud bullet, not this hushed warning. In truth, Vincent had feared the boy might betray this hideout by raising some alarm. But when sure Rufus would "behave", he holstered his gun again with cool composure.

He slumped back against the metallic wall. His pensive eyes withheld the feeble light, already lost amidst fresh thoughts. Vincent's sharp claw lay heaped across one bent knee. His whole demeanour fitted the dismal surroundings perfectly: dark and absorbed within the many shadows.

The mute prisoner beheld his aloof captor from the side in a mixture of dread and anticipation. If possible, he would have probably attempted some escape. Yet something in Vincent's countenance discouraged him. Therefore, Rufus sat slouched on both knees, still rubbing his sore neck.

They seemed to await some event. Their silence was unnatural.

"...so...when are you going to shoot me?" confronted Rufus very, very softly.

Vincent flicked his dispassionate sight to the young prisoner: Rufus awaited his death, with dignified eyes cast far down to his empty lap.

Vincent, however, turned his gaze away again, "I'm not going to shoot you."

Rufus was amazed, "You're not??"

"Not unless you want me to," he couldn't help but reply. The joke, however, lacked any humour.

Another awkward pause followed, during which the boy fidgetted in evident confusion. This abduction made no sense, if his kidnapper would not kill him or at least harm him.

"..then...why did you bring me here?" ventured Rufus, himself edging an inch back. He mistrusted these bleak surroundings, more this dark stranger.

"I apologize for kidnapping you. It was the only way I could think of to escape."

Though silent, Rufus still remained visibly tense, as if doubting that assurance. Nor could Vincent blame him. After all, he had kidnapped him for his own purposes.

Vincent would have added another apology, if only to ease this suspicion, when a vicious pain from his chest suddenly strangled his voice. All at once, poor Vincent recoiled back against such tension, even Rufus was alarmed. But the man stifled every bitter cough by pressing his hand hard over his mouth. His eyes squeezed tight.

"Are you..alright??" asked Rufus confusedly.

"I'm fine," Vincent snapped out the gruff lie.

Hot pain burbled inside his torn lungs. Already, the sour taste of blood clogged his throat. He felt himself suppressing a rageous fever, one that would not remain subdued forever. Luckily however, the attack soon retreated, and Vincent breathed easy again.

Definitely not a good sign, he mused, the fits have started already...that bastard Hojo doesn't waste a minute.

Indeed, Vincent had ventured straight into a lair where his health, perhaps his very sanity, rested in Professor Hojo's claws. He was in that monster's den now. Undoubtedly, the fits and fever would get worse. But still, he would not be thwarted. Come what may, he will not leave here without Aeris.

The mention of her name set his mind adrift for moment: the discovery of her past had just shattered her, nor had Professor Hojo taken pity on that fragile soul. He could still see her sprawled under Hojo's dirty foot, so frightened and helpless. He still heard her pitiful sobs of defeat. The more he dwelt upon her misery, the hotter his fury grew.

Vincent's thoughts broke off when he discerned two eyes scrutinising him from the side. On glancing askance, he caught Rufus' gaze. The alarmed boy, of course, gave a violent start, thinking he might have somehow angered his captor.

"Ah! S-sorry!" he faltered at once, "..it..it's just..I feel I've seen your face before."

Vincent had to discredit the awkward claim; he had never seen this boy until today.

"..just like Davoren..," Rufus mumbled, "When he first came, I thought I had seen his face before..."

Vincent said nothing, though all his attention remained rivetted on this young man alone. In the weak light, he appeared more like a ruby-eyed demon of darkness than a human. Small wonder why Rufus dared not move out of his kidnapper's range. Instead, he waited.

The two men had achieved *some* form of basic trust, enough for Vincent to start an interrogation. Not a cross-examination per say; then again, Rufus was a source of great mystery.

"You seem to know Davoren quite well," began Vincent, "Back there, you appeared very anxious about him. You kept on looking at him."

The boy, at first confused, reflected upon himself until a troubled look clouded his face, "...I don't know that much about him. Davoren's a very strange man...sometimes, he visits me everyday. Other times, he disappears for a long time."

"Has he ever mentioned this 'experiment' to you?"

"No...he's never mentioned it before."

Vincent's keen eyes dug deeper into this timid boy, "Then how did you know the experiment's name? You said it before the Professor did."

"I don't know...it just popped out...I don't know anything about the Professor's work or why he wants me."

Rufus had been quick to guess what this man wanted, and equally plain-spoken to prove he really knew nothing of Hojo's intentions. If anything, he probably knew the least. Yet despite this disappointment, Vincent regarded this young prisoner in much interest.

In return, Rufus fidgetted uncomfortably, too conscious of his own position and that ever watchful scrutiny. Perhaps in his awkwardness, he felt obliged to provide any information to this man.

"The Professor has kept me for a long time. He usually locks me up in my room. But sometimes, he straps me to a machine, and hooks these cold electrodes to my head...right here and here," Rufus indicated opposite ends of his temples, "...it hurts so much. So many things I can't understand whizz around, I think my head will explode."

Rufus struggled amongst a whirlpool of muddled memories, "I stand in a fire..I hear it roaring in my ears, but it's still cold inside. I find myself with strangers...they babble non-stop...and this man follows me. I can never escape him. Davoren says it's just a nightmare, and I shouldn't think about it."

Rufus trailed into a long, sad silence, fraught inside by troublesome thoughts. Vincent beheld this prisoner: how tragically wasted his young face appeared, and such gloom in those blue eyes. He found the boy pleasant enough; not "stone-crazy", maybe "not-all-there".

The mention of the gunman, however, had sparked another interest in Vincent.

"Davoren..he takes care of you then?" he inquired.

The question hid a peculiar meaning, but Rufus failed to understand it. He struggled to organise his many emotions and thoughts together, then cast his melancholy gaze aside.

"...long time ago, I was very sick. I guess it was after that 'explosion'.....my skin and eyes felt like they were burning...and I could never move, not even one finger. My whole body was wrapped in bandages. When I got better, they dumped me in a room. I didn't know where I was. In fact, I couldn't remember anything except my first name."

Anxiety strained his weary eyes. His gentle tone dropped to a fearful whisper of madness, "The fire always burned me, but inside, the cold made me stone-numb. That man sat there looking at me...he'd laugh, walk towards me, or just stare forever..."

Vincent could make nothing of such nonsense, except that perhaps Rufus hallucinated during these "spasm attacks". He recalled one mercenary mention how unruly this lunatic could become, also how Davoren alone could stabilise him again.

No doubt these recollections pained Rufus; his hands trembled with each word, "I couldn't control myself. The guards would give me medicine, but I hated it. So then, they would force it down my throat, beat me senseless, and leave me on the floor. It's okay. I know I deserve it. I'm always causing trouble."

"One night, the fire was burning the whole room, and that man was there too...his ugly voice wouldn't stop screaming through my ears. I thought the guards would come. But that night, Davoren came instead."

His eyes pulled to an intense gleam just at the gunman's name, "He began walking slowly towards me...he was saying something I couldn't understand. I..I didn't know him...and the fire was burning so hot...I got angry. So, I flung my food dish at him to make him leave."

Rufus hesitated. He shuffled against noticeable tension, trying to separate his confused emotions from the vivid memory. He sat huddled up against the wall, legs hugged loosely against his chest. His sad eyes peered into grim nothingness.

"Go on," encouraged Vincent patiently. In truth, this little anecdote had gripped his curiosity by the roots.

"I..I didn't mean to throw it...I just lost control again," Rufus apologized so pitifully to an invisible audience, "The dish struck his head hard, and some food splashed on his face. I thought...he'd hit me like the guards did."

When the pause stretched too long, Vincent asked, "...was he angry?"

"No. Davoren wasn't angry at all. He...smiled at me."

In a life where abuse seemed the norm, no wonder why such a reaction struck the boy's awe. His gaze, though downcast, brimmed with bright wondrousment. Vincent, on the other hand, absorbed each word. His scrutiny remained hard-set on Rufus.

The story continued, "I remember he wrapped me up in his trenchcoat....I didn't have any clothes back then. Davoren sat me down against the dirty wall, and sat next to me. He took off his jacket, then rolled it into a..a..."

"...pillow?" Vincent sought the right word.

Rufus nodded, "He put the pillow on the ground, then made me rest my head there. I lay down, while he sat next to me. He began talking again..no, he was whispering something to me..."

A new hope glimmered: perhaps the gunman had mentioned the experiment after all!

"What did he say?" Vincent demanded at once.

Rufus searched his dim memory by running his fingers back through his dishevelled hair. That same confused look returned, "...I can't remember exactly. I fell asleep while he was talking. I think...it was story....about some dargon and a princess..."

This time, Vincent blinked, struck blank by the most unexpected answer: a....fairy tale?? The gunman had told Rufus a *fairy tale*?

"When I woke up later, Davoren was still there," Rufus' soft voice harboured true fascination, "He had watched over me all night while I slept. He kept the fire and that man away."

"The next day, he got me these clothes. Sometimes, he even brings me good food. He never gives it to the guards, only me. And Davoren...he always makes the pain in my head stop."

"I felt I had seen him before...I asked him who he was...he told me his name was just 'Davoren'. He said he had to take care of me, because I was still sick, and the Professor needed me."

A heavy silence befell the conclusion. Rufus sank into his same gloomy dejection. Vincent was left alone to ponder the anecdote. At first, random thoughts collided against each other. But the longer he churned them about, the deeper he plunged into meditation.

Something sounded wrong here: this was *Davoren*, the heartless monster who spared nothing or no one to please his master. How could he exist as this paradox? Two extremes of a personality, one side brutal, cunning, sadistically insane, and the other side...

But the innocent simplicity of the story struck Vincent the hardest: it sounded like a little child had had some frightening nightmare. The parent would then appear to sooth the distraught child, and lull him back to sleep (with a fairy tale no less!). Just the comfort of having someone nearby, just the sound of a gentle voice instead of brash insults dispersed all fear.

Impossible! Davoren could never behave thus! Not that demon who had dogged poor Aeris non-stop, or schemed every artful trick to kill Vincent. It just wasn't possible.

"Then Davoren is very...*kind* to you," Vincent observed with such significance. His crimson eyes narrowed down on the confused boy.

"..I...I don't know..," faltered Rufus, unsure how to answer that tone, ".he's not like the guards. He never hits me, or gets angry at me, even when he should. He's just...strange."

Rather than accept that vague explanation, Vincent searched for another in the boy's befuddled expression. He found nothing. It seemed even Rufus himself knew not what to make of Davoren.

"But just now...Davoren was so different. I've never seen him like that before," muttered Rufus as a deeply perturbed look overcast his face, "His eyes...they weren't the same. They were...empty."

Another perplexing enigma to ponder: the gunman wore two masks. One evil for the entire world to fear; the other.. "kind" for this boy alone to see. But underneath it all, which was the real gunman?

The image of Davoren conjured up in Vincent's mind. Those graceful, pure-white hair strands dangling before a stoic visage. Cold pink eyes gazing back, those of a ruthless killer, revelling the sight of blood above all else.

The stark contrast would boggle any mind when compared against the old Davoren, with dark chestnut hair. Such warmth in that smile. So much kindness radiated through his gentle honey-coloured eyes, enough to disarm any mistrust or suspicion.

Yes. Rufus had pin-pointed the true difference between these two versions of Davoren: the eyes. One pair lacked emotion. No anger, no pain, no regret, no compassion.... "empty".

At a loss, Vincent returned to Rufus. Instead of finding answers, the boy had left him with more questions.

"Come on," commanded Vincent at last.

"Eh?" blinked Rufus confoundedly, "W-where are we...?"

Vincent shifted to move away, "Your two friends are very worried about you. I have to return you to them."

Rufus fidgetted in evident discomfort. Obviously, he hadn't liked that idea.

"You can trust them," assured Vincent, "They'd never harm you. They only came here to help you, Rufus."

He thought it strange he would address the boy by his first name instead of his formal title. In any case, Vincent patiently waited for him to follow.

"...Mr. Vincent?" muttered Rufus after some hesitation, "..do you know Davoren?"

Vincent paused before admitting, "Yes, I do."

"..you...you're going to kill him, aren't you?"

A dead silence filled the air. In truth, Vincent found himself unable to answer, which aroused his discomfort.

Each man beheld the other, that question hanging bare in between them. The boy gazed at Vincent unafraid, but tense under anticipation.

Their mutual hostility was known to all, yet Vincent had to admire the boy for sensing it to its barest core. Rufus truly knew how deep this enmity went: down to the simple, beast-like instinct to kill the other.

"Kill the other"...it seemed the only solution now. Davoren had taken too much, Vincent had resisted too long. If they met tonight, both men would plunge into a bloodbath. One would die, the other triumph. Simple.

But why, as he beheld those ocean-blue eyes, so intently set on him, Vincent felt an ominous feeling creep up?

He turned away from both his contemplation and the boy. Without a word, Vincent crawled down the stuffy air duct. The mute Rufus never pursued an answer, but obediently followed close behind. Soon, darkness engulfed their path again.

-End of Chp.59

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.60

It took a long time before they found an exit out of this labyrinth. The grim path had led them up further, growing more narrow until they had to crawl on their stomachs. At last, Vincent discovered a tiny side-vent, which ultimately ended at some overhead grate. He easily lifted it.

Vincent first climbed out, then helped Rufus, who eyed the dismal surroundings in great uneasiness. They found themselves over some wide bridge. It overlooked a complex network of platforms and pipes down below. In the far distance, the faint rumble of machines hummed through the bitter cold air.

After some deliberation, Vincent signalled for Rufus to follow. They pursued the path down the empty bridge, through a bleak entrance up a flight of steps. Vincent marched heedless to their own loud footsteps. However, his senses were heightened to full attentiveness. In truth, he mistrusted this silence.

The entrance opened upon a wrecked storage hall, so large the brick walls reached far into obscurity high, high above. Black shadows hung everywhere. All around, wretched cargo boxes and rusted shipping containers littered the hall. Where once rich materia had filled their bellies, now they lay empty, carelessly heaped up in sad neglect.

Vincent checked on Rufus before venturing forward into the ghostly hall. The dreaded silence seemed to grow heavier the further they walked, the darkness more insidious. Nevertheless, the two men wandered down the complex path. Many times, Vincent would choose between forking ways, or gracefully hop over crates, followed behind by Rufus.

Neither man had spoken since that rather unfruitful interrogation. Rufus never protested whichever path his kidnapper pursued, but just made sure he didn't lag too far behind. Nor cared Vincent to revive any conversation. He had plunged into morose meditation.

However, his attention suddenly sharpened on discerning some unnatural movement nearby. He suspected the worse: Davoren.

With uncanny swiftness, he shoved both himself and the boy against one huge cargo crate, pressing his claw against Rufus' chest to keep him in place. Rufus was certainly perplexed; he hadn't heard anything.

He observed Vincent unholster his gun, then draw it close, prepping it for any action. His face from the side expressed such sternness, all his keen hearing focussed on the still air.

They seemed to linger an eternity.

Vincent sensed an unknown presence creep alarmingly close; so close he held his breath under tense anticipation. He left Rufus safe behind to edge nearer, black gun ever rigid within his grip. Whoever it was, he would confront him.

Vincent only waited another second before suddenly leaping around the corner to fire. But he stopped short at once. Much to his great surprise, he found himself pointing his deadly weapon straight at a very astonished Reno, who similarly, had drawn out his nightstaff.

"Ah! Vincent!!" cried Reno in shock.

Rufus trotted up from behind the crate onto the scene. Rude also soon made his appearance. Rather than answer, Vincent holstered his gun with mild exasperation. It had been a false alarm, but at least they had found each other quickly.

The reunion would have sailed far more smoothly had Reno suppressed his sudden rage. It flared up the instant Vincent withdrew his gun, whereby he struck the nightstaff smack upon the man's head, if only to release his fury. It hit him so hard, poor stunned Vincent staggered one step back. Needless to say, both Rufus and Rude were shocked.

"You pasty-faced, freak-assed bastard!!" snarled Reno under seething anger, "What the hell were you THINKING back there?!"

Obviously, he meant Vincent's last adventure. Vincent wasn't hurt by the dull blow as much as irritated by this man, "I understand your anger, but please realize I had no other choice of escape."

"Like shit! You nearly killed us with that crazy stunt of yours! And you kidnapped Rufus! Damn you! I thought you were gonna suck his blood or something!!"

Vincent frowned, but since he saw it useless to argue, remained resentfully silent.

"C'mere!" Reno roughly yanked Rufus away. He asked the boy concerning his kidnapper, "He didn't try something weird, like make ya show him your neck, did he?"

The confounded boy only blinked back in confusion. Vincent's frown darkened further: he didn't enjoy these crude vampire jokes one bit.

"Hey, Reno. Just relax," pleaded Rude, most anxious to diffuse the tension, "He saved our lives, remember? At least we're all okay and the President's safe."

The man reflected a moment: True. Vincent has rescued them from *two* executions, and returned the boy unharmed. Perhaps hitting him hadn't been the best way to show gratitude.

"Yeah, whatever!" Reno dismissed as his way of thanks and apology (he hated guilt-trips). He then tossed his head aside.

While Vincent had effectively occupied those guards, these two ex-Turks had had enough opportunity to flee the scene, at least before the explosion. Afterwards, both men had snuck around like two cautious thieves, hoping to find their young President before another enemy found them. Luck had brought them to this storage hall, where the not so joyous reunion had taken place.

"Tsh! But this is as far as I go! I've had enough loony-business," Reno motioned towards his friend, "C'mon! We're outta this madhouse."

Their objective had been to investigate this secret laboratory, more specifically, Rufus ShinRa. Though events had taken them by storm, Reno saw no purpose in getting involved any further. Therefore, he turned away to leave.

"Wait," called Vincent's cool voice after him.

Reno halted. He threw a contemptuous look behind, "What now?"

"I still need to ask this boy something. It concerns the experiment."

Reno faced Vincent again, this time suspicion too evident on his lean expression. In return, Vincent maintained a cool, business-like visage. Behind, Rude lingered in uneasiness, with Rufus safe close by.

The boy said nothing, although his tense demeanour showed clearly how he hated to be questioned again.

Reno glanced aside at the mute boy, then back to Vincent, "He's the guinea pig for that screwball Hojo. What more do ya need to know?"

Vincent's calm voice dropped to an ominous mutter, "That is only one possibility. There could be others."

Indeed, while Professor Hojo had not denied he would use Rufus as the test subject, he had not confirmed it either. Reno thought a moment, seeking silent help from his friend behind. Yet Rude himself could make nothing of this complicated matter.

"You think Rufus is connected to this experiment in another way?" Rude asked Vincent at last.

"I don't know. He told me Professor Hojo often strapped him to some machine, and hooked electrodes to his head."

Both ex-Turks were solemnly silent.

"Rufus, are you **certain** you know nothing of 'Genesis Retrial'?" confronted Vincent squarely. Inside, he still hoped for some answer.

The anxious boy faltered, "...I don't know anything.."

"And no one has ever mentioned it to you? The guards, or perhaps Davoren?" interjected Rude quite earnestly.

"..n-no..I.."

"Then why would Professor Hojo need you so badly?" Vincent mumbled the tiresome question more to himself than anyone.

Rufus felt uncomfortable under everyone's gaze, especially this tall, dark man. His bitter blue eyes remained downcast, strained under very intense emotions.

"And how could the experiment's name simply 'pop out'?" Vincent hammered regardless, "You must have somehow known it before, at least heard of it."

Rufus' expression began to crumble. A painful gleam tensed his sad eyes.

"...maybe professor Hojo once spoke of it while you were.."

"....materia..."

"What?"

"I don't know! I don't know anything!!" Rufus exploded in a rageous passion, so sudden it caught everyone off guard. Immediately, Rufus clutched his head against a surge of violent headaches. He lost balance with a stifled grunt.

The spasm attack aroused everyone's alarm, yet Rude reacted first. He caught the lunatic just as he collapsed to his knees. The tempest inside flustered poor Rufus to painful madness. Both ex-Turks had crouched down by him, Rude for support, Reno to calm him.

"W-when the fire burns me, so many things flash by," Rufus squeezed out through wretched agony, "Faces...voices...but I can't understand anything! It's like...I'm living another life, and watching myself at the same time! Aah!!"

The young madman writhed aside, "I tell m-myself 'That's not me!', but inside, I know it is! That name 'Genesis Retrieval' ...it just drills into my head!..written jargon...words...pictures! But I can't understand that! I don't know what t-the Professor.."

"Whoa! Easy now!" cried Reno above this insane rave, supporting the boy's head in his own hands for comfort, "No one's blaming you here. If ya don't know, that's okay! That's okay!"

"Please Sir, just calm down," begged the much anxious Rude.

Vincent had made little sense of that outburst. Internally, he berated himself for pressing Rufus too hard for answers. Therefore, he had backed off. All this time, he had beheld the pitiful sight: for one so young and ruined to suffer further against such raw pain.

Luckily, the spasm fit diffused soon enough. Rude remained crouched down by the boy, trying his utmost to soothe his distress. He himself was awkward, but effective enough to calm Rufus to a reasonable level again.

When the storm had abated, Vincent called, "...Mr.Reno?"

Reno looked towards him, then stood up.

"The boy is on a machine named a 'brain scanner'. What is that?"

He guessed this mysterious machine bore no good; Reno's quizzical face darkened to a pensive frown. His whole demeanour turned quite serious as he folded his arms across his chest.

"Alright," he sighed, "Y'know, being a Turk means you gotta interrogate people sometimes. Once in a while, you get this really resistant bastard who won't talk, no matter *what*."

Though silent, Vincent nodded his head in perfect understanding.

"This 'brain scanner' is super-new technology invented by the Science Department back in ShinRa Inc.. It's this special machine that scans through a person's mind for information."

"It sends powerful neuro-electrical impulses...programmed to locate any specific information. They implant a tiny device in the person's brain. This acts as the impulse-centre."

"And then you hook up the electrodes?" Vincent asked, his eyes alit by keen interest.

"Yup. Basically, it digs into the brain. The info gets sent through the electrodes to be displayed on the machine's screen."

Reno's expression turned sour as he muttered aside, "...kinda scary, if ya ask me. The company controlled everything. They could even scour your own brain if they wanted."

Vincent had to marvel at such "scary" advancements. Technology had certainly gone a long way since he last worked for ShinRa Inc..

"But the impulse-centre itself causes a problem," added Reno, "The victim gets killer headaches and radical mood swings. Some can get pretty violent. The higher the scan level, the more intense and frequent the attacks."

Vincent made the grim connection, "Then that would explain his spasm fits. It's the result of the scanner."

"...yeah..."

For one silent moment, each man was left to ponder this discovery. Vincent studied the boy, who still sat miserably slouched on the floor. He struck such a sad appearance.

"But why would Professor Hojo do that?" wondered Rude outloud, "...for 'information'?"

A very good question.

"Perhaps...the boy knows something Professor Hojo needs," Vincent hypothesized after some deep deliberation.

"Like what? Rufus isn't a scientist!" snapped Reno, not at Vincent, but at this frustration, "Oh sure, he's got more smarts than his old man. And y'know, he *did* understand a lot about Mako Engineering and Reactor technology, but not heavy science stuff."

It sounded reasonable. As an important ShinRa executive and future president, Rufus would understand such relevant subjects. But that did not answer the question: what possible significance bore this boy to "Genesis Retrial"?

And why had he mentioned the word "materia"?

Their baffled scrutiny fell back to this riddle. In return, Rufus sat silently on the ground, tired and twice as wretched. He had heard their discussion until his eyes sunk in bitter shame; even he himself knew no explanation.

"This is waaay over my head," Reno vexedly scoffed the tension aside, "Get up, Rude. let's leave before things get any crazier."

However, Rude hesitated to rise, "What about...Rufus?"

Reno paused. His thoughtful eyes, of a keen sea-green colour, lingered over the boy for a rather tense moment. Rufus stared back at a loss.

"Aw, heck with it! The kid comes with us," came the decision loud and clear, "We'll figure out what to do later."

"Ah??" started Rufus confusedly, "B-but...I..I don't.."

"What, you rather stay here and get screwed up in some experiment?"

"No...it's just..."

"Listen," Reno cut short any further protests. His tone, however, contained a strange apologetic gentleness, "I know you don't remember us. It's been one shock after another for you. I know I've been a...jerk," he had trouble forcing the word out, "..dragging you around then slapping you. But you gotta trust us on this one, kid. We did not come here to hurt you. We just wanna get you outta here. Alright?"

The language had been plain, but the sentiments quite sincere. Rufus reflected upon his own thoughts: Vincent had assured him the same thing about these two men; Reno had been clearly worried when he was kidnapped; and Rude still sat crouched by his side in concern.

Finally, Rufus gathered himself back to his own feet again (with Rude's help, of course), then nodded his head in consent. He'd grant these two men some trust.

"okay," smiled Reno at this success, "Now that we're all cool on that, let's see how- HEY! Vinnie!!"

The alarmed cry came just as Reno suddenly noticed the man march away from the scene, morose as ever aloof.

"Take the boy and leave quickly," Vincent warned tonelessly, "I suspect Davoren is on the hunt for us."

"But...where the hell are YOU going?!" That ain't the.."

"I am not leaving yet."

The stern curtness of his answer took both ex-Turks by surprise. They could not believe their ears.

Rufus had been returned. That task now done, Vincent resumed his main objective: retrieving Aeris. He ventured onwards, undaunted by the darkness of whatever may lurk within its bleak territory.

"Y-you're going back THERE?!! You're nuts!!" cried Reno after him.

Even so, he continued his path.

Reno's anger sparked at such stubbornness, "Man, give it up! Whoever's paying ya to get that girl, it ain't worth it!! She's not even *real*!!"

The word "real" struck a violent chord in Vincent's heart. This time, he stopped dead, but did not turn around. His tall figure from behind was rigid in place, cool with deadly poise.

Was that it? Reno thought he had been hired, like some low-life mercenary, to retrieve this girl?

"Look, I understand what you're trying to do here," Reno reasoned out, "But you gotta look at reality. That girl ain't real. She's a copy of another person. There is a psycho back there with the words 'mad scientist' tattooed on his forehead. If he sees you, he will rip ya to shreds! No money is worth that! Just get out while the getting's good."

"If Rufus ShinRA had been a clone, would you have left him here?" retorted Vincent's dry voice. He flashed a hard glare behind at Reno, the crimson ablaze with scorn. His face was cold.

Reno found himself effectively silenced by the blunt question. He fidgetted, perhaps a bit ashamed of himself. Nevertheless, Vincent saw his answer: Even if this boy had been a clone, Reno would have still taken him in. Only NOW did he truly understand Vincent's point.

Yet the thought lingered around Vincent's mind: there was a cruel truth to Reno's words. This was not "Aeris", but a copy misbegotten from some machine. Why should he risk his life to retrieve her, when it would be easier to just walk away?

A copy...a clone...what a disgusting word, as if all her humanity had been stripped away. She had no name, only some specimen code; no past, only a detailed scientific report of her creation. Why throw away his life for a clone? It wasn't Aeris.

No. It wasn't Aeris. It wasn't Aeris who had tenderly nursed him while he raved between delirium and nightmares. Nor was it Aeris who, simple as she was, strove her best to uplift him whenever dejected. No. Not the one whose face he had touched in the rain. Not the girl he had embraced in his warm bed that cold, black night; or whose prophetic air still fascinated him as they sat at those snow fields...when she refused to believe he was a monster.

All those vivid memories floated by: Aeris had no part in them. It was her clone.

So what now? Walk away? Shrug it off, discard her tearful face and frightened sobs...just dump it all in the past and *abandon* her?

Damned if he'd commit the same horrid sin twice! He had sworn he'd never let anyone harm her, not while he still breathed and blood flowed through his veins.

Nor did he care about her past. He'd still risk his life against all odds to get her back.

He had wasted enough precious time already. Between returning the boy and dabbling in discussions, Vincent feared the worst for poor Aeris. She couldn't run forever from Professor Hojo, much less defend herself. In any case, he must hurry. Therefore, without even a farewell, Vincent left the group behind, and resumed his path.

"Tsk! More stubborn than a mule, even in your old age, eh Vincent?" suddenly mocked a playful voice from no where.

Vincent stopped short, feeling hot hatred stiffen every muscle. All at once, he sensed that familiar aura reek its evil from high above, those eyes so maliciously pink. He swung around, and shot his sight far up to the source.

Both ex-Turks similarly cast their apprehensive eyes high up, dreading what they would find there. Rufus, the most anxious of all, darted his tense eyes far up into the darkness above. His face expressed such perturbation.

"..it's that Davoren guy...", muttered Rude fearfully.

"..crap. He's already found us," cursed Reno beneath his breath.

Events had just taken a most serious turn. Indeed, the ruthless gunman stood tall, poised like a demon above a beam-joist far above against a black background. All his focus rested on Vincent alone, whereby his lips contorted into a vicious smile.

He had found them at last.

-End of Chp.60

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.61

The two enemies stood poised against each other, between them a height of cool defiance and mutual hatred. From his place high above, Davoren remained erect, one hand impertinently propped against his waist. Vincent held his ground down below. His sharp claw hung by his side, clenched into a tight fist.

The gunman sensed the rising hostility his sheer presence provoked. It filled him with cruel pleasure.

"I guess it's time we settled the score, my friend," he sneered aloud, "No holding back or sneaky tricks. Just your gun against mine."

Vincent made no response except narrow his eyes until they gleamed harsh crimson beneath knit brows. Deep hatred soared under that cold, marble-hard visage.

Yes. Time to end this madness for good. He had won one round, Davoren another, the third would finish it. And if Vincent wanted Aeris, he'd have to kill his way through Davoren; cast him back to the grim past where he belonged...a corpse in a ravaged apple orchard.

For a brief instant, Vincent recalled the boy's plain question "You're going to kill him, aren't you?"; that and his searching, deep-blue eyes. But he shook them both off at once.

If I must kill Davoren again, then so be it! Vincent argued fiercely inside himself, it will never end until one of us kills the other!

If that were so, why feel such discomfort everytime those eyes struck his memory? There had been a strange swirl of emotions in their tense blueness; had the boy actually anticipated the outcome of the bloodbath?

Kill Davoren or be killed..."kill"...

Thirty-one years ago, Vincent would have laid down his life for this man. He had been his best friend, his leader, and always the better man. And he knew Davoren had never hesitated to give all he could for Vincent, not just warm friendship, but protection and support too.

Now, Mysterious Fate had weaved a complex web of events, where each man pointed his gun at the other, hatred their sole fuel. Only blood would end the war.

Is that how Vincent wanted it?

Again, he dispelled these troublesome thoughts away. He couldn't afford to doubt himself now, not with poor Aeris at stake. It was too late for regrets; too late to dwell over things past and long dead. The present pressed itself so urgently upon the moment.

Then there was no other way except death. Either he killed Davoren, or died in the process.

His stern attention returned to that devillish figure perched high above. He looked those pink eyes straight, which seemed to glow all the more evilly. Davoren too knew it would end tonight.

A stiff silence oppressed the cold air, the two ex-Turks perhaps most aware of it. Indeed, their situation had just turned quite grim. Out of keen mistrust, Reno had gripped his nightstaff into the open. Rude, though apprehensive, nevertheless has assumed a hard front. Neither man lowered his guard for a moment.

It seemed Rufus alone bore no hostility for that man everyone else hated. Instead, he stood in plain view, head twisted up to behold Davoren up there. Clear anxiety strained his face, as if searching in vain for some explanation. However, he too dared not speak. His gaze, his whole concern, rested on Davoren; something the gunman seemed to purposely shun. He never looked at Rufus.

"You'd be delighted to know, gentlemen, the Professor has kindly granted me permission to kill you all," Davoren drew one hand over his face, so that his eyes peered like pink jewels through the fingers. His grin curled further to reveal a brutal madness, "Hehee...so much blood to spill...all in one night!"

The words belonged to a demon crazed by blood-lust, his gaze unnaturally bright, his aura too malicious to grasp. Vincent only uttered a scoff under his breath. He knew where Davoren's derangement would lead.

However, the tension grew too much for Reno. He would not be intimidated.

"Huh! Dunno what the hell you're yapping about," he rebuffed upwards, "But damned if I get done in by a freak like YOU....y'ol phony-faced albino geezer!!"

Not at all ruffled, Davoren squatted down upon the beam.

"And what will you do, pray tell?" he mocked, amused by this man's spunk, "Hit me with your magic wand?"

One thing Reno never tolerated was any insult to his prized nightstaff. His grip tightened on the weapon, but he suppressed his outrage down to a hateful scowl.

"But honestly!" declared Davoren in feigned indignation, "You youngsters sure lack proper respect for your elders!"

His tone, his whole demeanour, suddenly dropped to cold ruthlessness, "Maybe I should kill the boy first just for show. He's the easiest target out of you lot."

Rufus was struck blank by that venomous tone, Davoren's unemotional face, and that stark threat. Anxiety and wide disbelief clouded his eyes. But still, the gunman wouldn't even look at him.

The threat had aroused a keen anger in both ex-Turks, which Rude acted upon at once. He effectively yanked Rufus behind, making his own challenge clear for Davoren to hear, "Screw you. The only way you get this kid is through *me*."

He spoke for himself and his friend. Both men glared at the gunman, who wasn't the least bit impressed by their valour. Rufus stood safe behind, lost amidst his entangled thoughts and this disturbing scene. His anxious gaze never wavered off Davoren.

Vincent remained firm as ever in his spot, anticipating whatever may come next. One thing struck his sharp notice: Davoren had threatened to kill the boy, which meant Rufus was no longer needed anymore, at least not alive. Wasn't he the guinea pig? If not, then what?

At last, the gunman erected himself up again. He then strolled along the beam-joint, casually sweeping his fingers back through his fine white hair. A weak, smug smile crossed his lips.

"Well, not to worry, my good Sir," he remarked knowingly, "All in its own good time."

Vincent started when he suddenly noticed Davoren's other hand slip something out of his side-pocket. He recognized it too well: another time bomb.

He hadn't enough time to even shout a warning. Between the second it took Vincent to understand and act, Davoren hurtled the explosive device straight down upon the alarmed company. They scattered out at once: Vincent and Rude one direction, Reno shoving the astonished boy away into another.

No sooner had the bomb hit the floor than one thunderous explosion rocked the entire hall top to bottom. The sheer force sent all four men tumbling amidst blasted crates and wild shrapnel, their senses lost to the raucous chaos. Vincent felt the ground beneath crack wide open. Soon, he was plunging down...down into a black abyss.

Hazy consciousness stirred again. Slowly, Vincent forced his eyes open, gathering his dazed senses before even attempting to move. At first, he could see nothing. But as his keen eyes adjusted, he discovered himself in some bleak cavern of pipes. He lay sprawled back upon a jagged hill of wrecked crates and stone rubble.

It took him a moment to recall what events had dumped him here. He guessed the violent explosion had destroyed the floor, whereby he and this debris had crashed down here to the lower levels. Indeed, on looking up, Vincent spied a hole gape wide through the grey stone ceiling. He had fallen a great height, then lost consciousness, probably just for a few minutes.

He slid off the garbage hill, heedless to the dozen of aches and pains in each limb. Vincent then struggled back onto his feet. As he shook off this dizziness, he discerned stiff movements rattle beneath the rubble. Soon, Reno crawled out, choking on dust between stifled grunts. Of course, Vincent helped the man stand up.

Rude emerged next, having suffered a terrible gash in one arm, but still stern-faced. He shoved aside one giant cargo box off himself, then climbed to his feet again.

Their eyes searched around for Rufus. On spotting a pitiful hand outstretched through the garbage, all three men dug away until Rude forcefully dragged out a coughing Rufus.

"Y-you alright?" asked Reno, himself still dizzied by the blast.

"..I..think so...," wheezed the boy. He remained hunched over on the ground, encouraged by Rude to steady his breaths.

All in all though, they seemed to have managed well. They were all here and alive. No one had sustained any serious injuries; even Rude bore his own wound without complaint. Once Rufus had calmed again, he was helped to his feet. Though still a bit feeble, he stood unsupported and unharmed.

They beheld the dismal surroundings. The silence stretched into one painfully long minute.

"Where are we?" muttered Rude ominously.

"The main delivery centre," whispered Vincent, "It's directly above the reservoir pools and compressor tanks."

Darkness and cold hung like a disease throughout this dank dump. It extended into an endless labyrinth of pipes, gaskets, and ducts; a huge jungle of metal and wire. Dead cables hung loose. Tiny icicles or

green mould festooned the overhead metal-work. There were cracks and dents amidst the network, filth and misery in every quarter.

No doubt this place had once been prosperous. Many tanks had hummed the sweet song of fresh Mako, pumping green life up those metal veins. Now, one could only wonder at such devastation. Time had reduced it to a rusted playground for lost ghosts and rats to wander about.

But there permeated a sinister aura throughout its air. It surrounded them; it grew more odious the longer they waited.

Vincent stood keenly aware of this dreadful presentiment. His suspicious eyes darted side to side; his ears were pricked up to full alertness. Similarly, the two men glared around. Poor Rufus fidgetted in this mistrustful atmosphere.

"He's here, right?" Reno breathed aside to Vincent.

"Yes."

"Shit," he cursed more softly. This quiet tension made his blood curdle.

Somewhere within these deep jungles, the hunter lay in patient wait for his prey. Vincent had to praise Davoren's clever tactfulness: he had dropped them into this complex cavern. Chances were, Davoren knew the territory far better than any of them. Plus, here he had plenty of shelter and dark places to hide. The ideal battle ground for any intelligent gunman.

Vincent noticed Reno venture past him towards the ghostly jungle. His nightstaff was gripped tight, ready for any action.

"You won't be able to fight him," stated Vincent, like a sage warning a rash youth.

Reno stopped, then confronted the composed man, "Well, it ain't like I can just ASK him to let us leave!"

"Davoren can raise his resistance to full invincibility. No attack, no matter how powerful, will affect him. He won't even feel it."

For a moment, Reno was dumbstruck by the news, so much he dropped his charged weapon to the side. Rude grew more discomforted by their hopeless situation.

"Does he have a weak spot?" demanded Reno.

"He has none."

"C'mon! He's gotta have SOME weakness!"

For some reason, Vincent glanced at the nervous boy, but quietly repeated, "He has none."

"Tsh! You really know how to pick your enemies, don't ya Red-eyes," he scoffed. They were in one tight corner.

Vincent ignored the crude comment. Instead, his mind churned a dozen thoughts to formulate a plan. But how could one defeat such a person, one with such cunning intellect and incredible resistance?

The awkward pause endured an eternity until at last, Vincent said, "However, there is one fault in Davoren's abnormality. He can only maintain his invincibility for fifteen minutes."

Both ex-Turks grasped this valuable piece of information with keen interest.

"If we can somehow *force* him to exceed the time limit, the level will crumble. Only then will we stand a better chance against him."

Reno, on noticing Vincent address him in particular, recoiled a step back, "Hey! Whoa there! 'We'? As in you 'n me? You wanna team up?!"

"I am open to better suggestions if you have any to offer," challenged Vincent calmly but contemptuously. He didn't like the idea either, but circumstances dictated the terms.

Reno silently consulted his friend with a meaningful glance: not too long ago, Vincent had been considered an enemy; he had already tricked them once and kidnapped the boy, nor did he seem that fond of them (especially Reno). However, Rude, who luckily had a cooler head, nodded his head in agreement. An alliance was their best option.

"...so what do we do?" Reno asked his new ally sarcastically, "Ask he please stand still while we bash him for fifteen minutes?"

Vincent paused, if only to organise this final thoughts together. He asked, rather oddly, "Are you fast?"

"Huh? Well...", Reno scratched his head, "Not as quick as you, of course, but I'm fast enough. Why?"

The plan was uttered as a hushed, important secret, "We'll alternate our attack modes on Davoren between offense and defense. Each time one attacks, the other defends, and then we switch the pattern. It must be quick and smooth, but irregular. Our best hope is to confuse him off his guard."

Reno said nothing, though his bright eyes not only showed he understood the plan, but liked it too.

"You are at a better advantage than I am. Davoren's never seen you before; he doesn't know how you fight. So, it'll be harder for him to fight you."

"...yeah. I get'cha," agreed the man.

Indeed, Davoren depended on guns, not close combat, and certainly not electricity attacks. Perhaps hope glimmered after all.

The plan was set, the battle ground ready. All that remained was to act.

"So we gotta keep this up for fifteen minutes, huh?" confirmed Reno, ready to move out.

Vincent nodded, "We'll have to hit hard enough to force him to use his invincibility. If we keep it up without giving him a chance to rebuild, he..."

"NO!!!" suddenly interrupted a tense voice.

All sight turned to Rufus, who hitherto had listened to their scheme with growing horror. He now stood rigid in his place, a most anxious turmoil upon his pallid face, especially those stormy blue eyes.

"Y-you can't kill Davoren!" he cried outloud in a passion, "Davoren isn't like this!! He doesn't know how to fight or use a gun!"

How could one argue against such ignorance? Vincent folded his arms coldly, then stood aloof from this scene, passively watching Reno handle this predicament. He would not enter any argument with this boy.

"If we don't kill this guy, he'll kill us!" Reno rebuffed impatiently, "He'll kill YOU!!"

"But he's my friend! It's impossible! this can't.."

"Wake up and smell the coffee beans, idiot!! Your 'friend' is a trigger-happy homicidal maniac!! He may have looked after you for a while, but he doesn't care a fig about you! He only cares about serving the Professor!"

"No!!" Rufus angrily shook his head to deny every word, "You can't make me beleive that!! That's not the Davoren *I* know! He.."

"Oh! So now you're telling me he's got some 'multiple personality' thing too?" snapped Reno at peak sarcasm, so cutting Rude almost interfered, "It's in his damn eyes!! He's a killer and loving it!!"

He turned to his bald friend, "Rude, take care of the kid. Hide somewhere safe," Reno then tapped his nightstaff against Rufus' chest for exrta emphasis, "And YOU! Stay clear, understand?"

"But.."

"That's not negotiable!!"

They had wasted enough time of this useless argument. Deafeated, Rufus dropped his bitter glare to the ground, clenching his bare fists under supressed silence. He kept all his emotions in check. Reno broke away in clear annoyance. He had obviously hated to be so harsh, especially after he had just earned Rufus' trust. But between that and the boy's safety, he chose the latter.

Vincent had observed the tense scene all throughout. Internally, he agreed with Reno's decision to keep Rufus out of danger. He could trace a profound 'Turk Loyalty' in these two men, even though Rufus no longer held them in command. In fact, the irony was that they commanded the boy now.

The two ex-Turks separated quickly. After final consultation, Rude led Rufus away in quest for a good hiding place. Reno cranked his nightstaff to full charge, then solemnly turned to Vincent: was he ready?

Vincent nodded. He pulled out his loaded black gun, then motioned towards the grim, bleak jungle. It was time.

Soon, the new-founded allies ventured forth, like two cats exploring new terrain. But inside his own mind, Vincent could still see those tense blue eyes gaze at him, with Rufus's quiet voice ask so simply, "You're going to kill him, aren't you?"

-End of Chp.61

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.62

The labyrinth was far bigger, more eerie than Vincent had expected, so much like a barren graveyard. Paths intertwined into grim darkness. Pipes thronged the hallways; some formed arborescences, others snaked along the brick walls. There were rusty gauges and empty gaskets; neglected control panels and moulded clamps. Vines of writhed cable lines hung loose. Amidst such desolation, the ghosts of misery haunted their ruined territory. Their melancholy sighs echoed throughout these hollow halls before silence stifled them again. A bitter coldness stung the dank air, the atmosphere too sinister to ignore.

Somewhere within this shadow-infested jungle, the gunman lay in wait.

The two stealthy men crept cautiously alongside opposite walls of the hallway. They never glanced at each other, nor had they uttered a word since venturing inside. The air was too quiet. Even their soft footsteps sounded loud against this stiff background.

Vincent snuck along, slightly stooped over with gun in hand, and senses wary of every movement around. Reno kept up the pace. His nightstick was gripped tight between steady hands. Like Vincent, he felt too conscious of their situation.

The slow minutes dragged by. Their path led around more black corners, through darker territory, but no gunman. At times, it seemed uncertain which side hunted and which was being hunted.

Perhaps in an attempt to dispense his paranoia, Reno muttered aside, "So clue me in here. Your assets are speed and sharp-shooting. What about Davoren?"

Vincent mused the question, then replied, "He is physically stronger than I am, but a bit slower. His main specialties are battle tactics and enemy-analysis."

"THAT old-timer?!"

"You'd be very wise not to underestimate Davoren," he warned significantly, glaring askance at Reno, "Regardless of his age, he is quite sharp and dangerous. He was my leader when I had been a Turk."

"Ah! I *thought* you two had a 'Turk streak' to ya!" exclaimed the man now that his suspicion had been confirmed, "The way you can sneak around undetected...the way he obeys the Professor...it takes a Turk to know a Turk."

They fell silent again. The journey extended further through this dark maze, but still no gunman. Their tension had long turned to dread. Indeed, this hunt strained their nerves to near break-down.

"So, you fought this guy before?" resumed Reno.

"Yes. Twice."

"And?"

"Let's just say I consider myself lucky to have survived both encounters."

"...beat the shit outta ya, huh?"

"To put it mildly, yes," Vincent admitted, not at all offended by the crude paraphrase.

Reno scoffed a soft curse, "I still can't believe Rufus was just defending that bastard, even after he threatened him...the kid's a loony alright."

Rather than comment, Vincent strayed a moment into private meditation: yes, the boy had fireceely defended the gunman despite that vicious threat. From his view, Davoren was the sole source of warmth and protection he possessed in this nightmare. To everyone else, he was Professor Hojo's lowly puppet-slave. Vincent didn't think the boy "loony". Far from it, the longer he dwelt upon Rufus and his anecdotes, the deeper sunk his intrigue with the gunman.

Davoren...you are a mystery. You exist as a paradox, shifting between two extremes. But behind those pink eyes, what do you really hide?

Suddenly, Vincent alarm shot peak high, whereby he halted dead in his tracks: he sensed an odious presence nearby...**very** nearby.

No mistake. Davoren was close.

The man automatically bared his gun. Reno, who instantly understood Vincent's reaction, stopped short. His grip tightened further around the nightstaff until his knuckles turned white. Neither man dared move or breathe. Instead, they waited.

Nothing stirred. If Davoren lurked closeby, then he would not reveal himself...yet.

The silence endured a painful eternity. Vincent's sharp glare darted from corner to corner. Every muscle tensed as he discerned that evil aura draw closer, but from where? All his rigid concentration focussed on the stiff air around, searching... searching for the devil...

A quick flicker of a movement caught his instant alarm. On shooting his eyes behind, Vincent spotted a shadow flinch: the gunman had snuck up from behind.

"LOOK OUT!!" he shouted at once to Reno.

He hadn't finished the warning when Davoren suddenly swung around the corner, flashing out his cool semi-automatic. Each man barely parried aside in time, just as the wild rain of bullets tore silence apart.

Vincent huddled behind a stiff throng of pipes, hiding his face from the furious sparks blitzing this shelter. He peeked over across the hall. There, he found a hard-gasping Reno glued behind some delivery tank. That had been a narrow escape for him.

Amidst this madness, Vincent gave Reno a quick set of gestures which translated "I will attack first, then you follow in". Reno nodded. Despite the generation difference, these two former Turks could still communicate with their special sign language.

No sooner had the plan been set, than Vincent thrust out his arm for heavy retaliation. An all-out war erupted, loud and furious. Both sides exchanged fire at once, neither one surrendering to the other.

In a sudden rush of blood, Vincent doubled his gunfire, thereby overpowering the enemy for a split moment. But Reno seized this opprtunity, just as Vincent backed off to reload. With one incredible twirl of the staff, he swung out a fierce ring of charged fire, then hurtled this energy straight at Davoren's shelter.

It blasted the upper support girders dead on, rocking the walls with a thunderous boom. The wretched supports groaned under the pipework's hefty weight. Soon, the entire delivery system above stormed to an uproarious collapse.

Amidst the flying debris and swirls of dust, they spotted the gunman roll out into the open, having just narrowly escaped the destruction. The next move followed at once. Both allies rolled out of their hideouts: Vincent resumed full fire at Davoren, while Reno lunged in for a swift attack.

The clever ambush astonished Davoren. Vincent's hailstorm of hot lead showered him whole, shoving him back without a chance to retaliate. At the same moment, he perceived Reno rush straight for him, head bent low, weapon sparking electric charge. He was trapped. Next blink, and Reno jabbed for the target.

The prong struck clean into Davoren's chest. Immediately, an insane surge of electricity ripped through his body top to bottom, jerking his head so far back one thought it would snap. It brutally rattled his core with raw charge until sparks crackled out.

Yet Reno suddenly broke off this attack for an instant follow-up. He assaulted the enemy with a quick series of mini-attacks, stabbing here, striking there, until he reeled aside for Vincent to take aim. Vincent sprayed the gunman a second time, then finished with a final shot point-blank in the forehead, so precise Davoren slammed back against the wall; he now stood thrashed up in place.

An awkward pause befell the air now that the attack had finished. The two allies beheld the gunman, Reno gasping in awe of such incredible resistance. Indeed, none of the fatal attacks had even scratched Davoren's good humour, let alone affected his body. The gunman steadied himself again. Both men tensed back in rigid anticipation.

"Hey, no fair! Two against one," beamed Davoren pleasantly, "And here I thought only 'bad guys' could cheat."

Vincent foresaw instant danger, whereby he pulled Reno away. His fast reaction coincided with the gunman's attack: Davoren suddenly yanked out a second semi-automatic from within his suit-jacket, and fired two guns at once.

Both men raced the wild gunfire down the hallway until they dodged around some corner. They bolted through the black maze as if chased behind by devils. Fortunately however, Davoren did not give pursuit.

The rush took them deeper into this bleak jungle. Reno gasped out, "How long was that?"

"Just over three minutes."

"ONLY THREE MINUTES?!" he cried aloud, "Man, your watch's too slow!!"

Rather than bicker, Vincent coolly suggested, "It's best we split up and hunt Davoren down. The first to find him will alert the other."

"Right!"

"Be careful."

"Yeah. You too."

They diverged onto different paths. Reno disappeared down the grim corridor. Vincent took some side-hall, straight through the darkness.

Precious time was slipping by. This madness must end fast. He wanted to reach Aeris...before Professor Hojo did.

The long-winded path ended abruptly. Vincent found himself at the entrance of the North Wing Compressor Centre, as could be read from the sign fitted above. From his place at the threshold, he appeared a tall, black figure, with suspicious eyes scrutinising the interior: here was the upper deck hall. Dozens of compressor tanks stood in rows across the hall, like ancient tower-guardians wasted away by corrosion. Giant pipe lines fed into their conical heads. Smaller ducts and wires interconnected the wasted system together. Misery and darkness had long reduced this once glorious kingdom to a haunted wasteland.

Vincent felt a horrible misgiving arise as he beheld such dead ruins. Above the shadows and musty air, there lingered a silence which meant only one thing: Davoren was here.

He snatched the conclusion, just as his keen sniper senses warned him someone had taken direct aim of his head.

All at once, Vincent swung aside to evade the treacherous gunshot. Yet the bombardment, enraged by that lucky miss, blasted away after the slippery target, who in a flash, had already dodged behind one of the compressor tanks.

He granted himself only a single breath to steady his nerves and pin-point his enemy's location before returning full fire. Vincent aimed at the tank positioned further back, more specifically, its conical head. Davoren had concealed himself there.

Neither side spared the other. At times, Vincent emptied his gun in one round. Other times, he huddled back as chaos pelted the iron off his shelter. His bullets battled the wrath of twin semi-automatics non-stop. Sparks flew, lead zinged, and rage swelled more.

When the stand-off grew too heated, Davoren suddenly broke away. He leapt off the battered tank, then dashed aside for another shelter, blasting at Vincent all the way. But Vincent would not be driven back. He shoved a fresh cartridge of bullets into his gun, then charged after this enemy.

The two men played the deadly game "shoot-and-dodge" again, this time with the ferocity of crazed demons. They chased each other across the isles of tanks, blasting, evading, and returning fire. Their loud skirmishes suffocated the air. Their black figures whizzed by at speeds incomprehensible to the mind. Both guns screamed murder until Heaven itself heard them.

Vincent never diverted his concentration off this battle; one stray thought could be fatal. He ignored the sweat pouring down his face. Nor dared he count the number of times Davoren had missed his flesh for his coat. From the bitter sting gnawing his left arm, he realized he had been wounded.

For his part, Vincent strained both speed and hearing to the very limits. He listened out for Davoren's quick footsteps, letting that be his "radar" amidst this crazy war. He knew for sure he had hit the gunman twice. But getting an effective blow at Davoren was no easy task, at least not this way.

Vincent almost stumbled over as a hot surge of pain boiled up his ravaged lungs; just a reminder that there also raged a bitter war inside. Only by stubborn force did he suppress this agony back. Not now. He could not afford a coughing fit now.

His alarm suddenly darted upwards, just in time to witness one precise bullet blast a clamp supporting three overhead pipes. The weak clamp shattered open, and the monstrous weights plunged down towards Vincent, raining iron debris in their path.

Vincent exerted all force into one desperate forward dash. The earth-shaking collapse missed him by a hair. But between the vicious dust and confusion, he slipped off his guard for one moment, enough for Davoren to attack.

Indeed, Vincent did not detect him until too late.

With one mighty swing upward, Davoren struck the butt of his gun hard against the underside of Vincent's chin; so powerful it sent him flying backwards in numb stupefaction.

Yet despite the violent pain, Vincent managed to anticipate Davoren's move in for the kill. At once, his shattered senses recovered their shock, whereby he somehow tumbled back onto one knee. Vincent immediately opened rapid fire at Davoren, who still came charging forth like a mad bull.

Every bullet hit the bare-handed gunman; some deflected off his head and body, other tore through his suit, all to no avail. He lunged at a phenomenal speed straight for his target. In return, Vincent stood up, doubling his fire until the angry gun vibrated in his hand. Nothing could stop this demon, not even as he suddenly pounced forward!

Vincent saw Davoren yank out a jagged scrap of iron he had probably snatched from the debris. He perceived his thrust it at him. But his reaction came one milli-second too late.

It jabbed him like a sharp dagger. Vincent roared a hideous grunt as he felt a murderous pain pierce clean into the side of his abdomen: Davoren had stabbed him with the cruel metal piece.

Yet far from finished, the ruthless gunman wrenched Vincent aside by the iron piece, right over the balustrade. Poor Vincent spun wildly downwards until he crashed flat upon his back. The wretched man curled on his side at once, writhing amidst a whirl of fresh pain, with that blood-stained dagger still thrust in his side. A terrible buzz droned his ears.

He had plunged a considerable height onto the lower deck hall. Davoren, on the other hand, beheld the delightful sight from the balustrade above. Just like Vincent, the brutal battle had torn his clothes and messed up his white hair. His tie had even been loosened a bit to open his collar. But otherwise, he stood unaffected. Not even that evil, sadistic gaze had dulled a tinge.

For Vincent, it was a vicious struggle between consciousness and darkness. There he lay, helpless against such wild agony. It left him heaving hard, every gasp another stab to his lungs. His face, so contorted by pain, was half buried in his lustrous long hair, with teeth gnashed tight.

"You're still too weak in battle tactics," he heard Davoren's flat voice scold from above.

Vincent's rage flared up at that mockery. He darted his hateful glare far up to the gunman, "And you're still too confident!"

It all happened instantly. In a sudden wake of strength, Vincent fired one single bullet straight up at the astonished gunman, who barely evaded in time. But the unexpected bullet hadn't been intended for him. Instead, it hit the compressor tank right behind him; actually, the gas cylinder.

The blasted container hissed a soft warning before exploding at full force, spewing a wild hellstorm of fire and debris all around.

The violence swept Vincent backwards like a leaf caught in a hurricane. He tumbled wildly until he slammed against the wall, then hid his head as iron scraps and stone shrapnel flew about. . The impact had dizzied him further. The roar of fire deafened his ears

He had scored a hefty blow against the enemy. By sheer luck, Vincent had caught Davoren in the middle of the explosion. But still, he knew it hadn't killed him.

Indeed, It hadn't. On lifting his head again, Vincent spotted Davoren sprawled upon the floor some distance away. Apparently, the blast had sent him crashing hard upon the lower hall. But the invisible gunman slowly struggled to rise, uninjured, perhaps a bit annoyed.

Above, the entire blasted compressor blazed in hot brilliance. It cast a bright red-orange hue upon the scene below. The flames crackled in cruel satisfaction as they beheld the damage and spume of debris around.

It hurt to move. Nevertheless, Vincent would not surrender. His trembling hand groped along his side for that iron dagger. He wrenched it out by force, wincing aside as the cold metal tore out of his hot flesh. Vincent contemptuously flung it away, then somehow climbed back to his wobbly feet. Despite gasps, pain, and buzzing headaches, the man stood up in place. This battle was far from over. He would fight on.

Davoren too had stood up by now: his once fine suit had been singed and torn. Two horrible rips marked where stray shrapnel had torn through his shoulder, another his thigh. Many hair strands hung loose in front of a stoic, dirty face. But his narrow pink eyes lingered on Vincent alone, their malice brighter than the fire above.

The gunman, after sweeping back his dishevelled hair, straightened his tattered jacket. He dwelt a moment over his burnt sleeve.

"Hm...you've ruined my good clothes. I'll give you that much," Davoren praised rather indifferently.

He wasn't impressed at all, not even as he beheld Vincent grip his gun in readiness, eyes glowing cool crimson. Davoren gladly obliged by producing one semi-automatic. For him, killing Vincent would be a pleasure.

They stood frozen in a moment of bitter hostility. Each man had dealt a severe blow to the other. It seemed inevitable they'd fight on forever until Death claimed one.

And then, the moment passed.

They lunged into action at the same time, both men swinging up their weapons for a fierce shoot-out. But before Davoren could even take aim, he found himself, much to his angry astonishment, prisoner inside a pyramid of electric energy.

The strange shield could have sprung up for Hell itself; it had materialized so fast without any warning. Vincent gaped wide as the flabbergasted Davoren struggled to budge free. All in vain. He was trapped.

Trapped and wide open. Davoren shot his alarmed eyes behind, just in time to witness Reno's surprise attack: with the accuracy of a marksman, Reno thrust his staff like a spear through the electric pyramid, straight into the gunman's spine. Direct hit, deadly consequences.

The attack dazzled the sight but horrified the mind. Surge after surge of electricity mangled Davoren to madness, so violent his body and head twisted in shock. It tore havoc through his spine across every

limb. He was locked in place by that vicious prong, unable to escape, unable to scream. Nor would Reno spare him. The insane sparks flying about proved he had cranked the nightstaff to maximum output.

Next came the grand finale. No sooner had Reno yanked out the staff, than the entire pyramid exploded to a collapse, blasting its hapless prisoner through a swirl of charge and flames. Amazingly however, Davoren emerged alive. He stumbled forth amidst blind dizziness, with smoke trailing from his burnt back, but still on both feet.

Reno embraced his chance at once. He flanked Davoren's side, aiming to hammer in a volley of swift attacks. But much to his surprise, Davoren regained balance in time to parry. To Reno's further shock (and pain), the gunman rammed one powerful elbow clean into his face, hard enough to send him tumbling like a barrel across the hall.

This failure aroused Vincent to instant action. Taking a firm stand upfront, he fired a full round of bullets at Davoren; perhaps he could confuse him off guard again. No such luck. The gunman gracefully flipped out of harm's way.

However, he only returned a few shots before beating a hasty retreat. Davoren dashed away at such an incredible speed, over the balustrade onto the third deck down below. Soon, darkness swallowed him.

He was gone. A fortunate thing since Vincent could no longer repress this painful seizure. Between the wounds and vicious dizziness, he crumbled to a collapse. He sat hunched over amidst an outbreak of hacks and coughs, groping through this wretchedness for precious air. His lungs writhed inside his tight, hot chest. They howled outloud for mercy.

The attacks were worsening, nor could he suppress this continuous flood of fits forever. He had finally abated this one, but would he be so lucky next time?

"Crap! Hey, Vinnie! Pull yourself together!" cried a muffled voice. He felt someone shake him by the shoulders.

Vincent forced his dazed senses back into focus. He found Reno squatted down in front of him, one cheek bruised from Davoren's elbow, but otherwise unharmed.

"..ah..I..I'm alright..," Vincent gaped weakly, struggling to maintain some steady balance.

"Like Hell you are!" Good thing you guys fight loud, or I wouldn't have got here in time," retorted Reno. He beheld Vincent's battered state, "But man! He thrashed you good!"

No argument there. Vincent remained slouched upon the floor in tired misery. A hectic fever burned his ashen face, with hair strands dangling dead before haggard red eyes. Blood stained his wounds, bruises, cuts and raw aches ravaged every limb, all testimony of his incredible endurance and hard stubbornness. Indeed, Vincent owed much thanks to his abnormal body.

Nevertheless, the intensity of the last battle had overworked him to illness. He needed at least a few moments to steady himself again.

"Okay. You sit this one out for a minute," Reno solemnly declared with a nod, "It's my turn. I'll take him on 'till you come."

The rash decision rather alarmed Vincent. He staggered up to his feet, about to protest, but by then, Reno had already dashed away to pursue the enemy.

He stood there, lost amidst a flash of thoughts: most likely, Davoren now understood their clever plan; both allies would work together to destroy his invisibility level. On realizing how many fatal attacks he had sustained, the gunman had wisely retreated. He knew they'd soon come hunting after him, hoping to eliminate him.

It was like trapping an animal. But didn't Reno know? Some animals turn vicious when forced into a corner.

-End of Chp.62

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.63

Darkness saw no end throughout these hollow halls of ancient stone, rusted metal and clustered pipes. Deep within this jungle, there hung an eerie silence in the chilly air. For an eternity, it had reigned unchallenged.

That is until a quick rush of footsteps echoed down the corridor. The intruder emerged as a tall, black figure dashing forth at top speed. It didn't matter which path he took. Nor cared this brazen phantom much about disturbing the tranquility. Right now, far graver matters pressed upon him.

After breaking away from that fight, Davoren had retreated into the darkest depths of this Delivery Centre. He still held one semi-automatic within a tight grip. Behind him stretched the void further and further, but his stern glare instead focussed up front.

Deeper and deeper he flew through the maze, fuelled onwards by the urgency of the situation.

The path finally stopped at a dead-end, a dismal shelter Davoren was forced to accept. He slumped against the stone wall. Soon, he began to tumble many thoughts behind closed eyes, exasperation written clear on his dirty face. He held the gun in both hands, arms loosley stretched downwards. He struck a lonely figure there, more overwhelmed by events than blows.

The gunman lingered thus for a rather long time, as if awaiting something to happen. Around him loomed the darkness, a black curtain that draped in heavy folds upon this wasteland. Above him hovered silence, ominous and absolute.

A strange, soft sound suddenly reached the gunman's ears. When he realized this unfamiliar sound emanated from himself, Davoren snapped his eyes wide open: yes. He was gasping. Up till now, he had not noticed.

A rather silly discovery to fret about, yet nevertheless, the gunman gaped at his heaving chest, even pressed it to confirm his sight; the movements were quick and subdued, indicating only minor strain. But still, he was gasping.

His expression darkened to a grave frown. He knew what this ill-omen meant only too well.

Davoren scornfully swallowed down the gasps. His stern attention turned to his weapon. He ejected an almost empty cartridge, then jammed in a new one, cocking it once when done.

His preparation came at the most opportune time. Davoren's sharp senses suddenly warned eminent danger, whereby he instantly evaded aside. The moment passed as a single blink: a missile of charged fire shrieked straight by, spraying wild sparks all the way. It narrowly missed Davoren for the stone wall behind, and exploded at full impact, blasting rubble high into the air.

Heavy swirls of dust rushed about. The explosion had left a deep crater in the hapless wall as blatant proof of its power. But Davoren's unimpressed glare rested on the sneaky attacker, who stood poised some distance up ahead.

Reno had the gunman cornered down this blind hall. That blast had been a mere announcement of his arrival. And now that he caught Davoren's undivided attention, the man slacked off into an easy attack-stance, intending a far more serious fight.

Nevertheless, Reno couldn't help but smirk vindictively at the ruined state of Davoren's once fine appearance, "Not bad for a 'magic wand', eh Gramps?"

Davoren deemed it better to bare his gun than answer. For a moment, he measured up this new opponent, observing in particular how well the dangerous staff befitted those nimble fingers.

Discrete caution marked the gunman's stoic demeanour, more so as he drew his own weapon closer. Indeed, this enemy had already caught him twice off guard.

A playful glitter lit up Reno's narrow, sea-green eyes. They held Davoren half in mockery, half in contempt, "Y'know, Vinnie tells me you used to be leader of the Turks."

"And you?" replied the calm gunman, "You and your other friend were Turks also, correct?"

"Hey, not bad! Yeah, you guys saw the company rise to the skies, 'n we saw it collapse to the mud."

Davoren granted himself a small smile, "The old generation meets the new, hm?"

"Heh! Guess so."

No more pleasantries. Reno's whole appearance dropped dead-serious as he suddenly made a headlong lunge into combat. Davoren was prepared, so was his gun: it blasted straight into action.

Time, like this battle, escalated to an incredible pace. Reno somehow swerved out of range, doubling his speed until he reached the gunman upfront. There, he thrust in his nightstaff; fast but not fast enough. Davoren had already manoeuvred around, which brought him to Reno's unprotected back. He simply aimed for the head, and fired.

By miracle, Reno ducked down, just as that treacherous bullet zinged overhead. He took advantage of his crouched position by jabbing his staff upwards, right for Davoren's jaw. Failed again. The gunman gracefully flipped backwards with one hand, and the staff cut through empty air instead.

Reno hadn't time to curse his luck. On gaining enough space, Davoren introduced his second semi-automatic onto the scene. With a loud oath, Reno rolled aside as the twin guns pelted the floor after him.

One thing for certain: Davoren's concentration had dangerously improved. Reno reached that painful realisation when three bullets razed his body, one his head. He almost lost momentum from shock.

Yet far from intimidated, the man tumbled through heated gunfire to the far side, where he scrambled onto one knee for instant retaliation: Reno slashed his nightstaff in a quick outward sweep. The action spewed a roar of fireball of electricity, spinning madly through a spiral path straight for Davoren.

The gunman, who had come charging at Reno, anticipated the incoming volley. With such incredible athleticism, Davoren leapt forth over the wild fireball, tumbling only once before resuming his path. The blast collided with a clamorous boom into a thicket of pipes behind.

Astonished beyond words, Reno darted away, just before the furious bullets lashed a hellstorm upon his spot. It pursued him as he dashed across the battered hall. It riddled the walls, and splattered against the metal.

If Reno didn't "do something now", he knew he'd end up a bloody corpse on the ground.

He frowned at the unpleasant thought. Therefore, Reno shifted back into offense, even gripping his charged staff to full attack-mode. He wheeled around to make a new lunge for his adroit adversary, keeping his own head below the chaos.

Davoren prepared to meet a fresh round of attacks, this time in cool readiness.

Reno assaulted his opponent with an impressive barrage of jabs and thrusts, targetting every vital point in sight. The nightstaff whiffed electric sparks. The movements were quick and accurate, but sadly fruitless. Davoren evaded every attack with such ease, ducking here, tilting there. The enraged Reno skittered forwards, while Davoren seemed to simply dance backwards.

Suddenly, the gunman stopped this useless game by swinging up one mighty foot for Reno's head. Reno narrowly dodged, where the foot slammed a hard dent into a pipeline instead of his skull. Nevertheless, Davoren hammered on unaffected.

In a flash, Reno spotted a potential opening in Davoren; his final hope. All strength rushed to both arms. He swept the staff like a sword down upon the gunman's head, blazing a trail of charge towards this target.

What followed astounded Reno to a loud exclamation of "WHAT THE?!": Davoren had cleverly blocked that desperate attack by crossing his two guns overhead. They formed an X, with the nightstaff wedged in between, still crackling angry electricity.

Two words came to Reno's mind: "Oh, shit."

Perhaps now he understood why Vincent had warned him not to underestimate this gunman.

In this moment of blank shock, Reno could not anticipate Davoren deliver one brutal kick hard against the side of his ribcage. The stunned man was sent slamming back-first into a wall of pipes, which rattled stiffly on impact.

That blow had knocked more than wind from his chest. Reno would have collapsed, yet savagely retched a cry when something hard rammed straight into his abdomen. It pinned him up against the wall. On opening one bleary eye, he found Davoren leaning towards him. One foot was dug deep into Reno's stomach, while the gunman balanced himself upon the other foot, gun in hand. Thus Reno was now prisoner.

Davoren ruthlessly asserted his authority. The foot shoved further into Reno's battered stomach, causing him to grunt amidst a froth of blood and saliva.

"Oh, please forgive me," apologized Davoren in cold sarcasm, "I've forgotten how...delicate normal humans are. Been a while since I was one."

Poor Reno had no strength to breathe, let alone speak. He remained pinned in place, haggard eyes struggling to stay focussed. His pigtail hung dead over one shoulder. However, despite this agony, Reno still clutched his nightstaff tight.

Davoren, on the other hand, looked the epitome of cool confidence. The pink gleam in his eyes flickered sinister amusement, even though his face remained ever stern.

Death lingered but a heartbeat away. In such a dire situation, one could beg for mercy, resist, or accept this fate. Reno chose none. Instead, his lips twisted into a weak, crooked smile.

Davoren was a bit surprised, "You find this amusing?"

"Ah?...n-no...," croaked the prisoner through pressing pain, "I..I used to have a leader...back when I was Turk..great guy too. It's just-ugh! You fight A LOT better than he could've ever hoped to."

Davoren did not flinch, but accepted the compliment anyway.

"So tell me," confronted Reno so simply, "What kinda music do you like?"

The gunman blinked at this most unexpected digression, "Eh..excuse me??"

"Music! I figure you like all those fuddy-duddy songs the rest of the old folk listen to."

"Young man," retorted Davoren, "I'll have you know: whatever music us 'old folk' like is better than the noise you brain-dead kids listen to nowadays."

He paused on realizing how ridiculous this conversation was, more that he had actually participated in it. Reno, more amused than ever, asked outright, "Ever heard of the 'Bottle Song'?"

"...'Bottle Song'?...no."

"Really? It's my favorite! It goes like this," he broke off into an upbeat hum, "Duhn-doo-duhn...I'd rather have a bottle in front of meeee...than a frontal lobotomeeee...doo-doo-duhn.."

Perhaps Reno had taken leave of his senses. Davoren gaped at this crazy prisoner, then sighed aside, "NOW I know why the company fell apart.."

Reno's ruse had been deviously simple: to talk the gunman off guard. In flash of strength, he snatched his chance, and thrust up the staff straight for Davoren's chest, aiming to electrocute him again.

A commendable trick; if only Davoren hadn't already seen through it.

There was no need to even dodge. With uncanny reflexes, the ruthless gunman swacked the weapon out of Reno's stunned hand, then somehow flipped it into his own grip. Revenge came sweet: Davoren immediately jabbed the charged prong clean against Reno's shoulder; a taste of his own medicine.

Air snuffed out. Reno's whole body writhed wildly as surges of electric madness ravaged him like a thunder storm. Crackles and savage sparks drowned over his desperate scream. They scroched through cloth for flesh, and rattled him for a torturous eternity.

Yet eternity actually lasted a mere moment. Davoren, who still had Reno pinned up with one foot, suddenly yanked the staff out. The stunned victim slumped over in speechless shock.

"Nice try, sonny," praised Davoren callously, "You're lucky you didn't charge that toy to maximum. It could have fried your arm off."

Reno could barely hold that evil gaze through the buzzing pain. Davoren's vicious words aroused a hazy awareness about his now wrecked state; one charred shoulder, scruffy-dirty clothes, and bleeding wounds. Indeed, the old generation had thrashed some humility into the new.

Too bad he wouldn't live long to cherish the lesson. Davoren flung the dead staff behind, then flashed one gun straight into Reno's forehead.

It would end now.

When thus confronted by doom, Reno seized the most desperate hope from within his jacket, and simply acted: he snapped open some flask with his thumb, then splashed all its contents right into Davoren's astonished face.

The sudden move shocked the gunman with a confused cry. He staggered two steps back against the brash liquid, thereby releasing Reno from captivity. However, Reno could barely balance himself up, let alone follow through any attack. Instead, he remained weakly slumped against the wall. He watched the flabbergasted Davoren struggle madly to rub off that tarnation.

He had not expected that flask-attack. This liquid could be some sinister acid, or any other chemical. However, Davoren paused when the taste reached his lips: deliciously sweet and luscious, just like...

"Wine?!" he exclaimed, turning to Reno in disbelief.

"Beer, actually. Wine's too expensive for me."

Fury flared red-hot as Davoren spat out the beverage, "YOU THREW *BEER* IN MY FACE?!!"

"So I'm an alcoholic! So what?!" the angry Reno retorted, "You had a damn GUN pointed at my head!!"

Suddenly, a stern voice from behind shouted, "Reno, out of the way!!"

Events swept by too fast for comprehension. Reno obeyed without thinking; he scrambled aside for cover. At the same moment, Davoren darted his alarmed eyes far behind, where they met a hard crimson glare fixed behind a ready gun.

It was the perfect chance. In all this fluster of distractions, Vincent had caught Davoren wide open.

The ruthless bombardment pelted Davoren backwards. Such intensity, like Satan's fiercest hellstorm, overpowered any attempted retaliation. One blast after another. Vincent showered the gunman in hot lead, not sparing a second in between shots. With every bullet, he advanced forwards, while the gunman reeled back against this madness.

When he reached Reno's discarded nightstaff, Vincent kicked it over to its owner, who readily flipped it back to life within his nimble grasp. The two allies worked together: Vincent suddenly halted the bullet-blink, just before Reno seized the opportunity for an attack.

He thrust the charged prong fully against Davoren's chest, then blasted one electric explosion clean through the torso, just like a rifle. So powerful, it sent the gunman flying across until he slammed his back hard against the wall. There, he slumped to the floor, slouched up amidst a buzz of confusion.

His suit had been tattered, riddled across in bullets, and his white hair dangled in a mess. His once elegant jacket was blasted half-way open, exposing his frumpled collar and loose tie. Indeed, while his clothes had not survived, Davoren had certainly endured this fight. It was a wonder how anyone could bear so many fatal attacks, even with an invisibility level.

And now a dwindling invisibility level. They had passed eight minutes.

Not to say that Vincent had fared better. His side-wound stung bitterly, sometimes to the point where breathing itself became impossible. It took some effort to stay focussed, much more to tolerate his injuries

and aches. Yet there shone a feverish glow in Vincent's eyes; a strained sheen which indicated great pain repressed inside.

Nevertheless, he took a moment to check on Reno, who chafed his burnt shoulder in vexation. That attack had cost him much strength.

"Are you alright?" asked Vincent.

"I just got thrashed, electrocuted, AND wasted good beer," growled Reno, "OF COURSE I'm not alright!"

Though silent, Vincent's cool eyes spoke his reproof: I *told* you not to underestimate him.

"Okay! Don't rub it in, Vampy!" Reno paused, then added softly and rather awkwardly, "..thanks, man."

At least he earned some gratitude for rushing to Reno's rescue. Though Vincent had to admire him for using such...unconventional methods to distract the gunman so well.

A contemptuous snort brought them back to the present. They both heard Davoren's voice sneer, "Heh! You shouldn't take your eyes off your enemy."

Vincent swung around in alarm, but was too late: the gunman, already half-standing, opened a full round at the two men, who immediately dispersed for cover. Yet rather than pursue any further, Davoren instead blasted some gasket nearby. Heavy swirls of steam whooshed out upon the scene, blinding all sight to a haze. It choked the hall in loud chaos.

Luckily however, the mist soon dispersed. Vincent searched all over for the gunman. No trace; he had disappeared.

His expression darkened. Vincent's keen sight then lifted up towards the huge delivery system overhead. He spotted a grate hanging open, where the square vent led to an ominous void inside.

The gunman must have escaped through there. Both men stood just below the vent, lost in a moment of thoughtful silence. Right now, several options lay before them.

"Listen," decided Reno solemnly, "You go up there. Find him, 'n keep him occupied for a few minutes. I got an idea."

Vincent silently demanded an explanation.

"There's no time for that," insisted the man in a hurry, "But remember: when ya hear a rumbling sound, get yourself outta there AS FAST AS POSSIBLE!"

Though Vincent hadn't even a vague idea of Reno's plan, he put his trust in his comrade, and nodded in agreement: he'd assume defense, while this man would carry out his mysterious offense.

All settled then. They broke off again. Reno dashed down the corridor to fulfill his task. In the meantime, Vincent gracefully sprang high up to the open vent, and crawled into the void. Eight minutes passed, seven more to go. Wait for me..Aeris, he thought, just wait for me a bit longer...

-End of Chp.63

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.64

There was no time to waste. Once Vincent had ascended into the vent, he began a quick crawl forward. The gun felt comfortable in his rigid grip. Instinct had been whetted to peak sharpness, wary of every movement and sound around.

Through this voracious void stretched the iron caverns of darkness. It took Vincent a moment to adjust his sight, and even then he could barely distinguish the grim surroundings. It was a nightmare of pipes and ducts, all interconnected like a web into each other. Some were oval, others square. Every few yards, Vincent chanced upon a peculiar gauge fitted to the thick wall.

The cold air stung his hot face, more bitter than icy needles prickling his skin. He had to grimace at the putrid stench here, one of stale rust mixed with mako fumes. Once upon a time, these life-vessels had pumped green riches from the Planet's heart straight into the Reactor. Now, all that remained of that glorious era were the smells and this hollow system. Such a miserable waste.

Paths led to more paths. Soon, he found himself in the main duct, where several side-pipes fed into it from both sides. As Vincent crawled deeper, he became increasingly aware of the silence. It slithered through the pipework like an evil serpent, spreading its eerie aura all around.

Vincent stopped short when the aura became too strong. His suspicious eyes, two brilliant rubies, glared around this darkness. His senses heightened. Inside, pain boiled his torn lungs, yet somehow, he suppressed his breaths to the barest minimum. He listened...listened out for the dreaded gunman.

The suspense endured forever. He lingered patiently like a hunter awaiting his prey to appear, or a prey awaiting his hunter to attack. Right now, even he could not determine which analogy described the situation.

He suddenly heard a small clatter sound from behind. Quicker than lightening, Vincent swung his gun around at the source. But much to his confusion, he only found an empty bullet cartridge discarded upon the floor.

Very strange. That object hadn't been there before. Then where had...

The sudden realisation flashed danger. Vincent shot his eyes around to the front again, just as Davoren came rolling out of a side-vent, both guns bared for action. He blasted hell at Vincent, who miraculously reacted fast enough to dodge into another duct.

The tactful gunman has almost ambushed him. By distracting him from behind, he had then snuck up through the network, and attacked from the front. Indeed, Vincent could only attribute his survival to devil's luck; he hadn't even discerned Davoren creep here.

He hadn't time to praise his cunning foe; danger pressed upon the moment. Fierce bombardment battered his shelter, sputtering wild spark against metal. He could even feel the wall rattle behind him. Vincent waited for a brief lapse in gunfire, whereby he then thrust his arm around for brutal retaliation, at least to push Davoren back.

Which proved no easy task. The gunman too had huddled behind a corner further up, with twin guns hard at work. Both sides exchanged a hearty barrage of bullets, each man in a race to overpower the other.

In the end, however, they broke off into a mad scramble. Vincent glimpsed the phantom gunman whisk across the mainline into another side-pipe. He only took a split-moment to reload before pursuing his enemy. He couldn't afford to lose him in this maze.

The paths jumbled into a webwork of confusion. More side-vents; roads which slid downwards, others climbed upwards. Darkness hampered sight. Through such chaos, Vincent relied on his keen hearing for guidance. He pursued Davoren's light scruffles up the complex network. Vincent crawled quickly after the enemy, gun held back for any confrontation, eyes narrowed down upon the void ahead.

"Keep him occupied for a few minutes", Reno had instructed. Vincent frowned. He couldn't guess what plan that man had concocted. But he'd just have to maintain a hard defense to buy him enough time.

That is, IF Davoren didn't kill him first. It seemed the longer that gunman fought, the more demonic he became.

Vincent suddenly felt the tables turn against him. His sight just happened to stray aside to a black vent perpendicular to this path, where they glimpsed an evil pair of pink eyes twinkling behind the corner. All at once, Vincent rolled himself back, narrowly escaping the wild hailstorm.

Another ambush failed. Vincent's anger rose; he couldn't depend on luck forever! He knew not when or how this shrewd madman had intercepted his path, but he would get the better of him yet: two could play that game.

Therefore, Vincent returned a few shots just to occupy his enemy's attention. Shifting to a quick, noiseless crawl, he then retraced his path back to some side-tunnel. Through darkness and more vents, until at last, he snuck around the final corner, thereby catching Davoren from behind.

But not good enough to catch him unawares. The alarmed gunman reacted the same instant Vincent blasted full fire. He somehow tumbled through the madness for cover, protected all the way by his own devilish luck. This ambush had failed too. Vincent growled a soft curse.

Again, they bartered a heavy bout of gunshots. Again, they broke off. Despite all attempts, neither man could win the upper hand.

The situation escalated to a frenzy. Two demons in a mad scrimmage to destroy the other, darkness their sacred battle-grounds. Their energy sprung from black devils and unholy spirits cheering them onwards. Their bitter hostility flared sparks through the air.

Time was obliterated amidst the insane cross-fire. Loud skirmishes and rough scruffles echoed throughout. The insane rat-tat-tat of those semi-automatics battled a deadly handgun. The two adversaries moved through the labyrinth at mind-boggling speeds. They chased each other around. They blasted at each other non-stop.

Reason be damned. In this war, they fought based on one animal instinct: kill or be killed.

Vincent heard his own loud heartbeats pound above this blitz. The fit swelled further inside its prison chest, howling for freedom against these tight muscles. Many long hair strands swayed across his sweaty face. Vincent knew there trailed blood behind him. Yet he never thought of counting his wounds and aches; nor would he be bothered now about his wretched pain or ruined appearance. That all would come later. Instead, he rivetted his rigid concentration upon this moment.

His success depended on it. Aeris, the sole thing that kept his fury alive..she depended on it.

He wished Reno would hurry up.

"Dammit!" swore Reno for the fifth time.

He flew through the madhouse of corridors, pressed hard for speed. Quite fast, even though harsh pain still gnawed his shoulder, and his stomach felt gutted clean. In the network overhead, there resounded the faint gunshots of war, sometimes so fierce, Reno would steal a quick glance up, and marvel how Vincent kept it up.

Nevertheless, he rushed onwards. His angry eyes searched desperately for something in particular. Here nothing. There nothing. He had to swear a sixth time.

At last came deliverance: a metal box fitted into the brick wall, with several impressive cablelines snaking up to the ceiling. Reno squatted down upon one knee. He tore open the cover to inspect the interior. It appeared to be some control console. There was one screen, numerous switches and control panels, with a complex assortment of wires.

Reno tried a switch. Nothing stirred. There was no power.

He frowned gravely, then hunched over further, at the same time flicking out a wicked jack-knife from his pocket. Without hesitation, the man delved into his task.

His stern eyes proved he fully understood his actions. Reno flicked on a few more switches before tackling the array of wires. There, he tinkered through the connections, all the while using his nimble fingers and sharp knife. Reno worked with incredible dexterity through this jumbled mess.

He owed much thanks to all those hard training sessions back in the old bomb-squad days. And of course, the long, gruelling hours endured to become an electro-technician specialist (though he still hated that grouchy instructor...may his miserable soul rot in Hell, amen).

When the initial set-up was complete, Reno grabbed his nightstaff next. There was a small slit alongside this fine weapon, concealed behind a metal piece. Reno slid up the cover to reveal the wired interior. Using the very tip of his knife, he pulled out one end of some red wire, careful not to touch its flat prong.

Through mumbled encouragements like "C'mon baby...c'mon..", Reno inserted the red wire into the socket of one panel. That done, he cranked the staff to maximum output. Immediately, the whole console lit to life with a sharp bleep of gratitude; just what Reno prayed for: he had used his own electrical weapon to revive the console.

A self-assured nod was definately in order, "Reno, my boy... you are just TOO good!"

The man punched in a quick series of buttons until a password was demanded for entry. He typed in the not-so-original response "MAKO", whereby a long scroll of texts and digits danced down his keen scrutiny.

Not at all confused, he chose "activate" on the option screen, then pressed a special button encased in glass. His choice was confirmed twice. Finally, the screen obediently displayed a bar-graph loading different commands. At the bottom, there read a gradual count-up to 100%:..6.66%...10.07%..12.32%..

Reno looked up towards the ceiling again. Just a bit longer.. if only Vincent could keep it up a bit longer...

Brutality had long possessed the body, bitter hatred the mind, but still this inferno raged on hot as ever. The insane bullets spared nothing. They riddled darkness to pieces. They battered the metalwork. Crazy shuffles filled the black tunnels, in constant motion to surpass the other.

Here waged a war between two devils hellbent on sheer survival, Death the ultimate arbitrator. Around them swirled Satan's army, some cheering the ruby-eyed demon, others the white-haired phantom. It didn't really matter. Soon, one man would join their ranks.

Vincent found it increasingly difficult to keep up this wild pace. He had sustained new injuries and escaped many fatal near-misses (too near to his liking). The fever felt like a furnace, burning his very core out to the skin.

His grip was tight around the gun. His sharp hearing, probably his most important sense now, discerned every movement and sound around. He crawled quickly, sometimes even sped to a half-dash. Anything to stay alive in this madness.

"Madness" described the battle perfectly. The labyrinth seemed to grow more convoluted, neither opponent pausing for a minute. Vincent pursued Davoren through the network. He swept around the corner, where he spotted a black figure scuffling away down the tunnel. His gun went into automatic action. However, the fast figure had already dodged into a side-vent. Nor was it intimidated one bit. Much to Vincent's alarm, the enemy thrust out both guns, one above the other, for a deadly double blast.

One blink later, and Vincent rolled for cover into another vent. He hid his face away as the crazed shots lashed this shelter apart. Their loud zings deafened his ears. Davoren gave no room to breathe, let alone return fire.

Danger suddenly flashed clear across Vincent's mind: a suspicious movement rapidly approaching the corner. Indeed, on looking aside, Vincent was stunned blank to witness an arm swing out towards him, with one semi-automatic pointed ahead of bright pink eyes. They shone bloody murder.

It happened in a second. During this chaos, the clever gunman had snuck straight up to Vincent's shelter.

The fast reaction astounded one's comprehension, even Davoren's. With his hard claw, Vincent snagged the gunman's arm to divert the aim far up, just before several bullets rang loud. Now pinning the arm to the wall, Vincent then returned the surprise-attack tenfold. Every bullet hit Davoren point-blank. A brutal lead shower from head down to chest.

He didn't stop until the angry gunman managed to bare out his other semi-automatic. But Vincent reacted faster. He released the arm as he shoved it hard against Davoren, thus pushing him back for a split-moment; enough time to beat a hasty retreat.

A fresh hailstorm of bullets screamed vengeance after him. Their wild sparks flew all around. Yet Vincent somehow escaped into a side-vent, where the black path led him upwards. He scruffled up like a madman. Around more corners and through ducts..the nightmare simply had no end!

When he finally realized the gunshots had ceased, Vincent gasped to an unsteady halt. He slumped against the thick iron wall. After tearing open his collar, the ruined man thrust back his head to gulp precious air, squeezing each breath past his parched throat. His inflamed lungs wailed in pain. A dull headache pounded his brains.

That had been such a narrow escape, Vincent shuddered to remember it. His whole body ached from strain and injury. His long overcoat, alas, lay in miserable tatters, especially the hole-ridden hem.

Vincent was surprised to discover one entire shoulder soaked in hot blood. He gaped a moment at it, yet still could not feel any pain. No doubt, a stray bullet had grazed deep during that retreat. In his desperation, he never noticed.

Silence echoed through these hollow tunnels. Nothing stirred. He sat alone in darkness, listening to this unnatural tranquility while his senses gathered again.

"Comical little fellow...that punk-friend of yours, Vincent," suddenly came a cool, dry voice from nowhere.

Vincent tensed. He hadn't discerned the gunman sneak up here. Even now, he could not pin-point Davoren's location amidst this wretched maze. He seemed to surround him from every direction. Nevertheless, Vincent gripped his gun tight.

"A bit cocky, but he's quite good with that magic wand of his. Huh! Though Heaven help me if he'd been under my command."

Every sense was strained on high alert. Vincent anticipated an attack any second.

Nor did Davoren disappoint his expectations. Danger came from the left side, at the junction of two tunnels. Vincent caught a quick shadow flinch there, in which he immediately scurried away. A torrent of savage bullets pelted metal and pierced air after him.

Vincent swerved into a pipeline, slamming his bloody shoulder against the wall in the process. Down he scuffled, pursued close behind by fire and fury.

At last, he shoved himself aside into a vent. Safe there, Vincent thrust his gun around for hard retaliation. Both enemies exchanged a few bouts before breaking off again, neither side the victor.

"But it doesn't matter, my friend," he heard Davoren's gentle voice float by, softer than a ghost's "We'll still shed more blood..."

It erupted again. Vincent made an incredible dash out of his shelter for the vent across the tunnel, returning enemy gunfire all the way. He tumbled through, where he then crawled forward like a crazed maniac, well aware that Davoren had given pursuit.

The skirmish travelled further up the network until Vincent took a firm stand behind a side-vent. Only with full-scale fire frenzy did he shake Davoren off his tail. The gunman didn't retaliate, but instead took shelter inside a delivery pipe. Finally, when his gun clicked empty, Vincent pulled back.

Another battle he survived, would he be so lucky next time? Gasping against the sweat, Vincent reloaded his gun, then drew it up to his hot face. He tried hard to ignore the savage pain mauling his chest inside.

"...more blood...it's the only way to end this," whispered Davoren from his own shelter, now aroused to quiet insanity, "Can you hear them, Vincent? Can you hear Hell and all its fallen angels howl our names?"

Vincent's grip tightened on his gun as he listened to this derangement. The air reeked of malice, its source a sinister, murderous lunatic.

"I don't know why...heheh," raved the amused madman to no one, "...it's just a crazy passion I have..to shed more blood. The more people I hurt..and anger I cause, the stronger the desire.."

No reply; only a disgusted silence.

"Blood...smear it in my hands until they drip red... let the rotten smell fill my nostrils...and the sight burn me blind.."

His tone dropped to a gentle hush, so mysterious even Vincent was perplexed, "I only know I'm alive when I shed blood..it's the sight of it, Vincent...that's the only way..."

Insane. Davoren was a demon crazed by brutality. He lived to torture and destroy..fuel hatred...just throw himself whole into blood shed. Death around him meant life for himself.

This man...the very same who thirty-one years ago, had called human life "the most sacred gift from God".

Why, Davoren? Where does this sadistic passion stem from? It's a fountain that spouts cruelty all around, but what is the source?

Davoren...what happened to you?

Something new suddenly occurred to Vincent: never *once* had he asked himself that question before.

And when he recalled the gunman's rave just now, Vincent discovered something strange. Past the insanity and evil, there huddled an emotion, crushed and abandoned.

Vincent reached out to touch it. It almost felt like...utter despair...horrible, lonely pain...

Behind those empty pink eyes, what did the gunman hide?

Vincent violently shook off the reverie: time demanded another battle.

As if reading each other's moves, both enemies skid out of their shelters for a brutal confrontation, perhaps the last. The moment held them face to face. Their stern eyes locked hard upon each other, between them a bitter spark of hatred. All around, the invisible demonic crowd went wild.

And then, the moment released them. Each man took aim of the other to fire.

Yet God pounded down his divine fist of intervention: a furious rumble suddenly drowned the whole network. The frightened crowd dispersed. The battle stumbled to an instant halt, both enemies looking around in suspicious confusion. What meant that sound?

Long ago, Vincent had been assigned to storm a Reactor. As he recalled, they had strictly instructed him to sneak in via the ventilation system, not the delivery system; the latter contained a deadly program. It effectively eliminated any intruder or security breach within the pipeworks.

Vincent realized Reno had somehow activated the security program. Then himself and Davoren would be targeted as "intruders".

The advice "Get yourself outta there AS FAST AS POSSIBLE" rang clear through his mind.

He obeyed immediately. Vincent withdrew into a mad scurry, forgetting Davoren behind in desperate search for an exit. He scuffled upon all fours like a wild animal. All strength and concentration were exerted into escape.

The thunderous rumble shook the delivery system end to end. Soon, every ominous gauge along the wall blared the alarm. Iron doors systemically sealed off every vent and pipe, with the rumble still growing louder.

Vincent's speed reached frenzic proportions until he finally discovered a grate. From peril to safety, he slipped through at once, just as the program triggered its final stage.

-End of Chp.64

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.65

This whole madness had lasted a mere ten seconds.

One ferocious explosion rocked clean through the delivery system; so powerful the shockwaves reached the walls and even floor below. It occurred directly above a huge open corridor, which in itself haughtily overlooked another hall down below.

Vincent landed safe here. At the same time, he witnessed a huge pipeline come crashing down in a fiery path, having just been blasted out of the network above. It tumbled madly across the hall, completely out of control, until it collided head-on into the wall. Such violent impact slammed a crater into the concrete as the pipe fractured open. Dust flew about. Finally, the overhead rumble trickled to total silence. It was over.

Vincent remained tiredly squatted upon one knee. From a short distance away, he beheld this brutal wreckage of metal scrap, wires, and stone. His crimson eyes, like the stern grip on his gun, waited in silent anticipation. They both awaited Davoren.

Short wait. Soon, the debris began to rattle against some movement trapped beneath, at first faint but growing stronger. At last, force won over weight. Davoren shoved off a heavy metal scrap, then angrily kicked aside another to free his crushed leg.

Out of the two, Vincent had been the luckier to escape that deathtrap in time. The security program had caught Davoren like a rat inside the pipe, then expelled that pipe in hopes of killing him.

Or in this case, degrading his invisibility level further. As much discomfort as this alliance caused him, Vincent had to praise Reno again for devising such an effective blow.

Now would have been an excellent opportunity for another attack. Unfortunately, Vincent lacked the strength to stand, let alone engage in new battles, not with this wretched state and wounds. He needed a moment to breathe.

Nor seemed the battered gunman ready to resume combat either. Instead, he hunched over to press his temples amidst harsh gasps, perhaps even restore focus to his shattered senses. This insane war had finally started to take its toll on him.

A minute dragged by. The gunman recovered first. Shaking off the last bit of febleness, he climbed back up to his feet, then staggered a few steps out of the metal wreckage. His thick white hair hung in dishevelment before his dark, sinister eyes.

There shone murder in that venomous glare. Vincent felt it drill into his core. He had ignited a deadly fire; for all the successful blows he'd scored, for all the times he'd resisted. Now Davoren would go beyond all-out to kill him.

Yet Vincent refused to be intimidated, even in face of such hostility. He too struggled up to his feet. He stood his ground tall and firm, with fingers tightly gripped around the gun.

Vincent didn't flinch as he watched Davoren tear off the remnants of his suit-jacket, then fling the tattered garment aside. He wore a double-holster harness, each one strapped along his shoulder. His collar was ripped open, and that scorched tie loose. The shirt, though torn and frumpled from endless combat, subtly revealed his fine-toned frame; there still remained ample power in that body.

Davoren only bothered to pull up his sleeves before taking both semi-automatics into his gloved hands. He then drew them close. His face expressed no emotion, as if chisled from cold marble. Vincent, careful not to miss any movement, tensed in anticipation.

There was no need for words between these two men, for they both understood. Around them lingered silence. The calm before a storm.

They lunged in for each other like hunger-crazed wolves, eyes hard set on the enemy ahead. Vincent blasted rapid fire straight at the target, who unfortunately had already foreseen that attack. Without losing momentum, Davoren instantly sprung high over the gunfire. So high, with his back arched inwards, he almost seemed to fly towards the alarmed Vincent.

Graceful yet quite deadly. During the descent, Davoren suddenly unleashed a full-scale bombardment upon his enemy below, two guns at once. Vincent rolled aside. He narrowly evaded the wild hailstorm, then Davoren as he landed down, slamming his mighty foot into the floor instead of Vincent's head.

Another near-miss, but the gunman wasn't disheartened. Far from it, he made a headlong charge straight for Vincent, who alas couldn't recover in time to parry.

One slip up would be his doom. Vincent gasped a hideous grunt as the powerful blow rammed clean into his chest, almost shattering his breastbone with impact. Sensation was lost. Davoren, in fact, had used both butts of his weapons for the initiative strike. Next he hammered in a series of vicious blows, one into Vincent's injured side, and two others against his head. If he couldn't shoot him, then he'd certainly beat his brains out.

The unmerciful barrage hit hard and fast, without a chance to defend, not even breathe. Amidst such savagery, it was a miracle Vincent still kept upon both feet, even though every blow sent him staggering back in blind stupor. Pain battered sense. His sight went red: there was blood in his eyes; his own no doubt.

Davoren would have dealt another blow when he suddenly discerned a familiar presence attack from behind. At once, he parried aside with his arm uplifted, just as a disappointed nightstaff thrust straight through. Apparently, Reno had found his way to this battle too.

So as a welcome, Davoren gave this astonished young man just a taste of his ally's agony. He wheeled around sharply, thus slamming one gun right against Reno's head, then a brutal kick to send his spiralling back with a grunt.

Poor Reno, though stunned blind by such incredible strength and his own dismal failure, nevertheless managed to tumble onto one knee, but not fast enough to recover his dazed focus. Nor did Davoren wait: he opened double fire at full frenzy; he'd finish off this bothersome pest for good.

Reno blanked out. Undoubtedly, the mad torrent would have riddled him straight through had not something big and fast tackled him from the side, thereby sweeping his clear from danger. They both skid across until Reno sprawled onto his side, a bit shaken but alive. On looking up, he discovered a half-anxious, half-angry Rude squatted down, still holding him down for protection.

"What the Hell are YOU doing here?!" Reno furiously demanded.

"Saving your stupid punk-ass, what else!" retorted Rude.

Not the most touching reunion, to be sure. Much vexed by this interference, Davoren moved in for another try when a harsh claw suddenly clamped his wrist tight. A loud "WHAT?!" betrayed his disbelief.

Indeed, Vincent, though battered and breathless, had used that brief distraction to flank the gunman's side; fast enough to catch him unawares.

Time for some serious retribution. Vincent quickly and ruthlessly twisted the whole arm around so as to force an opening in Davoren's side. There, he delivered his hardest blow, striking his gun at such an angle it snapped the gunman aside. Vincent then exerted all his might into one beautiful arm swing, which brought his gun like a ram directly into Davoren's face. Steel collided hard into bone.

The impressive impact sent the gunman tumbling back. However, he soon recovered enough balance to flip over again, where he crouched down like an untame animal, both guns still in hand.

An untame animal, indeed. Savage anger raged bright across those pink eyes. His grit teeth were bared as hard gasps fumed their way through. Davoren's muscles bristled with keen hatred. They could fight on forever, yet neither man it seemed would ever overpower the other!

Endurance definately would choose Vincent to embody it. He stood slouched up right before Davoren's hateful sight. A thousand aches and pains, bruises and wounds plagued his body. Exhaustion and dizziness burdened his shoulders. Yet he bore the ordeal with an unnaturally stoic face.

Such coollness struck a sharp contrast to his miserable, tattered appearance. He had lost all sensation of his chest. His claw clutched his injured side, already soaked red from the treacherous wound. Every desperate breath wrangled his soul more, with this murderous pain leading a carnage through his torn lungs.

Blood was everywhere, hot and moist. It clogged his throat. It seeped through his wounds, sometimes dripped onto the floor. A thick red colour smeared along his pallid face. It added such deadliness to his crimson gaze.

Amazing he hadn't collapsed yet. Even standing itself seemed to require effort. But Vincent returned Davoren's glower with icy sternness. He would suffer an eternity, if in the end it meant retrieving *her* back into his arms. That determination kept him firm upon both feet.

Just a few more minutes, he repeated to himself, just a few more....

They should have resumed battle, for neither man would surrender to the other. However, Vincent was perplexed when he instead noted Davoren's whole face darken from rage to fearful dread. His pink eyes tensed, as if he'd just detected something he loathed most to see. Davoren slowly turned his anxious attention to the side. Similarly, Vincent and the two ex-Turks looked in that direction.

Rufus stood but a short distance away, staring wide at the ruined gunman, and no one else. For the first time since this war began, they looked each other straight in the eye. Deep blue fastened upon fiery pink.

Absolute silence chilled the heart. Time itself froze to watch this scene. In truth, nobody knew where Rufus had appeared from, or how much he had seen. But it was clear this sight shook him to the very core.

His blank face reflected the stunned state of his mind. He stood in plain view, unafraid, with both hands loose by his sides. His eyes shone many emotions floundering in an inner storm. There was terrible confusion. Tension. Anxiety. And so much horror, not from the gunman himself, but what this scene meant.

Strange enough, Davoren remained locked in place more rigid than a statue. His gaze absorbed all those emotions, perhaps more than he cared for, yet failed to flinch any reaction. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the boy's, even though it aroused such a fierce turmoil inside.

So fierce, in fact, it suddenly sparked Davoren to intense, red-hot rage. He broke away from those eyes by force. Whatever the reason, Rufus' presence here provoked him to violence; a violence which erupted into instant action.

All his anger targetted Vincent again, whereby he bellowed some wordless battle-cry. The gunman charged forth at a phenomenal speed. Vincent barely managed to block as this madman tackled him head-on, thus sending them both tumbling over the balustrade. During the plummet downwards, Vincent forcefully wrenched himself free, just in time to land on the hall floor, then dash away. Davoren flipped feet-first onto the ground, and persued at once.

Rufus rushed up to the balustrade. From his place above, he caught sight of the two enemies disappear into the labyrinthine corridors below. His gaze strained to an intense gleam, fraught by horrible premonitions and confusion. If one were allowed just a glimpse into this boy's mind, it would be impossible to unravel his flustered thoughts from an entanglement of memories.

That man...whose eyes betrayed a dangerous killer inside, whose aura emanated such menace...was that Davoren? No. It couldn't be. Blood and battle had transformed him into something savage and so ugly.

Or was this the truth? The truth he had been told about, the truth Davoren had simply concealed from his view.

Rufus' anxious thoughts ran clear: he couldn't understand the gunman. But there was something hideously wrong in what he had just witnessed. There was something wrong with the Davoren he had just seen. This madness must cease...somehow...right now!

A mad buzz swarmed about Reno's head. Rude held him up by the shoulders while he sat hunched over, still struggling to sort his entangled senses. Hot blood streamed down his face. It seeped from a large gash along one side of his forehead. No mistake, Davoren had dealt his a severe blow.

"Reno! Hey Reno! Get a hold on yourself!" cried Rude, fearful the man may faint any minute.

"Argh...s-shit..," he forcefully shook off this giddiness, then glared straight at his friend, "I thought we agreed you'd take the kid 'n hide somewhere safe!"

"I did! We hid HERE till you guys came crashing through... which is something you should be very thankful for!"

"That ain't important now!" declared the exasperated Reno, "Take Rufus 'n get outta here quick! Before things get crazier!"

Rude had to postpone his rebuke for later, in which he nodded in agreement. However, on turning around, both men were astonished to discover the boy had vanished. Their eyes searched around in confusion, then apprehension. Not a trace. Rufus had been standing there just moments ago. Where could he possibly have...

Suddenly, both men looked at each other in wild alarm, having grasped the answer at the same time.

"THAT CRAZY IDIOT!!" snarled Reno. All injuries and feebleness were instantly forgotten as he scrambled onto his feet, then darted away at top speed. He headed for the battle-grounds below.

No Hell could match this wild war-zone. An inferno of corners and corridors, which through this insanity zipped by as a grey haze, full of sinister shadows and shapes. Here two demons fought their final battle. Victory meant the enemy's life, failure meant greusome death. There were no restraints or logic here. Bullets blasted about indiscriminately. Two black figures chased each other in a frezy for blood. Wherever they stormed through, chaos and destruction followed.

To stay alive, Vincent had to keep both speed and sense alive. Despite his ruined condition and howling lungs, he fought at such a frantic pace, oblivious of everything save this war. It wasn't a battle of wits and tactics anymore, but sheer survival. Indeed, Davoren was down to his last few minutes.

His tight grip choked the gun. He couldn't hear anything except the crazy cross-fire. Sometimes, he almost shot the gunman. Other times, Davoren almost ambushed him. They swirled around deeper and deeper in these senseless circles. It never ceased. They had simply drifted far beyond control.

Yet Vincent had to wonder back on that scene just now, when the boy and gunman had met. The unexpected encounter had only lasted a moment, then dissolved to violence again. But in between those two events, Vincent had noticed (quite keenly) how profound the effect had been on Davoren. He could understand Rufus' shock, but the gunman's?

Why hadn't he shot the boy on sight? Rufus had stood there wide open and unarmed. All it would have required was one bullet. Instead, he had taken the battle down here.

Almost as if he wanted to escape.

Escape what? The boy, or his own turmoil? Davoren had only shown Rufus one mask. Was he..angry...even afraid now that the boy had clearly seen the other one?

Vincent's expression darkened further. The more layers he peeled through, the more perplexion he uncovered. Memories floated by. He remembered the moment he shot Davoren, so vivid he could still see the man lying dead in a pool of blood. He remembered their first encounter thirty-one long years later. How much he had changed! Vincent recalled that brief time in the park, when he caught pain..real anguish.. flicker across those pink eyes. He recalled the gunman's rave, especially his bizarre tone while he obsessed about blood shed...he said the sight kept him "alive".

What did it all mean? Davoren...what happened to you?

He had twisted himself into an enigma no one would dare approach, let alone solve. He was locked behind a door, and had discarded the key into the grey mists of oblivion.

Despite this thick fog, Vincent still ventured in. He searched around when he accidently groped something so small. It slowly took shape in between his fingers...slowly as he sought revelation from its touch.

All thoughts suddenly dispersed as Vincent perceived danger up ahead. At the very end of this long hallway, Davoren himself skid out into full view, having now intercepted the enemy's path. Without hesitation, he made a headlong dash straight for Vincent, both semi-automatics bared out. Nor did Vincent stop. He darted forth, drawing out his own gun. They ran on a collision course towards each other, each man at top speed.

There was an edge to Davoren's movements, ruthless and cuttngly brutal, even more than before. His eyes flashed brilliant pink; the glare of a madman.

A dark demon drove Vincent forward. Its crimson eyes glowed through his own, brighter than blood set on fire. He ran at full charge.

In the end, however, it came down to a simple ratio: two guns to one.

Vincent took aim to fire, when much to his astonishment, Davoren hurtled one semi-automatic right at him. The weapon spun wildly until it struck Vincent's wrist, so hard it knocked his own gun clean out of his grip. I

t all lasted a blink. Before Vincent even realized he had been disarmed, the insane gunman was right in front of him, still charging forth. Davoren's follow-up came swift: he sprung towards the enemy, at the same time slamming one knee hard into Vincent face. Perfect form, full-impact, no mercy.

It felt as though a concrete ram had collided into his senses, easily sending his flying back in a whirl of painful numbness. Vincent tumbled backwards, over and over, until he crashed back-first into the wall, then slumped down to the ground.

Raw sensations tingled his consciousness amidst a buzz of noises. A blurry haze clouded his eyesight. The mighty blow, in fact, had knocked him back to the end of the hall.

He now saw Davoren still lunge towards him. He saw the other semi-automatic flash at him. Yet awareness and action lingered far apart. In his feebleness, Vincent could not move.

"Hell awaits you, Mr.Valentine!" bellowed Davoren in a victorious frenzy, "Now DIE!!"

In rushed frantic footsteps to intercept right between the two foes. With arms spread wide out, Rufus suddenly flung himself fully in the line of fire, shouting, "DAVOREN STOP!!!!"

Eyes widened from shock. But by then, it was already too late.

One bullet rang out.

-End of Chp.65

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.66

The bullet hears no plea once the trigger has been pulled. It shattered clean through Rufus' desperate cry, straight for his life...his life which stood bare for the taking.

That is, had not the astonished gunman reacted first.

Such speed, such reaction indeed defied belief. By miracle, Davoren barely managed to tilt his aim aside, just before that one bullet rang out. Rufus was whiffed a step back as it zinged right past his face, so close it snatched a lock of hair.

Davoren was still at full charge. Yet rather than collide into the boy, he forcefully skid himself to a halt, using one foot as the emergency brake. The violent friction trailed dust behind until he came to a complete stop, just one step in front of Rufus, and a hair-width from disaster.

With him, the entire war crumbled to a confused halt. Time itself lingered upon this moment to capture every detail. A heavy silence trickled in, so contrary to the previous chaos, one could feel his own heartbeat pound aloud.

Between them the minute lasted an infinity. Stormy ocean blue searched the brilliant pink. Through these lies and false pretenses, past the confusion, just search.

Rufus stood his ground shivering and breathless. Though bewildered by his own miraculous survival, he still held out both arm weakly to block Davoren's way, as if that alone would somehow stop this madness. The turmoil inside showed its intensity on his face, every fine feature stressed to tense sharpness.

He had cried for Davoren to stop, and (surprisingly) Davoren stopped. Now, poor Rufus could only gape at the gunman, and await whatever may follow next. It seemed he hadn't planned anything beyond stopping the madman.

Vincent had not expected this boy to interfere, much less to see him still alive afterwards. Nevertheless, he owed him his life. This precious pause had been enough to gather his scattered senses again, at least disperse this buzzing daze from his consciousness.

Thrashed and battered bloody, Vincent sat hunched over with face buried in hand. The boy stood right in front of him. However, Vincent soon peered through his fingers, where his keener observation wandered over to the gunman.

If Rufus were breathless, then Davoren was gasping from perturbation. No physical blow, no matter how brutal, had in as much effected him as this second encounter. Nor had such a fatal near-miss ever paled his face to such stark anxiety. Beads of sweat rolled down. Vincent noted how harsh sounded Davoren's breaths, like wind rasping through tight chest muscles. His pink eyes stared wide into the boy's. His tattered appearance, with his white hair in such dangling disorder, accenuated the wildness of that gaze.

Vincent's expression darkened in contemplation. Very slowly, he climbed up to his feet again, leaning himself against the wall for support.

The tension became increasingly palpable. Neither enemy stirred, but beheld this boy.

That bullet should have killed Rufus point-blank. There was no way he could have survived unless Davoren had so quickly diverted his aim. He knew it. Vincent knew it. And when calmed again, Rufus would realize it too.

Hadn't the Professor ordered him to kill Rufus too? Then why divert fire...why *stop* when he could have just blasted his way through? It was such an easy target. Yet twice already, Davoren had shunned both opportunities.

Instead, there he stood at an utter loss, unable to even brush aside a mere boy; a boy who for all his bravery could only hold out his two scrawny arms as an obstacle.

Even Davoren himself seemed unable to explain himself, which bemused him all the more.

A mad rush of footsteps suddenly shattered the moment. Awash with aggravation, Reno stormed onto the scene from behind. On spotting Rufus right in front of the gunman, he instantly cried out, "Ah! Kid! Get away from him!!"

Too late.

Already Davoren had snapped from stupor back to a brutality even more ruthless than before. Rufus grunted a cry as Davoren savagely grabbed him by the hair, then slammed him up against the wall, at the same time pressing the gun into his throat. The boy froze at once.

Stark alarm seized both men. Vincent took a step forward, but instantly thought better. The enraged Reno skid to a quick halt. He impetuously flipped out his charged weapon for an attack.

"Back away, or I'll blast his throat open," ordered the gunman icily. His eyes darted between Vincent and Reno as he drew closer upon the hostage.

From that maniacal glare, both men knew there was a real chance he may follow his threat. Vincent stood still. Reno stiffened, torn between his refusal to obey and gambling the boy's life. His fingers still itched for an attack. Perhaps he could lunge in fast before..

"Don't try it, punk!" roared Davoren against such dangerous thoughts. He shoved the whole muzzle further into poor Rufus' throat, almost choking him, "Just back away NOW!"

No use. If this shrewd man could read their minds, then he could definitely anticipate their moves. Reno wouldn't take the risk. So, he resentfully dropped his stance, and backed two steps away. The disappointed nightstaff hung dead by his side.

Davoren had won the upper hand thanks to luck and quick wit. Now he held both allies at a safe distance. Neither man would dare attack. And even if Vincent did, Reno would not, not with Rufus as hostage; they had to act together. In other words, this alliance was strained in the middle.

Triumph tickled Davoren. His lips curled into a grin, "Heh..heheh...my! What a delightful predicament THIS is...little Rufus ShinRa at gunpoint," he peered over to Reno, "Yes..you'd be *pretty* upset if I killed him, hmm?"

Reno boiled with rage. Through grit teeth, he growled restrainedly, "I swear...you harm that kid, and I..."

In truth, Reno knew not *what* he could do against such a devil. He trailed into a hateful silence, which only amused Davoren more.

Vincent, on the other hand, showed an unnaturally stoic front. Behind those crimson eyes he pondered the situation at hand. Instinctively, he searched for his forsaken gun. It was spotted some distance away on the floor; too far to make a dive for it. And he certainly daren't challenge the gunman bare-handed.

Vincent's keen scrutiny returned to the scene. He noted one detail which particularly struck his interest: Davoren's hands were trembling. Just a slight tremor. But it seemed no evil smile could fully conceal the hot storm within.

Deeper sunk Vincent's thoughts upon this enigma.

Soon, Davoren's delight cooled down. He still held the boy up against the wall, having yanked his head so far back to expose his throat. There, the cold muzzle pressed into his skin for all to see.

Rufus never flinched any resistance, nor could he even swallow past the muzzle. His eyes twitched anxiously just to stay shut. He seemed to expect that bullet any second.

Everyone, in fact, seemed to expect it in this long moment of agony. However, Davoren suddenly released the boy. He took one step back, not to spare him; the gun still remained fixed on Rufus' face, but rather to behold him in his helplessness.

The boy hesitantly re-opened his eyes. No one could guess what raced through his mind: fear? Anger? Feelings of betrayal? After another moment, Rufus steadied himself upon his feet again. He stood at gunpoint, attention focused beyond the muzzle upon a bright gaze of murderous derrangement.

Blue met pink again. Everything else receded to oblivion.

"Why are you doing this?" asked Rufus. There was no trace of anger or fear in his bearing, only quiet sadness.

"It's the Professor's orders, boy," conceded the gunman unaffectedly, "I am to kill everyone here. You've outlived your usefulness, and so, you too must die."

Poor Rufus could not reply.

"You should have stayed safe in hiding. Tell me, what did you hope to achieve by coming here?"

The boy's resolution wavered a bit against the direct question. He fumbled to put his muddlement into words, "...something..very wrong has happened to you, Davoren..so wrong it shakes me inside just to look at you now. This..," Rufus gestured all around the battered battleground, "..all of this has changed you into something I know is wrong!"

"And?" Davoren cut short, "You came here to stop me?"

Such cold words, mocking him to the core. Again, the poor boy struggled to reply, "I came here...because I..I.."

"You came here because you were afraid of what you saw back there. You wanted your stupid caretaker back, not this. You came here because you are a fool!"

Rufus blinked at the blunt insult.

"Has it ever occurred to you, boy, that maybe the only reason I've taken care of you...is because the Professor ordered me?"

Apparently not, as the boy stood lost amidst a whirl of consternation, more intimidated by Davoren's eyes than his gun.

Yes. Vincent recalled Rufus fiercely refute that idea: that Davoren couldn't be the "friend" he valued, but just a hollow machine who served Hojo. Davoren was the sole source of kindness and warmth this lunatic possessed. Yet how sharply this situation contrasted against the boy's stories.

Both were true, but which the reality?

The gunman beamed into a sneer as he beheld Rufus' visible anxiety, "Oh yes. Us Turks..we're a special type of monsters. We're bred to swallow ANY order, and obey....the perfect type the likes YOU and your father want."

"..me..and my father..?" echoed the boy in amazement.

"You and your father."

He slightly tilted his head aside. Through loose hair strands, his eyes blazed pink madness, "I served your illustrious father thirty-one years ago. And I've heard plenty about you, Rufus ShinRa. Like father, like son. You live in your wonderful play-house society high above, surrounded by wealth, toys and pretty faces. It's glamour for show, but dirty hands beneath the tables. Me, Vincent, your friend over there...WE are your dirty hands."

Whatever Rufus understood from this half-demented rave profoundly disturbed him. From their places, both allies listened in anticipation. It took Reno every effort to restrain his rage. However, Vincent found much interest in listening.

"Why sure!" declared the madman all around, "Anything you order, we obey! We sully ourselves in people's blood and tears, so that bastards like you stay clean and innocent."

"I...don't remember," mumbled Rufus weakly.

"And what a convenient little excuse THAT is!"

Such a sudden outburst startled Rufus to look up again. All traces of amusement had vanished from Davoren's face, replaced by hot anger furrowed deep. His pink eyes glowered behind a rigid gun, both fixated upon him alone.

"If we are all guilty here, then you're probably the guiltiest one out of us. If God does care for justice or retribution, then you DESERVE to have fallen, Mr. New-Age President Rufus ShinRA," Davoren spat out the title through venomous sarcasm, "..a huge Hellfire to cast you from your throne down to the mud...down with the rest of us! Our crimes are your crimes. Your hands are dirty too, and you just answer 'I don't remember'. PAH!"

It wasn't the gunman accusing. It was an endless storm of voices, all blustered by hatred. The era had died, but their misery still remained. They still charged their wrongdoers with crimes, still cursed their existence. And now Rufus knew he received a fair share too. It did not matter whether he remembered or "conveniently" forgot. Just like Davoren, it only made the voices angrier.

Vincent couldn't argue with Davoren, however harshly he may have spoken. The old ShinRa jackal had moulded a new one. There stood the product: a power-hungry, arrogant and utterly merciless monster. Around him stood his "dirty hands": demons who'd dress in suits. They'd stalk the inky night in his service. No fire could ever cleanse Rufus. He was like them, forever damned by crimes.

The boy almost seems able to hear those accusing voices inside his mind. He struggled to understand this hideous truth until his head hung low.

"..somehow..I already knew that, Davoren," admitted the boy dejectedly, "When the fire burned me...when the pain ripped me up, and the guards beat me...I somehow knew I deserved it all. I deserve to be punished, even though I couldn't remember why."

The gun remained pointed. Davoren said nothing. Another struggle spiralled up Rufus as both fists tightened. He looked directly into the gunman's eyes, angry desperation strained upon his own face.

"That nightmare..me trapped in there..with..with that man always following me..it was real! All of it!" he cried straight out, "But if that's how I really was, and you felt so angry...why didn't you tell me before? Why didn't you tell me of my past?!"

But Davoren instantly snapped against the outburst with triple the rage, unable to tolerate another word. He grabbed the stunned Rufus by the throat, then yanked him up right under his pink, icy glare. Needless to say, Reno started in alarm, while Vincent tensed.

"Tell you, boy?" growled Davoren, "Why? Weren't you already miserable enough, living your life in shambles? Even a DOG lives a better life than yours!"

His stern voice drilled into Rufus. The poor boy struggled for air as the grip squeezed further upon his windpipe. Pain strained his eyes shut.

"That infernal scanner tears your brain apart. The guards beat you day-in, day-out, then stuff your system full of drugs. You always rave in fear, about 'fires' and some 'man' who chases you. All of that and you still wanted me to tell you?!"

He broke all restraints upon a brash fury, rattling the boy once just for emphasis, "Tell you once used to be the most powerful, richest figure on the Planet? Look at you then, look at you now! Tell you, Rufus? Why? To make you MORE MISERABLE?!"

"So..that's..w-what you were trying to..do..," wheezed the boy in a cracked whisper.

Davoren only raised one quizzical eyebrow.

"Whenever the nightmare..crawled up on me..you beat it away, and tried so hard to cheer me up again-ugh!" Rufus barely managed to open one bleary eye, "All this time ..y..you were trying to..hide me from punishment."

The interpretation, so plainly presented, caught Davoren off guard for a moment. He simply stared back at a total loss, looking into that eye which struggled to stay focused. Soon however, his face darkened again to a deep frown.

Davoren could have crushed Rufus' throat. It was that easy. But instead, he contemptuously flung the boy back, who at once hacked a violent gasp of relief, then hunched over against the wall in dizzy pain. The gunman beheld him in cold silence.

"Argh! You damn bastard!!" bellowed Reno for vengeance, preparing to lunge in. However, he stopped dead when Davoren aimed his gun again at the hostage, this time with rigid fixation. A silent warning that any wrong move would be fatal.

Though fuming red with anger, Reno returned to a helpless spectator. He gripped his staff very tightly, one thought he'd snap it in two. What would he give to snap Davoren's neck instead.

Unlike his hot-tempered ally, Vincent remained cool in place. Inside his keen mind, he churned a dozen thoughts while observing Davoren, especially after Rufus had momentarily disarmed him with those words. Each thought was an irregular fragment of an enigmatic face. If he unlocked the door, and pieced the puzzle together, he knew he'd find the true face behind there.

He knew because he had finally found the key.

The ruthless gunman stood unbothered by the surroundings. Instead, with chin turned up, he callously viewed the hostage from behind a fixed gun. There was no pity in his eyes, just cruel mockery.

"My dear boy," he patronized, "that explosion has degraded you to a ragged, frightened lunatic. You haven't even sense enough to survive anymore. You NEEDED someone to take care of you. When you were starving, I had to feed you. When you were shivering naked and hallucinating, I had to clothe and calm you down again."

Rufus listened with head bowed low. Loose hair strands fell between his fingers, adding such wretchedness to his beggarly appearance.

"That's how pathetic you are now, Rufus ShinRa. You need to rely on a *stranger* to keep you alive!"

The boy still did not stir.

Reno seethed on the verge of another interference when something else caught his attention. At the end of the corridor, Rude hid behind the dark corner, having snuck here undetected. He stood perfectly still. His stern brown eyes fought nervousness to transfer a message over to Reno.

This message contained a simple bargain. It was their final hope.

Reno's expression turned quite solemn, whereby he glanced to Vincent. Vincent understood at once, then flicked his sight back to the unwary gunman. All this time Davoren spoke, a secret plan brewed about. He was too occupied with Rufus.

"Take a good look!" he snarled in a passion, "This man you see right now...ugly, tattered and demented...this is what I really am! I am the Professor's slave! I live to obey his orders! He ordered me to keep you alive, I obeyed. He ordered me to kill you, I will obey!"

"And when you brought me those rice-cakes, were you obeying the Professor too?" retorted Rufus firmly, removing his hand to reveal a calm face. He returned none of Davoren's malice or bitterness.

It was a question only these two understood.

The gun did not waver off its mark. Davoren gazed back in a long, pensive silence. Slowly, a gentle smile crossed his lips, giving his face such unnatural warmth.

"Don't give me that look, Rufus," he begged rather playfully, "Heh. I wouldn't know whether I should kill you...or just adopt you."

They'd never find the answer. Before Davoren could decide, the now three allies lunged into sudden action.

The scene plunged into instant madness, fast-paced without pause. Vincent dived straight in at Rufus for a swift tackle. His hard claw secured the boy as they tumbled over across the floor, where Vincent

snatched his own discarded gun, then recovered onto his feet. All strength converted to speed. Grabbing the bewildered boy even more tightly, Vincent fled at once.

Davoren couldn't react amongst three simultaneous events. Just as Rufus was rescued, Rude swung out of his hide-out, forcefully wrenching open a gasket in the process. Loud, icy steam instantly choked the hall to the brim; the perfect smoke screen.

Sight went foggy, but not before Reno hurtled two mega-charged fire missiles at the vital support girders above. Both fireballs blasted their targets dead on. Soon, the walls groaned under the mammoth weight of the now unsupported delivery system. The groan escalated to a thunderous rumble as the whole ceiling stormed to a collapse, dragging down the system as well.

The demolition zone spread outwards, swallowing everything into darkness.

Vincent never once glanced back. He flew beyond the limit, holding onto the boy through this chaos. Behind pursued a tidal wave of destruction. Its insane roar deafened his ears to numbness. The ground shook angrier than an earthquake. Yet both feet carried him forth regardless. They sought escape.

Down the maze he ran in a race against time, faster and faster, until deliverance shone up ahead. He boosted himself to a final dash forward, barely clearing the premises as it all caved in behind.

The violence swept both men far across the floor, neither one able to co-ordinate any balance amidst such madness. By sheer determination, Vincent recovered his focus. He huddled over Rufus as a spume of fiery rubble and dust rained Hell upon them.

Reno and Rude had struck an unspoken deal with Vincent: he was the fastest. If he would save the boy, then they would "handle" Davoren. With their eyes they had sealed the pact, and together went into action.

Now, Rufus was safe; Vincent battered from battle but well alive; the two ex-Turks and Davoren missing, with the battlegrounds in ruins.

-End of Chp.66

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.67

Vincent did not stir until the mad rumble in his ears subdued, whereby he then lifted his head for a peak. At first, dust hampered his vision. Yet as it gradually dispersed, Vincent's senses sharpened to a fine focus again. He instantly recalled the present situation.

The Delivery System had collapsed. Luckily, they had escaped in time, where the violence had swept them half-way down an open bridge, clear out of danger. Here he lay upon the dirty floor, with the boy huddled safe beneath him. Around them loomed a silence eerie enough to chill any heart.

Out of caution, Vincent waited another moment. When nothing emerged, he finally pushed his weary body up to its knees, wincing against severe muscle strain. Rubble and dust tumbled off his sore back. His long black hair dangled in dishevelment.

Inside, fever boiled his ruined chest. Nevertheless, he helped the boy sit up. Rufus struggled weakly amidst a daze of confusion. Vincent even had to steady him by the shoulders. A quick check soon assured the boy had sustained no injuries (Vincent had made sure of that). The chaos had just shaken him a bit.

However, Rufus sprang to full alarm when he suddenly remembered, "Reno..and Rude!..Davoren!! What..w-where are..??"

Such anxiety searched all around in blind desperation. At a loss, Rufus turned to Vincent for answers. But the aloof man only stood up. He left the boy to resolve his own turmoil.

His back ached miserably, more so as he limped a few steps ahead. From a distance, Vincent beheld the ruins in long thoughtfulness. Rufus remained slouched upon the floor. He gaped beyond Vincent, at the devastation up in front. His face paled.

In a disastrous chain of events, the first cave-in had brought the upper levels to a secondary collapse, causing a massive landslide as the centre stormed down. In fact, it now stood as a steep hillside of garbage and rubble. Corridors were crushed beneath unsupported ceilings. Pipelines were torn out.

Both men viewed this wreckage, Vincent without any visible emotion, Rufus with rising consternation. There were mangled steel and jagged brick. Pipes and girders protruding out like gravestones throughout.

Devastation spared nothing. It all sloped downwards, some debris even spilled upon the bridge. No body could have survived such destruction. Indeed, just the thought of getting buried thus made one's blood curdle.

They had been quite fortunate to escape alive out into the open. This bridge, a rather sturdy, wide structure, extended across. Smaller bridges intercepted its path at right angles. Far down stretched a black abyss, so deep it seemed bottomless, like a tunnelway to oblivion.

For a long time, Vincent's cool gaze lingered upon the mountaneous debris in front, musing his thoughts amidst a grave suspicion. The still air cautioned him not to lower his guard just yet.

Yes. The two ex-Turks certainly deserved praise for their bravery, if not at least admiration for their steadfast loyalty to Rufus. In exchange for his safety, they had scored an impressive blow against Davoren, maybe enough to kill him.

But there showed no sign of them anywhere. Perhaps they too had perished, perhaps they had managed to escape. Vincent hoped the latter. As much as he begrudged it, both men, especially that loudmouthed Reno, had proven worthy allies.

Vincent could discern the boy's heart sink. No doubt, Davoren would flood his memory, already causing him much trouble and anxiety. He would realize what both ex-Turks had bargained for with Vincent: his life for this attack.

And now where lay everything? Beneath the rubble. He could not rejoice in losing Davoren or his other two friends. Instead of stopping this madness, the madness had almost swallowed him.

It's a war that tears him between opposite sides, mused Vincent gloomily.

Silence and all thoughts dispersed when a loud clamour suddenly resounded out. It emanated from above, somewhere behind the debris. Vincent automatically gripped his gun in stern anticipation. The bewildered Rufus scrambled up to his feet. The clamour resounded again, this time with double anger.

There was a survivor after all, but who?

The third clamour answered that question. From their position below, they witnessed a mighty foot kick its way to freedom amidst an entanglement of bar and stone. Soon, a battered figure crawled out. Through chaotic white hair, Davoren's eyes glared fiery pink.

It only took him a moment to skid down the jagged hillside. There he stood for all to behold; a devil just arisen from the depths of Hell.

Somehow, Vincent was not surprised, nor did his expression waver off its cold stoicism.

"You still intend to fight?" he asked dryly.

"It will never finish...until either one of us dies..," the gunman growled. He staggered against sharp dizziness, but immediately steadied himself again, enough to pull out his own gun, "I have my orders to obey...y-you..have your vow to keep."

Saying that, he took direct aim of Vincent, and waited. Vincent did not respond.

True. As long as both men lived, one would always thwart the other. Davoren would not defy Hojo's orders, even at the cost of his own life. Vincent would never abandon Aeris, not while that vow burned hot upon his heart.

Another clash was imminent. The two bitter foes stood their distance far apart. Between them sparked heated hostility, yet still Vincent would not draw his gun.

Instead, he measured up this man with calmness, so contrary to Davoren's harsh glare. The man wanted to finish this tedious business in a final shoot-out. Just his gun against Vincent's; to the victor goes the spoils (or the enemy's life).

Inside seethed rage, but outside both exhaustion and weakness plagued Davoren's body. It obviously took him much effort to maintain balance, more to steady his shaky aim. His dirty, tattered clothes and haggard eyes all gave him the appearance of a wild animal.

Vincent himself had suffered grievous injuries, from his bleeding side to a battered head. But by comparison, the war had taken its greater toll on Davoren. The alliance had dealt him so many blows, reaching its climax with that massive collapse. Whatever remained of his invincibility level, he had used to crawl out alive. Now, it was almost depleted.

Vincent's face hardened: most likely, he could kill Davoren first. He gripped his own gun more tightly; no backing out now.

But before the tension swelled any further, Rufus, hitherto forgotten, bravely intervened upon the scene. From askance, Vincent watched the young man stand out in plain view. His eyes, like a calm blue ocean, gazed upon Davoren, unafraid of his appearance or the muzzle.

"Davoren, please stop this," he spoke gently.

Such placidity, however, only redoubled the gunman's irritation. He vehemently hissed back, "Spare me the melodrama, boy. Get out of my way."

The weapon remained fixed. Nevertheless, Rufus insisted with the same patient softness, "Davoren, you can't fight anymore."

Vincent stood aloof, continuously darting his keen eyes between these two without any interruption. He let the boy speak.

Davoren had revealed his brutal side to the boy. He had vented out such intense emotions, from hatred to violence. But still, Rufus persisted. As he simply expressed, something was "wrong"; something he foresaw would end with Davoren in a bloodbath.

"And..so what if I die, Rufus?" smiled Davoren humourlessly. His voice trailed far into hushed bitterness, "I don't care. Maybe because living...just breathing..has become a burden.."

Light and darkness, life and death had long become an equivalence to those empty pink eyes. They glared behind a loaded weapon straight at Rufus, nettled inside by such a tempest.

As he gazed back, boy sunk into gradual sadness. He quietly answered, "It's a burden...if you live it all alone, or live it behind a face you yourself hate but cannot discard. But I'd think..if there was one person who truly cared about you, isn't that reason enough to live?"

The argument, though so childlike in its simplicity, struck the gunman at the most sensitive chord. His aim wavered slightly. For a moment, he lost the struggle against an uprising of intense mental anguish.

A certain irony marked the scene; the lunatic now trying to reason with Davoren. Vincent found it uncanny. While Rufus spoke, he seemed to delve deep into himself, and with plain words somehow extract Davoren's core.

Yet that was a secret place, and one was allowed there. Davoren suddenly shook his head, casting off all emotion except red-hot rage, all words except except murder. He fixed his aim again.

"I don't want to see your face!" he roared venomously at Rufus, "Just get out of my way, dammit!!"

Rufus would have tried a second plea. Alas, the winds blew against him. Davoren refused to stop, and Vincent had only granted him one chance to speak. Indeed, Rufus gave a violent start as Vincent now brushed past him, prepping his gun for a bloody finale.

"Ah! No! W-wait!!" he begged. In desperation, the boy grabbed Vincent's claw to thwart his advance.

Just like a child trying to protect its parent from Death. But all in vain. Vincent ruthlessly flung the anxious boy behind: time to end this madness for good.

"You've already defeated him!!" Rufus cried aloud, "Must you kill him too?!!"

Vincent did not listen. Taking a firm stand upfront, he stretched out his arm, and immediately opened full fire at Davoren.

The brutal lead shower pelted the gunman backwards. One bullet after another, every bang louder than the first. Davoren never retaliated; perhaps he couldn't, or maybe he just didn't try.

Vincent paused a split-moment upon his seventh bullet, if only to note Davoren's disorientated state, then fired the eighth. At the other side, Davoren grunted sharply as the gunshot grazed clean through his arm, sending him stumbling back against a spout of bright blood. Yet he refused to fall. Instead, he clutched his wounded arm, and wrestled the dizziness outright to stay standing.

It was over. The barrier had finally shattered.

Again, Vincent paused but did not lower his gun. Rufus stood rooted behind, overwhelmed by speechless horror, and his inability to act.

Pain crumpled Davoren's pallid face as each gasp ravaged his interior more. Yet at the same time, such raw, physical agony fascinated him, like a sensation long forgotten but now fully realized. He glanced into his palm. It was smeared red. Already, the blood trickled down his dangling arm until his grip on the gun became sticky-wet. It even dripped down onto the floor.

Somehow, Davoren found the sight too funny. What started as a crooked smile developed into a derranged chuckle. He declared to Vincent, "S-Saint's alive! I haven't seen my own blood in ages!"

Vincent stared back unamused, nor could Rufus force out his voice through his clogged throat. Soon, the gunman's laughter crumbled to such a coarse cough, one wondered how he still stood. He was deteriorating fast.

"I suppose...you'll have to finish me off quickly, Vincent.." wheezed the sly gunman, "You want to reach your little girl before he does.."

Yes, before Hojo drags her away to eternal darkness. He is finished. Kill him now.

"Ugh!...t-though..I'm sure..you'd rather get some satisfaction out of watching me die..," Davoren teased through a hard-grit sneer. He fed his amusement on Vincent's thoughts, "..watch the life pour out of me...slowly and painfully, eh?"

Hurry. Hurry and kill him! Just pull the trigger once and it will end.

It will end. It must end. He can't fight anymore. He can't even hold up his own gun. For all the trouble he's caused you, from the day he first appeared to this moment, kill him. Cast this demon into the black, murky past...another dead corpse in a pool of blood.

Kill him, Vincent. Isn't that what you want?

"No," refused Vincent calmly, but loud enough for everyone to hear. He lowered his gun.

Neither Rufus nor Davoren had expected this sudden act of mercy. Death of the enemy meant victory. Why should there be mercy? The gunman stood lost in a moment of bewilderment, as if he had perhaps misheard the verdict.

"You have changed into something hideous, Davoren," confessed Vincent demurely, "Until now, I had been content to just think of you as Professor Hojo's puppet-slave..an enemy I had to eliminate," his tone softened into profound thoughtfulness, "But while we were fighting, I suddenly realized something: never once had I asked myself *why* you changed."

Davoren tensed as he felt that crimson gaze search too deep into him. It seemed to unravel many complexities to discover the simple truth hidden inside. No, he did not like that gaze at all.

"Feh! Come now, Vincent!" he mocked with such brash scorn, "I tore that girl from your arms. Remember? Remember all that anger you felt? That hatred? Surely you want to *kill* me for that."

His vicious tone dripped temptation. Vincent's muscles stiffened involuntarily: and how could he ever forget that terrible night? Him standing there helpless...watching Davoren kiss the tearful Aeris...it was all burned clear into his memory. Yes, inside boiled enough rage to kill this gunman.

Not anymore. It seemed Vincent had indeed gained an entirely new insight; something far stronger than any mockery or murderous temptation could destroy. He remained unprovoked.

"At first, I could not understand why or how you could change," Vincent answered Davoren with calm words instead of bullets, "It's strange. You think life, including your own, is so cheap...just as long as there's more blood to shed. You were a dark riddle."

He indicated Rufus with a curt nod, "But this boy gave me the solution. Now I see through you, and for once, I understand you perfectly...more so now than ever."

The atmosphere around lingered in rigid tension, its weight heaviest upon the silent gunman. His unemotional exterior could not conceal the dread inside.

"You and I are very similar, Davoren. There is this wretched pain inside of us. Everything else withers away, but the pain grows until our very lives revolve around it. We plod on, searching for a way..ANY way to get rid of it."

He ventured a step forward, as if to draw some invisible bond closer. Yet if there were any bond, Davoren nervously brushed it aside with a derisive scoff, "What absolute nonsense! Heh! 'Pain'? There is nothing inside of me. It's all hollow and dead."

"There *is* pain, Davoren. I see so much pain and sadness behind your smile," Vincent's gaze reached deeper into that pink brilliance, where it found a warm core hidden there. So gently, he touched it. So gently, he muttered the name.

"...Donal."

Strange how one person could drift through dozens of different experiences unaffected, yet be so violently stirred by a single name. It evokes a storm of memories and emotions. They could be joyful and welcome. Or bitter, shunned but not forgotten.

On hearing that name, Davoren's eyes twitched to a harsh, narrow glare. He stiffened in place, clutching his wounded arm so tight, he could have torn his flesh out.

Rufus looked on in puzzlement. He softly echoed to himself, "..D..Donal..?"

But this scene belonged to three men; two stood pitted against each other, the third was a ghost lingering between them.

"It took me a while, but I finally remembered Donal. I even remember you once spoke about him to me," Vincent reflected coolly upon Davoren's anger, "You loved him dearly. It showed in your eyes, even the warmth of your voice. Yes, you even sold your own beliefs and became a Turk for him."

The gunman growled back, "Stop it."

"And when he died, you were left alone with all this pain and bitterness. That is why you shed blood. You hope that if you shed enough, it will blot over Donal, and you won't feel pain anymore."

"I said stop it!"

"You channel that pain into evil and brutality, then unleash it onto the world around you," Vincent's voice gained impressive strength over Davoren's, "But it doesn't lessen the hurt, does it? It only makes it worse. And you repeat the same cycle again and again until you can't stop anymore!"

The gunman blistered under forced silence, for a moment overwhelmed by this merciless bombardment. Rage burned hot upon his face. His limbs trembled.

Vincent dwelt upon dangerous grounds. The more he unveiled, the greater swelled Davoren's fury. Yet regardless, he peeled through deeper layers, "That night you tried to kill Lucrecia...that's when you first slipped. For a long time, you've been flooded by pain and anger. You hid it all well, but it still grew worse. In the end, pain overwhelmed you, and it turned into this desire to shed blood. It was so strong..so insane, Davoren, you just couldn't resist."

It had taken him this long to finally understand. Thirty-one years ago, he killed this man in a apple orchard. He then placed that memory on the upper shelf, and left it there untouched. No questions. No reflections.

Now that memory filled his mind, and he understood. Davoren was prisoner of a bitter pain he could not escape, so much like himself. But that night, he surrendered his despair to a murderous demon. He could not stop, even at the cost of his own life. What mattered was drowning the pain, in blood if need be.

"And there you stand," Vincent hammered on, "The pain still eats you alive. You still shed more blood...soak your hands in red...let the sight burn you blind...it's all to forget Donal!"

"DON'T YOU DARE SAY MY BROTHER'S NAME, YOU BASTARD!!" exploded Davoren in a sudden burst of passion.

Every time that name was spoken, it wound his wrath tighter and tighter, until at last the coil snapped. He trembled all over, breathless from his own outburst.

"Don't mention him or even utter his name," he hissed, "He was the *first* thing I got rid of. It's all dead in the past."

"I don't believe that," retorted the composed Vincent, "Donal is the *only* thing you still cling to after all these years."

Davoren glared back. Again, he was beaten into silence, unable to stop this torture. Vincent's cool voice forced him to listen to things he obviously did not want to hear. And those ruby eyes spilled out so many secrets he had long kept bottled inside.

Indeed, neither threat nor fiery glower could affect Vincent, not even scorch his composure. He would still speak.

"You think you've truned yourself into an empty shell. You think you've cast off the old Davoren to become Hojo's slave. That's what I..what everyone thought too."

Yes. This hated gunman. The same who had long hounded Aeris, then against all pleas and tears, carried her back to Hojo. He fought like a maniac, stooping to any lows just to obey orders. Everything the "old" Davoren would hate, this one enjoyed. A heartless killer, a hound dog, and a lowly servant for his master.

"But this boy proves us all wrong. He paints your true picture. It is a picture of kindness, pity and protection. You showed him that because you *care* for him, just like you cared for Donal. It's not because Hojo ordered you."

Davoren said nothing.

"The old Davoren hasn't died. He IS alive somewhere within. You've only drowned him in grief, and gave this monster control."

Vincent's gaze softened upon the ruined gunman. Even his tone assumed a certain gentleness as he pleaded, "Bring your old self..your true self..back to the surface again, Davoren. This is just a mask. Behind it, Rufus can still see his caretaker, Donal can see his brother," something like a smile floated past his lips, "..and I can see you..the Davoren who has always been my friend and by far the better man."

Vincent turned slightly away in conclusion, "That is why I have lowered my gun, Davoren. From here onwards, I refuse to fight you."

They stood rivetted in a long moment of silent scrutiny. Vincent's exterior had returned to its unemotional state, yet his crimson eyes lingered upon Davoren. In them brimmed a deep warmth. He waited.

He wanted to destroy this demon, not with blood and fury, but with gentle, simple words...just discard all hostilities and strip the turth to its barest core. To him victory didn't mean the enemy's death. True victory was making Davoren see the truth as he did now.

Davoren had survived so many fatal attacks, yet in the end could not withstand these words. The longer he pondered them, the weaker he grew. Like day fades to night, his harsh anger slowly sunk to wistful sadness, tinted by some shame. From Vincent he glanced to Rufus, then sealed his eyes shut, as if sealing them away from his own emotions.

Davoren dropped his gun to the ground. He was defeated.

The air around brimmed with such sorrow. From afar, Vincent watched the gunman in morose meditation. Tonight had forever changed his view of this man.

During this whole time, Rufus had listened in silence. After some hesitation, he took a step towards Davoren. But the gunman immediately shunned him off by staggering two steps back. He hugged this agony tighter against himself, and would let no one, especially the boy, hold it.

Nobody spoke. What could be said? There are some scars that remain open, and no words could ever stop the bleeding. How well Vincent knew that.

At that moment, he suddenly discerned an insidious presence lurk nearby. Vincent darted his alarmed attention down one of the side-bridges. There at the entrance stood a wasted black figure. Its narrow yellow eyes glared upon this scene, particularly Davoren.

It was none other than Professor Hojo.

-End of Chp.67

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.68

If ever a presence evoked such dread, Hojo's well exceeded any other. All around, ghosts and ghouls crowded the shadows to behold their king, a devil worst than Satan himself. The creature stood poised at the very end of the side-bridge. His lanky frame could barely be distinguished from the darkness. Yet his round specs, like two brilliant flashlights, gleamed yellow malice from one side to the other; from Vincent and the boy, over to Davoren.

Nobody knew when or how Professor Hojo had crept here, nor did the scene require much to understand: just the sight of the gunman, with his weapon flung upon the floor, explained it all.

Apparently, the sly Professor had foreseen such treachery. Indeed, that peculiar "resentment" he caught in Davoren's eyes had long played upon his suspicions. So strong, Hojo hadn't pursued Aeris as believed (he could capture her anytime), but instead, lurked the shadows while observing the battle from afar.

And much to his displeasure, his suspicions proved correct.

"I might have expected you'd eventually betray me, Mr.Davoren," Hojo hissed severely, "But never had I dreamed it would be for THIS!"

The monster, already fuming rage, emerged from the darkness, out where everyone could feel his odious aura. His hard glare warned of dire punishment. From his place, however, the gunman only gazed back in a mixture of indifference and fatigue.

"You are mistaken, Professor. I am still your slave. You can kill me if you want, or spare my life," Davoren's eyes strayed far into sorrow as he added tiredly, "...it never mattered to me. Ever since I lost him..it never mattered."

Beyond that, he could say no more; the words got caught in his throat. Gone that smiling confidence and brutality. All drowned by lonesome despair. As he appeared now, even breathing seemed a heavy burden.

In the end, nothing had changed. Davoren may have succumbed, but he still considered himself Professor Hojo's property; a lowly dog who simply did not care how his master treated him.

Unfortunately, the Professor was neither amused nor pleased. He regarded this as outright treason, and would not forgive. For by discarding his gun, Davoren had openly defied orders. Hojo could take his life, but he could never make him fight again.

He could never make him kill the boy.

For a long moment, Hojo stood there arrogantly posed while pondering this problem, never once lifting his glower off the traitor. Irritation crumpled his whole face. Even his high forehead pinched over into a tight knot. He may have appeared wasted: his clothes, especially the labcoat, were ragged; his raven-black hair dangled all about in chaos. But no one dared demote the eeriness this withered creature emanated. That alone seemed to hold this entire scene in aching suspense.

Whatever verdict Professor Hojo reached, it certainly would not be merciful. He tied his two scrawny arms behind, then paced forward. His slow footsteps drummed the beat of Death. All eyes followed.

"Honestly, Mr.Davoren," he snorted with enough venom to poison the man, "I always thought you were a sentimental idiot, even back then. I cannot understand why everyone admired you so much. The 'great' leader of the Turks, more prone to petty emotion than reason!"

A dreadful premonition spiralled up through the air. Vincent remained stern in place. Anticipation darkened his demeanour, more so as he gripped the gun tighter. To be honest, he knew not what he'd do if the Professor tried to harm Davoren. Rufus lingered tensely behind. Quite obviously, he feared for the gunman.

To contrast, Davoren showed the least concern. Let Death take him, or may he lived forever in contempt. Either way he didn't seem to care. He stood slouched up upon two weak feet, still clutching his injured arm even though he hardly noticed the pain; the mental anguish felt far more bitter.

Since he lost "him", it never mattered. The loss had carved a wound deep into his heart, where everything drained away: not just strength, but emotion, will, and integrity.

The side-path merged into the main bridge. It led upon the wide space separating Vincent and Davoren. The callous Professor stepped here, so that between them, both men could see him in full view. Hojo confronted the traitor straight out, almost pouncing on him. For now, he ignored the two men in the background.

"And this only proves my point! Look what you betray me for! A bumbling lunatic!" snarled the scientist, gesturing indignantly towards Rufus, "That you would develop such a pathetic...'soft spot' for this wretch! UGH!"

His open brashness outraged the listeners more than Davoren himself. Rufus scowled. His fists tightened to restrain his anger and rising anxiety. Though Vincent's visage remained stone-hard, inside boiled deep hatred.

Nevertheless, they remained silent. Davoren let the brazen scientist snub him to the dirt; the experience certainly was not new. He accepted it all with vacant eyes cast downwards.

Hojo could have killed him there and then, However, the slimy-skinned monstrosity, after another violent oath, suddenly wheeled half-way around to face the other two men.

Events brought them to a second encounter. He returned Vincent's glare with twice the spite: this stubborn man was rapidly becoming a thorn in his side. Only two ways to remove him: Death or relinquish Aeris. (And since Hojo would never even consider the second option, that left Death for Vincent). Not only had he won the battle, he also reduced Davoren to this incompetent state.

His attention then flashed onto Rufus, who though a bit shaken by that viciousness, still maintained a firm stand. It flustered Hojo to know his henchman dared betray him for this "lunatic", when in fact he had only been assigned to keep him alive. However, the Professor's fury slowly abated to contemptuous thoughtfulness. Indeed, those reptilian eyes seemed to hone in on a secret deep within Rufus; somewhere beyond the boy's reach.

"Yes..this wretched boy," he mused aloud, "He suffers from severe emotional trauma and amnesia, with occasional mental instabilities. In any case, it is quite unlikely he will ever recover."

He added, rather mockingly, "Such a shame. He would have told you some interesting facts. This boy is actually an accomplice to my experiment."

At first, Vincent thought he had misheard the word: an "accomplice"? As in a partner in crime? He glanced quizzically towards Rufus. The confused boy only gaped back at the Professor; he didn't understand either.

"Feh! Don't go dragging him in too, Professor," spat Davoren restrainedly. He cared nothing about his own fate, but wouldn't allow anyone to involve the boy, "Rufus wasn't even born when you started this mess."

"No, of course not."

Hojo haughtily adjusted his specs, tilting his chin up for added effect. Upon his lips hovered a mysterious smile, "But you will soon discover, Sir, both father and son have much to do with this experiment."

His riddles stirred more dread. Vincent's sharp gaze narrowed upon this devil in search for answers: what did he mean? How could two ShinRa generations have any share in this madness? On the other side, Davoren waited in anticipation. Obviously, the same questions pestered his mind.

But most anxious of all was Rufus. For some reason, that strange word troubled him to the core.

It amused the cruel Professor to torture his listeners with suspense. He strolled over to the iron balustrade at perfect ease. There, he gripped the railing with one hand, and whimsically gazed into the black abyss below as if into the distant past.

"JENOVA Project consists of two parts, the first being Sephiroth's birth," he spoke deliberately into the pit, "That part, as you recall, was conducted in Nibelheim. Old President ShinRa fully supported it. Oh yes, he provided us with all the necessary equipment, safety, and funding."

Nothing new, but the tension grew so heated, it burned their nerves.

"And..he also supported the second part...*my* experiment... 'Genesis Retrieval'. It was a secret only he and I knew: I would take the Project to a higher level, and he provided me with everything I needed," Hojo's smile widened as he peered askance to Vincent, "...even human test subjects."

It spelled one word: conspiracy.

The sudden revelation struck both Vincent and Davoren harder than lightning. They gaped amidst a whirl of pure shock, having heard the Professor, but failed to fully comprehend. They'd been locked in darkness for an eternity, and now a burst of light had exploded full into their eyes. They've only just begun to see.

"Then..President ShinRa..*knew* you'd alter our bodies?" Davoren blurted in astonishment, "He sent to us Nibelheim...on purpose??"

"It was a set-up," breathed Vincent sternly. His pulse raced to absorb this blow.

"Quite so. President ShinRa..heheh..'donated' you both to science," chuckled the Professor at their consternation, "He then had all your records destroyed, all traces erased, and you became the experiment's property."

The truth stood out bare and ugly,, yet nobody could grasp it. Vincent's mind rushed back thirty-one years. There, President ShinRa greeted him with a cheerful guffaw, between his fingers a cigar. The uncouth, corpulent man would waddle around excitedly, always busy, always scheming.

Scheming ways to strengthen his empire. If successful, "Genesis Retrial" would spawn a creation far superior than any Sephiroth...just the power President ShinRa would love to control. He had always lusted for money and power, as much as Hojo lusted for science. So, they'd combine their interests: he provided Hojo with the means, and Hojo provided him with results.

Hojo had needed human test subjects, and President ShinRa sent him two subjects. Both Vincent and Davoren had long fallen victims to a conspiracy. Only now did they realize it. Thirty-one years ago (such a long time!), they walked into Nibelheim: two men unwarily delivered to become "correcting fragments". All Hojo had to do was receive them.

Vincent still remembered that day ShinRa bid him farewell before his departure. No, he didn't see what ulterior motives lurked behind those piggish eyes. Human life was cheap to ShinRa, and now they truly realized how cheap.

It took Vincent another moment before the truth finally sunk in. On looking across to Davoren, he found the man at a complete loss.

"Time passed," the Professor resumed. He strolled along, running his fingers over the railing in smug confidence, "I became busy testing and analysing Sephiroth, as well as accumulating data on the Cetra. I was preparing for 'Genesis Retrial'. But shortly before I finalised my results, the President was murdered. Then as you know, Rufus ShinRa assumed presidency."

When he stopped, it was a short distance away from Vincent. However, Hojo's shrewd eyes dwelt upon the boy behind, "We held a secret meeting. I fully revealed the details of my experiment to Rufus: theory, results, data, and the ultimate outcome. As I expected, he became much interested."

First came the father. It was the son's turn next.

"He provided me with everything I needed to take this experiment to its final stages. In fact, Rufus ShinRa granted me full use of this secret laboratory and all other services the company could offer."

Rufus' face paled. He stared speechless at the Professor, his "accomplice", as he heard this dark piece of *his* past unfold.

"Without him, I could never have come this far," the amused scientist admitted. He looked around between the two men for a reaction, "Hehee...I even showed him the files on you gentlemen. It listed all your abnormalities, my personal observations, relevant data and analysis. He saw and knew everything about the experiment!"

At first, Vincent could not guess how Rufus had known the experiment's name or why he'd feel he had seen his face before; they had never met. Now it made sense. While that scanner-machine searched for some 'information', it had spilled vague memories upon his mind: his past, the explosion, and the experiment. Endless texts, photographs of the specimens, complex diagrams...all memories of 'Genesis Retrial'."

Hojo scoffed outloud, with an arrogant gesture obviously meant to deride Davoren, "Any pity on Rufus would be wasted; he showed none for you. He could very well have terminated my experiment..possibly had me charged for a string of nonsense. But no. Instead, he supported me. It didn't bother him what I had done to three men in the past or how I used them, just as long as I achieved success."

Rufus would have spoken out had he the strength. He struggled to comprehend this atrocity which now lay at his feet. He tried so hard to remember. Nothing. That memory was forever lost.

But, his sad face admitted this somehow to be true. If he could not recall, he certainly felt the smudge on his consciousness. Just like Davoren had said: it didn't matter whether he remembered or forgot. He was like them, guilty of so many crimes, even this one. No doubt those truthful words stung him now, more bitter because Davoren himself was standing there. Perturbation, anger, and shame all overwhelmed this boy. For once, couldn't he see himself for what he truly was?

Perhaps Davoren too felt the sting of his own words upon Rufus. He watched the boy in a solemnity tinted by gentle concern. Vincent studied Rufus a moment, then returned to Hojo. He felt a keen revulsion sicken his stomach.

Father and son think exactly alike, Vincent thought to himself, they're both greedy jackals.

The second President had merely sought to finish what the first President started, and reap the rewards for himself. Power and wealth held such allurements to the ShinRa's. Both generations were accomplices to this experiment.

However, something strange suddenly caught Vincent's attention. "...three?" he echoed in puzzlement. Hojo had said "three men"

Davoren too noticed the mistake, "There were only two. I was the first, Vincent the second."

"No," argued Hojo. He smirked over his shoulder at the baffled gunman, "You weren't the first. Another man was before you."

His riddle mystified the listeners in an air of premonition. They waited as though for a time-bomb to explode. Hojo, still focused on Davoren, turned to face the confounded man. His aura reeked of something heinous. Everyone, especially Vincent, discerned its foul stench.

"I couldn't perform such delicate alterations fresh upon the human test subjects," spoke the monster to Davoren alone, "I needed a specimen to.. 'practice' on first, just to make sure I get the all the procedures right."

Indeed, a cold, sinister meaning played behind those words. Vincent tensed as he felt it crawl up his spine. For some reason, he didn't want Davoren to hear the rest, as if it would destroy him to dust. But by then, it was already too late. The perplexed gunman said, "I was never told of this."

"And for a good reason," replied Hojo, "That man was your brother."

-End of Chp.68

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.69

Time froze in the dead of silence.

One sentence. Five words, yet they pierced clean to the inner most core. Davoren stood there solid, too petrified to even breathe. Around him swirled a whirlwind of raw emotions no mind could grasp.

That man was your brother.

His eyes gaped wide. The words still echoed through his stunned ears. Across the bridge, Vincent stood stone-rigid. The unexpected blow had struck him dumb, rendering him unable to gather his scattered thoughts. Rufus lingered behind no less shocked. Of all bombshells, this one caused the most horror.

That man was your brother.

"..you lie," Davoren's voice rasped out dryly.

"No," insisted Hojo, "Your full name is Davoren J. Murdock, correct? That man was a Turk too. His name was Donal J. Murdock."

"You lie!" he thundered back. Anger and fear strained his face tight, "My brother disappeared on an escort mission to Wutai! They never found his body, but-"

"Oh, is that what they told you? Here, let me enlighten you!" exclaimed the professor with such mockery, it scathed Davoren back to silence, "Yes, your brother was sent to Wutai. However, it was planned on a certain night, he would be abducted, and smuggled back to Midgar. He was brought to another lab facility, actually. There, I conducted all necessary experiments on him."

Davoren could have denied it..shut his ears and ran far away. But the ugly eyes of truth gaped into his, and he could not budge. Terror slowly tangled his mind. The story awakened him from one nightmare to a reality far worse.

He faltered anxiously, "..and President ShinRa..knew of this all along..?"

"Of course!" Hojo brushed the stupid question aside, "He sent him to Wutai and masterminded the whole set-up."

Davoren did not need to hear the answer. He already understood: President ShinRa had played him for a fool, and he never realized it until this moment.

In the background, Vincent stood suppressed under stern anger, listening to this infamy. The conspiracy all wove into one cloth: Professor Hojo had required two male human test subjects. The President complied, and his choice fell on his two best Turks. But first, Hojo requested a "dummy" specimen for practice (as if this were a game!) Any female specimen would have been inappropriate, so Cindy was overlooked. That foreigner Turk, Gerald, was excluded too. Probably, the President feared his disappearance might spark some international investigation, and that would jeopardize their plans.

So, he gave Donal to Professor Hojo. And once Vincent was accepted into the ranks, The President decided to give both him and Davoren to the experiment.

"He was quite young as I recall!...around the boy's age, hm?" declared Hojo, nodding once towards a very troubled Rufus.

Davoren emptily stared back. He could barely keep steady anymore, let alone find the strength to speak.

Which pleased the Professor quite well. He rubbed his chin, all the while sneering at the speechless Davoren, "I remember him because he raved so much during the tests...it was quite incredible. Yes, he became hysterical and cried. He struggled non-stop. I even had to keep him drugged the whole time. But despite that, he always screamed out some name...probably yours."

The joke was too delicious. Hojo gave one insolent guffaw, "But of course, you never knew that! You still thought he was somewhere in Wutai!! HA HA!!"

Vincent grit his teeth. Inside, he seethed on the verge of strangling this creature, if only to silence him: he had revealed many outrageous truths, but **this** was simply going too far!

Davoren had endured many, many attacks. They battered his body and tore his clothes, but none of them pained him as much as this one detail: that his brother had cried out for him, and he did not know.

He had been blind to not see the truth. He had been deaf for not hearing Donal's wail. Now he stood there in a stupor; the ridicule of Professor Hojo and every ghost around, including President ShinRa's.

"Then...is...is Donal alive?" the desperate man asked hoarsely.

Hojo measured up Davoren bottom to top, just a final look before he'd quash him flat. He couldn't wipe that insufferable grin off his wrinkled face.

"Answer me, damn you! Is my brother ALIVE?!"

"No. When I finished the tests and gathered the results, I killed him. His body was destroyed."

Silence again. Davoren's ghastly-pale face showed how deep the words had stabbed him: straight into an open wound. Pain and grief gushed out until it flooded his entire soul. He began to tremble. His eyes, haggard and wide, gazed beyond the Professor, beyond the darkness. What did he see?

Could he see Donal there, looking back at him? In that glazed stare, what horrors were recounted?

Donal...you are a restless soul that forever haunts your brother. Were you abducted from your bed in the dead of the night? While you lay on the operation table, under the tortures of a black demon, how often did you cry for your brother? You must have been cold, frightened, and so alone. You must have suffered terribly...it showed in your sad eyes.

And what could Davoren hear in this deathly stillness? His brother's painful screams, calling out his name? Hojo's cackle, or President ShinRa stuffing his head with lies?

He knew everything. But what did that matter now? The truth had emerged thirty-one years too late.

"..y-y'know..," Davoren faltered, "...I raised Donal..ever since he was a little child. He was more than my family...he was literally my whole life."

His tremulous voice dropped to a bitter whisper coiled in heartache, "And I did love him...I loved him **so** much. There was nothing I wouldn't do, even sacrifice myself a thousand times for him."

The man spoke in a daze, more to himself than anyone else. Hojo was totally uninterested in this display. Vincent, on the other hand, listened in tense thoughtfulness; he sensed Davoren's turmoil rise within himself, growing sharper by the moment.

"I served President ShinRa all those years...took his orders-kill, threaten-anything! And you..," he turned to Professor Hojo, bewildered, "..you were under my nose all along..and t-then..after you altered my body, I became your slave.."

Hojo only squared his shoulders in cold scorn. The boy, overcome by anxiety, watched this tragedy without a word.

"And now..after all these years..you tell me it was you?" in all his life, Davoren never looked more crushed as he asked, "You took my brother..m..murdered him for an experiment. All this time I served you both, I was actually serving his murderers?"

There was no need to reply. For a moment, Davoren lost himself in a tempest. The fierce winds tossed him around so many emotions. They strained his eyes to an unnatural pink brillinace.

Maybe he still saw Donal there. Maybe he felt the mockery shred him to pieces. But this truth, the simplest one of all, hurt the most: all this time, he had been serving his brother's murderers.

The strain tightened and tightened until suddenly, the chord snapped. Davoren's face uplifted to a weak, derranged smile.

"Heh..heheh..I..heheh..," he simpered in madness, "..I find that v-very..funny...heheheh.."

He began to chuckle. Soon, the chuckle erupted into loud, delirious laughter. It rattled his frame until tears streamed down. The demented man couldn't stop. He laughed harder and harder, even staggered back from the intenisty.

Sense was lost. Davoren didn't even seem aware of his surroundings anymore.

They all beheld the madman from afar. Hojo hardly flinched a reaction. Poor Rufus seemed ready to rush forward, but Davoren's crazed appearance kept him well behind. Vincent's face darkened to solemnity. If anyone, he felt that anguish best behind Davoren's laughter. It was so similar to his own: something horrible carved into their consciousness. A burden without release.

The burden suddenly became too heavy. Davoren collapsed hard to his knees and hunched over, where the maniacal laughter dissolved into bitter, hard-grit sobs. Here sat the most pitiful sight of all: the sight of a helpless man reduced to tears.

He had served his brother's murderers. He had served his brother's murderers. Donal had screamed out for him...

..and Davoren had served both his murderers.

Everyone saw the truth tear him inside out. Over and over it stabbed him until all grief exploded to the Heavens above, "MY GOD, DONAL!! WHAT HAVE I DONE?!! WHAT HAVE I-UGH!!"

It struck dead-on. The attack pierced straight through Davoren's lungs, catching that desperate wail midway in his throat. Much to Vincent's and Rufus' alarm, the man instantly doubled over against a severe coughing fit. In truth, Professor Hojo had grown weary of this woeful scene.

"Tsk! for shame, Davoren," he scolded with arms crossed, "A grown man over sixty, throwing a tantrum like a six year old child."

Vincent's muscled stiffened. An imminent disaster rang through the air.

Davoren struggled to breathe, but hacked out a spume of blood instead. He convulsed at a loss for voice and strength, pinned prisoner beneath Hojo's glare. It seemed Hojo possessed greater power over the gunman. Indeed, his fit reached such ferocity, Vincent even felt it nibble at his own chest.

"This is the thanks I get for saving your measly life," regretted the callous scientist, "Ungrateful git! If it wasn't for me, you'd have-"

No more degradation. Davoren angrily cut him short by slamming his hand against the floor, all in a feeble attempt to rise. Despite the agony and through his tears, he growled out forcefully, "I would rather...burn in Hell..than owe my life to YOU!!"

The spiteful declaration won the monster's contempt. He scoffed back, "Then you can consider your wish granted!"

The punishment was gruesome death, no hesitation or mercy. In one swift movement, Hojo swung round one arm in deadly grace. A fiery-green blaze immediately swallowed his whole hand, sparking wild flames all about. His glare caught the target in sight. Next blink, and he hurtled this massive alien energy straight at the helpless gunman, just as Rufus cried "DAVOREN!!" in wild alarm.

Davoren simply blanked out.

Vincent, however, reacted on sheer impulse. One split-moment before Hojo fired, he shoved the boy far back out of danger, at the same time dashing forth at a phenomenal speed, past the scientist, straight down the bridge. He forgot his wounds and weakness for demonic momentum. Right now, all focus rivetted on reaching Davoren in time.

The mega-blast wreaked havoc hot upon Vincent's heels, roaring destruction as it tore the floor apart. Still, Vincent led the race. Faster and faster, until at last he dove head-in for the stunned gunman. He miraculously swept Davoren aside, just before the chaos screamed by in disappointment. Instead, it collided into the slope of debris just ahead.

Vincent suddenly lost hold of events. A thunderous boom deafened his ears. He felt a hurricane force blow him away, where his shoulder broke through a hard barrier. Nevertheless, he held tightly onto Davoren. They seemed to plunge down in slow motion. A rain of debris surrounded them. Dazed, Vincent somehow looked up. He saw the bridge grow farther and farther.

He understood: that explosion had blasted them both through the balustrade, right off the bridge.

Rufus had witnessed the disaster from afar. He could not contain his deep-shaken terror. At once, he scrambled to his feet again and rushed aside to the balustrade, almost tumbling as he leaned far over the rail. There, he caught a brief glimpse of the two figures plummet like dead weights down into the abyss. Darkness swallowed them, and they were gone.

The explosion died to an echo. Soon, an uneasy silence befell the air again. The end of the bridge groaned in devastation, its unfortunate floor riven apart all way downwards. A break in the now mangled balustrade marked where Vincent had crashed through just moments ago, along with him Davoren.

Rufus stood lost in frantic perturbation. He still stared wide into the black pit. He waited for a miracle, but the hollow wind of nothingness only answered back. All hopes sunk until at last, his head bowed to the worst. His loose hair fell in front of his face.

Hojo lingered some distance ahead. He only graced the abyss with one contemptuous glance. He was not too pleased with this twist, much less with Vincent's heroism (or stupidity). Rather, he viewed matters the practical way: he had lost two specimens, and could not retrieve them.

His shrewd gaze eventually fell on Rufus, "Well, boy. Looks like it is just you and me."

The boy heard him. His jaw tightened as both hands gripped the railing harder. Inside, Rufus seemed to battle a surge of hot anger.

"..you'll pay for that," he hissed out.

The scientist only lifted one quizzical eyebrow.

Rufus wheeled around to confront Hojo eye-to-eye, himself so enraged by what this man had done, "I..I don't know how..but I swear, Professor, I'll make you pay DEARLY for that!"

"You're hardly in any position to threaten ME, boy," rebuffed Hojo, not at all amused by such boldness, "Huh! My, how the mighty have fallen. You're just a harmless insect now."

Rufus' face darkened to hateful scowl. Those words, though jeering, made him too aware of his present situation: he was alone against this monster. A lot of good anger would do if he could not act. So, he awaited his fate under silent tension.

"I saved you from that explosion, but you don't even know **why** I bothered," Hojo spoke coolly, "You hold..or rather, held the key to the experiment's success. But still, you don't know why I needed you."

Rufus glared back in suspicion. Indeed, he did not know.

"I needed you...for this."

In announcing that, the Professor reached for his labcoat pocket, and carefully pulled out a small orb. It shimmered a hazy aquatic-blue. A treasure smaller than his palm, Hojo held it out for Rufus to wonder at.

The boy gazed upon this strange orb in a whirl of confusion and dread. But somehow, the glow seemed familiar, like a magical light he had met before.

"..ma..teria..?" Rufus faltered amazedly. He looked to Hojo for an immediate explanation.

Too bad Hojo would not provide any. He retracted the orb back into his long, curled fingers.

"It's a waste explaining anything to a miserable runt like you," slowly, Hojo began to advance forward, "Now then, I could kill you," he checked that thought, "..on the other hand, I will be needing new test subjects since the original two have been lost."

The evil words chilled Rufus to paleness; they held only one meaning. He could not move, not even as Professor Hojo suddenly lunged in like a Cobra for its prey. In this madness, all he could do was raise both arms in front of his face, and squeeze his eyes shut.

Something fast whiffed in front of him. Rufus heard a rough grunt as two bodies collided into each other, one strength against another. But it wasn't him. On opening his confused eyes again, Rufus found a man, tall and quite muscular, had intercepted the attack.

"R-Rude?!" he gasped in astonishment.

"Get outta here!" the man forced through gnashed teeth.

Rude held off the flabbergasted Hojo as if holding back a crushing wall. He focussed all his main power into one shoulder. Sweat poured down. If he could not push Hojo back, he'd certainly not let him advance another inch.

In the end, Hojo broke off, more exasperated by this unexpected interference than anything else. He skid back a short distance, glaring straight at this stern-faced man. Though obviously outmatched, Rude took his stand firm in front of the bewildered boy, ready for another confrontation if need be.

However, the next attack came from behind. Professor Hojo suddenly discerned a presence sneak up, but not fast enough as the charged nightstaff hammered in three mighty jabs across his back. Reno did not wait. At once, he slipped the staff around Hojo's neck, and shoved it up his throat like a crossbar. He used both hands to hold the monster back against himself.

"Go on, kid! Run for it!!" Reno yelled as Hojo began a violent struggle.

Rufus was double stunned, "But..!"

"Urgh! Dammit!! I can't hold him back like this forev-"

No, indeed. Hojo had tolerated enough nonsense: infuriated beyond words, he grabbed Reno hard by the head, then literally flung him clear across the bridge, if only to be rid of him. The poor man tumbled over, but somehow recovered again; just in time to anticipate an angry Hojo lunge in at him for a follow-up.

In between these wild moments, Rude managed to forcefully push the boy away with a loud, "JUST GO!!". Before Rufus even realized it, he found himself rushing at top speed, through the main entrance, and into the shadows. Far behind, he heard the clash of a desperate battle erupt.

It seemed Lady Luck had protected these two ex-Turks after all. During that collapse, they had managed to flee a long way, almost to the end of the labyrinth, when they fell prisoners. By miracle, the walls and ceiling buckled together in such a way, it left them trapped alive in a pocket of air. From there onwards, they had dug their way to freedom: tore at stone, crawled through tight crevices (with Reno using every curse known), until at last, they emerged into the open.

Unfortunately, they had to make their way around the destroyed Delivery Centre in search of the other two men. On hearing that explosion, they had rushed here, Rude in time to save the boy, and Reno to initiate the offense. They jumped from one disaster into an all-out war; from the frying pan straight into the fire.

No one could deny their bravery or loyalty. But soon..very soon...they'd discover neither quality, just like themselves, could stand up much against Hojo.

-End of Chp.69

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.70

"Davo..? Davo, wake up."

The gentle voice, at first very muffled, floated through Davoren's ears. He opened his tired eyes half-way.

Light streamed in to fill his gaze. It bathed him whole in pleasant warmth until he melted away to such peacefulness. Not even a ripple of trouble disturbed him. Soon, he found himself flat upon his back, surrounded all around by this glow. There was another presence closeby. Indeed, on looking up, Davoren discovered a young man sitting nearby, peering back down at him.

Davoren could not move, nor cared he to even try. He simply stared up in bewilderment at this youth. His very presence filled him with such comfort...such security.

"You've slept a long time," smiled the young man amicably, "C'mon, Davo. Wake up."

Strange enough, the smile looked just like Davoren's. In fact, the youth bore a curious resemblance to him, especially those lovely honey-coloured eyes. Davoren blinked- "Davo"? How long has it been since he last heard that nickname?

However, as he gazed into this young man's kind face, a tired yet very happy smile spread across his own.

"..ah..Donny..heheh," chuckled Davoren, rubbing his eyes to disperse the fatigue, "I was having this awful nightmare."

"..a nightmare?"

"I dreamed...you were taken away, and.."

"Heh, silly big brother. You always worried about me, even when I was a little kid. I'm right here. I've always been here."

"It doesn't matter," Davoren sighed all his relief up into the youth's face, "It was horrible..I..I thought it was real. But it was just a nightmare...just a bad dream."

His smile broadened as he felt this safety wrap him from harm. Davoren's happy gaze clung onto the young man, who still beamed down in equal warmth. It soothed Davoren to wallow on his back in such tranquility...just rest here for an eternity.

It crept on him from behind. Through this silence, Davoren discerned another voice in the far, far distance. He tensed, whereas the young man continued to smile as if he could hear nothing. Steadily the voice drew closer upon them until Davoren heard it clearly: it was someone crying out his name.

Wild terror froze him in place at once. He recognized that voice too well. Still the tearful wail grew stronger and stronger. Amidst this madness, Davoren gaped up horror-stricken. But the young man still smiled down; a smile full of gentle kindness, totally oblivious of the insanity raging around.

The scream hammered on...calling his name again..and again...louder and louder...

Suddenly, Davoren's eyes shot wide open. He had regained consciousness at last.

It was quiet here, and dark. The bewildered gunman did not twitch a muscle, but remained thus flat upon his back. He stared emptily at the grey ceiling, where just moments ago that youthful face had filled his eyes. Though awake, Davoren seemed at best half-aware of his surroundings.

There was another presence very closeby, thoughtful and morbid. Vincent sat bent over a bit, coolly peering down at this man. Obviously, he had been waiting for Davoren to awaken.

Devil's luck; that's what Vincent attributed to their miraculous survival. That massive explosion had cast them both into the abyss, along with a shower of debris. Down, down they had plunged towards doom when Vincent spotted a balcony just ahead: their only hope!

He still could not believe how he dared this crazy stunt, especially in his ruined state. Then again, the urgency of the moment surpassed any physical weakness. It had all happened during free fall, just as they zipped down past the balcony. Vincent exerted himself to a fast recovery. Somehow, he touched down onto the largest debris piece in reach. Using this as a springboard, he had instantly rebounded straight across, over the balustrade, and clear into safety.

From peril to impunity, Vincent had tumbled wildly across the room, still holding onto Davoren, until he slammed hard into the concrete wall. Not his most graceful landing, but it didn't matter. They were both alive, and there was a floor beneath them.

It appeared they had crashed into a small surveillance room, now just a squalid hovel for ghosts. Some mainframes occupied one side, with many panels of screens running along, all dead and neglected. The air was stale and quite chilly. Yet however shabby this sanctuary appeared, Vincent hadn't refused its shelter. He needed respite to gather his senses again.

His immediate attention had been to check Davoren for any injuries. Much to his relief, the gunman had only lost consciousness. Vincent had then lain Davoren flat upon his back, and since then sat still, watching over him, dreading what may follow once this man would reawaken.

Weakness and pain had finally caught up to Vincent with a vengeance. It had required much effort to subdue his gasps, and even then he could not abate the agony burbling inside.

He had been glad to discover the bleeding in his side had stopped. With luck, it would heal enough to hold him through. Vincent dared not even think about the other injuries; he thought himself better off not knowing. Yes, his battered appearance testified how much damage his abnormal body had endured so far. But if strength ever depleted, he knew the image of Aeris would hold him up.

Still, Vincent had had plenty of time to contemplate his many thoughts while waiting: he spent a long minute wondering about Rufus' fate- had Professor Hojo killed him, or..? What significance had that boy borne? An ominous cloud of mystery still surrounded "Genesis Retrial", but try as he may, all his questions amounted to frustration.

He caught a stray thought of Aeris. The more time that passed, the greater he feared for her. He yearned to wisk her out of this nightmare as much as the Professor yearned to keep her here. On the other hand, he would not leave Davoren unattended.

Not surprisingly, as he gazed upon the unconscious gunman, Vincent's mind had drifted upon the past. He marvelled at how well this man had equally proven himself a true friend and a deadly enemy. He still grappled with the truth: old ShinRA had "donated" them to this experiment, while the new one had brought it to its final stages. Both presidents had worked in cahoots with the professor towards the same goal.

And now the goal shone almost within reach. But to Davoren, all truths would fly past except one: Donal, his beloved brother, had been used as the "dummy" test subject. Professor Hojo had cruelly crushed this man's heart before attempting his life.

It was at that moment when Vincent had noticed Davoren stir to life again. He edged closer, just as the man awakened.

Davoren still lay there upon his back, listening to something else above this heavy silence. His blank stare rested upon the ceiling, while Vincent waited all the more gravely. Both men lingered long in the stillness. Even a breath would have sounded too loud.

"I didn't hear him, Vincent," mumbled Davoren tonelessly.

Vincent said nothing.

Nor would Davoren have listened. The gunman spoke in a numb stupor as if lost between two nightmares, "He cried all the time. He was in pain and so scared. He screamed my name out, over and over," his voice trailed farther into hushed sorrow, "...that's what he's been doing all these years..calling my name.."

Despite his feebleness, Davoren somehow managed to sit himself up unaided. Slouched thus into a hunched posture, he stared vacantly into space, "But I didn't hear him, Vincent. I didn't hear him."

The simple sentence chewed on Davoren's sanity. The more he repeated it, the lower he sank into dull shock. The world around faded away, including Vincent who sat nearby. He was alone. Just him and the truth.

That man was your brother.

Vincent studied Davoren from the side in particular thoughtfulness. Never had he beheld such despair..such misery weigh so heavy as upon this man. Davoren seemed quite old now. His face, dirty and wan, showed the ruins of someone scrubbed to utter degradation. His clothes were torn, with the double-holster harness still in tact and tie loose half-down. He cut such a pitiful figure now, more so because he himself did not realize it.

The silent truth still echoed out: that man was your brother...and you served both his murderers.

Vincent could have spoken, only it seemed so useless. Would his voice even reach the gunman through his grief? Besides, what could he possibly say? Davoren, it's okay. They played you for a fool? I'm sorry? He rummaged through words, but found no comfort.

"..Davoren..," Vincent hesitated, unsure how to continue. However, Davoren didn't flinch any response. Strangely, something else far more wonderous occupied his attention. He gaped straight ahead, blank eyes wide with awe.

Most puzzled, Vincent glanced askance towards the source of such fascination. Just a short distance away, he spotted his own gun discarded upon the floor. It had probably slipped unnoticed out of its holster during that crash-landing.

Both men silently beheld the black gun. It filled their eyes, singing a song of dark temptation to those who'd listen. From the weapon back to the entranced Davoren, and Vincent understood: suicide.

Next blink, then Hell broke loose. Davoren suddenly dove in like a maniac straight for the gun, just as the alarmed Vincent pounced on him, and managed to grab him in time.

"LET ME GO!!" roared Davoren savagely.

"No, Davoren! Don't!!" he begged aloud.

It escalated into a violent struggle. Vincent strove by any means to stop him. In desperation, he tried pleading for sense. All in vain. No effort or entreaty could match the lure of that gun. Frantic beyond reason, Davoren angrily crawled across the dirty floor, despite Vincent's every attempt to pull him back. His outstretched hand groped around until at last it gripped the weapon.

One bullet; that's all it would take. Pain had spawned an endless cycle of bloodshed...crimson red to blot over Donal's memory. Now when it overwhelmed him, Davoren would still spill more blood. This time his own.

But damned if Vincent would let any bullet be fired. Davoren's rage tripled when this man suddenly pinned him down upon his side, then reached over to grab his hand with that claw. The delirious madman struggled wildly.

"Let me go!! His face..his voice are in my head!! I can hear him screaming my name now!! I can't bear it!! Let me go!!"

In Death, he'd find shelter from the storm. He fought more firecely, even thrashed his legs about. No good. Vincent would not release him, nor would he stop until he had wrenched that weapon free, "Drop the gun, Davoren!"

"Let me GO, damn you!"

"Drop it!!"

"Argh!!"

When reason failed, Vincent resorted to brute force. He forcefully twisted Davoren's hand around, disregarding his painful cry, then ruthlessly pounded it hard against the ground several times until he let go. The disappointed gun fell out, whereby Vincent immediately flung it away into a corner.

His attention returned to the distraught gunman. Out of caution, Vincent still held down Davoren, who by then had dissolved into another tearful defeat. Gone all strength, all dignity, even the choice to die had been denied him. Davoren didn't resist anymore. Instead, he languished weakly sprawled upon his side, held prisoner thus.

One could only wonder how much sorrow this pitiful wretch had borne. Again, a storm had swallowed him, and nobody could reach deep enough to pull him out.

Still, that wouldn't deter Vincent. He bent over to speak very, very gently into his ear, "Davoren.."

Davoren burried his face away into the dirty floor. Sounds of rage seethed up his thraot. He squeezed both eyes, gnashed his teeth, anything to repress it; or maybe to block out Vincent's voice. He obviously didn't want to listen.

Nevertheless, Vincent persevered, "Davoren, if your brother could see you now, he wouldn't want you to do this to yourself."

"IF MY BROTHER COULD SEE ME NOW, HE WOULDN'T RECOGNIZE ME!!" bawled Davoren in one passionate outburst, "I've changed so much, even *I* can't recognize myself anymore!!!"

The bitterness quaked his very depths, causing him to tremble like mad in Vincent's arms. But the same grief swamped over again, and his belligerency died into a long-drawn moan, "While we were fighting..w-when Rufus saw me...those eyes..that's EXACTLY how Donal would look if..he saw me..n-now.."

Pain, shame, anger. They all flooded him until he could no longer suppress it. Davoren feebly curled upon himself as misery gushed out. It choked him breathless. So much anguish, from a broken heart onto the floor, just pour it out for all to hear.

Vincent let him cry. No doubt, these were tears bottled up for a long, long time. Throughout this ordeal, he sat huddled up against the man's backside, holding him down to the floor. Outside his face showed no emotion, but inside, he felt so angry at his own helplessness- he could find no words to comfort this devastated soul.

All he could do was offer Davoren silent reassurances of his presence, and wait. Once, when the agony sunk to such lows, Vincent even hugged him against the shoulder for comfort. Here he held the shattered pieces of one man together; and he feared that if he let go now, it would collapse again.

More than thirty-one years ago, Davoren lost his brother. It cut a wound into his heart, and he bled alone in the shadows, concealing the agony from the world around. He yearned to forget this pain. So, he walled himself up in grief, then built another person around that foundation.

He built the opposite of himself. Someone strong, brutal, who would not be affected by emotion or pain. But deep within, the foundation was weak. Now the wall had crumbled, and they found his heart in the rubble, still bleeding after all this time.

What to do with such pain? Keep it hidden, or show it? Everyone must bear his cross upon his own shoulders, but where to take it? And the longer one carried it, the more burdensome it became.

Vincent's face darkened: how could he offer any comfort, when he himself didn't know the answer?

"..w..why did you save me?" a hoarse voice suddenly broke into his thoughts. Before Vincent realized it, he felt a violent force shove him off, hard enough to send him landing on his bottom.

Davoren's new strength exploded like a volcano, whereby he scrambled onto both knees in a rush for fury. He almost pounced on Vincent to grab him by the collar. In return, Vincent found himself staring back into the eyes of a madman; harsh and bloodshot with tears.

"We've spent this whole time trying to kill each other...and then you! You have the gall to save me?!" Davoren snarled outloud, "BASTARD! What the Hell do you gain by saving me?!!!"

The ravaged gunman fumed with hard-grit hatred, even suspicion: one man's death meant the other's victory, so why? Why would Vincent rush in to save him? This man, just an hour ago his enemy, why would he push Death away, when Davoren should...no, *wanted* to die?

What does he gain?

Such questions hung open in the hostile air. Amazingly however, Vincent maintained a most serene visage. Nor did he try to break free of Davoren's grip. He answered, "I gain the friend I lost thirty-one years ago."

At first, the reply caught Davoren off guard. There was no hidden meaning, just a plain truth: below the ruins of a hateful demon, Vincent had found his friend again. And for that friend, he'd gladly rush through fire and fury to save him.

It all shone so clear for Davoren to see. But the longer he beheld those solemn crimson eyes, the greater swelled his irritation until he suddenly spat back at full scorn, "Your 'friend' died long, long ago. Don't you know, Vincent?" he rattled the man hard to shake the words through, "I died when my brother died! They murdered *ME* when they murdered him!!"

Vincent absorbed this belligerency unruffled, even as the insane Davoren roared clear into his face, "What can you say now?! Do you know how it feels to live your whole life just for someone else?..to be dirt-poor.. but sacrifice yourself to give him a better life...raise him from a little child...love him and watch him grow... only to have him snatched away!! Do you even understand it?!!"

He shouted, but the bitterness only echoed back upon his wounded heart. It stirred a flood of memories and emotions: Donal and Donal again. Anguish strained Davoren's face to distortion until he could speak no more. Finally, he flung Vincent away, just as he himself crumbled into bleak despair.

"..aah..your friend..," he lamented weakly, "..your friend is long dead..there's just an empty old man here.."

Outside, he appeared young, but inside there ached an broken, old heart. He sat slouched forward with both legs folded up, hiding his agony in one hand. The storm had left him lonely and desolate; no strength to even cry anymore.

They had murdered his soul. Now he languished for Death to take the rest of him...take this hollow body..this breathing prison of flesh...it was dead and empty.

After being released, Vincent sat himself upon both knees again. As he beheld this pitiful wretch, his eyes darkened into thoughtfulness. There was still more to say.

"Davoren," he challenged gently, "Doesn't the fact that you care so much for Rufus...prove you wrong?"

The gunman peered askance, where he met Vincent's meaningful look. When he found no counter-argument, Davoren just scoffed back, "The boy's a lunatic."

"No. That boy is Rufus ShinRa, the ex-President of ShinRa Inc. He's a criminal, just like us. You've given your kindness to someone you *know* does not deserve it."

He delved deeper inside, "You care dearly about Rufus, just like your brother. And he was right. All this time, you have been trying to hide him from punishment. You may try, but you can't bring yourself to hurt him or watch him suffer."

Davoren listened in a tired daze. This time as Vincent spoke, he didn't drill through him for the core. Instead, he invited him to dig it out by himself.

"My friend Davoren is not dead. He's right here, the same man I knew thirty-one years ago. I'm sure because only HE could give such kindness to someone everyone else would shun."

Yes, Vincent could recall that day so long ago when they stormed a Reactor full of terrorists. Orders were given to kill them all, and they obeyed. But after the slaughter, only Davoren offered pity and prayer to those terrorists, while everyone else scorned them away. He didn't even regard them as "terrorists". Just "poor, illiterate men" duped into violence.

And now, thirty-one years later, he had done the same thing. When everyone else would disdain Rufus ShinRa, Davoren alone sheltered him. Professor Hojo considered this being "prone to petty emotion". To Vincent, this was a quality far superior to any other.

He fidgetted to add something, however awkward it made him feel or wistful it sounded, "...I..always respected and admired you, Davoren. I see matters as they appear square before my eyes. But somehow, you can reach deeper and see things in a completely different way...the more..'humane' way. I suppose I..wish I had that type of insight too."

Davoren expressed some surprise. Indeed, they had never spoken heart to heart like this before. Yet as they beheld each other, Vincent could perceive his plain words sink into Davoren's consciousness, slowly but surely.

So much had happened since the day they first met. Mysterious Fate had twisted their paths from warm friendship to bitter enmity. Now as they sat here again, it all entangled together into a jumble, and neither man knew how to unravel it.

At last, Davoren broke away to rub his temples, whilst his sad eyes mused upon empty space. After some difficulty, he wearily confessed, "...when I first saw Rufus, it was during one of his spasm fits. I..I found him huddled there like a wild animal...raving mad, clutching his head and shivering in the cold."

Vincent knew the rest. The gunman had then wrapped him in his trenchcoat, and lulled him to sleep with some fairy tale. Yet did he even once consider who this boy actually was?

"I knew who he was..of course I knew," Davoren sighed as if admitting a heinous crime, "All those things I shouted at him..about him deserving punishment..that's what I should have thought of him. But that night, I didn't see 'New Age President Rufus ShinRa'..," he turned to Vincent in desperation, "...I just saw a frightened lunatic. And he was so alone, Vincent. He didn't even have anyone to cry out for! Who was I to judge him for his crimes?...me..with my own hands so bloody..?"

Vincent watched anguish gnaw this man alive. He said nothing.

"..maybe..there's a hole inside of me I needed to fill..I don't know..for all the boy was, I still took him in," his tired voice quivered. Weak, devastated, the gunman buried this sorrow into his hands again, "...I just want to forget Donal..oh God..he's still screaming my name, Vincent..I want to forget him..."

He was doomed, forever a prisoner of his own pain. He'd shed blood to blot out one face...one face burned into his mind like a curse. But the more red he spilled, the more desperate he became. For no blood thick enough could ever cover that face completely.

In the silence, these two men waited for nothing. Between them there stood a wall of misery, so high Vincent saw no end to it. He could have withdrawn. But no. Of all barriers, he wanted to break this one the most. If never again, he wanted to reach out for Davoren just once...truly reach out for him past this wall of pain.

He had no clever arguments, just a handful of feelings and a steady voice. With these simple tools, Vincent edged closer to the forlorn gunman, and there placed one firm hand upon his shoulder. Surprised, Davoren lifted his head to look at him.

"No, you are wrong," Vincent stated, "Donal isn't crying out your name. Right now, he just wants to return to you, because that is where he belongs."

His grip tightened a bit on Davoren's shoulder, as if he'd imbue him with enough strength to build a new dignity. Vincent whispered solemnly, "Don't taint your brother's memory with blood, Davoren. It's far too precious for that. And don't shun him out in the cold. Take him back in, just like you took in Rufus, and keep him warm inside."

These words touched the wall at its most sensitive stone. Vincent himself could not quite explain where they had originated. But from afar, he could almost discern a strange aura linger about. With eyes ever benevolent, it seemed to smile back upon him, as if to thank him for being its true voice. Had that been his silent aid?

Strange. It seemed this presence had loitered here all along ...observing these two men...listening to them speak. Was it....Donal?

No one except Davoren could say how deep those words had sunk. He gaped at Vincent in certain awe, for a moment too tired to speak. He dwelt long upon his own shattered thoughts. Maybe he too sensed that gentle presence somewhere about. Whatever happened inside, Davoren's face soon relaxed into pensive melancholia.

"..you've changed, Vincent," he remarked dully. His wistful gaze dug deep into the crimson brilliance, "But tell me...is what you do with *your* own pain any better?"

This time, Vincent was caught by surprise, as if Davoren had read deep into a place even he himself had never seen before. Those pink eyes mirrored the image upon his consciousness. The reflection filled him with contemplation, but equal dread. In order to reach Davoren, Vincent realized he had bared parts of himself..parts he never knew existed before. If he stopped to think, had he really..."changed"?

In a way, he and this man were both similar and different. Each one dragged his own pain across an endless desert of suffering. But Davoren channelled his outward. Vincent reverted his inward, towards himself. Was that really any better? Could there perhaps be another way? If so, where? He couldn't find it anywhere.

For some very strange reason, the image of those snow fields crossed his memory, with Aeris standing there alone amidst their whiteness.

Davoren, however, interrupted his reverie, "You'd best go now. Your little girl is waiting for you."

Vincent was aroused back into hard focus. Yes. Aeris. He'd have to shelve these many questions. For now, he must hurry. Instantly, Vincent scuffled onto his feet again.

"One warning," added Davoren, "Professor Hojo has this crazy...'infatuation' with her. Find her before he does, and get out of here. Most likely, he's already given you a brain-fever attack...it's just a matter of time before it starts."

The grave-faced Vincent nodded in acknowledgement, then struggled to stand again. Davoren remained slouched on the dirty floor. He sat huddled upon himself, legs drawn up, with his heavy head in one hand.

Vincent limped over to the corner, and picked up his discarded gun. Concentrate. He must concentrate on reaching Aeris. The last he saw her was when she ran away through the southern entrance. That path led down to the lower levels, around here. Then she was close. From this surveillance room, it would take

him a while to reach the main hall, especially since he intended to search every corridor. But he could probably manage it.

He glanced quizzically towards the miserable gunman, whose mind seemed stranded miles away. Vincent thought he should stay here a bit longer. But then, nothing remained to be said, and somehow, he knew Davoren wouldn't re-attempt suicide. In fact, maybe it was best to leave him alone.

Besides, there was no time. After a final check, he quietly made his way to the door.

"..Vincent?" called Davoren.

Vincent stopped, his hand frozen upon the doorknob. He peered over his shoulder back towards the gunman.

Without looking around, not even a tinge of emotion, Davoren said, "Goodbye."

Though he realized the meaning of that word, Vincent did not respond. Instead, he took a final moment to study this man. So this would be how they part. This was how he'd remember Davoren last: a wretch sitting upon the floor, with his head in his hand. How ironic. This same man could raise an invisibility level to shield himself from...pain.

Then the moment passed. Vincent opened the door, and marched out before gently closing it again. He never looked behind.

The silence here resembled a tomb's. In the darkness, Davoren sat a long, long time. His hollow eyes hung down upon his shoes, simply because he hadn't the strength or interest to lift them. Around him loomed sorrow..more pain...more bitterness. They all crushed his shoulders with their inconsolable weight.

"We're all soaked in sin..but tell me, Donal..," he whimpered, so lost in a blind daze, "..up there..is there any room up there for bloody demons..like us?"

No voice replied. Slowly, Davoren huddled back into utter dejection. Fresh tears welled up despite his every effort to suppress them. Inside, he had reached a point where he just did not know what to do. All roads were grim, with no solace in sight.

He sat by himself, but not alone. Indeed, if (for just a moment) logic were suspended, one could have sensed a peaceful spirit descend by Davoren's side. It lovingly embraced him into a loose grip, letting him languish, but always reassuring him of its presence. Though two worlds apart, man and spirit sat huddled together on the filthy floor, around them the grimness of a nightmare.

Perhaps this was the answer. After an eternity of wandering, perhaps Donal had finally returned home to his brother.

-End of Chp.70

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.71

Throughout their lifetimes, Reno and Rude had fought many battles; some quite easy, others best abandoned. But this was one fight both men refused point-blank to surrender. They simply did not consider that option. Events had long turned desperate. They had bravely (or foolishly) confronted Professor Hojo, who soon proved to be powerful as equally vicious; so much like a beast let loose upon two hapless prey.

Rude fought hard. All strength concentrated into combat. Even as the monster wreaked havoc upon him, he still managed to endure it with fists bared out.

No less could be said for Reno. He had honed his skills to a fine point just to stay alive. The nightstaff always twirled through his nimble fingers, jabbing, blocking, whiffing out voltage unlike anything before. Rude had the brawn, he had the speed.

They fought together as a team, in perfect synchronisation. They went all-out against a common foe. And for a while, they even managed to hold their ground. In the end, however, the strong must yield to the stronger, as Hojo soon demonstrated that painful adage.

The hurricane battle moved further down the Reactor until it reached the old mako reservoirs. All the way, both men were blasted and beaten back. Clashes of a hopeless war echoed up the air, with a demon sparing neither fire nor fury to overwhelm them. Every effort thrown was rejected tenfold. Nor would Hojo show one shred of mercy towards these fools who dared challenge him.

Finally, when the game grew boring, he suddenly lunged in for the coup de grace: one dash, straight ahead.

Neither man could anticipate such high speed, such beastly ferocity. The blow came hard into Rude's stomach. Next one rammed clear into Reno's side right in the ribcage. The now shattered team came tumbling through the grand entrance, out across the open bridge like two wild barrels.

By some major exertion, Reno recovered onto one knee so that he skid backwards to a halt. Rude unfortunately had already lost consciousness. He rolled on until he collided back-first into a huge valve at the end of the bridge, where the loud "clang" affirmed just how grievous the impact was. There, he lurched over in place, and moved no more.

The alarmed Reno shot one concerned look back towards his friend, but instantly returned his attention up front again.

Smug as ever, Professor Hojo emerged from the entrance onto the scene. The battle hadn't affected him the least, not even scratched his evil humor. Indeed, for all their valiant endeavours, neither man had managed one effective blow at this creature.

".shit..," cursed Reno for the hundreth time. Hojo had quashed them flat without fighting them seriously. He probably didn't even consider this a "fight", more like a mild exercise session.

In a more prosperous era, this bleak cavern had been the Reactor's heart, pumping fresh Mako up through its metallic veins. Now only the ruins remained. The main bridge extended straight across the reservoirs, from the entrance to the control valve at the other end. Overhead arched a complex of ducts and pipes. Slanted aside hung a massive girder, from which dangled a rusty crane, all roped in cables. Far, far below yawned a black pit. Once emerald life had filled its depths. Now filthy-green muck clogged its throat.

Such a grim Hell-hole. Perhaps here would be the best place to put these pests out of their misery.

Hojo stood pompously poised, with one hand propped against his waist to flaunt his superiority. No doubt, that thought delighted him much. He had already spent enough time playing around with weaklings.

On the other side, both men had been pummelled to pulp. Never had they challenged such incredible power. Even now, Hojo's presence evoked deeper dread than ever before. Of the two, poor Rude had suffered more. The lifeless man sat thrashed against the valve, head bent so low one thought it would roll off.

Reno fared no better, the only difference being that he still clung to consciousness. To use his own expression, he felt more battered than an old punch bag; he certainly had sustained enough blows to look like one.

Either way, he was on his own now. Vincent was probably dead, and Rude half-way there. Regardless, Reno climbed onto his wobbly feet again, clutching his side for support. The man stood his ground single but firm. With one graceful flip of the staff, Reno assumed a rigid defense stance.

He had absolutely no intention of dying tonight. Then again, he wouldn't back down, not with his friend and the boy at stake.

"Rather pathetic how you persist so hard," mocked Professor Hojo, rubbing his chin with wry amusement, "Heheh...actually, you'd make an interesting specimen too."

Hard-grit hatred flashed across Reno's face. He spat right back, "You damn fugative from the freak show! Why don't ya just shove a microscope up yer ass!!"

The vulgar retort did not impress Hojo one bit. On the contrary, his smirk soured into a frown of dire consequence. Inside, Reno had his big mouth to thank for adding fuel to the fire. But outside, he hardened his front further, ready for whatever fate awaited him.

And that fate was greusome death. Professor Hojo suddenly buckled to make one sweeping finish to this insolent pest. Reno prepared himself.

But before violence could erupt anew, one stern voice boomed, "Professor, wait!!"

It emanated somewhere from above. The battle crumbled to an instant halt as both enemies searched upwards, Reno particularly anxious to find the brave speaker (also his saviour). Their sights fell on a sturdy pipeline which ran across. There stood Rufus in full view of the scene below. His face, as if chisled from marble, expressed hard determination, fixed straight down upon Professor Hojo.

He would confront the scientist.

In truth, the boy had fled quite some distance. Behind him had raged a battle against a demon determined to kill him, or worse, use him for a vile experiment. As a hideout, he had huddled amongst the pipe bases, listening to the war echo from afar.

However, it wasn't long before his thoughts had caught up with him. For a long time, Rufus had floundered in evident struggle. Reflections and emotions whirled around this madness: so many discoveries-how could he grasp them all? New lights which shed such ugliness upon these truths. Himself; his father, a loathsome blur haunting his mind; and then...Davoren. Yet strangely, as Rufus had grappled with this turmoil, something new brimmed through his eyes.

Something which for the first time since he could remember, hardened his resolve into solid stone.

It was at that moment when the war exploded onto the bridge with Reno and Rude tumbling across (it

saved him the trouble of running back). From then, Rufus had emerged from his hideout above. It shone clear upon his face: if never again, then now he knew exactly what to do.

"..Rufus..," Reno muttered rather affectedly, affected with sudden rage that is. He exploded upwards, "YOU GODDAMN LOONY SHITHEAD!! I THOUGHT I TOLD YA TO RUN AWAY!! WHAT'RE YA-?!!"

Rufus, in glancing towards this infuriated man, mumbled half-annoyed, "Hmph! So who's got the gratitude problem *now*?"

However, he immediately spoke his determination outloud again, "I'm not running away or hiding anymore. You two escape. I'll handle the Professor by myself."

"Wha?! B..but.."

"Don't question me! Just do as I say!!"

His tone bore strong command. Rufus' hard visage, with blue eyes darkened to such intensity, left no room for compromise.

From his place below, Reno gaped in a whirl of astonishment, unsure how to respond to that brusque order. Whatever had drawn Rufus out here had certainly caused an uncanny change in his demeanour. As he stood there, one could have sworn a certain part of "President Rufus ShinRa" had surfaced again.

Professor Hojo heard the challenge loud and clear. For a long time, he studied the boy in cold contempt. He had to admire Rufus for his bravery, and scorn him stupidity; for what could a miscreant like *him* possibly do?

Nevertheless, Professor Hojo was not one to ignore a defiance, especially against his authority. For now, he left matters below with a leap high up into the air. Reno gave an alarmed "Hey!", as if that would somehow divert Hojo's attention. No such luck. The monster hopped onto one pipe, then further up onto the next, where Rufus waited, stern-faced and totally unarmed.

Meanwhile, Reno lingered below at a complete loss. What to do? Obey that order? Try to blast Hojo away, even though his nightstaff couldn't reach a target that far up?

First things first: he must check his unconscious friend. At once, Reno scuffled back to Rude.

He crouched, or rather dropped onto his knees. There, he roughly shook the man by one shoulder, "Rude! C'mon man! Wake up!"

No response, not even a twitch. It occurred to Reno that perhaps his friend had already died; he certainly appeared dead. Gripped by sudden panic, Reno angrily cried, "Rude! Wake up already! Dammit!!"

Three hard slaps across Rude's face proved far more effective. The battered man was started back to consciousness with a confused grunt. Reno could not conceal his relief. He steadied Rude up while the man swam in a tizzy, still struggling for sense amidst this agony.

Yet it didn't take Rude too long to snap back into sharp focus. He blinked from Reno all around in amazement, then his alarm shot sky-high when he suddenly spotted Rufus up there. He even grunted something as he tried to scramble up again.

In vain. He collapsed back before he even reached his knees, in which Reno had to support him lest he may fall to the floor next. Nothing was left to do. In their helplessness, both men could only behold the scene above, and expect the worst.

Rufus ShinRa, their ex-President, was on his own.

Exactly how Rufus wanted it. Never once did he glance down towards those two ex-Turks, as if he expected them to obey without delay. He stood his ground in firm dignity. On the other end of the pipeline, Professor Hojo took a stance in front, making sure everyone could see his dagger-like claws.

"..miserable whelp," Hojo burred, "YOU are going to 'handle' me? You plan to fight me then?"

The insidious creature couldn't help but snicker. Once upon a time, this boy had stridden master of the world. But no more. Once "Mr. President", full of pompous vanity; now just "Rufus", an insane beggar.

One slash would end his life. And still this weakling dared stand in Hojo's way?

Rufus didn't waver in face of the question. Instead, he stiffly rebuffed, "Of course not, Professor. I want to talk with you."

"Oh really? Huh! You certainly have the nerve to go about making demands from *me*."

"Actually, I have more than that."

Situations are won by those who possess the upper hand, as Rufus dramatically proved. No words, just one move: he yanked up the hem of his sweater just enough to procure a tiny orb from inside, then held it out for Hojo to gawk at.

A perfect reversal of positions.

The orb gleamed brightly through these prison fingers for freedom. Shock spread like wildfire, from the stunned Professor, who couldn't absorb this blow, down to the two men.

The enraged scientist instantly thundered forth, "YOU!! HOW-?!!"

But Rufus was quick to assert his own authority, and quite effective too. Before Hojo could take another step, he swung his arm aside so that the precious orb hung way out in the air. This time, Hojo froze dead still. His eyes bulged so wide with terror, they almost popped through his specs.

It all became clear. Back when Rude had blocked Hojo's first attack, the orb must have accidentally slipped out unnoticed. By sheer impulse, Rufus had snatched it off the ground before fleeing the scene, and didn't even realize he had done so until he had ran far away.

He did not know what value this mysterious object had; but he played on the assumption that whatever purpose it served, Hojo prized it greatly.

How right he was.

"Tell me, Professor," mocked Rufus, too pleased by that look, "What would happen if I dropped your little treasure down there?"

The plunge stretched far, far down into a pit below, where green muck hungrily oogled that dazzling beauty. Behind Rufus' words lurked an intention with disastrous consequences. All he had to do was open his hand, and...

"Don't do that!!" spluttered the alarmed scientist, "That's super-refined, highly condensed mako! If you you dump it into raw mako, it will be destroyed in a massive exothermic reaction!!"

"An explosion, hmm?"

"You wouldn't *dare*, boy!"

Rufus smirked vindictively, "Well I'm crazy, so I guess I would. Either way I'm dead where I stand."

There shone a peculiar slyness in the boy's gaze; one which arose from stormy derangement. Neither sane nor all insane, Rufus held the scene in limbo, and did not fear the outcome.

Each second passed tightened the air further into unbearable tension. In truth, no one knew what to expect now: dread hung heavy upon Rude's face. Reno hid his strained nerves behind a solemn visage, and waited.

One could practically palpate the deadlock high above. On one end, Hojo seethed on the very verge of eruption. Half of him anxiously awaited what would follow; another half wished to shred this pest to pieces.

All fine by Rufus. It didn't seem to bother him the least. But at heart, he had always been a shrewd businessman. Therefore, he rolled the orb back into his palm, and clasped it close again.

"On the other hand, I'm willing to return it if you answer my questions," Rufus negotiated, or rather extorted, "They're not hard. I just want to know...before I die."

A simple trade off: the orb for answers. Hojo only stiffened in response. No doubt, he considered it below himself to barter with this lunatic, especially when suspicion ran so high. Then again, he dared not underestimate the boy's capabilities or endanger the materia.

Rufus took this long silence as agreement. No less stern than the Professor, he inquired dryly, "What you said back there...was that true? Did I really support this experiment?"

"Huh! Why the big shock?" snorted the spiteful scientist, "Surprised to discover you're not so innocent after all?"

Rufus wouldn't be mocked. His blue eyes hardened into ice, "Answer my question."

After a tactful pause, in which Hojo deemed it best to obey, he grudgingly admitted, "Yes. What I said is all true. You funded 'Genesis Retrial', just like your father. Not only that, you also helped bring it to its final stages."

"How?"

Much as this farce boiled his fury, the Professor yielded to the briefest explanation, only because he had to, "That is no ordinary materia. It is a genetic enhancer which triggers certain biochemical reactions, Merger Grade-1, as they're called. It is simply vital to my experiment."

Rufus listened. He listened to a forgotten past unfold before him. Word by word, every detail another crime to sully his hands.

"You had agreed to help me. At the time, you headed a team of materia-engineers and biotechnology specialists. Together, they were to construct this materia for me. You assumed responsibility for that part."

Hojo's voice strained into a hiss. This recollection obviously doubled his irritation, "However, the materia was still halfway through development when ShinRa Inc. collapsed. I had this laboratory within the Reactor. I could have finished the construction by myself. Only I hadn't the design blueprints or enough data to complete it."

"Ah, so that's why you saved my life then put me on the 'brain scanner'," Rufus completed the connection, in rather strange good humour, "I had headed that team. So naturally, I'd know every detail of those designs. And of course, now that you have your materia..your 'key'.. I am useless."

Hojo needn't reply. In fact, there was nothing more to add. Just silence. Rufus ShinRa had supported "Genesis Retrial". It was he who brought this "enhancer" into existence. If this experiment was a crime in itself, then he was as guilty as Hojo and his father.

A greedy jackal, just the way "daddy" moulded him.

Hojo had answered all questions. By agreement, Rufus had to return the orb. However, instead he indulged the moment to examine this curious object up close.

"..materia..pretty, pretty materia..," he murmured in fascination.

The orb shimmered seductively between his fingers. Its hazy glow reflected upon his eyes, making them sparkle twice as bright. Slowly, a wistful smile curled his lips; the picture of madness wrangled by pure pain, with long hair strands dangling in front.

"..there is this man," Rufus simpered gently past an inaudible buzz, "..he says he's my father, but I'm not his son. No, I'm his clever 'business partner'...just another person who makes money for him. See, the old man's madly in love with his materia kingdom, he doesn't even know I exist.."

Shards of memories tore across his mind. The more he spoke to this mystical jewel, the farther away its blueness lured him, "..when they told me he died, I felt... happy. But deep inside, I was so cold...so cold I got torn in two. One part controlled my body, the other just watched."

"You speak utter rot!" Professor Hojo cut short. He hadn't the patience or interest to listen to these ramblings, "I suppose now you want to turn yourself into some pitiful victim."

Rufus blinked back into reality, if only to grasp those vicious words. Indeed, they stirred another emotion which resolved into unnatural amusement. Somehow, those words sounded funny.

"On no!" Rufus laughed, "I'm not some poor victim. I'm a ShinRa! I tread over others for my own personal goals!" he flung out one arm just for added grandeur, "But Professor, why SHOULDN'T I tread over people? Aren't their lives so cheap?!"

Louder and wilder. His voice, seething hot in sudden bitterness, reached the darkness above, where no doubt his father lurked...listening to every word, "He loved his kingdom more than anything. I..I wanted to take it away...to have him there in the dirt, while I enjoyed *his* power. That made me happy! And the more I abused it, the more I knew the old man was writhing in the grave: I had his kingdom all to myself, while he had nothing!! I wanted him to hate me, because I HATED HIM!!!"

One simple emotion: hatred. Rufus couldn't remember that man's face. But he clearly remembered that hatred. For a moment, the lunatic stood lost amidst a nightmare. He glared at Hojo as if into a mirror, where the reflection revealed a broken psyche. All he could now was glue the pieces together.

"..that's how I lived...in my wonderful 'doll-house' society. Leeches and liars all clung to me, until I became one of them," Rufus lamented, unaware of the tragic sadness upon his face, "At first...when I was small, this angered me..no actually, it frightened me. I didn't want to live like that. But it was already too late. Everytime something hurt me, or made me angry, I'd say 'it doesn't matter'... 'I don't care'. If I repeated it long enough, it went away. And as I grew older, it got easier, until I could do it without even thinking."

Unafraid, Rufus pronounced his own confession, "I'm selfish. I'm cruel. I'm greedy and so arrogant. I deserve this torture. That's how it is. Once we fall from grace, there's nothing but Hell and punishment, and none of us know the way back up."

He paused upon a stray thought. His expression darkened into puzzlement, yet at the same time profound intrigue, "It's strange. Davoren knew all that. He knew I deserved this torture. But he still...hid me away from punishment. When I burned in the fire, only he dared step in to pull me out...no one's ever done that for me..." he added softly, "...no one.. not even my 'father'."

The sentence, though quite simple, held the lunatic in deep melancholia. Only he truly understood the significance of that sentence.

Down below, the scene remained frozen in stiff stasis. Rude, by some tortuous exertion, had managed to stand up, while the ever grim Reno stood by, nightstaff still in hand. They could do nothing. Between the boy's rambling and this danger, they could not guess what to expect.

All very touching, to be sure. Professor Hojo, however, had strained his patience beyond the limits. He wanted that orb...now.

"You've wasted my time long enough with this silly speech, boy!" he snarled outloud, "Give me that materia! And if you're so attached to your precious Davoren, I'll gladly send you over to join him."

The mockery cut straight through, but Rufus only sighed back to himself, "No. I can't face Davoren...not after I've learned what my company had done to him and those two other men. I can't face his tears of all that grief."

A heavy silence befell the air.

Nothing else was left to do. Donal was long dead; Davoren and Vincent both gone too. Lives tampered with for the sake of profit. The revelations, so many...so painful...

Yes. Nothing else left to do. Rufus' resolve suddenly hardened to solid stone again as his grip tightened upon the materia: he had made his decision.

"I'm to blame for this," the young man addressed the Professor with impressive fortitude, "I supported you of my own free will. For once, I'll take responsibility for my own crimes and my company's."

"What does that mean?!" barked Hojo in suspicious alarm.

"I'm putting 'Genesis Retrieval' out of operation...permanently!"

"AH?! BUT YOU-!!"

"Forgive me, Professor," Rufus smiled back so sweetly, "I lied."

Sly like his father, twice as manipulative.

Events spiralled out of control; just as the astonished Hojo realized he had been duped by a very clever businessman. Struck mad into a frenzy, the demon lunged straight at Rufus, roaring for his blood, claw stretched out to prevent a disaster.

Too late. The boy had already flung the orb aside.

One simple toss, but of such impact, enough to lock the Professor in rigid stupor, so stiff he stopped breathing altogether. The two ex-Turks blanked upon this twist. They saw it, but could not comprehend.

Time slowed to an eternity. In this silence, all eyes followed the materia as it plunged towards doom. Down, down it spun in a trail of blue hue; bounced off the metalwork, past the bridge, still bewailing its fate.

Below, the viscous mako swamp gleaned in welcome of this beauty.

There resounded a dull "plunk": the orb plunged straight into the reservoirs, and never resurfaced again. It was gone.

No sounds. No breaths. Just an agony of waiting. Neither Reno nor the disconcerted Rude dared move. From high above, Professor Hojo gaped down, by far the most shocked of all. Somehow, he wrenched his sight from the pit back to the lunatic...this wretch...a mere boy without even enough hold on reality. How could *he*...?

But in return, Rufus simply stood there. Triumph lit his face, with a smile so devious feeding off Hojo's bewilderment. Insane or not, he understood what he had done. He understood it too well, knew where it would take him, and that made him smile.

The boy didn't bother to move. There was no need.

~...it doesn't even matter...~

He had stood like this before, studying his reflection in a glass pane... just waiting...

~...and I don't care anymore...~

He had fallen through Hell before; through all the many levels until he crashed into its deepest pit.

~..it burns me up, but it's still so cold inside...am I really all alone?...~

Fire. All around dance the flames of sin to scorch them black. For those who lost their souls or simply never had one, is that the only way to pay for their crimes?

Five seconds from the moment it dropped to the next heartbeat, and suddenly the depths of Hell exploded sky high.

Both Reno and Rude were flung hard to the ground by rumbling violence. Professor Hojo darted his eyes all around in alarm. The insane turmoil rocked the Reactor's very foundation as spumes of fire and mako whooshed up, so much like a furious volcano. Up swirled the roaring heat, putrid fumes, metal debris and shrapnel stone. Hearing was lost to the drone of disaster; sight gone in flames.

Yet still Rufus did not move. There was no need. Instead he gazed smugly at the catastrophe he had wrought, his hair billowing like mad in the wind.

Yes. He swore he'd make Hojo pay *dearly* for killing Davoren. So much like his father, Rufus knew exactly how to strike an enemy where it hurt most.

And this was the price: "Genesis Retrial"'s ultimate destruction.

The chaos spiralled its way up the Reactor faster than sense could comprehend. Indeed, Hojo narrowly escaped the explosion by one high leap, abandoning the scene below to the flames. From pipes to scaffolds, the nimble demon raced the danger upwards until he reached a ceiling girder, where he gracefully flipped on top, just as the final gust of fire whirled by. He was safe.

It took some moments before the choking whiffs of flames subsided, at least to permit a cautious peak. Such devastation by such a small object: whatever could be seen past the crackling flames revealed an abyss of wreckage, with the walls charred black. The enormous blast had literally ripped off the main bridge by its supports. Pipes and cables hung dead, many less fortunate girders incinerated to scrap. A thick mist clogged the air. Regardless, Hojo scoured the ruins far below for something...anything. In vain. Even his sharp senses could not detect any life signs through this fog.

All was gone. All gone in the fire.

Another desperate scan only confirmed it. Finally, Professor Hojo squatted down upon the beam, if only to brood over his thoughts. Anger. Disbelief. Frustration. Indeed, his yellow eyes reflected emotions more intense than the flames below, boiling wild until his veins throbbed under their heat.

Gone. It was all gone.

The truth laughed at him. In the smoke, no doubt he saw Rufus' face, still smirking back. Hotter and hotter he seethed, when at last the creature roared all his fury out, so loud neither Heaven nor Hell dared challenge its might.

Gone! That lunatic..! Without a weapon, without even sanity, he had..!! All gone!!

His wasted frame shook hard. Professor Hojo blistered there another minute, gasping, or rather wheezing, his anger upon the disaster site below. The question hung clearly upon his face: what to do now?

Not too long afterwards, the answer surfaced, just as his expression tightened into a resolute frown. He had suffered many setbacks before, but always overcame them. Yes..yes...overcame them, one way or another.

His mind honed in on *her*. That girl. He had to find that girl first.

-End of Chp.71

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.72

She ran, but knew not where. Nor did she even care. Escape. Escape from the Professor. Right now, only that mattered.

Aeris had long lost herself to this cavern of corridors: no light to disperse these shadows haunting the frosty air. If she passed the same hall twice, she wouldn't have known. All paths simply whirled into one endless maze.

Don't stop. Run. Run. It didn't matter...just as long as *he* never catches you.

Heavier grew the darkness until it suffocated her senses mad. Her loud footsteps echoed through these hollow halls. She was alone. There was no one, yet everywhere she turned, those evil eyes seemed to chase her close behind. They relentlessly clawed at the hem of her dress just to savour her paranoia.

Where to go? Caught in a nightmare, where could this frightened soul possibly hide?

Nowhere. In her blind desperation, poor Aeris didn't even notice that loose stone; not until her foot tripped over it, whereby she crashed hard against the floor with a little shriek. There she lay sprawled flat, distraught by wild fear more than any pain.

Heaven only knows how long she had been running or how far her legs had carried her. She could have rushed past madness itself, yet no distance seemed safe enough... not with the Professor.

Just the mention of his name set her thoughts in fresh turbulence. But now, the exhausted girl found it near impossible to rise again. Inside, her mind begged: get up! Hurry! Run away! Alas, she could only manage to lift her head, using one bruised elbow to push herself up.

She gaped around, dazed, confused. Indeed, for the first time, Aeris took time to actually notice her surroundings; or at least, whatever could be distinguished.

Apparently, her flight had taken her deeper through the jungle to the intersection of several corridors. Each entrance yawned open to reveal an even darker void inside.

Poor Aeris realized she was crying again. Most likely, she had been crying the whole time. Too tired to resist these many tears, Aeris let them flow, and instead mustered up enough strength to climb onto her knees. There she sat slouched upon the dirty floor. The tranquility here chilled her to the core. Even her sobs, so wrangled by misery, never exceeded the ominous silence here.

She knew not where she was. She expected no one, waited for nothing. It seemed in her greatest hour of need, God had abandoned her.

Aeris had already bowed to the inevitable when by pure chance, she just so happened to glance aside. Suddenly in that moment, her breath, her tears, her entire soul froze dead still.

Behind her, Aeris knew there stood a big doorway; she had in fact stumbled through it just minutes ago. Thanks to some dusty lantern, one could even trace its frame upon the floor; so much like a long strip of light carved through darkness. Aeris herself sat here within the parameters of this shelter.

Moments ago, there had been nothing except her shadow. But now as she sat, Aeris gaped blankly upon another shadow which somehow, had crept all the way from behind right up to her side.

The shadow stretched far just to fill the doorway end to end. No doubt, it belonged to the man standing behind her.

When God abandoned her, the devil had certainly wasted no time in claiming her. Nobody here: just her and Professor Hojo.

If the sheer thought of him frightened her, then his presence stirred up enough terror to overwhelm all senses.

I don't want to go back there!

She had no choice.

I..I want to run away..so far away from here.

Pain all over her body. Her own screams echoing through the emptiness. Cold. Afraid. More pain. More torture. All these feelings rushed past her mind.

Run. Escape....hope you'll somehow wake up, and find yourself safe in bed...pray it's just another bad dream.

Then again, it hardly mattered anymore. The Professor had found her.

Torn thus between two impulses, the wretched girl hesitated to flinch even one finger. Instead, Aeris spent almost an eternity just staring at the showdow there by her side.

Yet the figure remained stiffly poised behind her, ever silent. He too was waiting. He was waiting for her.

Aeris never knew how she gathered the strength to rise, for her pulse had reached such frantic levels. But somehow, she found herself on both feet again. Another moment, and she turned around fully. The girl stood in place, hands loose by her sides, body stone rigid.

She had stood like this before. In the darkest depths of her fears...just her and the Professor, between them the mirror of truth.

Now the horror exceeded any nightmare. Her perturbed green eyes fell directly upon the silhouette of a most grotesque creature, black in all its glory except for those bright specs. Hojo stood rooted at the doorway, just a short distance in front of her, and even closer to derangement; so much one could see his eyes spark raw insanity.

"It doesn't end here," he finally choked out, almost desperate to believe his own words.

Aeris blinked back in confusion. Rightly so, she guessed something must have went "wrong". Whatever had happened, Aeris knew she alone would bear the brunt of Hojo's frustration. His malice, unlike anything else she'd seen, made her blood curdle.

Hojo stumbled forth one step. The longer he beheld her there, paralysed in his shadow, the more emotion rattled his voice, "It doesn't... it *can't* end..I must finish my experiment...he thinks he's destroyed me...but no...he is mistaken..."

Though Aeris understood nothing, she'd still beg for mercy, no matter how difficult it was to speak, "..P..Professor...please don't..."

"I can still salvage this experiment...my experiment ...as long as I have you...yes...yes...it can still be saved..."

Mad. Utterly insane, beyond logic or pity. The madman staggered another step closer. Aeris sprang two back, more frightened, when the idea snapped out at once: she'd rather make a dash for it than return to him!

Yet before she could even act, Aeris heard Hojo's stern voice bark out, "You know escape is futile, girl. I'll only find you again."

His words warned her of dire consequences; strong enough to rivet Aeris in place again, if only to reflect long and hard upon herself: yes. It was futile. If she ran, he'd catch her for sure. And besides, where could she possibly go?

Aeris glanced towards the nearest corridor, then quickly to the Professor: trapped! Hojo stood there blistering under irritation, just waiting for her next move, silently warning her not to try anything stupid. No doubt, he could read her every thought.

Run. No, I can't. I'm afraid. I...I'm so afraid...

Surrender then. There's no escape. You're all alone. It's useless. You'll never escape, not in your dreams or in reality.

Aeris knew. Still, she would take her chances.

So before sense could prevail, Aeris instantly turned her heels to the wind. She ran, and ran. Through this nightmare, all sanity disintegrated to the heat of escape. No time to think. No time to listen. Just run.

Faster and faster, Aeris raced her own heartbeats down the hall. Around that corner, through another corridor, panting all the way but finding only more darkness.

Where to go? How much longer? It didn't matter! Just run!

Something ominous swooped in from behind. It reached out for her. Still she ran faster. Still she persisted.

Then it was over: Hojo caught her.

Aeris shrieked as she felt his claw clamp upon her arm, so tight it could have crushed her bone. Stirred up to a frenzy, the girl struggled for her freedom, while Hojo, already fuming mad, teetered forth to overpower her. In the skirmish, however, neither noticed that grim flight of steps; not until poor Aeris lost her balance backwards, thereby sending herself and the Professor tumbling together down the stairs in a whirl of chaos.

Aeris heard herself scream all the way. So many violent forces ripped at her body non-stop. Everything just rolled round and round...and round...

All the pain suddenly caught up with her the moment she slammed onto the floor. It left her sprawled numb upon the ground, at the base of the staircase.

She could see nothing. The madness still buzzed about her like wild flies, but not enough to deter her desperate attempts. Indeed, Aeris immediately scrambled onto all fours to make another break for it.

No such luck. She hadn't reached beyond three inches when that same grip fell upon her again. And against all cries, it reeled her back in towards a beast, whose eyes glared yellow fury upon her.

"NO! GET OFF ME!! NO!!" she wailed outloud. Aerus tried to shove him away. She thrashed her legs about. Regardless, Professor Hojo ruthlessly brought her under control: he pressed her flat to the ground, then by scuffling on top of her, finally managed to pin her upon her back.

Her terror tripled. Louder grew her cries. When she still struggled to push him away, Hojo effectively pinned both her hands to the floor like a crucifix, thereby bringing his wasted face closer than Aerus even wanted.

"I MUST FINISH MY EXPERIMENT!!" roared the madman.

"LET ME GO!! P-PLEASE PROFESSOR! LET ME GO!LET ME GO!!"

"It doesn't...it CAN'T finish here!! Not like this!! Do you understand?!! It can't!! It can't!!"

It was useless. Poor Aerus could no longer hear anything save the gasps and sobs heaving out of her bosom. If her heart pounded any faster, no doubt it would explode. Half of her wished it would. Death was better than this!

But even that option had been denied her, as the Professor gripped her more tightly in a fluster of delirium, "That boy had the key...but it's YOU!! You are the centre!! As long as I have you, then my experiment can be saved! It can still be-"

Suddenly, Hojo stopped short. It seemed his senses had detected a very, very familiar presence nearby; a presence most unwelcome judging from the way his face crumpled into a frown. Indeed, Aerus, by now reduced to tears, didn't understand this awkward pause, or the Professor's odd behavior. In her confusion, the trembling girl twisted her head aside to see.

It took Aerus some moments to actually focus her bleary sight. At the entrance of the main hall, where darkness hung thickest, she spotted a brilliant pair of crimson-red eyes. There, one could barely make out the frame of a very tall figure, human but not without a strong aura of a demon.

It took the distraught girl another moment to realize who it was.

"How now, Mr.Valentine?" Hojo spitefully greeted the intruder, "Defied Death yet again?"

Vincent made no reply. Instead, he took one step forward, if not to distinguish himself from the shadows, then at least to prove he was no ghost.

"Hmph!" the vicious creature snorted unimpressed, "If you've survived, then I'd assume that idiot Davoren is alive too."

"You've tortured that man long enough. Now leave him be," Vincent retorted with ice-cool composure. He'd let no one, especially Hojo, go near his friend.

From his stoic demeanour to Hojo's yellow, reptilian eyes, between these two burned such hostility, no one could have withstood its heat.

And Aerus lay petrified at the heart of this fire. Inside, the surge of emotions made breathing all the more difficult. Disbelief, confusion, soon to be swept aside by intense anxiety.

She couldn't comprehend from where he had appeared. For all his incredible stealth, he could have materialized from darkness itself. Close but not quite. Vincent in fact had spent a long time searching through the West Wing, when by luck he discerned a loud skirmish not too far away.

Next flash, and he was on the scene, just in time to interrupt Hojo's mad rave. It took him much restraint and prudence not to attack all at once, especially since the sight of Hojo perched upon a sobbing Aeris boiled his blood. He hadn't even drawn out his gun...yet.

Once again, their paths had clashed. This time, fate had chosen the most dreary place: a broad platform on which several mammoth-sized girders based their support, some already slanted under the curse of decay. All around this bleak cavern, devils hung from the pipelines above, so curious to follow the spectacle below. They could smell a storm brewing up. All it needed was a tiny spark.

Indeed, the ruby-eyed demon, certainly no stranger to their evil circles, had now challenged their leader.

But to Aeris, her turmoil rested solely on Vincent. He stood there, ravaged bloody, but still dignified.

He had come after all, just as promised. However, far from any joy, Aeris instead welled upon another tearful breakdown.

No. This wasn't what she wanted...not to witness him get murdered again...not for her, some filthy clone!

He shouldn't have come! He shouldn't have come!

Most probably, Vincent could feel the sting of her thoughts within himself. Whether he did or not, he certainly knew how to keep his resolve unaffected. His steely glare rested squarely upon Professor Hojo, who had more than enough contempt to match.

"You think it's over, don't you?" he blurted suddenly.

The odd question baffled Vincent.

"That bastard thinks he's ruined me...he thinks by destroying himself with the Merger Grade-1, he's destroyed 'Genesis Retrial!'"

Vincent's perplexion only deepened further, "..what?"

"One year ago, Rufus ShinRa had headed a team of experts. They were to construct a special materia for me...a Merger Grade-1," the madman seethed back, "It's designed to select the best genes out of different cells...and merge them all into one. Only HE knew the whole blueprint designs for that materia! Somewhere in that foggy mind of his, Rufus had it all locked up!!"

By the end, Hojo had released both Aeris' hands to straighten himself up, even though he still would not shift an inch off her. His claws clenched tight upon his knees, perhaps pretending to crush Rufus' skull. Beneath him, Aeris lay trembling in silence.

On the other side, Vincent had to filter out Hojo's madness just to understand his words; and even then there were missing pieces he just had to assume. This "Merger" materia could fuse different genes into the best combination. It was the key to creating a superior being with the perfect genetic make-up.

But now all was gone. Rufus had not only somehow destroyed the materia, but also himself. That way, Hojo could never have that vital 'key'.

And so, "JENOVA Project: Genesis Retrial" could never go to completion.

In a way, Vincent had to admire the boy. Single-handedly, he had wrecked three decades worth of work beyond hope; and no doubt did it smiling to the end. So much like his father. They both knew how to get whatever they wanted, no matter the odds.

Vincent returned to the present. Infront, he beheld a man wasted to a half-crazed neurotic, still clinging to the ashes of a burnt dream; or rather, still clinging to Aeris.

Hojo, no less aware of his own desperation, tragically hung his head as both shoulders sagged under an invisible weight. For a moment, he forgot both Vincent and Aeris to the inner aches of his frustrations.

To be sure, by destroying that materia, Rufus had hit him where it hurt most.

"..it was vital for my experiment..ah...my experiment..," the heart-broken scientist lamented, "..that bastard...he thinks he's destroyed it...by destroying the Merger, he thinks it's..."

Bitterness choked him until it rattled his scraggly frame, so violent Hojo had to repress it by squeezing his eyes tight. From afar, it almost seemed as though he were crying.

Vincent reflected long before he calmly stated, "...then it is over, Professor."

"IT IS NOT!!!" Hojo exploded too readily. He smashed his fist right next to Aeris' head, causing the distraught girl to cower away with a shriek, just as the ground itself cracked under his knuckles.

"It can still be saved!!" he blared all his rage at Vincent, "I can make another materia! What's to stop me?! I have this lab! I have this entire Reactor!! I'll just start again!!"

But Vincent too had lost his patience.

"Professor Hojo, listen to yourself!" he argued, "You've become so obsessed with 'Genesis Retrial', you can't even see logic anymore!"

He reasoned outloud, "There is nothing more to be done. You can NOT construct another materia from scratch. All Reactors have ceased operation. There is no ShinRa Inc. to hide behind, or any Davoren to do your dirty work. It's over."

Gone. Destroyed. All that remained now was to accept the plain truth, something Professor Hojo seemed most spiteful to do. His expression never wavered off a scowl as he listened.

Vincent needed another moment to soothe his irritation. Venturing another step froward, he renewed his appeal, "Now Professor Hojo. I beg you, release Aeris. Let me take her with me, and you have my word, I will leave as quietly as I came."

No reaction. Hojo's jaw remained compressed in thought.

"Please, Professor. She is of no more use to you."

His offer met with stiff silence. As he sat there, Hojo took his time before he'd grant any answer. His narrow, intelligent eyes measured up Vincent, just as they had the first day they met. No one could guess what ran through that shrewd mind of his.

Vincent waited. He was careful not to get his hopes too high. But then, he much preferred a peaceful solution over a battle.

Aeris understood very little of what was happening. She remained cringed in place, prisoner between this gargoyle's two legs. Her mind, just like her eyes, were sealed tight. It seemed the only way to stop this torture from robbing her last morsel of sanity.

Longer and longer extended the wait.

Finally came the verdict: Hojo's expression twisted into mockery, his grin sinister enough to chill any heart.

"Heh..heheh," he callously chuckled at the confused Vincent, "You still don't understand 'Genesis Retrial', do you? Rufus may have held the key, but this girl..."

His attention fell upon Aeris, who cowered further as she felt his hot hand fondle her neck, "...this Cetra-female... this beautiful clone...she's the one who will open the door."

Indeed, Vincent did not understand, which only spurred his suspicions more: yet *another* insidious riddle to be solved.

"'Genesis Retrial' is an experiment aimed to transcend man beyond all boundaries that make him 'human'," the scientist patronized with a simplistic explanation, "To create a being in the image of man, but with potential of a God... a *better* Sephiroth."

He elaborated, "All the fragments merge into one body: your raw powers of Chaos, Davoren's invisibility, the age factor, JENOVA cells, Cetra blood....Merger Grade-1 materia assembles them all into one."

"I see," Vincent concluded dryly, "Rufus wasn't to be your test subject after all. You intended to merge all those 'fragments' into your *own* body."

"Hardly!"

The derisive retort rather caught Vincent off guard again: not in Hojo? Then where would the "fragments" be fused?

The Professor easily caught that question in Vincent's sharp glare, but delayed his reply as his expression darkened again. This time, to a pensive, almost wistful, moroseness.

"It's the child," he muttered to himself.

"...c..'child'?"

"The child..another child..just like my son, only better"

The revelation collided head-on into Vincent's senses, plain and ugly. He stood there in a whirl of shock...still grappling, still tingling, for comprehension.

Suddenly, it all became crystal clear.

"Then...," he whispered hoarsely, "...Aeris is to be this new God's..... mother."

Of course. This was a retrial. She was Lucrecia's replacement.

Only by chance did Aeris snatch that strange word "mother". At that one moment, her entire body went cold. With scarcely understanding anything, the girl turned her dazed stare up, where they met Hojo's stern visage, ever fixed upon her alone.

Mother? But how...what mother??

"Her womb," Hojo spoke, "Her Cetra womb is the core of this experiment. Once her ovum has been fertilized, JENOVA cells will follow their usual course. The other cells are then injected into the zygote...and the materia will fuse them together," his voice trailed off to a very subdued growl, "..and when the child is born...my experiment will be a success."

One bombshell after another. Everytime Vincent thought he had attained the truth, a bigger one burst right in his face.

Finally the explosions had cleared away all mystery to reveal the picture; a picture crafted either by a genius, or a twisted madman. Vincent could not decide which.

And now, there was nothing left to say.

Still, poor Aeris could not make sense of Hojo's gibberish. For what felt an eternity, she remained frozen in vaccant stupefaction.

Mother?

The word entangled her emotions into a flurry...rising, rising within her wide, intense green eyes.

Child? The Professor's...

"..ah..," she numbly faltered out, "..then...I am to bear y-your.. your..."

Hojo needn't complete her sentence. His silence was answer enough. All at once, she grasped the truth.

Aeris' face paled to horror, the kind only conjured up in the worst nightmares. It shot up her spine to seize her very soul. So this was her true fate: to bear the Professor's...

"UGH! NO! NO!!" she struggled in a frenzy, "YOU CAN'T!! YOU HAVE NO RIGHT!!!"

"No right'?" echoed Hojo. Irritated threefold, the monster overpowered her again. With one claw, he crossed over both her wrists, then pinned them together just above her head, "I *created* you! I have EVERY right!"

"NO, YOU DON'T!! YOU CREATED ME, BUT YOU HAVE NO RIGHT TO MY BODY LIKE THAT!!" she wailed even louder, "NO ONE HAS THAT RIGHT!!!"

Enough was enough. Aeris let out a painful shriek as Hojo tightened his grip harder upon her wrists; so ruthless, it cut off her voice into sobs.

"You may scream all you like," he mercilessly hissed, "But the fact remains: you are still a clone of another person. An aggregate of cellular garbage!"

And when, in desperation, she turned her tearful face aside, Hojo hammered it clear into her ear, "The only purpose of your existence is to serve this experiment!!"

She lay there, paralysed under his might. Her world had already been shattered. Now it seemed he'd also crush the broken pieces to fine dust. Let her cry. Let her shut her eyes away from this reality. She knew he'd always win.

She was a clone; some rag-doll whose womb determined her value...no, her very existence.

Let it be then. Aeris had given up.

From his place, Vincent had to enforce a cool head, even though every muscle seethed under rage, especially as he beheld Aeris' degradation.

"Genesis Retrial". Its very name evoked a swirl of emotions: disgust. Anger. Sadness.

Its tyranny spanned two generations...where to begin? When Hojo first concocted this madness, or when old President ShinRa "donated" them, no better than guinea pigs? Lucrecia's sad death? Donal's brutal murder, or the sight of a devastated Davoren in tears? Maybe Rufus' involvement?

But this exceeded anything Vincent could stomach. More than immorality, it bordered close upon utter perversion.

"And in the end, is THAT all your 'experiment', Professor?" he grinded out his outrage, "To defile a young woman's body with some demon?!"

"Don't be so sanctimonious! You're the last one to lecture me on ethics, Turk!" Hojo indignantly spat right back.

Such brashness scathed Vincent into silence.

"The greatest scientific achievements were made by those who dared defy ethics for knowledge!" snarled the beast from the very depths of his chest, fury hotter than fire, "I have toiled more than thirty-one years for this! Thirty-one years of blood and sweat...playing second-fiddle to that fool Gast, when in fact I was far more superior! Every resource, I used! Every obstacle, I crushed! I'll never stop..no... NOT UNTIL THIS EXPERIMENT IS COMPLETE!!!!"

By the time he had finished, Hojo was gasping through a froth of purple saliva, some of which had spattered down upon Aeris' cheek. His wrinkled face showed determination at its most fierce.

What little sanity Hojo had possessed was forever lost. Perhaps he really could somehow save his work. And why not? No level was low enough to deter him.

In return, Vincent merely gazed back upon this man, unmoved by his dogmatic rave or that harsh glare.

"You can do whatever you want, Professor Hojo," he yielded at last, "I didn't come to fight or even stop you. That was something I should have done long ago, back when it mattered," he paused, then added dispassionately, "But I'm too old now. I'm too tired to care anymore."

His front hardened to ice, "I only came here for Aeris."

Hojo scoffed, "You came for a nameless lab specimen!"

"I came here for *Aeris*," Vincent insisted, almost in anger. He reiterated, emphasizing himself with one finger, "I'll ask you one last time: return that girl to me *now*, and I will leave."

Their glares lingered in silent deadlock. Hojo was not impressed, nor Vincent the least intimidated.

Aeris, who hitherto had remained stifled under tension, brought her wretched sight upon Vincent again. She had seen him stern before, but never to such intensity as now.

"Huh!" the sour Professor finally dismissed. Ever defiant, he crouched closer upon the trembling Aeris, and staked his claim, "I created this specimen. I *own* her, body and soul. And she belongs in this laboratory...here to fulfill her purpose," Hojo hissed the ultimate slur straight at Vincent, "The only way I relinquish this girl...is by Death!"

It was useless. All negotiations had crumbled. Somehow, Vincent was not surprised.

Death. Aeris' eyes widened with fear at the word.

Either him or Hojo.

He coolly slipped off his tattered long-coat, then discarded it aside. Without a second thought, Vincent twirled out his gun.

No other way: Death.

"So be it," he accepted. At once, the man assumed a hard-line defense, weapon ready for whatever may follow.

Had he seen Aeris now, he'd have beheld a soul terrified beyond any description, staring at him as though he'd stabbed her heart. Indeed, that probably explained why he avoided her eyes.

"Ahah? You actually intend to fight me? In YOUR sorry state?! Hahah!!" laughed Hojo, greatly amused.

His mockery bounced off a marble-hard visage. Vincent stoically stood his ground in wait.

He certainly needed no reminder about his ruined condition. On one side, the illness had boiled up an inferno within. He knew it would get worst...a lot worse. On the other hand, that last battle had drained him, no small thanks to Davoren. Countless injuries, torn clothes, holding up his strength when in fact he should have collapsed long ago.

Yes. What he intended was probably more stupid than courageous. But it didn't matter one bit to him.

Damned if he'd abandon her now. Damned twice if he'd let Hojo poison her body for some derranged experiment.

The question then came out of no where: who is "her", Vincent? Aeris, or...

No time for that, he instantly suppressed it: he couldn't afford any cracks in his concentration. Not now.

In the end, Hojo was quite pleased with Vincent's decision: nothing would gratify him more than to personally shred this annoying pest, piece by bloody piece.

The scientist magestically stood up. At the same time, he dragged up Aeris halfway, then literally flung her aside out of danger. The poor girl rolled across the floor until she sprawled to a halt upon her stomach.

Aeris dizzily struggled to recover herself, or at least, lift her head far enough to follow the scene. From here, she watched the sneering Professor Hojo advance two steps towards Vincent, then stand at perfect ease. Even his hands were dug into his pant-pockets just to snub Vincent further. Vincent, however, showed no reaction.

Hot tears flooded her eyes anew. She wanted to scream...warn him...beg he leave before this nightmare swallowed him too.

Wasn't once enough?! She had lain like this before, completely helpless as Death swept him away. The memory flashed across her mind a hundred times; each time more horrific than the last.

Would to God she'd never met him! She had been so stupid to escape...to snuggle into another girl's life, when in fact she was just a hollow image. No. His life wasn't worth all this! It wasn't even for her!! She didn't want to see him die!! He should have escaped! He should have escaped!!

Inside she wanted to scream, yet all she managed was an anguished, "...n..no..," barely audible upon her lips.

But events had long spiralled out of control. Just one demon against another, he with the sharper instincts stays alive. In this pin-drop silence, the invisible crowd of ghosts and shadows, the entire Reactor in fact, waited. They waited for Hell to explode.

Next heartbeat, and it did.

-End of Chp.72

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.73

Demon wars rage well beyond human imagination. They escape the confines of comprehension into the realm of nightmares. Not all take place in open space. Many burn inside, pitting self against self in heated combat, sometimes with no conclusion; just more scars and more devastation.

Their hearts are frozen dead. Some have never felt warmth. Instead they wander the wastelands alone. Some have let themselves wither long ago, simply because dragging a wounded soul caused too much grief, and it was easier to just forget it behind in the mud. Others don't care how far they stray as long as it satiated their inner hunger.

One cannot decide which is the worst kind. And in the end, it hardly matters. They are all Heaven's outcasts; "the Damned".

"Monsters".

They may appear deformed. More insidiously, they may assume "human" guises. But no mask good enough can conceal their inner ugliness or the stench of crime upon their hands. To these children of Satan, the Gates of Paradise are always locked shut. And no one knows how to get in.

Tonight the storm centred around two demons. Over the span of thirty-one years, Mistress Fate had weaved a fine tapestry of events: greed, deceit, pain, and lunacy. No heroes. Just monsters. Which brought them to here and now.

Both men trailed a long streak of evil behind them... terror, and so much blood. Between their conflict there cowered a young, frightened girl. Their soiled, black interior contrasted sharply against her white purity. Of all eyes, hers Vincent wished most to hide. He wanted to embrace her into himself, even take on more dirt just to keep her clean.

And farther in the background, there lingered another woman; a wraith shaded to the barest tinge of grey. She watched the scene in wistful melancholia, as if she already lamented the sad outcome. Vincent felt her close by. So close it hurt.

He was here. But where dwelt his mind? In the present, or the distant past? Upon Aeris or upon *her*?

"Why won't you answer?" teased a guileful voice from within. It sounded like his own.

Vincent did not speak.

"I know why. It's because you're afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Yes. You're afraid of the answer."

With one leg stretched far back, Vincent dug his foot into the ground for control. He came skidding all way backwards, feeling friction scrape his knee, until finally he stopped at the wall. There he remained, still crouched in readiness. On the other end, Professor Hojo stood poised in refined grace. Arms casually folded, he waited for his battered opponent to steady his gasps.

Only one minute into the battle, and already Vincent had been thrashed and beaten back. The fact that he hadn't come close to even scratching the Professor added insult to injury.

Behind cool specs, Hojo's frigid visage expressed boredom at Vincent's shabby performance. Thus far, he'd wasted nil effort on this pest. He probably thought those two ex-Turns had put up a better struggle, and they were mere humans.

"Well?" he scoffed impatiently, "Is that all?"

No, most certainly not. Vincent had just wiped the blood from his mouth when he suddenly made a fresh lunge at Professor Hojo; gun gripped tight, velocity triple force. But multiplications mattered little to this wily creature. In face of two well-aimed gunshots, he playfully parried just a step for the bullets to zing by, then dashed right in to intersect Vincent slam in the midriff. Quality not quantity. And that single blow contained ample power to send the stunned man tumbling back in exquisite pain.

He would not surrender yet. Vincent somehow used to claw to flip himself into recovery. Just in time to anticipate a set of talons slash down upon him. No sooner on his feet than he sprang further back, one millisecond before Hojo missed his skull for the front of his shirt: one clean tear from collar straight down, almost to his double-belt.

Any later, and he would have shared his shirt's fate, which now flapped open to reveal his loose, black undershirt, all soaked in blood and sweat. Lucky, but he knew luck would not last.

With one twist of the foot, Vincent took another chance on attack. He darted straight in for the demon, who perceived Vincent suddenly hit the emergency brakes, at the same instant whipping up his gun to shoot him point-blank in the face.

Several bullets rang out, none fast enough. Vincent was astonished to see Hojo evade the blasts as quick as a blur unscathed: he'd never witnessed such incredible speed!

"Incredible" hardly did Hojo justice. He moved faster than sense itself could comprehend. By the time Vincent skid to a halt, the crafty enemy had already swerved around, which ultimately brought him right onto his open flank. All in a single heartbeat.

Alarmed threefold, Vincent reacted by swinging the butt of his gun for that wasted green face: If anything, he'd try to throw the bastard off guard!

Wishful thinking. The uninterested Professor simply blocked that desperate blow with one arm, nor did he wince a wrinkle.

Next came the rejection: Hojo rammed the heel of his hand sideways into Vincent's face harder than a brick wall. Once more, Vincent was sent back tumbleweed-fashion. And again, scruffled onto one knee.

All very fortunate. For then, he perceived Professor Hojo, poised in profile, sharply flick three fingers upwards. Hell obliged. At his gesture, a fiery energy wave instantly geysered its way through the stone floor right in for him. So loud. So fast.

Hojo simply refused to stop. It just came one attack after another after another!

Vincent mobilised every muscle fibre into one huge effort. He sprang as high up as gravity permitted. The uncontrollable wavefront ripped the floor beneath on a destructive joyride, gushing all its wrath up to toss him off balance.

Through this madness, his keen eyes shot behind. He saw it collide head-on into an old gas tank just up ahead, only to cause a massive explosion ten times more powerful. Vincent was still airborne when the volcanic gust of chaos, fire, and metal scrap swept him further upwards into total disorientation. High up there, he lost himself to an endless night sky.

Time slowed to an eternity. Vincent felt strangely detached from his physical body. He watched himself sail wild through the air as though it were another person.

He seemed weightless...

The ground... it spun meters below him...

Too many noises... the explosion... the raucous cheers of the crowd...

Something caught his attention. Through the roaring haze, Vincent perceived a black vulture dive in at him from higher above. Its eyes trailed murderous flames. Its wings, more like ropes, splayed out... shooting down... down right for him...

Suddenly, Vincent snapped wide into alarm as he realized that was no bird of prey. It was Professor Hojo.

That "eternity" Vincent spent in limbo hadn't lasted a minute in reality: he didn't see the Professor, having cleverly ambushed him in midair, leap onto some slanted girder, then springboard over to meet him. He barely anticipated this "vulture" soar down after him as he fell- yes, he was falling.

But what Vincent *did* see was Hojo bare his palms, when a dozen slithery tentacles literally ripped out of both forearms. They speared fast through air for their stunned target below.

The crazed roped attacked from different directions all at once. Vincent actually believed this web of whips was hacking him alive. They tossed his ragged body about between lashes and shears, splattering out more and more blood. Pain... he'd never tasted such physical pain as now...

Hojo could have killed him. But preferred to maul him in free fall for these slow five seconds; that is until he swooped down for the grand finale.

Aeris had watched on in ever-rising terror. Half the battle escaped her comprehension. The rest rattled her soul by the roots. Yet nothing could have prepared her for this sight. Indeed, the memory etched itself forever into her mind.

She witnessed the completely helpless Vincent plunge amidst a swirl of ropes. Down came Professor Hojo from above. With both hands clasped tight overhead, the savage monster bashed it hard upon Vincent's head; just like a hammer upon a nail.

The man crashed onto the ground in a rumpled mess. But it didn't end yet. Before Vincent even knew where he was, Hojo, now both hands in his pockets, landed directly in front of him for the second blow: he scuffed his foot away, then kicked Vincent to the full extent his leg could swing, making sure he hit the face.

No different than kicking a soccer ball. And all right before Aeris' horrified eyes.

Vincent spun clear across the hall into one of the support girders. His left shoulder slammed whole against the edge; brutal enough to actually dent the structure, and rouse Aeris to a mad shriek. She

beheld the lifeless man slump flat to the stone floor. He lay there. Simply lay there face-down, torn and bloody.

Round one was over. The entire Reactor held its breath in silent wonder.

Professor Hojo stood poised as before at the centre of such awe. Beneath that scraggy, angular frame lurked a darker force just beginning to emerge. The features of his shrewd face seemed more pronounced... more fervid with obsession.

Again, Vincent had been beaten back. As he lingered over there, the sinister monstrosity studied that ravaged carcass. Soon, contempt sparked his narrow, reptilian eyes.

"Huh! Pathetic!" he pronounced his judgement crossly, "Can you really be that stupid? You would jump headlong into a fight with someone you know absolutely *nothing* about?"

Across the arena, Vincent heard Hojo's mockery cut through an inner fluster of numbness. By force, he pulled himself into a woozy awareness, then attempted to rise, but with little success. He couldn't feel his battered limb, nevermind twitch it. At first, he'd almost thought it had been ripped off.

Aeris needed another minute to collect her wits. Hitherto a petrified figure in the background, she suddenly sprinted forth to his aid. Hojo did not interfere. He watched the frantic girl, by now sprawled on both knees, help a very dazed Vincent sit up. He had to lean against her for support.

The Professor remained disdainful. Hands still in his pocket, he lifted his chin slightly, and with a stern voice snubbed down, "I need not remind you, Sir: you are no longer fighting Davoren. Whatever antic you used on that sentimental prat will not work on me. Nor am I the same as last time," he let one of the tentacles play by his foot to emphasize, "During this past year, JENOVA cells have mutated my body even further. But then, you were just too daft to realize that."

Point well taken. To Hojo, this battle was so out of balance, it wasn't even funny.

Ruined, tired, Vincent dropped his buzzing head into one hand to stop this pain gnawing his face. Too many blows... far more than he could absorb... so many in such a short period. Dizzy... he felt so...dizzy...

"Vincent! Ah God!" cried Aeris as the man almost relapsed aside. She secured him into both arms, at the same time whirled her tearful eyes towards Hojo, "Professor, stop it! If you've a speck of pity, STOP!! He can't fight you! He's hurt! He's too weak!!"

Vincent didn't know which was worse: Hojo pummelling him in the first three minutes, or Aeris calling him "weak".

The scientist however, unmoved by her plea, replied curtly: "Then he should transform."

The two word syllable immediately stiffened Vincent. Such a dramatic change, from giddiness to stone rigidity, rather frightened Aeris: through his fingers and dishevelled hair, she beheld a crimson fire glare bright at the callous creature. Hot, and quite hostile.

Hojo plucked another sensitive string in mischievous amusement, "Ho? You don't like that transformation, do you? Is it because you hate it, or are you... afraid of it?"

Vincent compressed his jaws, but kept himself in check.

"Well, no matter," he dismissed it after a pause, during which he adjusted his specs, "We both know the answer to that question. See, I know you a lot better than you think, Mr. Valetine."

Accept it or reject it, Vincent was Hojo's specimen, and Hojo his "owner"; the one who twisted his body into *this*. Between them existed a bond. Some instinctive enmity Time had whetted instead of dulled.

Their animosity, however, ran on a more insidious level. An invisible chain thirty years long fettered their minds together, perhaps tighter than Vincent cared to bear. In this surreal moment, as he glowered at the Professor, he saw a black void carved into that man's sanity. Nothing there but dogma, anger, and psychopathic obsessions.

And what could those yellow eyes see through him? Vincent felt an icy sensation tingle his spine. He was looking at *it*. Inside, there always raged a war on the subconscious front. Two psyches locked in one head; not him and yet also an inseparable part of him, tethered deep in darkness.

Chaos.

The beast personified the name itself. His mind was its prison; his body the means of escape to the outside world. It thrived on anger. It hungered for destruction. No purpose. Just wanton, senseless destruction to satisfy its voracious appetite.

No. Vincent refused to succumb to something like Chaos. If unbridled, it could blow the entire Reactor sky-high, along with Aeris, maybe himself too. He would not take that gamble.

Both he and Hojo knew it: he'd rather be weak and in control than powerful and out of control.

...but why?...

...are you afraid?...

...afraid of what?...

...being shackled alone in the dark?...

...becoming a muted voice in the back of that beast's mind?...

...She's seen half of it before... are you afraid of revealing your true form in front of her?...

...monster...

Again, Vincent barred out these intrusive voices with a resolute barrier. By now, his left arm had regained sufficient function. He picked his gun off the floor, then tore himself away from Aeris' arms, totally ignoring her sudden alarm. Instead, he climbed onto both feet. There he stood slouched up for Hojo to view.

"Dear me. More?" hummed the Professor in feigned concern.

Vincent understood now. This demon played a very game than his underling. Davoren had always relied on wits first, strength second, and the invincibility shield for back-up. He was a tactician at heart. And while he doubted Professor Hojo possessed Davoren's keen sense for strategy, Vincent could not dismiss either his agility or power. He could match up to neither.

Regardless, he stepped forward to resume battle.

Just then, Vincent felt a weak grip catch his hand from behind. He dutifully stopped, nor did he attempt to break loose. But he also refused to look back at those perturbed green eyes, even if he had to shade his face under profound solemnity.

"..Vincent..," faltered the distressed Aeris, still upon her knees, "..I.. I beg you... don't.."

The rest got caught in her throat. Inside, her bosom swelled with misery. So many things she wished to say, if only she had a voice!

She didn't need one. Vincent understood it all through the squeeze of her hand. Without force, without the slightest hint of irritation, he calmly ordered her, "Please let go of me."

His frostiness struck Aeris stone-still. To her, Vincent's demeanour never appeared more dark or aloof than now, with her holding him back. His eyes were stoic; avoidant.

His resolve had shut her out too. Everything except this battle. Everything pushed out except this battle.

No choice. Aeris hesitated a long moment, feeling the tension of his grip upon the gun, until finally she conceded to loosen her grip, just enough for Vincent to slip away. From here, her anguished gaze followed him behind. He marched towards Professor Hojo, who waited neither impressed nor amused.

The enemy had speed and strength. A deadly combo. Nevertheless, Vincent advanced undeterred. He emptied his gun, then mechanically shoved in a fresh cartridge, cocking it once for confirmation. Hojo did not react.

He had very little. Just a gun and some vague plan. He'd just have to improvise. The rest he trusted to whichever devil guarded over him.

And so it began. Vincent's pace quickened to a dash. Professor Hojo easily anticipated the attack. With one casual swoop, he whiplashed a bundle of tentacles at his rash assailant, wreaking widespread anarchy in the process.

Vincent didn't quite remember how, but somehow he managed to bypass the first wave intact. Unfortunately, he couldn't manoeuvre around the second in time. It swacked him away like a razor-sharp wind.

Hojo wouldn't let him crash to the ground again, not when he could deal a third decisive blow: he dived in with an outward swing of the arm, behind it all the strength four knuckles could produce.

On the receiving end, the jagged ridge of bone collided into Vincent's senses. Vision blurred to red. Floor and ceiling spun round. He heard someone scream his name. He groped for his gun, but found it no where. It must have been knocked out of his hand back there...back there...

Waking to a whirl of pain, Vincent realized that blow had literally sent him flying clear across to the opposite end of the arena, where stood the brick wall. Upside down, he caught a glimpse of Hojo, now seemingly miles away. He saw the arrogant scientist swagger away without any follow-up, having decided himself the victor, and Vincent on a fatal collision course into the wall; or better yet already dead.

Maybe so. Maybe not. Vincent wasn't one to let a chance slip by.

Harnessing this momentum to his own advantage required precise timing and a lot of effort. One second before impact, Vincent acrobatically flipped over, so that his feet touched onto the wall. He crouched in for

an immediate rebound. All the fire pumped up his legs, giving him the extra boost he needed to ricochet off this springboard, airway express right back into Hojo, who realized his gross miscalculation too late.

Retribution came sweet. Scarcely had the incredulous Professor wheeled around, than in rammed Vincent's heel clean into his jawbone. The impressive blow knocked Hojo back and over in a clumsy stagger. No words could describe his shock.

Meanwhile, Vincent sailed overhead for a perfect landing. No time to lose. He spotted a second opportunity shine ahead. Once he touched down safe, he decelerated himself by skidding backwards across the floor, straight for his discarded gun. No sooner there, than Vincent stamped his heel against the handle, which effectively flipped it up into the air. He snatched it midway, only to take off like lightning back in for Hojo once more, low and fixed on target.

It had taken Vincent ten unbelievable seconds to turn the tide. Yet it was enough for the outraged scientist to not only recover his balance, but also retaliate with the belligerency of a madman twelve times over.

Be he brave or foolish, Vincent charged in on a dead-set path. No one could stop him, not even as Hojo hurtled a spume of energy at him, trailing green aura all the way. With no regrets, he took the blow full-force by shielding his face behind his metal arm.

The explosion rocked the battlegrounds and its amazed spectators, from the terrified Aeris to the shadows high above. They all witnessed the gust of madness blow both enemies back, but not enough to phase either.

Getting pushed against impact meant nothing to the determined Vincent. He simply whiffed to one side, at the same time casting the damaged foreplate off his claw, thereby revealing the metallic knuckles and hinged wrist beneath. He'd lost one third of its function, but it also meant he'd broken through Hojo's defences. From there, the two demons steered around a semicircle, each in the opposite direction. They resembled bloodhounds, ruthless eyes measuring up the opposition before lunging in to kill.

Strange how both took charge at the exact instant. Vincent, however, acted faster. Aimed like a true sniper, he fired one shot bullseye into Hojo's thigh, right through the main vascular bundle of the whole leg- artery, vein, nerve; everything was severed in a snarl. Before he realized it, the flabbergasted Hojo lurched over as his legs gave out beneath him. Vincent, still at top speed, came zipping by to deliver the second bullet, this time shattering Hojo's kneecap to pieces.

The creature roared with gruesome pain. As a bonus, Vincent scuffed to a sudden halt, then reversed gears to ram his metallic elbow back into its maker's nape (his way of expressing thanks, perhaps?) For the first time, Hojo crashed to the floor as a tumbled heap of stupefaction. Miraculously however, he rolled himself onto his feet again in a flash. Indignation drove him forth, despite pain, despite injury, straight at Vincent, who hadn't imagined this adversary could recover so quickly.

His attention then shot aside. A lash of tentacles cracked at him on the right flank. Though Vincent managed to block it, the brutal lash wobbled him off balance a bit with an arm gashed clean across. In that one moment of unsteadiness, Professor Hojo perceived an opening: one good kick. It more than caught Vincent by painful surprise. It stabbed against his side, right where Davoren had knifed in that piece of scrap previously.

In effect, the man spiralled sideways, both legs sprawled mad through the air, until he slammed to the ground. Vincent struggled to rise. He clutched the now re-opened wound, at least to control the bleeding.

Hojo too staggered a step back under his injured leg, if only to shake off this wretched giddiness. His glare instantly shot back to focus.

Indeed, Vincent had barely stood halfway up when he anticipated the battle resume full-force. With only a fraction of a second to react, he dived aside, after which those tentacles tore the floor instead. He used his body weight to roll forth onto both feet again, just in time to parry a down-swoop of dagger-nails. It hurt to move, but it would definitely kill to stand still.

They scruffled all around in this evasive game. One side led the attack, the other strove to keep up his defence, striking back whenever opportunity allowed, and even then he wasn't nearly as effective; Vincent simply hadn't enough physical power to match Hojo's. Those claws slashed at him from every angle. Some were near misses. Some gashed and grazed him.

Soon the tentacles joined the fun. Vincent found himself attacked on all fronts. He couldn't gain enough time or space to retaliate, only quick blows to leave an impression. Nor could Professor Hojo win the upper hand. Not that Vincent had become faster. Rather, he's become slower, no small thanks to his wounded leg: this sniper had chosen his target well.

The gridlock battle filled thirty seconds when they spontaneously broke off, but only for another second before the infuriated scientist lunged in again. There Hojo swept out a gesture which imperiously invited a fresh energy wave to precede him on a destruction spree. Together, they charged in at Vincent.

He did not think. Vincent simply reacted. He squatted down to spring high overhead, flipping forward as the anarchy blazed under, first the disappointed tidal wave, next Professor Hojo, who for the life of him could not believe his eyes.

At that frozen instant, the two demons flew in opposite directions; one gliding through mid-air; the other still charging forth behind a force fields of havoc. In that single mad moment, as they sailed across each other, Vincent looked down to find himself in view of Hojo's unprotected back. Perfect target range.

All he had to do was shoot.

Vincent broke out of this slow time frame into instant action. No sooner did he spin himself right-side up than he showered his hapless enemy in hot lead. He didn't hear Hojo's harsh wail, or see how the creature reeled over against this inescapable hailstorm. What mattered was pumping in as many bullets as possible. In a single sweep, he sprayed Hojo's back, shattered his shoulder blade, his other leg, and whatever arteries or nerves around. V

ery swift. Very brutal. However, the attack took its toll on all sides: the Professor, at a total loss for stability, came crashing and tumbling across the floor in a grizzly heap. Vincent landed safe on both feet, only to clumsily collapse aside onto his buttocks, frazzled to near unconsciousness. Aeris remained petrified in place. Two hard-core demons at war. She daren't cross their blood-streaked arena now.

Instead, the silent, anxious girl watched Vincent steady himself again. He seemed far more demonic now; as if those few strings which linked him to "humanity" had been loosened during this war. His chest, his entire frame in fact, heaved double hard under agony. But his eyes struck her as most unnatural. Such an intense, fervid-red glow.

She looked towards the other end of the ravaged battlefield. For the second time, Hojo had been knocked to the ground. There, he struggled amidst sickening vertigo to rise again. At no easy price. Every movement, even the slightest twitch, hurt excruciatingly. Twice he collapsed, his breathing like a cacophony of wheezes and spumes of purple saliva. Aeris couldn't bear to look at his bullet-ridden backside, which sprouted and oozed blood, or his broken lump of a body as it writhed despite himself.

After another futile attempt, Professor Hojo managed to climb onto his limp feet, though not to stand in any better shape than before. He dripped blood. Gone his specs, along with his haughtiness, replaced by a slouched up, unsteady posture. Aeris clasped both hands over her pounding heart: here the Professor was already standing, whereas Vincent still sat hunched over on the floor.

"Huh! Strange how somethings never change," grunted Hojo to his enemy, "You're still the same stubborn, meddling piece of cow dung you were thirty-one years ago."

Vincent spat some blood aside, then replied cuttingly, "I suppose I could say you're still the same asshole you were back then... but that would be a compliment, wouldn't it?"

Touché. The scientist acknowledged the retort with a crooked sneer. Gathering his shattered dignity further, he mocked outloud, "Oh yes! You may praise yourself for a battle well fought. Bravo!" With a peculiar air of mysticism, Hojo then archly placed one hand over the opposite side of his wrinkled face, and breathed, "But you will soon discover, my good Sir, all you've done is scratch the surface."

The riddle bore a sinister meaning. Neither Vincent nor the perturbed Aeris understood, though it certainly aroused their alarm.

As Hojo stood there, hand on face, a black swarm of evil gathered around his presence. The ground began to tremble. The walls shed their loose stones. Between those spindly fingers, they beheld his pupils disappear into a brighter flame. Some inner force rattled his skeletal frame. Something far greater than he could contain, pushing itself harder and harder through this lanky body.

He became distorted... beastly...

Suddenly, he acceded to its freedom. The scientist buckled over for several bony spikes to erupt clean through his back, and spread themselves as six pairs of serrated wings.

The terrible sight sent shockwaves all around as a glorious cocoon of aura instantly engulfed Hojo. Inside, the force twisted and mangled his body into higher evolution. The metamorphosis seemed to hurt him but delight his senses.

His size doubled...tripled. Those wasted muscles gained such bulk; they tightened his now dark leathery-green skin until one could trace every vein throbbing beneath.

Most horrifying was his face. Its human features faded to a remnant, remoulded into another as grotesque as a dragon, erratic hair billowing in madness. The monstrosity tossed its head far back for the last stretch. There his jaws snapped far out to display a jagged double-set of fangs.

No lie. JENOVA cells not only thrived on his body, but had ascended him to a new level of majesty: Holocaust Hojo.

Unshackled thus from its human form, the burly gargantua of a gargoyle announced itself with a grating scream which shook the Heavens above. Out splayed the tentacles. More bony blades and spines sheared through; twin pairs unsheathed from each elbow.

Free and fully armoured, Hojo crouched into a loose stance, like a predator ready to attack. Sadistic barbarity lurked behind those narrow eyes, but also intelligence. Intelligence and plenty of cunning. They seemed to ask Vincent "Well? What do you think?"

Vincent thought it disturbing to say the very least. He struggled to comprehend this twist: The Holocaust creature towered eight feet at full stretch, though crouched suited its posture just fine, especially with that

arched, ridged back. Each gnarled claw could easily accommodate two skulls. And no doubt possessed the power to crush a hundred more.

All in all, not good.

It suddenly got worse when this hulk of a Hellspawn shot in at the astonished Vincent, aiming for nothing short of a carnage.

-End of Chp.73

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.74

The gusty winds and loose stone whipped past Vincent. Next the disfigured monster flew in at a velocity which literally shredded the floor in flaming-white aura. All of Hell's fire shone bright through those eyes. In slow motion, he seemed to ride the very wings of Satan.

But in reality, Hojo was there faster than lightning. From her place, Aeris gave a horrified "AH!" as the charging Professor, claws now fully contracted, took one swipe at his shocked enemy. Perhaps her cry awakened him. Somehow, Vincent broke free of paralysis to roll aside, escaping those five daggers with just a nicked sleeve.

Very, very close.

Vincent had to move even quicker now. By sheer reflex, he somersaulted backwards onto both feet, then sprang high up, one heartbeat before Hojo's other fist smashed full force upon the spot. Another close call.

But not one to be commended. Airborne through a gross oversight, Vincent realized that by avoiding one attack, he'd now opened himself to worse attacks from below. A blunder Hojo used only too readily.

He swung all weight round to deliver one brutal uppercut clean into Vincent's stomach. In return, Vincent retched a froth of blood. It felt like four sharp nails had gutted him clean through, jolting his skull down whilst his spine snapped upwards. Sensation was lost. He hardly felt Hojo launch the second blow: this time hard across his face. It sent him spiralling mad across the air, head so twisted aside, one wondered how his neck hadn't dislocated yet.

Vincent bounced off the stone floor like a rubber ball. He collided back-first into the balustrade at the edge of the arena with a resonant slam. Only then did the savage pain flood his nervous system. He fumbled dazedly. Everything swam around. Inside, he could hear the blood throbbing against his eardrums.

His instincts, however, remained strained alert. They blared warning of danger on a collision course... a collision he would not survive unless he acted NOW. Vincent obeyed without argument. He automatically gripped the railing behind, then flipped over this pivot point, just as the Professor came mowing through madder than a runaway bull.

Vincent lost his hold. Hojo didn't even try to dampen his own insane momentum. Over the brink both enemies tumbled at a complete loss for balance, into open space. As he whirled in mid-air, Vincent caught glimpse of a horror-stricken Aeris rush up towards the balustrade. Too late. He lost sight of her to the pit below, which yawned wide to welcome him. All sorts of structures arched across its magnificent diameter: pipelines, support girders roped in cables, and massive conduit systems.

Gravity reeled both demons straight through this metal network. But of the two, Vincent possessed better control thanks to his light weight. He spun himself right-side up, just in time to land safe upon the nearest pipeline. From there, he immediately hopped off onto a slanted girder below, slid along its length to another one further down, and so on; all with the perfect grace of a monkey. When far enough, Vincent landed on a stiff transport duct, and squatted in place.

He quickly scanned the terrain (or what little he could distinguish) Vincent soon deemed himself the only breathing soul here. In the darkness, this place resembled a floating graveyard of metal and entangled shadows.

He guessed he'd fallen quite some distance. Looking up, the platform seemed miles away. Down, the abyss stretched a thousand miles more. Far across on the opposite side, he noticed a vertical series of broad windows. They lined the pit's height all way downwards, between each pair an impudent ledge protruded out. A rather putrid yet familiar odour permeated the air. They must be near the Mako refinery centre.

Which raised a very important question: where was Professor Hojo?

He'd lost sight of him too during the fall. Nevertheless, Vincent stayed crouched in position. His suspicious glare searched around for any movement. The gun waited close by his sweaty face, ready to fire at the slightest provocation.

Nothing stirred.

It was the enemy's move. He knew Hojo lurked nearby. He could feel his skin crawl from the sheer presence this creature evoked.

The eerie tranquillity could have unnerved anyone. Longer and longer it extended. Vincent kept his focus cool, every sense sharpened to a knife's edge. Still nothing.

And supposing Hojo did attack. How would he retaliate? He wasn't exactly on even ground here. One slip and God knows where this void would end. Vincent reassessed the situation: he was marooned between earth and hell. Not good. Hojo had exchanged agility for size and strength. Even worse. Bullets had an effect on his "human" form. In fact, Vincent had wounded him at several vital points. But "Holocaust"? Vincent wasn't too sure.

Wonderful: all *he* had was this gun, a battered body with claw to match, and a stifling fever.

His thoughts returned to Aeris. During the entire battle, he's avoided eye contact for fear of distraction. Not that he'd never sensed her turmoil. On the contrary. He's always felt it peck him from behind, most keenly when she begged him so pitifully not to continue.

Now the war had moved to lower grounds. Vincent didn't like leaving her alone. Then again, better her safe up there than down here. Last thing he needed was the double task of protecting her *and* fighting back. Experience had taught him well.

"But you know what I find even stranger, Mr. Valentine?" suddenly boomed a coarse, garbled voice from nowhere, "It's how passionate you've become about retrieving that Cetra-clone."

Vincent tensed: he hadn't expected the beast could actually speak as well as think.

"Heheh... but then, no surprise. We always seem to fight over the same woman, eh?"

Or indulge his sick humour. Vincent said nothing, nor was he the least bit amused. Instead, his stern eyes darted around this infernal webwork. Still, he could not determine Hojo's location, who after a long wait, finally snorted, "Hmph! I hate it when you give me that 'silent treatment'. It is quite irritating."

At once, Vincent detected incoming at twelve o'clock sharp: down speared a swarm of long tentacles from high above. Each one sauntered the girder more and more as their light-footed target manoeuvred in-between them. All until the hapless structure shattered to pieces.

Vincent leapt away onto some other beam before the duct collapsed, then landed on an entanglement of joists further below. His attention turned upwards: there he spotted a shapeless phantom whiz across from post to post.

Instinctively, he blasted full-fire at the enemy. The acoustics here made every gunshot sound triple loud, to the extent that he thought he'd go deaf. Yet for all the rounds wasted, only hollow echoes struck Professor Hojo. The nimble creature moved faster than Vincent could follow!

His alarm peaked maximum when Hojo, whilst dodging the gunfire, severed the supports off a heavy transport duct, thereby liberating it of all restraints. Vincent flipped to the next beam. The mangled piece of scrap smashed through, only to get lynched in more garbage and cablelines.

Another miss, but the diversion was perfect. Before Vincent could catch a single breath, Hojo eagerly clawed his way down the trunk of one girder, then dropped in for a personal visit.

Most unwelcome, to be sure. Trapped under, Vincent frantically sprang aside onto the oscillating mess of metal, after which the monster crashed feet-first on the spot. Vincent swung off, then landed safe on another girder below, only to make a break for it. The relentless monster immediately followed suit, unleashing a fresh battery tentacles in the process.

The action spiralled downwards. Vincent found himself overwhelmed and outnumbered one to twenty: him against these tireless whips. Together, they played a deadly game. Worse, the stealthy Professor had used this opportunity to swoop in on Vincent's unprotected flank.

He didn't know *how* Hojo got there or how he even anticipated the incoming blow, but somehow Vincent managed to block those razor-sharp nails with his metal claw. Not the smartest move; Hojo's diabolical daggers easily shred five marks through that "shield", their brutality almost whiffing Vincent off both feet alongway.

At least he was still in one piece. Something Hojo would soon change unless he kept alert. Already, the scientist swished both elbow blades together like shears. Vincent ducked, then skittered away as those same blades, having failed, slashed straight down. Missed again. In desperation, Vincent kicked the lynched girder off balance. It violently teetered sideways, knocking the enemy backwards, but only enough to distract him. By then, Vincent had leapt still further down this jungle-gym. Exasperated, the Professor whisked after him.

Vincent's mind raced far ahead of him: what to do? Against Davoren, he could hold out his own for a good while. But Hojo? NOW? He wouldn't last one minute!

No indeed. Rather than continue this irksome farce, the insidious demon chose a more interesting alternative: aerial assault. Quickly, Hojo dropped onto a strategic beam-joist. He locked dead on the fleeing target below. With a mere flick of the wrist, a fiery torpedo of alien energy ignited out from his palm, whereby he spiked it downwards full-force.

The glaring comet wreaked havoc through the pit. Vincent heard its thunderous clamour, felt its heat burn upon his back, but knew better than to look up. He hopped down and down this metallic webwork in a race against time. Finally, when the countdown reached zero, he made a leap of faith high across the abyss... towards one of the stoic window ledges on the opposite side.

The chain of explosions sent vibration ten meters around. It spewed charred scrap and flames ten meters more. Vincent used this outward gust to fly him the rest of the way across. First came the shrapnel to blitz holy Hell through every glass pane. Next Vincent slammed against the ledge, right across the midgut with a hideous grunt.

The pit never appeared more terrifying than at that instant. He struggled, almost slipped, but clumsily vaulted onto the ledge again, breathless and dripping sweat.

Hojo of course realized his prey had eluded Death yet again. From his view high, high above, his harsh glare followed Vincent as he gathered himself up to safety. Nor was the latter oblivious to that fact. However, the blast had destroyed the duct network. Between them gaped a distance at least fifty feet long. It would take the enemy some time to find stable passage down the wreckage.

Meanwhile, Vincent beat a hasty retreat.

He clambered in through one of the broken windows. He tumbled back-over into a narrow corridor, upon a tile floor strewn in glass shards and debris. But he was too flustered to notice pain right now. The wounded man scuffled away to find shelter. Anything that could conceal him would do!

He knew not where he was or went. He didn't care. Vincent arbitrarily dodged around one entrance. He fumbled his way past a room crowded with crates and delivery parcels, down the next passageway, then onto a haunted atrium. He searched around, dizzy, lost. First thing he saw was some large modern sculpture posed in one corner.

Good enough. Vincent took immediate refuge behind this dusty piece of art. There, he dropped down, and slumped aside against its steel base, not just for support, but to hold his scattered thoughts together.

So what now? The Professor was on the hunt for him. His power exceeded far beyond Davoren's, beyond anything Vincent had ever encountered. And here he sat huddled up, alone, like a trapped rat.

With each gulp of air, he winced in agony. It hurt to think. It hurt to breathe. Vincent clutched his tight chest, and hunched over to further ease respiration. More sweat trickled down. Thus far, he'd managed to repress the fit. But he was losing this battle too. Inside, he could feel it gaining ground. Time was running out.

What now? Any ideas? At least a dozen sprouted up, all useless or unsatisfactory. Transform? Surrender his mind Chaos? No. Too dangerous. More dangerous than *now*? He wouldn't risk it in closed space, not with Aeris somewhere in the Reactor. Yes, Chaos was THAT destructive.

Well then, Vincent mocked himself, you'd better think up something fast. Otherwise, we're screwed.

Spoken plain and true. The options chased each other in ceaseless circles, which only brought a scowl to his face: what *could* he do? Just how long did he think he could hide before the Professor found him? So, what to do?

I don't know, dammit! he snapped.

Then what? Rot here until Hojo finds you? Fight? What should we do?

So what now, Vincent?

She's crying for you...can you hear her?

No. You never came... when she was crying...you never came..

What now?are you afraid?....

Vincent forcefully, almost angrily, shook off this nonsensical flutter. No. He would not panic. He would not submit to fear. That was one advantage he's never grant the enemy.

Rather than dwell on internal matters, Vincent looked around; perhaps discover something of use. Nothing outstanding presented itself, at least nothing he could find.

Wherever he was, it sure was not Reactor premises. It appeared to be the reception hall to some sort of multiplex. An enormous multiplex. From this central area, several wings spread out towards obscurity. Vincent looked up. The atrium reached high up, past three floors of glazed windows, into the void above.

Just then, Vincent noticed a very, very familiar sign emblazoned like a star on the front wall. Yes, he certainly remembered ShinRa Inc.'s impressive trademark logo. But what captured his interest was the rectangular gold plaque fitted snugly beneath.

It read: ShinRa Incorporated Advanced Science and Technology Research Centre. Then in smaller inscription: AdM306-security ID card required- unauthorised personnel strictly forbidden.

He recognized "AdM306". It was the standard code ShinRa Inc. bestowed on high-class places of restricted access. Vincent studied that plaque again, this time quite morbidly.

No mistake. He's taken the "express route" into ShinRa's secret laboratory.

He felt a peculiar chill tingle his spine. Here stood one of ShinRa's buried legacies. Here it was meant to happen; the genesis of a God... a new, perfected Sephiroth.

A vision burnt in smoke. Only a wasted madman remained alive, twisted inside out from love of a life-long dream.

Vincent lingered upon a particular realisation: himself, Davoren, the lunatic Rufus and the Professor. Strange how each man seemed shackled to the past. Their bodies were here, but their minds always drifted behind... so fixated upon a face, an emotion, or an ambition. They lived within their own shells. To them, the world inside was more real than outside. In a way, Vincent could even empathize with Hojo's desperation.

The present, however, yanked him back to keen awareness: he'd distinctly detected something slink its way towards this hall.

It hadn't taken Hojo long to sniff out his trail. And no doubt would take him less time to find him. After all, this was *his* turf.

Such a dire emergency mobilised Vincent to action. He scrambled away from the sculpture to hide behind that broad reception desk on the other end of the atrium. Maybe he could throw Hojo off the scent a while longer, at least until he devised some plan!

He huddled in the blackest corner, next to a heap of abandoned crates. Here darkness obscured him to shadow. Vincent kept himself low and on full alert.

Silence weighed a ton upon the air. Time languished second by second, tick by tock, still nothing emerged. From afar though, if one pricked up his ears sharp enough, faint shuffles could be heard to approach. Soon, they evolved into heavy, slow footsteps.

Just listening to them wound Vincent's nerves tighter. Much to his annoyance, he noticed the gun shaking slightly within his grip- like some damn rookie, he frowned.

Closer and louder until at long last, the ominous footsteps reached the hall. There was a brief pause of movement. Vincent didn't twitch a single muscle fibre, never mind take a peak. He could just imagine the silhouette of Hojo poised at the entrance, glaring around in deep mistrust. Vincent heard a low-pitched growl float overhead, then the footsteps entered, this time deliberate.

Breathing was stifled mute. From his place behind the desk, Vincent discerned the shrewd predator prowling about for a fresh trace. He tensed further as he saw Hojo's irregular shadow slide across the marble floor. Luckily, he wandered away again.

So Vincent would wait... then what? Every minute passed brought him closer to discovery. He had to do *something*! But what? If he was physically outmatched, how on earth could he fight when...

Amidst this futile debate, his eyes happened to stray towards the boxes dumped nearby. One such container sat wide open. Inside there huddled some dusty flasks, each one filled with liquid and sealed. Vincent just barely made out the label on the crate.

He was no chemist, but he definitely recognized hazardous acid; concentrated no less. These delivery boxes must have been left unprocessed shortly before the Reactor's closure.

It all depended on his own gun skills. Since he hadn't much else to trust in right now, Vincent accepted the gamble. Quickly yet very, very cautiously, the desperate man slipped three flasks out of the shipment box. He secured them in-between his claw-fingers, and drew up the gun in rigid anticipation.

All set.

Timing. Timing mattered most. He heard the Professor give a snort, and probe towards one corner. Only then did Vincent steal a peak over the tabletop. He perceived Hojo over there, busy inspecting the sculpture, or rather the curious trail of blood on the floor. For one moment, his attention was diverted aside.

Now.

Vincent suddenly sprang up to both feet again, at the same time hurtling the chemical arsenal full-swing towards the astounded Professor. Hojo instantly whirled round to encounter this brazen attack; but not before Vincent aimed his gun upwards: he blasted the flasks one-two-three as they came spinning high over Hojo's head.

Perfect sharp-shooting. For a second, the shocked scientist did not realize, did not even feel the acid and glass fragments shower his torso, face, and limbs. He was still midway around when it splashed full into his left eye. Only then did he awaken to a pain grisly beyond any possible description.

The wrathful creature wailed out loud to shake the Heaven's above. He staggered aside in feral disorientation, snarling, rubbing his eye whilst his burnt flesh began to fume. By instinct, the enraged demon unleashed an indiscriminate barrage of energy blasts; if not to kill his assailant, then push him far back.

Madness flew about. Vincent, no less alarmed, rolled out into the open, after which a stray missile blitzed his shelter apart. Shaken but unharmed, he bolted towards one of the giant pillars across the battlefield. From there, he readily returned fire with the exact intentions as Hojo. One bullet after another, no pause in-between. The ruthless hailstorm pelted Hojo back and back again. He couldn't fight Vincent and the pain at the same time.

Flummoxed, overwhelmed, Professor Hojo swung one arm all-way back to deliver a massive counter-offence. Energy particles immediately gathered in his broad palm, whereby he sent this charged trajectory in the direction of his adversary. Vincent deemed it best to huddle away. Just as well. He'd run out of ammo.

It spiralled an energy wave on an uncontrollable destruction spree. It collided head-on into the front wall, against the ShinRa logo with an earth-shaking explosion. Vincent protected his head as rubble and iron scrap came crashing around.

He remained thus another minute or so; that is until he realized the bombardment had ceased. Vincent raised his head again, slightly puzzled. He waited just to make sure all had settled, then peaked around the devastated pillar: no sign of Hojo anywhere.

He staggered out into the silent warzone. From the looks of things, Professor Hojo must have retreated during the anarchy, probably to tend his wounds, or reassess his strategy. At least that gave him some breathing space.

In any case, Vincent was stuck here. Unlike the Professor, he knew nothing of this laboratory's layout. And he obviously could not retrace his original route. So, he'd just have to find his own way out, and back to Aeris.

By random choice, Vincent selected the East Wing. It didn't really matter. The lab was interconnected. If he didn't meet Hojo first, then Hojo would surely find him. Either way, their paths would clash again before the night was through. The question was: when?

Vincent reloaded his gun, when he noticed the bloody gash across his arm. But then, he hadn't time for that. Onwards he limped into the lion's den.

-End of Chp.74

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.75

Under the arched entrance, the path stretched down a long, broad corridor. Vincent made his way through a thick drapery of darkness. He crept along the wall as stealthily as a cat, too wary of this tomb-like tranquillity. It made his cautious footsteps sound quite loud.

The laboratory struck him as a curious blend between a hospital and factory. ShinRa Inc. had clearly invested considerable capital into this centre. One only had to appreciate the vastness of this multiplex, with its chambers, doorways, and endless halls, each one more bleak than the last. Not to mention all the idle machinery lying around, from computers to preservation tanks twice his size.

Vincent found himself a lonely drifter amidst a haunted labyrinth, unsure where the next turn would lead, or when his cunning adversary might strike. Time dragged by. Five minutes. Ten minutes. Half an hour. Nothing.

He passed so many grotesque shadows. None offered any directions out of this maze. They silently watched the lost intruder venture through uncharted territory: who knew? His path could lead to the end of the laboratory, or his life.

Deeper he wandered. Vincent soon emerged into another atrium, far grander than the first. He had to pause a moment just to absorb it all. His gaze floated across the huge round hall, then turned high up until his head thrust back: the sheer height of this place!

Looking up, five semi-circular platforms curved along the brick wall, decked over each other like shelves. Vincent stood in awe of this extraordinary architecture. High above him hung a webwork of supports, trestles, and bridges, interconnected by steel stairwells. They all arched across the air from one side of the atrium to the other.

Most impressively though was that colossal black screen. It sat embedded within the wall just opposite the five-platform system. No one would dare dispute its majesty. Height by width, the screen practically spanned the entire upper wall. From the floor upwards, cablelines and conductor tubes fed into the computer network framed around the screen. It overlooked the simple world below in certain haughtiness.

Vincent guessed this to be the core data-banks of all ShinRa's science files, be they public or private. He could only imagine how much information such a mammoth computer system had processed in its days of glory. But dead or alive, it remained a wonder among wonders.

Just then, Vincent discerned a movement flicker behind.

He reached for the trigger faster than he had whirled around. But much to his puzzlement, Vincent found no one there. Strange. Had he really detected a presence, or simply imagined it? He stood strained on edge, torn between doubts, waiting for something to settle the matter.

All remained still. He must have imagined it.

After a brief deliberation, Vincent decided to continue. He pursued the entrance farthest to the side. It led upwards into some dome-shaped observation facility, or so he surmised from the ominous equipment and operation tables scattered around, like relics of a lost civilisation.

The man prowled amongst these ruins. Several times, he stopped short to listen, thinking he'd heard footsteps nearby. Instead, the same stiff silence answered back.

A dreadful premonition permeated the air. As he advanced, Vincent felt eyes watching him from every angle. Misshapen ghosts clustered around him. They tugged at him. They laughed and blubbered nonsense. Everywhere he looked, he spotted Hojo's gargoyle figure in the crowd. Everywhere, he saw those narrow, detestable eyes.

...she's crying...

...Fear. Are you afraid, Vincent?...

Inside, he felt them rip his reason apart. Vincent almost fell under the mob but luckily, grabbed the table for support, just as the erratic mental spasm became a piercing headache. At once, the wretched man pressed his temples in painful agitation.

It only meant one thing: his mind had begun to crack under the fever's weight. Whilst precious time slipped by, the fit ravaged him, strength first, now his logic. All Professor Hojo had to do was finish him off whenever he pleased. That could be the next minute, or perhaps in an hour.

Vincent had to commend the Professor for how beautifully he played with other people's nerves (one of his most distinguished talents) In any case, he remained lurching against the table a few more minutes until the killer headache dissipated. Again, he shook his head clear. He must rivet his concentration on here and now, while there was still some sanity to control. He surveyed the hall a second time. For some odd reason, Vincent noticed his attention drawn towards an electronic sliding-door. More specifically, its smashed glass façade. It seemed quiet there...a little too quiet.

Vincent's expression gravened. Swiftly, he dashed over and glued his back to the wall next to the doorway. He stood rigid for one full minute. When sure nothing lurked around, he slipped through the shattered door, and down the corridor.

The path opened onto an impressive exhibition hall. As Vincent entered, he noted all those aisles of proud specimen showcases lined up. He couldn't help but wonder (rather morosely) which one had poor Aeris endured her torture. Never before had he beheld so much technology in one place. It resembled a stalactite cavern of machines and metal: computer consoles and dusty black monitors filled the skyline. Switchboards, panels of buttons and levers. Overcrowded workbenches, and such sinister-looking apparatuses Vincent shunned to entertain their purposes.

The suspense felt like waiting for a timebomb to explode beneath one's feet. He crept among the specimen tanks, taking care not to trip over the cablelines which snaked across the floor. There were shelves crammed with ragged journals and files. Microscopes. Medical instruments, from syringes to scalpels. Above towered battlements of control booths. Indeed, all these incredible sights thoroughly intrigued him.

The jungle grew darker, thicker. The atmosphere reeked of horrible foreboding. Vincent could not stop his finger from twitching on the trigger, or subdue his quickened breaths. His tense glare darted from side to side. All shadows resembled Hojo. There he was. Over there too. And there. All his shadows. Which was the real one?

He didn't know when or how, but Vincent suddenly became aware of a presence looming right behind him.

All at once, the alarmed man swung round with gun pointed straight out. Instead of firing, however, Vincent himself was smitten point-blank into rigid stupor by the sight; to such an intensity he felt his heart crash down. Beyond the muzzle, he gaped at the enemy before him.

She stood there solitary, a young woman, her face as stoic as cold stone. To him, her slender figure seemed conjured up from an ethereal mist which surrounded them both. She showed no emotion. To contrast, Vincent's aim and logic wavered into stark anxiety, every sign furrowed deep upon his own face.

If he forgot the entire world, he could never forget those eyes, or that beloved face, whose beauty radiated light upon the darkness around. Only *she* could stir him up like this, from complete stillness to violent passion. Only her...

"..L..Lucrecia...", Vincent whispered her name hoarsely, almost deliriously.

The woman did not flinch. Nor could he squeeze his voice past his parched throat. There they stood in plain view of each other, between them an agony of three decades.

He raged inside. He repeated a thousand times over this was not real. A nightmare! Not real! The fever had opened crevices for derangement to seep through- this could NOT be real!!

Yet argue as he tried, the dazed madman couldn't wrench himself free of this hallucinatory spell, or the fervid urge to reach out for her again.

Around her lurked danger. He saw it swarm about in larger and larger circles. Its drone hammered his ears. He wanted to hide her, where nothing and no one could harm her.

... She's frightened. She's alone...

... She's crying for you... can you hear her?...

The unmerciful tumult swept him away without moving him at all. Amidst crashing waves, Vincent saw a most painful sorrow strain the woman's face. So much suffering, all wrung into one rueful look. She watched him drown under.

...blood suits you...

...monster...

...are you afraid?...

...afraid of what?...

In those hollow eyes, he saw his true reflection: ugly and vacant.

...forgiveness?...

...no. It's too late now...

...this is your punishment...

...your sin...

Something else drew her away. Her figure began to fade again. With no ties to bind her, she turned to flee, just as the crazed Vincent practically screamed after her, "LUCRECIA!!"

No. Not even he could hold her back. Lucrecia had already vanished into thin air.

...your punishment...

He stood there shivering all alone, breathless, like someone had splashed cold water into his face. Just moments ago, she was there. Nothing now but black space. The same void she left in him the day she died.

Her sadness, his fault. Her pain, his damnation. But where did that leave him? An outcast, always yearning for a past left in desolation. Let him roam the wastelands, search and search again for atonement, until he rot there.

...this is your punishment...

...monster...

Yet Aeris had smiled so gently at him. To this blood-soaked demon sitting ragged next to her innocence, she had smiled at him. She said she knew what's beneath the Snow Fields.

He saw nothing. Memories frozen under ice. Crimes against people he did not know... against people he'd cared most about. Guilt and bitter self-hate. What else lay beneath there?

...look down...

Roused out of his reverie, the confused man obeyed. He discovered some sneaky cable wire slithering around his ankle.

No actually, it looked more like... a tentacle.

Vincent realized the danger too late: hitherto concealed behind another tank, Professor Hojo belligerently swept out louder than a typhoon, lassoing his alarmed victim by the foot, upside down for a wild ride.

The wily Professor could not have chosen a better time to strike. Topsy-turvy flew Vincent like a ragdoll, smashing round through every unfortunate piece of machinery in his way, until he slammed at full force into the concrete wall. He heard something crack over his own hideous cry, yet couldn't determine whether the wall or his shoulder joint had sustained damage. The sudden pain which inflamed his entire limb sure answered that question.

Hojo didn't give his battered victim a chance to think. In his callous delight, he tore him off the wall and whirled him clear across the air by the same foot. Vincent rammed back-first into a gigantic valve; stiff steel against all thirty-one segments of his spine, then total anaesthesia. Even his vocal chords hadn't the strength to scream.

Again, Vincent was helplessly reeled back. As he dashed forth, the ruthless demon took him flying across the tops of computer screens. Then he swung Vincent overhead in a wide arch, making sure he hit that support buttress at the sharpest angle. But Vincent felt nothing. If the blow had torn him in two, he wouldn't have known.

Professor Hojo whipped him aside, only to relinquish his hold at mid-swing. In effect, Vincent was sent spinning off expressway, tumbled across the floor, where he collided hard against a hapless workbench. The impact not only fractured through wood, jabbing his raw flesh full of splinters. It also rattled the racks of empty flasks on top, which brought them crashing down. A few shards slashed his face; one glass bomb shattered against his side, followed by the racks onto his back. Just one shambolic mess.

He floundered in a blind daze. Every part of his body felt detached from the rest. Pain finally caught up to him, from a dull awareness to nauseating agony. Vincent remained thrashed in a bloody heap. He struggled to steady himself. Alas, he barely managed to writhe a few muscles, at least to dislodge his shoulder from the broken table.

Of all bashings he'd ever endured, this one qualified as the very worst. Compared to Professor Hojo, even Davoren seemed like the gentlest saint now, and his grievous blows mere scratches.

"What, still alive?" he heard the creature's voice jeer. It sounded miles away, though in fact he knew Hojo hovered right in front of him.

Indeed, Vincent too was amazed to be alive at all; if one could call his ruined state such.

The poor man. He could not even face his own death. Hojo, feeling particularly charitable, decided to help: he kicked Vincent full against his injured side, enough to send him skidding sideways across the floor. All the way trailed dust and blood until he crashed into another workbench with a sharp "Oomph!", and collapsed flat onto the floor.

Still, Vincent writhed to steady himself again. But the sheer effort caused him to double up in fresh pain: physically, he just couldn't do it anymore.

From afar, Professor Hojo stood pompously poised. Through a crown of insane hair fringes, his glare burned utter scorn upon this tenacious enemy. Across the distance their eyes met: Vincent's blurry red; Hojo's impenetrable yellow. It was then that the scientist unfurled his claws and marched forward.

This was one thorn he'd love to pluck out and squash dead.

One step after another. There was, however, a slight wobble to Hojo's gait. His left eyes too seemed a bit off centered. No surprise. For as he approached even closer, Vincent beheld the extent of that acid attack: the corrosive tarnation still remained splattered like a plague across his face, eye, and upper torso; through skin onto flesh and abraded nerves beneath. Yet it only added more magnificence to his macabre appearance.

From macabre to outright murderous, Hojo instantly burst straight into full charge, whipping up a force which quaked the entire laboratory end to end. Devils and angels dispersed. They left Vincent alone to face this incoming menace.

Desperate men take desperate actions; Vincent no exception as he felt that last rush of adrenaline pump hot across his veins: he wouldn't forsake the girl. And if he were half-alive, then he'd fight on until he was all dead!

The frantic man scrambled like mad to the left, at the same moment in which Professor Hojo foresaw that attempt, and scooped five scythe-daggers upwards to cut him dead.

Fast, but Vincent was faster: those claws just missed him for the workbench instead. They literally ripped the table out by the very roots high into midair, where it disintegrated to utter wreckage. Hojo didn't even notice the destruction. All he saw was Vincent still moving. Automatically, he whirled himself round a pivot point, by which he cranked his assault to the bloody max.

The narrow escape compared to hair's breadth. Too close for comfort, but then Vincent couldn't complain. He broke away into a scuffle to buy himself some space.

Down rained the table debris, clanging and clattering around him, along with a multitude of furious, well-aimed tentacles he detected only too readily. Again, he rolled aside, and the appendages cracked the floor to pieces instead.

Vincent had less than a blink to clamber onto his feet and retaliate, especially as he perceived this holocaust of a creature fly at him for a third attack. Immediately, he launched an unrepentant hailstorm of bullets. He fired at Hojo's burnt side. Yet far from deterred, Hojo came in at double velocity. One bullet exploded against a major chest vein. Still the demented monstrosity charged on full-steam ahead until Vincent, quite overwhelmed, had to fall back; quickly before..

But the thought hadn't completed itself when Hojo delved in, only to ram his bone-spiked leg against Vincent's stomach, gutting him backwards. Vincent collided into a stiff showcase. The glass wall crackled from impact, which of course did not benefit his spine. Yet his attention shot upfront again. There danger, already whole upon him, took a hefty slash at his life.

Hojo's elbow blade smashed clear across the glass showcase, the connection wires, yet no Vincent could be found. Indeed, the flabbergasted Professor immediately spotted his slippery enemy parry aside, having somehow dodged that Death-blow intact.

Not for long. At once, Hojo whiffed his serrated wings around; they swept an unbelievable ripple of havoc within a five meter radius. Vincent, however, had already flipped high over, whereby he landed on top of some observatory tank. Safe again.

This time, the roaring scientist vented all his frustration with one thick rope of tentacles. But no sooner had Vincent touched down, than he leapt high up. The thorny whips lacerated the tank to metal shards, still no flesh.

Only a millisecond to act. Vincent instantly reversed modes to all-out offense. The high jump brought him flipping aside, where he landed both feet down by Hojo's open flank. Before the latter even noticed him there, Vincent twirled his gun, then effectively jammed its edge upwards into Hojo's throat. The astounded monster grunted some frothy sputum as the blow buckled him under pain.

Vincent utilized his own momentum to its full potential. He wheeled around to slam the back of his heel against Hojo's injured elbow, which threw the scientist more off balance. In the follow-up to that spin, Vincent steadied himself -ready- then mercilessly blasted Hojo's side point-blank; two gunshots in a trail of hazy smoke.

He heard Hojo's thunderous wail pierce his eardrums. Rich, dark blood spurted out. The demon stumbled aside, almost collapsed, but amazingly recovered, faster than Vincent expected. He just barely managed to pull back as those jagged claws slashed across, and tore the floor apart with their razor aura.

Unfortunately, he didn't realize he'd stepped into an ambush far worse. Not until Hojo raised a hidden net of tentacles up beneath Vincent's feet. The astonished man was tossed head over through this entanglement. Once again, he couldn't distinguish the ceiling from the floor.

No worries; Hojo would restore his orientation, and quite savagely too. As Vincent spiralled over, the ruthless Professor cracked a wave of tentacles across his torso, stunning him blind, at such force it spiked him clear across the laboratory.

Pain had long lost its novelty. Vincent did not feel it when those vicious tentacles whipped him. Or as he sailed across one of the table tops, scattering dusty papers, vials, and other surgical tools into disarray.

Inbetween these two moments, Hojo charged in for a follow-up attack. Vincent couldn't see. Nor could he anticipate the demon thrust out one shearing claw to meet him. Indeed, Vincent had just crashed onto the ground when all of a sudden Hojo swept him forth, and drove him back-first into the computer system up ahead.

His massive palm compressed Vincent's entire chest. All five nails dug deep into the computer console just to make sure his victim could not escape. From there, the vindictive madman steadily pushed on Vincent's ribcage. He'd either crush his chest or snap his spine against the jagged edge of the console.

Vincent writhed, tried to break free, but found himself utterly overpowered. His eyesight blurred to greyness. He couldn't breathe. Nor would Hojo stop. His muscles strained past his own wounds; the longer this pest lived, the more he wanted him dead!

It happened by pure chance. Vincent, on glancing aside for help, noticed some wires sprawled out of an electricity box nearby. In fact, the console next to them seemed alive, for it hummed a low-pitched drone from inside: it was a voltage generator. An *operational* voltage generator.

He'd try anything. Vincent immediately tore out the bundle of live wires by the socket, and applied it to Hojo's forearm. Out erupted a surge of raw electricity. Though only a jolt, it stunned the demon far back with a sharp snarl, as if it had shocked his very interior into spasms. He clutched his arm tight upon himself, growling as the pain spread up the rest of his limb.

Meanwhile, Vincent had collapsed onto all fours. His gasps escalated to loud, loarse coughs. He heaved hard to refill his lungs with precious oxygen. Then again, everytime his chest expanded, pain stabbed him anew. He had to press claw against ribcage for support.

This was their first pause in ten minutes.

Both sides had sustained severe damage. Vincent now walked a thin line between Death and insanity; one tugged at his body, the other pounded voices and gibberish against his brain. Hojo stood staggered some distance away. For the first time, he had become acutely aware of his own battered state; his majesty tarnished under broken armour, injuries, and the pain, especially that gnawing his electrocuted limb. Nor appeared he too please by it.

The Professor had all the physical power and hungry obsession. Vincent had an unbreakable resilience and just as much determination, almost an obsession in itself. Their bodies were degraded, the war long exhausted. Still, neither force would yield to the other.

No, by no means. The awkward interlude lasted but a whiff when suddenly shattered by an all-out crescendo of violence. Having already hinged himself into position, the maniacal creature lunged headlong with a spectacular array of tentacles flared all around. No less immediately, Vincent gathered himself into a scramble towards the far side. Through the madness he scuttled out. At the right moment, he then pivotted his foot round to propel himself straight back into the fray as the gun, now fully prepped, fired into action overtime.

This was it. Whoever won this battle, won the war.

-End of Chp.75

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.76

Aeris flew down the staircase two steps at a time, then a long corridor fraught with shadows. From the corners, small ghosts watched this frightened soul rush by, alone and so lost. She on the other hand hardly noticed the surroundings.

The battlegrounds. All she could think of was reaching the battlegrounds... reaching *him* in time. For every moment passed, worse grew her fears to the point of madness.

It seemed she'd been running forever! Through black halls, down endless stairwells, into haunted torture chambers. Were there no end to them?! And if her heart pounded any harder, surely it would burst!

Her thoughts attacked her from different directions. Nor could she outrun them. There was the Professor's hands upon her, blaring his vile claims... crushing her beneath the horrid truth until she succumbed.

There was intense self-disgust... for her helplessness... for her disgracing another person's life by simply existing. Everything happening now.. all her fault. All this her fault.

Most disconcerting of all were the vivid images of a blood-spattered, ruined Vincent torn apart, with her unable to stop it. Over and over the words mercilessly tumbled: he shouldn't have come! There is nothing for him here! He shouldn't have come!! Aeris yearned to scream them outloud, as if that would somehow end everything.

Still she pressed onwards. She'd last seen both enemies take their war down to the depths of the Reactor. Without a second's hesitation, the frenzied girl had dashed over to catch up with them.

She knew not what she *could* do there. She didn't know her way around either. But to Aeris' distressed mind, whichever path led downwards sufficed. And as for she she'd "do", she never thought that far ahead. All she wanted now was to reach Vincent... prevent the horrific images in her head from becoming a reality, even if she had to intervene between him and Death itself.

Halls intertwined together. Overhead, the pipework and joists arched into a hideous arbour. Aeris let her feet chose the path through this dank, dreary forest. Into the entrance there, down these grey steps onto a lower labyrinth.

At first, there'd been nothing except the echoes of her quick footsteps racing down the corridors. However, it wasn't too long before she discerned a fierce war rage nearby. That of course only spurred her on double-speed.

The raucous clamour emanated somewhere above. Every so often, Aeris glanced up towards the ceiling in concern, especially whenever shockwaves rattled the pipework. There resounded gunshots, fast but irregular. There were several crashes and blasts; gallops and the groans of machinery thrashed about. No imagination wild enough could picture the level of brutality those two demons had sunk to.

No, but Aeris could guess. Faster she ran. She followed the echoes, around some obscure corner until she emerged onto a wide balcony which overlooked the refinery far below. As the distraught girl came rushing in, she heard several rounds of bullets high above. After about a five second silence, there suddenly followed a massive explosion. Like a full-scale earthquake, it easily flung Aeris to the ground in more confusion.

At once, her stark green eyes, scarcely understanding anything, turned far up towards the source: the explosion had blasted computer consoles, metal garbage, stone shrapnel, and God knows what else

through the entire upper wall. Amidst the debris, Aeris also spotted a battered lump of a body twirl downwards in complete free fall. Much to her horror, it was Vincent.

In the end, Fickle Fate had favoured Hojo. Vincent couldn't quite recall how it happened. His mind spiralled like the rest of the world beneath. There'd been a skirmish. Many tentacles slashed at him, then came a searing-hot light... an energy blast. He must have got swept along the hurricane, and clean through the wall with the rest of the debris. It didn't matter now anyway.

He had lost the war.

The man whirled across the yawning pit. Behind him trailed fiery smoke which singed the edges of his ragged clothes. Meanwhile, the battle-weary Hojo emerged from the brink of the blast hole just to savour the scene. His black, jagged silhouette contrasted sharply against his brilliant eyes.

Whether from Aeris' terrified view below or the Professor's above, the sight was the same. Vincent flew high across towards some renovation scaffoldings on the other side, probably left abandoned since a year ago. At a total loss for control, he came crashing straight through two decks of wood. A hailstorm of debris followed suit. Be it survival instincts or fluke luck, however, Vincent somehow managed to catch hold of one of the support girders in time. The rest plummeted to obscurity far, far below.

He'd escaped one fate. Yet the devastated scaffolding system had sustained too much damage to uphold itself anymore, nevermind his weight. Nor needed Vincent much wits to anticipate the next fiasco. In desperation, he clung tight onto the girder as the support system agonisingly lurched over, wrenching a whole mangled mess of pipes along the way.

Soon gravity broke it free of all restraints, and down rumbled the system. Fortunately, the length of this shambolic chaos far exceeded the pit's diameter. It had only plunged a few meters, past the balcony, when it twisted round to become wedged between opposite walls. Vincent was almost jolted off as the entangled mess skid downwards. Its loud sparks deafened his ears. They screeched, screeched all the way until finally everything stumbled to an unsteady halt.

The explosion still reverberated across Vincent's dizzy head. It took him another minute to realize they'd stopped. There he dangled, more than half his body free in the open, both arms literally clinging to dear life (or what little remained).

First thing Vincent did was check his heart- yes, still beating. There were more injuries; something felt broken along his side. He noticed himself shaking. Whether from fear or pain, he couldn't decide.

Vincent daredn't look down. Instead, he feebly struggled to clamber up to safety. But at the slightest movement, the unstable structure heaved a languid moan, then tipped aside. Vincent fell back to dangling in the open. Again, the entanglement groaned. Some scraps of metal chipped off. In fact, the whole mess seemed ready to collapse any minute.

...are you afraid?...

...of the answer?...

...of the darkness?...

...you never came...

...no...

Consciousness began to slip. His body sagged under this swarm of nonsense... round... round it buzzed...

"Vincent!!!" he heard a tearful voice cry out.

Vincent was startled into sudden alarm. His bloodshot eyes whirled over to the far side. They strained further to a harsh crimson on spotting Aeris. From her place, she leaned far across the balustrade, almost falling over, as turmoil wrangled her inside out. He had never seen her look so terrified as that instant; her face pallid, green eyes wide amidst thick, loose hair.

Indeed, she had seen him wrecked by illness. She'd seen him get scorched through hell and fury. But just now, as she'd witnessed him spiral high overhead, poor Aeris had felt her whole soul freeze still with horror. It shattered when he crashed, releasing a flurry of emotions she could no longer contain.

He dangled there by a girder, no better than a corpse on a thread. Vincent was all the more alarmed when he saw Aeris, at a total disregard for sense, vault over the balcony railing, and hopped onto dangerous grounds.

The girl made her way down the mangled steel and broken pipelines, arms stretched out for steadiness. Between them the distance seemed infinite. Beneath her the path creaked and groaned. Bits of scrap shed off, and plunged down, down to the ogling pit below.

One slip-up would cost her life. Yet if Aeris did not reach him now, it would cost her sanity and her heart.

"H-hang on!" she faltered, "I'm coming!"

Exactly what Vincent did NOT want. He had just managed to lumber halfway up, awash with agitation, when his attention shot high upwards: he beheld Professor Hojo leap from the blast hole, down a thirty foot height onto the scene below.

"Shit! AERIS!! GET BACK!!" he blared at the confused girl.

His warning came one second too late. The gargantuan monster dropped full-weight onto the system, right in front of Aeris. Both Vincent and the shrieking girl were thrown off balance as the already frail structure buckled under impact with a violent protest, then suddenly collapsed altogether.

Vincent lost hold, fell, but managed to grapple another girder piece in time. Down skid the system again. More garbage was wrenched out. Sparks flew so hot they carved a black trail in stone. On the other end, Aeris cowered upon herself, eyes squeezed tight just to block out the racket. The girl had been flung onto her side, where she'd immediately clung to the nearest piece of wreckage within reach. Even now, she felt her body begin to slide away as the entire structure teetered around its own axis.

If felt longer than eternity. But only a few moments had passed when everything jolted to a rough standstill. Once again, the shambolic mess had wedged itself between opposite walls. This time though, it lay tilted at a sharp angle. In effect, Vincent found himself dangling loose from the lowest end, by a lifeline which wouldn't sustain him for long.

No, certainly not the best of situations.

The silence sounded so unnatural. Shaken and twice bewildered, Aeris finally overcame enough fear to lift her head. A vicious pair of eyes, one a bit deformed, pierced hers dead-on. Their intensity frightened her to such magnitude, the girl scuffled back a few inches, when she became too aware of her grim position: events had left her stranded atop this steep slope of metal rubbish. Worse, Professor Hojo sat

crouched in plain view, neck twisted around to study this trembling little girl. In return, Aeris gaped at him: his imposing frame, bony shears, and long tentacles splayed about, one or two even twitching against her boot.

This was the Professor. Her creator. The embodiment of nightmares, stripped from a human guise so she could behold him at his most terrible.

He didn't seem surprised to find her here, nor the least bit touched. Rather, Hojo disdainfully snorted, "I honestly cannot decide which is more ludicrous: this man's stubbornness, or your persistent clinging to him."

That said, he turned away to finish the job. Confused, Aeris looked beyond Hojo down towards the opposite end of the slope. She gasped on spotting Vincent there, who all this time had been clumsily trying to pull himself up.

"P-Professor!!" she begged outloud.

"Don't interfere," Hojo ordered dryly.

"Professor! Please don't-AAH!!"

The instant she'd tried to scramble up, the structure beneath cradled sideways in agony, and she crashed back in place. Hojo ignored her; she wasn't worth a second glance.

It took Aeris a moment or so to gather herself together. By now, terror left her speechless; alone to witness his murder all over again, like with Davoren only a hundred times worse. All around, the demon crowd roared for blood. They pounded that horrible memory over and over into her mind: watch his blood get splattered... you the helpless spectator, always weak, always pathetic... watch...

Watch him die.

Every step rattled the system into further instability. Still, that never deterred Professor Hojo. Already the predator-creature had skid down the rugged slope towards his defenceless enemy. The metamorphosis happened as smoothly as donning a cloak: as he strode forth upon all fours, closer and closer, Hojo's monstrous body devolved to its scraggly human form. From there, he erected himself up, and stopped right in view of Vincent below.

Holocaust or human, whichever appeared more grotesque remained a personal choice. Either one did not detract an ounce from Hojo's malicious aura. The war had left ample scars, gory wounds, and dirt all over his grace. Under deeply furrowed brows, acid burns marred his gaunt face like a throbbing spider's web, all way down. But despite his own battered condition, the Professor maintained more poise than Vincent; even with an elbow twice broken and one limp leg. Such were the powers of JENOVA cells.

Not like Vincent could climb back up. Just to make sure, Hojo swacked a tentacle hard against the girder. It snapped upon its hinge, flinging the alarmed Vincent further out into danger, and Aeris into more distress.

He fumbled with both hand and claw to hold on. The flimsy girder creaked louder. Suspended thus between two hells, Vincent's anxious eyes whirled downwards, only to find a hungry pit awaiting him. From wall to wall he made one desperate search for a way out: nothing!

At least to the sane-minded. However, *he* noticed something...

"Well, Mr.Valentine. You've been nothing but a nuisance and a pest," relished Hojo upon his verdict, "For all the trouble you've caused me, your death will be sweet compensation."

Spoken with such a firm tone, Vincent replied, "No."

Aeris blinked through her tears in evident muddlement. Professor Hojo raised an eyebrow: what did he mean 'no'?

"It may not seem obvious to you," he addressed the scientist, "But not only have I already escaped, I've also taken Aeris with me."

Confident words. Perhaps he'd been bludgeoned over the head one time too many. Vincent's mysterious answer, his suddenly stern expression, certainly contrasted against his bleak situation: the ruthless enemy hovered above him. At the slightest whim, he could cut his lifeline short. The girl was trapped in Hojo's corner, well out of reach or range.

But as he hung there, Vincent's eyes glowered crimson defiance up at his enemy. He seemed ready to act, or to die.

Either way, Hojo was amused, "Huh! Stubborn to the very last, eh Mr.Valentine?" his grin distorted into a sneer. Instantly he belted out a fatal whip of tentacles, "A lot of good it may serve you! NOW GO TO HELL!!"

"You first!"

In one unbelievable act of madness, Vincent purposely swung both legs up, then thrust all his weight downwards, thereby pulling upon the girder too. No longer able to maintain its integrity, the system collapsed to utter ruin. The astounded Professor and Aeris, whose alarm choked her wild, both lurched aside at a total loss for co-ordination. Suddenly, everything was falling. Metal debris, crackled stone, all plummeted in a thunderous rumble, amidst them Vincent, Hojo, and Aeris.

Vincent had pulled off many stunts, but none compared to this one. Between a ledge on one wall and a ventilation grate right opposite, his ingenuity had devised a plan... a plan maybe just crazy enough to work.

One chance; everything gambled on precise calculations and perfect timing against free fall. Unconstrained, Vincent flipped over several times until he touched feet-first down onto the ledge. Momentum cocked his heels. With this propulsive force, he dived straight across the pit's diameter, tackling Aeris en route as she fell in time to catch her.

Vincent braced for impact. On the opposite wall, a rusted grate greeted them. Together they came bursting through, where they skid sideways down the ventilation duct. Vincent always kept Aeris' head pressed against his chest; at last, the rough ride crumbled to a halt.

His muscles ached. He had wagered a lot more than he could afford on that acrobatic stunt; the strain, the sheer concentration and effort! But the gains outweighed the losses: he had escaped, and taken the girl with him.

His first concern fell upon Aeris. Vincent quickly checked her for any injuries, but thankfully found none; he'd made extra sure of that.

The girl, on the other hand, lay sprawled in numb perplexity: just ten seconds ago, she'd been spinning free through pandemonium, nothing beneath her except nothingness itself. She remembered screaming.

She recalled seeing Professor Hojo plunge fast like a heavy rock. But how she ended up here, that simply bewildered her mind.

Aeris faltered to speak. Vincent however hastily mollified her, "Sh.Sh. It's okay. Don't say anything."

Retreat seemed the best strategy. So without further deliberation, his claw encircled her waist. Vincent then dragged the traumatised girl along. She clutched one side of his torn shirt, dazed by the surroundings. Indeed, the sooner he got her out of here, the better.

Yet they hadn't reached five inches when something suddenly yanked Aeris back; so violent she shrieked and clung tighter onto Vincent as it tugged harder at her. Vincent, clasping her whole in alarm, instantly whirled his eyes behind.

The shocking sight struck him dumb.

Sure enough, they beheld a deranged Professor Hojo clambering through the busted vent. His outstretched hand was clamped around Aeris' ankle, not only to hold her back, but also to pull himself up. Aeris felt her heart jump up her throat. No matter what the barrier, nothing could unshackle the Professor's grip on her!

Most probably, Hojo had utilised his tentacles to gain footing, then clawed his way up the wall to the same vent. As he now scruffled to enter, bristling fury, teeth gnashed until they almost cracked under pressure, he resembled a rabid animal. His hair hung in dishevelment. Through those dangling fringes, two fierce eyes glared straight at the petrified Aeris alone.

"It's useless. D-don't you understand?!" rasped the madman, "You're just an image to everyone else! There is no place for you outside the laboratory! Or do you s-suppose... *he* could somehow change the truth?"

Neither Vincent nor the horror-stricken girl could speak. Yellow against turbulent green, Hojo's glare drilled into Aeris' very core. It grabbed something inside, leaving her cold with his curse upon her mind.

But that did not satisfy the Professor. He wanted all of her. So bad that his obsession soon seethed into roaring fanaticism, "Stupid little chit! He can't change a thing! He can't hide you! You belong to me! YOU BELONG TO MY EXPERIMENT!!!!!!!"

If Vincent had the determination to rescue Aeris, then Professor Hojo possessed equal infatuation to keep her under his claws. The girl raised a frightened cry when the incensed demon suddenly reeled her back towards himself; with such force it almost ripped out her leg from its socket. Aeris frantically clung around Vincent's neck. She wailed "NO! NO!!" as she struggled to beat Hojo away. All in vain.

For all his own attempts, Vincent could not wrench her free, even as he held onto her with every bit of strength. Inch by inch, both were dragged back. She began to slip away, still crying, still pleading...

No good. At his wits end, Vincent twirled out his gun, and jabbed its butt hard against Hojo's exposed wrist. The bone-cracking blow stunned the monster with a snarl, enough to loosen his iron grip on Aeris. To break the hold completely, Vincent next delivered one sharp kick straight out into Hojo's chin. This time, it knocked him away from the vent altogether.

The brutal double-whammy keeled Hojo over. But far from vanquished, he managed to grab firm hold again before falling. By the time he'd vaulted back into the vent, Vincent had already slung Aeris onto his back and made a hurried getaway.

He needn't look behind to realize the enraged Professor had given pursuit. He discerned mad scuffles, inhuman growls close upon their tail. Faster hustled Vincent on all fours. Aeris not only clung to his neck, but kept her face buried deep against his shoulder. He knew she tried her utmost not to weep. It made her shivering all the more intense.

Into the bowels of darkness they fled. Haunted ducts and long, corroded tunnels radiated into an endless network. Grates alongway barred goblins and ghouls, whose sickly arms reached out to grapple these fugitives. Vincent felt impeded, laden down. Not by the girl's weight (she weighed nothing) but exhaustion, injuries, and the fever boiling his organs inside.

Still he pressed onwards. He hadn't the foggiest clue where to go, much less cared. He just wanted to shake off their pursuer. Not an easy task. Hojo's speed, though reduced, still exceeded his own. Furthermore, the sly scientist could track them down, thanks to that cerebral microchip implanted within Aeris' brain.

Bastard, cursed Vincent, it's like he's thought of everything!

And speaking of the devil, he suddenly discerned a menace spear in fast upon them: tentacles. Each one zinged out from a different vent. Vincent automatically swung aside to blast the first one clean through. Next one managed to graze his arm, but didn't enjoy victory long before Vincent shot it point-blank in the nodule. A twin pair whipped down at an angle. He dodged the two into another airduct nearby, just as they lashed metal instead. From there, he sniped them both dead. Defeated, the headless appendages dispersed in different directions.

A suspicious tranquillity befell the cold, stale air.

Very clever of Professor Hojo; he was trying to throw Vincent off concentration. So far, he'd succeeded. The tentacles had attacked from so many places, he couldn't determine where their *source* originated. Down that ominous duct? Over there, around that corner and beyond? Hojo lurked nearby. Where remained yet to be found.

A lot closer than anticipated, from the place least expected. Danger instincts warned Vincent to look upwards *pronto*, just when a diabolical barrage of tentacles ripped havoc through the duct's ceiling. Aeris wailed outloud. She hugged his neck so tight, he could barely breathe. They invaded by the dozens; slimy, sensuous ropes of flesh, wreaking destruction in search for prey.

Vincent thought fast. Rather than fight, he scrambled head-low through the warzone, onwards into some small side-pipe.

Too many noises hammered him at once: metal crunched and torn open as Professor Hojo smashed his way down to give chase. His own coarse gasps. Strange voices... laughter.. murmurs... rants...

Amidst this chaos, Vincent somehow had to instil a clear head, even though his pulse raced mad to keep pace. All the while, he detected the infuriated scientist catch up to them. Vincent kept going. Gallops grew louder. The entourage of appendages shred through walls like cardboard. Still, he persevered.

Events ticked faster than the clock, in which Vincent's attention now darted around. A storm blew their way, at its centre a black phantom, eyes blustered to a frenzy. Vincent saw it. Aeris saw it. Next blink, and Professor Hojo lunged in for the kill.

By luck, Vincent remembered one useful tactic he'd learnt from Davoren. So before the storm swallowed them whole, he took aim of the nearest steam gasket, then blasted it wide open. Choking whiffs of white gas instantly swooshed out, right into Hojo's irritated eye. The astounded enemy swerved off course in

painful confusion. In mere microseconds, the miasma fog consumed everyone to leave them in total blindness.

The smoke screen offered a perfect opportunity to sneak away. Vincent groped his way through this steam-saturated maze, quickly least Hojo overtook them again. Coughing, sweaty and tired, he finally discovered an emergency hatch overhead; A Godsend, to be sure!

First, he secured Aeris. Then he climbed up the ladder rungs, not forgetting to manually double-lock the hatch behind. It wouldn't stop Professor Hojo. But it should thwart him for a while. By then, Vincent hoped they'd be long gone.

Up, up the shaft he ascended. The girl hung latched onto his back, petrified mute, her face nestled against his shoulder. Not a word was exchanged between them. For now, the focus remained on escape; or if not then retreat far enough to consider themselves "safe".

They soon reached the end of this claustrophobic tube. Vincent clambered into the right vent. He crawled down the path, around one corner, when they met a forking of routes. Again, he chose the right.

And so they journeyed through rat-infested, dark terrain. Vincent fought fatigue to keep moving. Every meter transversed, he pushed himself harder for the next. He wanted to maximise the distance between them and the Professor.

Time dragged on. They wandered deeper across unfamiliar tunnelways, through thick forests of shadows and ice-logged crevices. Way led onto way. By perseverance and a lot of guesswork, they happened to discover a blind-ended duct. It seemed a bit cleaner than the rest. Better yet, Vincent spied a humble grate over there, which admitted some light inside; a mere trickle, but any light was welcome. This shelter would do, especially since he too needed a rest.

He placed Aeris safe by the grate, then backtracked to the vent's entrance. Gun in hand, the man pricked up his ears to a fine-point. He listened for a movement, a noise, anything suspicious. Be it precaution or paranoia, one part of him still expected Professor Hojo to attack. Even a hundred miles didn't seem far enough to escape that maniac.

He spent an entire minute listening. Nothing ever emerged. For once, Vincent took relief in this disappointment. He holstered his gun, then returned to Aeris. He found the girl huddled forlorn, hugging herself to stop shaking, and eyes tensed upon empty space. She never stirred. Never spoke. However, the instant Vincent touched her, just a light hand to check her, she struck it away with a shrill "NO!!"

Her violent reaction certainly baffled Vincent, more so as she scrambled away from him to the opposite corner. Nor did Aeris seem able to explain her own irrationality. But she cringed far back, frightened, shaking amidst tempestuous emotion. One could dare say, insane.

"..h..his hand!" she blurted.

Vincent didn't understand, "...what?"

"HIS HAND!!" she shrieked deliriously, "It's still there! He's still pulling me back!!"

There was no hand upon her ankle. No one here save Vincent, whose expression soon softened to thoughtful concern. He remembered that night she crashed into him, a pitiful little dove on the run from a nightmare. Once it had recaptured that dove, the nightmare broke both her wings and sanity to fragments. No pity for her.

Vincent assumed the most non-threatening demeanour. He deliberately crawled towards Aeri. Yet whatever her deranged mind saw approach instead made her skitter back even more until he had her cornered, screaming louder, "NO! NO! I don't want to bear this child! He created me... he has every right to me! But I..I.."

Vincent overcame these raves to cup her distraught face, and forced her to look straight at him. He called firmly, "Aeri."

"I don't want him c-crawling all over my body! No! I don't want to bear this child! His hand... IT'S STILL THERE!!"

"Aeri!"

"IT'S STILL THERE!! HE WON'T LET ME GO!! HE WON'T-"

"Aeri!!"

Whether by repetition of her name or the strength of both Vincent's voice and grip, Aeri suddenly snapped back to reason with a start. She blinked. She found herself breathless, cold, her own pale face supported at close range to his. Between his claw and hand, Aeri gaped wide into those intense ruby-red eyes. They radiated kind warmth upon her.

Sense slowly pieced the last events together: the chase, this shelter, that fitful scene just now. As their gazes interlocked longer, a keen double pang of sorrow and shame stabbed Aeri. Bitter tears of self-hate welled up, though she struggled hard to repress them: How foolish she must appear to him now!

So painful that without knowing why, Aeri whimpered softly to him "...oh Vincent, I..I'm sorry...I am s-so..sorry.."

Perhaps she did appear foolish. A dozen emotions tumbled inside. She knew not how to bear them, especially with him holding her thus under meditative scrutiny, almost as if he fuelled them on. She felt so stupid, raving just now, apologizing for nothing. She wished she could just...

Yet Vincent wouldn't let her finish that thought. Before Aeri realized it, he unexpectedly bent over to kiss her full upon the mouth, if only to soothe her silent.

The moment lingered a blissful eternity. No one here save these two refugees, hidden in this black corner from the world around. He felt her tremble as he tilted up her head back a bit. Indeed, he'd more than caught her off guard. Maybe unconsciously, both Aeri's shaky hands slid halfway up Vincent's chest, where just his ragged undershirt separated her fingertips from his skin. Everything was quiet. Everything so still.

Aeri could not conceal her wonderment when he withdrew his lips from hers. Nor could she speak anymore; he'd cruelly stolen her voice too. Instead, she stared at him as if lost in a daze, their faces near enough to feel his gentle breath upon her cheek. Through these long hair locks, she beheld cuts and blood, his own and others, spattered across his solemn face.

This face.

The same she'd ached to touch. Ever since God cast her back in this Hellhole, his face never left her for one minute. In fact, she ran her fingers along one side for fear it might disappear. No, he was here. Somehow, he was here.

Still the mute girl stared at him until she finally noticed something about herself: all this time, tears have been streaming free down her own face.

She couldn't suppress them anymore. Vincent, anticipating them before her, immediately engulfed Aeris to press her dear against himself. No sooner inside, than she dissolved into the most heated crying bout ever experienced. Her sobs filled the air, each one wrangling another bit of her anguished heart. Vincent never tried to hush her. He merely kissed her hair twice, tender reassurances of his presence, and let her pour it all out.

He didn't want to talk. He didn't want to think. Vincent just held this frightened, tearful child safe. Upon his life, he'd vowed no one would take her away. Some would have scoffed. But to him, every blow received, every pain suffered had been worth it.

Just to embrace her like this again. Yes. It was worth it.

-End of Chp.76

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.77

Vincent awoke with a start. He'd been having a nightmare. At first, he thought he was trapped inside that coffin at Nibelheim again, or in some sort of stuffy black box. Soon however, his vision adjusted to the dim light. Much to his confusion, he found himself huddled in the corner of the same old vent; just a blood-spattered, limp wreck slumped back against the cold duct wall. Aeris sat curled up between his legs, snuggled safe in his arms. Her head rested against his feverish chest. She was sound asleep.

Vincent rubbed his eyes. He struggled to re-organize his shambolic mind: there was that messy battle, the daring stunt across the pit, the escape, then... that's right. They'd taken refuge in this vent. He must have lost consciousness soon afterwards. Vincent couldn't quite recall when or how he slipped into oblivion. To him, fainting was one privilege he'd long denied himself, not until he'd fully attained his goal.

That goal he now held close. For all the brutality and violence suffered tonight, he only had one reason for coming: her. Indeed, Vincent peered down at the slumbering Aeris. She'd wept a great deal, as he last remembered. The tears still stained her pallid cheeks. Needless to say, tonight's events had shaken her to near madness, especially her witnessing first-hand that gritty, decisive war. Thankfully though, the cry had flushed out the shock from her system, and mollified her to an unsettled sleep, at least for now.

Nor would Vincent even consider disturbing her yet. Her drained spirits needed refreshment. Besides, he felt too weak to move. Instead, he sunk further back against the icy wall, and set his tired mind adrift a sea of aimless contemplation, sailing wherever the winds blew.

Just a few more minutes. He wished to linger in this silence just a while longer.

He felt so exhausted... so sick. Every inch of his body ached. Every joint, from limb to vertebrae, felt rusted stiff. Vincent's memory hung in tatters, so much like his appearance and health.

He had difficulty tying the battle sequence together into one thread. By now, all the blows and agony, the exquisite taste of pain mixed with blood had been dulled to a hazy recollection. He remembered being chased through the labyrinthine duct system. They'd found sanctuary in this dead-end hovel. He remembered comforting the distraught girl. The rest fizzed out. He must have settled himself thus against the wall with Aeris wrapped in his protective embrace, then lost consciousness under the lull of her sobs. Time eluded Vincent. He knew not how long they'd sat here; certainly more than an hour.

One thing, however, struck him quite distinctly. He remembered kissing the tearful girl. Vincent paused, bewildered. The more he dwelt upon the memory, the sharper it became until he lived every detail again: yes, he remembered that blissful moment of peace, just the two of them hidden here deep in darkness. The thrill of his lips upon hers. All those tingly sensations... their **strength**...

Why? What on earth had possessed him to suddenly bend over and kiss her? He couldn't understand.

Maybe he didn't want to understand.

...fear?...

All his life, he'd followed cool sense and precise calculations. Obey orders without question or judgment. Choose reason over emotion. Reason clarified his vision, whether he peered through the sight on his gun, or beheld himself in the mirror.

Only once had he slipped to utter helplessness. Only once had emotion eclipsed reason. It happened thirty-one years ago, when he gave a woman his undying love and devotion; forever hers, even after she'd crossed to the nether world.

But now. Right now, what did he see?

Vincent saw himself sitting slouched back against a wall, a tiny speck lost inside a huge maze, battered on both physical and mental front. He saw Aeris asleep, unaware of his thoughts. He remembered Lucrecia; his beloved Lucrecia, still fresh in his mind after so many years.

Vincent saw the guilt that fettered him to the ignoble past. He saw the sins that sullied both hands, most horrid the one he committed against *her*.

...monster...

...this is your punishment...

To trudge across barren wastelands under her melancholy gaze. Guilty. Guilty. Her death, his fault- his crime, his sin!

Then why...?

Vincent picked his brains in vicious self-examination. He demanded answers without even knowing the questions. Too many forces tugged at him from too many sides. He grew irritated, listless. He seemed to grope through a fog of premonition in search for something. He couldn't describe it. He couldn't understand it.

...it's because you don't want to understand it...

...doubt...

...anger...

...fear...

...are you afraid?...

Yet when he had Aeris there, cornered, her frightened face cupped between his hands, something there triggered an impulse within himself, and he kissed her. He'd felt it, hot, unreasonable, and inexplicable. It was this passionate desire to seal her safe from harm as intensely as he'd sealed her mouth.

...you're afraid...

No. More than that. Much more. In that one moment, he'd wanted to...

A sharp pain pierced Vincent's skull right on cue, scattering his thoughts in a dozen directions. He pressed his temples to restrain the rampaging headache. The coughs reverberated within his tight chest, but he never let one escape. It hurt. Inside, he burned like a furnace. A secret part of him, however, felt grateful for this agony; at least it provided some distraction from those obsessions.

Luckily, the seizure soon passed, and Vincent breathed free once more. Again, he returned to the pitiful girl clasped against him. Vincent spent a rather pensive minute studying her upclose. He traced the torture marks along way. He noted her sickly condition; her dirty face, and rumpled clothes which covered that frail, meek, little body underneath.

He frowned gravely: all the beautiful life he'd watched blossom out of her, Professor Hojo had drained dry. He'd reduced her to the same miserable creature she was the night she escaped...

The realization suddenly slapped him smack into the present: Hojo! He'd practically forgotten the Professor! He'd been engulfed by the smoke (or steam screen), during which they'd quickly slipped away, hoping to lose him amidst the entangled ventilation network. Lose but not escape. Hojo had probably overcome that door obstacle in zilch minutes. Vincent easily pictured the demented scientist on the prowl

for them. Meanwhile, they'd dawdled here for God-knows-how-long. Why, Hojo could be *anywhere* by now, maybe even waiting outside their hideout! Vincent perked up his ears to the suspicious air. He thought he heard a noise- just his paranoid imagination, or a real threat?

He didn't care to find out. Craven or prudent, either way Vincent decided to flee- flee the laboratory, the Reactor, this whole nightmare of painful truths and rude awakenings. Besides, he couldn't fight anymore than keep a steady focus, and even that seemed on the wane. Against Hojo, he wouldn't last three seconds .

Time to go then. Despite his rheumatic agony, he managed to sit upright, still supporting Aeris against himself. The girl gave a weak moan of protest at the movement. Her hazy green eyes happened to open halfway. But under exhaustion's weight, they closed again, having understood very little. He flopped Aeris onto his back, whereby she unconsciously hugged his neck and buried her heavy head against his shoulder in submission. Everything set. Vincent checked before venturing outside the shelter. Several paths diverged from this junction point. He took the grimmest one.

Good news: though the short respite had wasted some time, it had also re-vitalized his body, hopefully enough to see them through. Overall, he'd stopped bleeding. In fact, the less serious wounds had already begun to heal. Alive. He was still alive (well, not dead anyway). And most importantly, he'd retrieved Aeris. She was latched on his back, safe and sound.

Bad news: Vincent hadn't the foggiest clue how to exit this blasted rat maze, nevermind this madhouse. Worse, he realized he'd no more ammo, just that last cartridge loaded in his gun. His metal arm needed emergency repair. Plus there were the more serious injuries, broken side, and rising fever which chewed at his mind like a rabid beast. Plus he had the girl to consider. She was ill and traumatised; not forgetting of course their relentless predator in the background.

Figures. The bad always outweighed the good. Vincent muttered a curse as he scrambled onwards.

He followed a haphazard course through thick veils of gray and black. They explored frosty conduit burrows with tiny icicles dangling overhead. They wandered down dirty ghettos full of denizen ghouls, who from the shadows watched those two strangers pass by. No start or finish to these narrow caverns. More pipelines. More intersections. Same impenetrable darkness.

Time dragged on. Five minutes turned to ten turned to forty, still nothing. The eerie suspense wound Vincent's nerves tighter. He could not dispel this terrible premonition. Nor would the fever ease off. It grilled him over a voracious inner fire. Indeed, the strain, the sheer act of respiring, showed on his face, in particular those brilliant crimson eyes.

All the while, Aeris kept silent. She didn't stir either. She just kept her head low and her arms around his neck. Vincent knew she'd fully awakened now, but in her fear and timid confusion, refrained from any speech. Instead she nestled closer for security (not to mention warmth).

Vincent didn't mind. On the contrary, having her near set part of his mind at ease. He only wished he'd kept his overcoat, at least have something to wrap her up in. Like this, he felt her every breath on his neck, as gentle as a ghost's. For some reason, it sent a chill down his spine.

Way led onto way. Vincent relied on intuition more than anything else; this place was too complex to map out. Plus they hadn't the time. He remained on high alert. The air grew so cold it stung his skin numb. The silence made every movement sound so loud until Vincent was certain Hojo could hear them- he felt ready to explode! Were there no exits out of these claustrophobic tunnels?!

Regardless, he kept moving, and the clock kept ticking. By chance, they came across another intersection of paths, when Vincent suddenly stopped short. Was that...? It was! He felt a breeze whiffing by. Very faint, but it meant one thing: an exit vent was near!

Vincent quickened his pace. He entered the passageway he believed would lead to the source, and hopefully to salvation. Onwards he shuffled, around a corner. They reached a slanted airshaft, in which Vincent used the equally spaced iron rims to clamber upwards. Once at the top, he crawled straight ahead. Sure enough, he perceived a rectangular grate neatly fitted into the flooring.

First, Vincent peeked between the bars onto the world far below. He could not quite determine where they've arrived. It appeared to be some hall. A very, very grand hall. There were two platforms, the smaller decked over the much larger one, both supported by an intricate construction of tall girders, scaffoldings and ceiling-high glass pillars. At this altitude, Vincent estimated about thirty meters from here to the first platform, another twenty to the lower one.

The coast was clear. They still dwelt in laboratory terrain, but that hardly mattered. One good kick downwards dented the grate; two more broke it free, sending it plummeting down to oblivion.

After he'd secured the girl, Vincent slipped through, and dangled loose from the outlet high, high above. Having already spotted his next "footing", he used his own weight to oscillate back and forth, back and forth, whereby he let go for momentum to carry them across open space. He landed on a sturdy metal beam, then crouched down in place to regain balance. He hopped further down onto the scaffoldings. He scurried along the delivery conduits, only to jump onto a lower pipe. Therefore, by a series of well-planned leaps, they made their way down this craggy architecture until they finally landed safe on the upper platform.

No sooner there, however, than the weary man collapsed onto one knee, almost crashing aside had he not steadied himself in time. Before, it would have cost no effort. Now even simple acrobatics taxed his muscles beyond endurance. It wouldn't be too long before his strength gave out altogether.

Vincent shook that worry off. Right now he had more pressing concerns to deal with. He looked behind towards the girl, who'd clung to him throughout the whole trip downwards, and still did.

"Aeris, can you stand?" he asked softly.

She nodded twice without lifting her head. Vincent climbed onto both feet again, doing his best to assist Aeris as she slid off him. Still, the girl needed another kind reassurance to relinquish his shirt and stand unaided. He held her steady for a moment or so just to make sure she was absolutely okay. Strangely, Vincent found himself studying her care-worn face a little too closely. He seemed to search her for some secret. In response, Aeris shyed away from him, becoming so acutely self-conscious that she dropped her eyes aside to avoid his.

The question hung between them: now what? Vincent surveyed the open terrain. He wracked his brains for an answer.

Offhand, he guessed they'd dropped into some specimen-preservation centre. On this floor stood several stately stasis-tanks dressed in their best electronic finery. Expensive computer equipment littered the hall. Wires and cablelines wrapped around this technology like gnarly vines. Yet what struck Vincent most was the glass colonnade around them. It resembled a massive, petrified arbour where giants once roamed. The interiors of these pillars were divided horizontally into separate compartments, each chamber filled with a discoloured liquid (probably the preservatives). Every glass columns took root from the ground floor, and passed both decks upwards. They all upheld the delivery network against the vaulted ceiling above.

So far, nothing.

"Wait here," he ordered. Aeris complied without argument.

Vincent stepped across towards the balustrade to view the lower platform. Very large indeed. However, it

served no more than another junction point between different laboratory wings. There were six big entrances. So, which path should they choose?

He knew the lab's layout very dimly. Add to that they had Professor Hojo hunting for them. Not good. On the positive side, he possessed a keen sense of direction. And perhaps with an extra dose of luck, he could retrace his path back to the main reception hall, then from there make it back up to the surface.

A plan had just begun to materialize when Vincent heard a sad murmur behind him, "'It's useless'."

He turned his head towards Aeris again, puzzled. He beheld the lonesome girl over there, who lingered lost in a private reverie, having betrayed her innermost thoughts without realizing it. The comment had escaped her unintentionally. She didn't even imagine he'd hear her. But he had. And now, upon noticing his attention fixed on her again, Aeris fumbled in evident confusion, as if he'd caught her off guard.

"..the Professor..," she stammered, "..that's what he said. Nothing will change the truth. 'It's useless'," she grew more disconcerted, "..I..I had plenty of time to think about it. I'm beginning to realize how right he is... about me. About everything..."

Vincent could make neither head nor tail of her fragmented sentences. Inside, however, he felt that same premonition tingle his spine. He turned to face her, standing tall and thoughtful despite injury. He waited for her to speak.

-End of Chp.77

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.78

Aeris hadn't anything anymore. In one single night, her entire world had caved-in upon her head. Now she drifted amongst the rubble destitute and forlorn. Above her hovered the vultures, squawking, pecking at her vulnerable mind.

He shouldn't have come here.
He shouldn't have come here.
It's all your fault.
It's not you.
It's never BEEN you.
Not you!

Aeris had nothing to hold onto anymore. Nothing except "the truth" and these shards of emotions tearing her up like a storm. At the centre stood Vincent. It's always been him. He'd always occupied the centre.

But it's never been *you*
You have nothing.
You ARE nothing!
Image
Clone
Garbage
....monster!

Aeris scoffed at her arrogance: fine of her to swagger about accusing others, screaming judgement without ever once studying herself. Huh! "Monster". What did that word mean anyway? What was a "monster"? Those who'd committed crimes in the name of orders, desperation, or pure blood lust? Those creatures conceived from evil, chained to evil, with no purpose but to serve evil.... like her?

But I...I don't WANT to serve this experiment!
You have no choice.
I don't want to bear this child!
He is your creator. He has every right to you.
But I...
You are his creation. You *belong* to him, body and soul.

She didn't even attempt to defend herself against such cruel mental bombardment. Matters appeared so much clearer now. In fact, Aeris saw justice in her punishment. Why hadn't she realized it from the start? It was her fault anyway. She'd been blind and stupid. She deserved what she got.

Then why was *he* here, risking his life, when she treasured it above all else? Why? There were no more mysteries for him to unravel. Only this ugly truth which hung plain and ugly between them.

Didn't he know? Ever since she spotted him from atop that crossbeam, held prisoner whilst he looked resolutely back up at her... even since then these feelings had tumbled unabated. As he waged wars on demons ten times stronger, did he know of the war raging inside of her?

And did he also know how much she...?

These agonies were not new. On the contrary, they'd long plagued her heart. Strong emotions. Emotions she'd always felt, always known even before she realized them. They burned at such intensity it frightened her. Still other emotions she couldn't recognize. Maybe she just didn't want to. Perhaps because they flowed from the deepest rivers of her subconsciousness, an uncharted territory very few ever dare explore. Or maybe because she despised herself, as if to accept, even entertain them, would contaminated her with sin.

She'd ample time to think about it. All that time she'd languished in the dungeon, all those hours of uninterrupted solitude, Aeris spent it grappling with a flurry emotions and contemplations. During the battle, amidst the gunshots and blasts, her thoughts had zinged just as loudly within her head. But especially afterwards, while Vincent carried her on his back. All the way, she'd listened to his harsh gasps. She'd felt those injuries and illness burden him under their heavy weight. All the way, she'd thought about it.

He shouldn't have come here.

He shouldn't have come here.

Die.. no, she couldn't bear the thought of watching him die...

Just like that night.

It's useless.

Davoren's sinister words seeped through like poison on her tormented mind. Many times she'd weighed those words against her emotions, trying so hard to balance Vincent in the equation. But it never worked out right. And now it was useless. "The truth" alone tipped everything out of equilibrium.

She'd thought about it. About her despicable origins. Her role in this nefarious experiment. About "Aeris", the girl whose identity she stole. About "monsters". About her life, and the different people who filled it: Cloud with his sunny smile. Tifa would embrace him from behind, laughing, playfully bossing him around. Davoren occupied a black corner over there, smoking a cigarette smugly. His eyes still made her shiver. Nearby hovered Professor Hojo...reaching out to grab her...his round specs glaring yellow...

And yes. Vincent. She'd thought a lot about him too.

As far as memory stretched, the laboratory had been her only world. Pain and degradation her sole companions. When she escaped that nightmare, she suddenly found herself running into another world, bigger, darker, and completely alien. She knew no one. She had no where to go. It didn't matter. Just run. Run before they catch you.

Then she crashed into him.

She was lost. He found her.

She was crying, cold and afraid. He dried her tears. He embraced her into such wonderful warmth.

She was alone. He offered her understanding and comfort, even hope.

Aeris bristled, frustrated by her own emotions. Didn't he know? With him only she'd felt true security, best of all when he pulled her into bed on that chilly night. During their time together, Vincent had wrapped her in compassion and protection. He gave her a sense of belonging. He made her feel safe. He made her feel happy. And she- fool that she was- built herself a little home around him.

Right now though, could he detect the fear inside of her? That terrible fear of losing him? Anger. Anger also seethed hot within her, at him, at herself, at everything past and present, truths and lies. Hurt. Aeris felt so hurt. All this bitterness she'd confined inside her bosom swelled the longer she thought about it... about him...

And then... then she felt all this.....

Hate?

"It's her, not you! Not you!!"

Words sharper than daggers. Vincent had bestowed many gifts upon her. But if she had all that, why did

she feel so empty and defeated right now? Sure. The one thing she yearned most from him, she knew she could never own.

"And do you hate Lucrecia for that...?"

Fool! What a fool she'd been! Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. This was wrong. Her running away- where was she going anyway? Where did she belong? His coming here, his fighting despite her anxious pleas, despite the odds- wrong! All wrong!!

She'd plenty of time to think about it. She had nothing anymore. Just emotions burning like cinders within her aching heart, and "The truth".

"...'the truth'..." Aeris whispered to herself.

Image
Clone
Garbage
It's not you! Not you!!
It's never been you!
Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

These feelings and ruthless obsessions revolved a hundred times per second inside her head. Many events marked her life- her escape, their chance meeting, Davoren, Vincent's illness, that cunning ambush in the park, and tonight's fiasco. Many secrets she'd learnt- the "experiment" in its grimmest details. Revelations. New insights. And in the end, Aeris had nothing. No strength to uphold her flimsy shack of falsehood. No more reason to hide among futile fantasies. She had nothing. She always had nothing...always will have nothing.

Image
Clone
Garbage
It's not you! Not you!!
It's never been you!
Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

Ridicule surrounded her, vicious jeers only audible to her ears. Upon the entangled metalwork, atop the tall glass towers sat an invisible crowd of snickering monsters. Different breeds, but all prisoners of the same caste... the same caste she belonged to. Indeed, Aeris felt an intense revulsion at herself; almost ready to claw off her own skin and flesh just to be free.

The mental torture churned over and over forever, though in reality it only endured an awkward minute, during which she forgot the external world, Vincent included. Far from mocking or disgusted, Vincent regarded her in a mixture of puzzlement and genuine concern. As she stood there, a solitary figure, he saw- no- **felt** her distress stir within himself, from the way tension held her stiff, to her sorrowful gaze cast downwards. Her demeanor was definitely not natural.

Still, he remained unsure what to think: had she gone into shock again? She didn't appear so. Rather, she appeared lost in conflict, dazed. There certainly was something burbling inside. Maybe she simply did not know where to begin or where it might end.

What was happening to her? He lingered just a short distance away. But in-between them stretched a wide gulf, his coast dark and rocky, hers stormy with trouble. Deliberately, gently, Vincent reached out for her, "... Aeris-"

"DON'T CALL ME THAT!!!"

Her sudden shriek cracked like a whip. Just a name, but what a reaction. It struck Vincent stone still in amazement. The girl, now too aware of his presence, recoiled two steps back, impassioned to a hot glow. Her harsh glare spurned both him and that hateful name.

Just a name, but what violence. It confounded him. Never had Vincent beheld a face so distorted by wrath and pain, yet quite as beautiful as hers. Again returned that vague uneasiness, like the ground beneath them was crumbling fast. On one hand, he wanted to soothe her. On the other hand, Vincent dare not advance an inch for fear of provoking her further.

He needn't bother. Just the sight of him right now, bedraggled and pasty sick, fuelled her fire. "The truth, Vincent..," Aeris faltered, actually shaking until she exploded at him, " The truth is I've been so stupid! I never should have run away in the first place! You never should have met me! It's wrong! All wrong! You should have just let Davoren drag me back here long ago... back to the Professor!!"

Vincent was taken aback by these fervid "should's"- was this really "the truth"? Was she... accusing him?

"Do you think it makes me happy looking at you now... wh..watching you throw your life away... all for WHAT?!!" despair wrangled her voice louder as she exclaimed, "I didn't want you to come here! It's useless, Vincent! That's what the Professor said! You can fight him, but you will never change the truth!!"

But the vexed man would no longer tolerate this verbal attack. Vincent stated sternly, "He is wrong."

"No! Everything he said is true! I'm just a piece of garbage. You cannot change that! And I have no place but here! I belong to no one but the Profe-"

"Don't you *dare* spit his words back at me!" snapped Vincent, so sharp it cut Aeris to silence. Beaten under his authority, the girl fixed his eyes downwards again. She clenched her fists, just as fresh tears welled up.

It angered him to hear her- specifically her- repeat Hojo's rants verbatim. He continued, dropping his voice but not its firmness, " I did not come here to fight the Professor or change any truth. Neither means a thing to me," Vincent added even more softly, "I fought to take you back with me."

A tender declaration, followed by a cool pause. Aeris made no immediate response. Instead, she turned slightly away, giving him one side of her face. She didn't appear the least touched either, but contemplative and visibly pained, as though he'd rubbed salt into an open wound long burning upon her breast.

He'd spoken in earnest. She needn't look at him to realize that. Nor did she doubt his intentions. He'd sworn he'd let no one have her. It still struck her how he'd stood that miserable night, upheld by fury when no strength remained. He'd fought through Hell and hardships just to reach her. He came to take her back.

Her. Her. Her. Always her.

A spark of scorn lit Aeris' wet green eyes. She believed him. He had spoken sincerely, but not to her.

Not her.

She was no longer angry. It didn't matter what she felt or thought anymore, only this one question. With melancholy calmness quite the opposite to her previous outburst, Aeris asked, almost mockingly, "And if I go with you, Vincent, back to that silly pink dream world...what then? Shall I continue pretending to be 'Aeris'?" Every word tasted bitter in her mouth, especially these: "Shall you push me into another woman's

shadow and pretend you're protecting her now like you should have years ago?"

Her blunt question, posed so ruefully, received a long, long silence, heavy enough to crush sense itself beneath its weight. Aeris expressed no surprise. She'd expected this answer.

She stood in plain view of this man; Heaven knows how he alone evoked so many emotions within her by his sheer presence, nevermind his touch. The despondent girl waited for nothing to happen. Let it be whatever it be. That seemed the only way to end this fiasco, and she was too tired to go on. Both hands hung loose and empty. Her gaze, hard yet somehow betraying such vulnerability, remained riveted down towards the far side.

Image
Clone
Garbage

No need to speak either. This tranquility said far more. Again those lovely memories floated across her mind... precious memories of a world that now appeared a wild fantasy compared to this reality. Especially those he'd given her. To Aeris, no price could ever buy them. Or all those wonderful feelings. Warmth. Happiness. Compassion. Things she'd never known. Things he'd lavished endlessly on her. Yes, it was a dreamland in there. But none of it was ever meant for her.

Not her.

Much time had passed since that delirious night. Many events filled the space in-between. Still, Aeris could hear those hurtful words. They cut her to shred more so now than ever before.

She wondered if he heard them too.

But Vincent had also turned slightly away from Aeris in apparent discomfort, her question having disarmed him where all his enemies had failed. Silence hung thickest around him. He bore himself rather stiffly. His head was twisted farthest aside. His avoidant face was shaded and quite morose, as if to look at this girl wrought some inner confrontation. Instead, Vincent compressed his jaw in private meditation.

During this agony of waiting, one could only guess what went on behind that frigid exterior. Did he feel threatened? Ashamed? Did his silence mean denial... or agreement?

The essence of the question couldn't have been new. Not at all. From a troublesome feeling, it must have surfaced several ways, in thoughts, in deeds. Strange though. Each time the actual words began to form, he'd stuff them in a closet at the back of his mind, along with other things collected across the years... things better left unspoken and unresolved. When did it start? This restless drifting between self-doubt and desperation... this obsession to rectify one sin no matter what it cost him or those around him.

The essence of the question couldn't have been new to him. However, to hear it spoken in plain language, and from her mouth no less, somehow sounded... "wrong", like there was still more to it. He must have recalled that terrible night he fell ill. He'd pinned Aeris flat to the floor, and shouted atrocities at her. He could've dismissed it as a madman's rave, called it "unimportant". But would he be deluding himself?

Truth was truth, whether blared in a fit of rage or admitted in perfect grasp of logic. Then why couldn't he answer the question? Was what she'd said... "the truth"? Was it too complicated to find... or so brutally simple that he just did not WANT to find it?

"And so, what will you have me do, Aeris?" Vincent wearily returned her question with another. He glanced askance at her for a solution. He for one didn't know anymore.

Aeris was quiet a moment longer. After all her thinking, she'd reached the way to conclude this night: with

nothing. The placid girl didn't look at him- it hurt too much. She closed her eyes and stated clear and steady.

"..I want you to leave me."

-End of Chp.78

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.79

"I want you to leave me," she'd said.

Leave her?

Vincent's spine froze solid. His breath stopped short. Had Aeris pronounced his own death sentence it wouldn't have hit him nearly as hard. Her words had plucked a very, very sensitive string.

Leave her?

While he stood here, gaping wide at Aeris, his stunned mind flashed back years down a road until there appeared a sleepy village in the horizon. From a distance, Vincent spied a lonely figure loitering by the main gate; a young woman actually, slim and of such haunting beauty. An aura of sorrow surrounded her. Vincent wanted to reach her. He wanted to embrace her. He tried, but his entire body was paralyzed. Nor seemed this wraith of a woman remotely aware of him.

Long time she waited for him. Long time, but he never came.

...you knew she needed you...
...you should have protected her...
...but you never came...
...monster...

Caught amidst a flurry of vicious voices and condemnations, just then Vincent felt that three-decade old wound burst anew with double passion: leave her?

Abandon her?!

Aeris insisted sternly, "I want you to turn around and walk away. Right now."

"No," he rasped even more sternly.

"Leave me here. Leave this whole place and never, ever look behind!"

"NO!"

No, no and a thousand no's! In an uncanny surge of strength, the agitated man had already stepped across to grab her tight by both arms, overwhelming her, his voice seething hot upon her, "Listen to me! I committed the exact same mistake thirty-one years ago: I turned my back on the one person I held dearest," Vincent yanked her closer as he snarled, "Ever since then, there has not been one-miserable-DAY I haven't regretted my actions. I did it once. I will NOT do it again!!"

He held her a lot stronger than he imagined. It certainly was rare to see emotion written raw over his face. Vincent's menacing height, his demonic demeanor and fiery glower all threatened to engulf Aeris. One almost thought he'd strike her. Amazingly however, Aeris neither resisted nor quarreled, but at the peak of his outburst simply lifted her gaze towards him. Something in those eyes rendered Vincent suddenly mute, like a balmy breeze abates roaring red flames.

If she'd argued, he'd have argued back ten times fiercer. If she'd struggled, he'd have overpowered her. Yet this plain, weak child had merely looked up at him, and Vincent was completely helpless.

It wasn't the contact itself that mystified him as much as the strangeness of her expression. Vincent had never beheld such serenity in any eyes as hers. In fact, with her loose hair, Aeris' face made a fascinating study of detachment and despair swirled together, their tone softened by a peculiar wistfulness.

And hurt. Deep mental anguish. Vincent couldn't understand the meaning behind that look. She seemed to beg him: don't be angry with me. Don't defy what was meant to be. Most of all, don't hurt me anymore than you already have.

The eerie peace, brought on by a single pair of green eyes, filled the grand hall to the brim. The stoic machinery, the arbours of pipes and glass, all observed the scene below in dread. Heaviest weighed this silence upon Vincent's shoulders. Again, he waited for her to speak.

Aeris regarded him thoughtfully for a long minute. Soon, she hung her head, defeated, unsure what good telling him would do. Still, the confession slipped out, soft-spoken words from the core. She recounted, "While I was locked up, Davoren came to visit me once. He talked to me. He asked me.... if..if I hated Lucrecia..."

Vincent didn't comment. His solemn visage masked his reaction perfectly.

"At first, I screamed at him. I said that was terrible. To hate some poor dead woman who'd suffered so much... who never did me any harm... to actually *hate* her...that..," Aeris murmured woefully to herself, "That's just terrible..."

Imprisoned thus in his grip, Aeris could discern his keen eyes fixated on her. He followed her every word, every hesitation, every subtle movement down to her meek trembling. God how she wished he'd let go! How she wished to run away and burry herself a hundred miles underground!

"But now I see things more clearly. The Professor has been right all along: I am just an image behind the mirror. I reflect whoever stands on the opposite side, " the girl visibly tensed as she felt him draw his face nearer. Tears welled up. His kiss still burned like fire on her lips, and it hurt. It hurt. It hurt. She admitted, "...fighting won't change the truth. Running away and playing pretend won't either. T-the truth is there's no place for *me* in the world outside. To Cloud and Tifa, I'm their dead friend 'Aeris'. To Davoren, I'm just 'girl' or 'A-25'- a lab specimen he's responsible for."

She'd struggled to maintain a dispassionate tone, keep her eyes lowered, maybe prevent a few secrets from emerging. In vain. The longer Aeris stayed under Vincent's scrutiny, the hotter her emotions boiled. And his face was so close to hers. Plus with *her* watching them from the netherworld. The loneliness. The pain. She couldn't bear it! Aeris declared straight up at him, quickly losing her control to this wrangled desperation, "Inside, Vincent, there're so many things ripping me apart! Everybody pretends I'm whoever they want me to be... and it's YOU who hurts me the most! See, I'm in love with you: I've built my whole world around you! But to you, I'm no better than trash! I'm just there to be Lucrecia's reflection!! And I..I don't w-want to hate her either..," she paused to catch a sob, only to pound her bitterest frustration with two fists against his chest, ".. BUT LUCRECIA'S TAKEN ALL YOUR HEART FOR HERSELF AND LEFT NOTHING- ABSOLUTELY NOTHING- FOR ME!!!!"

Loud and furious. The confession quaked Aeris to the deepest depths of defeat. She could tolerate no more. Roused to a fit, she managed to wrench herself free, at least put enough distance between them to collect her senses. Nor tried Vincent to detain her. He released her with forbearance, watching her, around him an aura of brooding darker than shadow.

To contrast, Aeris appeared on the verge of emotional collapse. Dazed, she'd barely wobbled two steps backwards before staggering to a halt, in which she turned aside just to avoid his sight. She clasped one hand over her mouth, swallowed her sobs, anything to contain this grief. Still the tears streamed down, and she despised herself double for her inability to control them.

Nothing for her. It all belonged to a woman named "Lucrecia". In life or death, she held him enthralled under an unbreakable spell. Vincent still thought about Lucrecia, still loved her, still wanted her. Even after thirty-one years, her memory consumed him blind. Her ghost haunted his heart. Passionate, devoted love. The kind no length of time could wane, just like Davoren had described...

"Do you hate Lucrecia for having all his love, while you have none?"

Lucrecia. Lucrecia. It's always been Lucrecia. Never her. In a race between them to reach Vincent, Aeris always emerged the loser, always emerged having less than what she started out with.

No actually, she never had anything to begin with. And there never was any race. She could never compete against Lucrecia. Putting herself on equal terms with that woman was like comparing common dirt to pure diamonds.

She'd just have to accept it: Lucrecia owned his heart. Accept it she had long ago, but that didn't dull the pain! She loved him- how much he'll never really know; he probably didn't care. In that wonderful world, she served nothing more than a tool to him. Somehow Aeris found that quite alright. She was created for that purpose... to be used.

But she still loved him! Aeris bit her lower lip: fool! What a fool she was! Why did she escape from the Professor in the first place?! Was this Hell here any worse than that outside? Many things have happened. In the end, was she really any better off, knowing what she knew now, feeling what she felt now?

She shouldn't have escaped! She shouldn't have met Vincent that night! She should have just surrendered to truth, not dawdle in some ludicrous dream. And he should not have come here. No, he should not have come!

The silence oppressed Aeris. This mad cycle of thoughts, reproaches and obsessions pulsed a thousand beats across her brain. They felt like mental bullets riddling her conscience with holes. She had to steady herself. She gathered her voice one last time. It rolled out a dry, tired monotony, "...please, I.. want you to leave now," she ordered Vincent without looking at him. In fact, she flicked her eyes to the far corner, "Let the Professor have me for his experiment. It doesn't matter anymore. I just don't want to stand behind the mirror, watching you throw your life away for an image... or make me Lucrecia's replacement," Aeris hugged herself loosely as she felt a chilly vacuum grow inside. Drained, she sighed out the finale, "...I may be garbage to you... but you're still the most important thing to me, Vincent.."

She'd laid all her cards out on the table. Aeris fell into a lamentable hush, still holding herself in both arms. She shuffled away half a step, just enough to conceal her face behind dangling curls of hair. She didn't expect him to speak. No need. Truth spoke for itself: this is how it was meant to end, with nothing. She belonged to the experiment. He belonged to Lucrecia.

Still it hurt. It hurt. Aeris barricaded herself from her own bleeding heart. She barricaded herself far, far away from him. Maybe the cold would freeze this sorrow ice-solid. Then she'd feel no more pain. Then she'd feel nothing anymore.

Stranded and shunned outside this barrier stood a war-torn Vincent, alone to study the despondent girl in profound contemplation. He'd listened to her. He'd witnessed the turmoil through her eyes. Now he was left here to watch misery crush her flat; this innocent little dove, both wings broken like her spirit, caged within a huge horror house called the laboratory.

He didn't say anything for a long time. During this numbing silence, Vincent mentally juggled her harsh accusations, those angry "shoulds" against her tender laments; all the emotions she'd thrown at him, some so intense they almost shattered her fragile body; his own thoughts... about her... about himself... everything boiled mad over a pensive fire.

Whatever revolved within his head, Vincent concealed it marvelously behind marble-hard stoicism. It seemed as though he wanted no one to see the mental entanglement inside, not the darkness, not Aeris or Lucrecia, but most of all himself.

He must have known of these strong feelings she harboured towards him long before she realized them herself. Perhaps he actually spurned them. Perhaps he'd just ignored them; shoved them into that subconscious closet with many other things. It was easier that way. Just leave them and don't think about them. Still, it must have sounded strange to hear those words declared loud into his face. After all this time of roaming an outcast and a monster, detesting himself until it made him hollow... how strange, how bewildering it must have felt to hear her say she loved him.

How could she, her purity whiter than white, possibly love someone as black and base as *him*?! Didn't she know of those atrocities he'd committed in the past? Didn't she see the ugly, murderous creature behind this human guise?

And yet, she said she loved him.

When this frightened girl crashed into his life, he took her in without really knowing why. Maybe it gave him a purpose again. A part of him felt responsible for her. In a way, she reminded him of himself. He could connect to her plight. He could understand her anxieties and despair better than anyone else.

And also, he could..."use" her. She was terrified with no one to turn to. A little more than subconsciously came the idea: if he protected her like he should have protected Lucrecia... pretend the image he saw was Lucrecia... maybe then this one sin would be washed clean off his two soiled hands.

Yet now, as they stood at the crossroads, there seemed to be more Vincent withheld from himself; a lot more than he cared to search. There had to be. Otherwise, why did he remain silent for so long? Why did he appear so perturbed, hurt?

But it didn't matter anymore. To her, all of that didn't matter. It shouldn't to him either. Tonight had irrevocably wrecked everything for everyone. New facts uncovered, unexpected revelations, hearts broken beyond redemption, tears, and "the truth". Whether Aeris surrendered to the crazed Professor or returned with Vincent, she'd be a replacement: the mother of a glorious god engineered by science, or the filler of an old, aching void. To her, the second option hurt a lot more.

Aeris said all she had to say. She wanted him to leave now. The person she treasured most, she wanted him to be safe from Hojo's razor-sharp claws, from the experiment, far, far away from her.

Their roads should never have crossed. Now she would set things as they should end: with nothing.

"...that's not very fair of you, Aeris," chided Vincent gently.

Surprised, she looked around to find him gazing directly back at her: what did he mean by that?

Vincent stood ragged and upright for her to behold; a battle-weary, ashen-faced man with disheveled long hair, neither angry nor embittered, just reproachful; even wistful one might add. He continued on the same soft tone, "I cannot quite explain myself. Right now... there're many things tearing me inside too. For some reason, I've always wanted you, specifically you, Aeris, to condemn me. I just wanted to hear you shout: 'Vincent, you are a monster!'," something troublesome began to cloud his mind. He knit his brows slightly as he forced the words out warily, "I attacked you. I tried to convince you that I'm not the 'good guardian angel' you think me to be. I'm actually a criminal... worst still, a monster. But you.. you never gave in to me. At times, it angered me that you-a mere child- wouldn't believe me. Instead you told me... 'I know what's beneath the snow fields'."

The recollection stirred within Aeris to lock her stiff in place. Her apprehension fixed on him as though shell-shocked. Between them stretched but a small distance, each in view of the other, Vincent somehow maintaining balance despite wretched illness, she held prisoner of those ruby eyes. Yes, she remembered that peaceful night they sat together in those vast fields of snow. She remembered telling him that.

"If you surrender to the Professor, he'll chain you by the neck to his experiment," prophesied Vincent, his voice gaining an edge until it cut straight through her, "He'll go on defiling you while you lie there frozen. You'll burry yourself under snow... with all that pain and fear, cursed to live that moment over and over again!"

Aeris was a bit startled when he suddenly stepped across to grab her by the arms; not violently this time, but with strength stemming from an inner passion, some strong energy that pleaded anxiously, "Can't you see, Aeris? That's what's happened to the rest of us! Not only myself, but Davoren, that boy Rufus, even Professor Hojo: we've each buried ourselves deep in our own fields of snow..... and Aeris, I don't want that to happen to you too," he brought his face nearer to hiss softly, "I simply cannot *bear* the thought."

Aeris found herself lost in him. Upclose, his expression was grave, yet strained by an intense earnestness she'd never witnessed in anyone before. And this time when he spoke, she knew he addressed her and no one else, "...I don't care about Hojo's 'truth' or the rest of the world for that matter. I have no place there either. But when you were taken away from me... it.. it felt like the life was ripped out of my chest... and I've come here to get it back. That life is you, Aeris. I came here to take *you* back with me," the words weren't coming out right. Too mawkish, though God knows he spoke straight from an open heart like he'd never done in thirty-one years. Vincent hesitated, uncertain of himself. At last, he tenderly asked her, "... but if... I put my faith in you... if I believe I'm not a monster like you say, will you for once throw this 'truth' away, the Professor, everything... just throw them aside and put your faith in me?"

Aeris blinked. She felt so confused. Part of her wanted to run. That's what her life had been about: always running. Always crying. Another part wanted to fling both arms around this man and give him her all. Aeris made no response except cast her anguished gaze downwards. She wavered between emotion and doubt, what she should say and what she really yearned to say.

"Aeris.. please..," Vincent whispered.

His desperate supplication tugged at her entire being. Regardless of "the truth", what should be and how it should end, what Heaven or Hell decreed, he'd battled his way up to reach her. Now as he held her, Vincent's warm eyes beseeched Aeris she let him take her back home.

Home, a place where nothing and no one could ever harm her. All she had to do was let him.

Aeris turned up to him, about to speak, when Vincent noticed her attention suddenly shoot up past him with an alarmed "AH!!", just as his own danger senses flared wild. The quick-witted man automatically swung aside, snatching the confounded Aeris along one millisecond before a barrage of tentacles showered chaos upon them from above.

Vincent lost balance, but only for a moment. With the girl clamped tight against him, he somehow flipped himself back up then instantly dived forth, thus escaping the next assault by a hair's breadth. Another followed. And another and another until it seemed like the sky was raining spears of death.

Vincent's most dreaded expectation had come true: Professor Hojo has found them. He didn't know how the artful bastard had managed to catch them unawares or exactly where he'd taken position; probably on one of the upper pipelines, where he had a good view of the field below. Nor had Vincent the time to retaliate or even think. All he understood was Hojo had found them, and they needed to take cover.... fast!

The platform was blitzed, the girders shred to shrapnel and the unfortunate machinery torn apart. All this destruction just to get this one man. Amidst such erratic bombardment, Vincent rushed across no-man's land with amazing nimbleness. Amazing in that he protectively carried the terror-crazed Aeris, who clung close to him, whilst he, frazzled to a crisp, kept up the pace full speed. He dashed towards the only exit on the opposite side. If they could make it across in one piece, he could probably shake the enemy off their tail again.

Or not. Vincent suddenly skid to an abrupt halt as a swarm of treacherous appendages descended straight upon them. Each trailed an aura of vengeful malice. Trapped, he immediately squatted then sprung high up into the air. Beneath them the angry ropes craked the ground to rubble.

Events slowed to an agony and sped to a blur at the same time. The airborne pair were tossed off coordination amidst this upward gust of debris and mayhem. Something pierced Vincent's conscience out of nowhere... a bleak warning that worst yet was to follow. He happened to look up. Across the distance he met two brilliant yellow eyes; the colour of insanity set on fire.

From darkness above swooped the glorious Holocaust demon at terminal velocity, having dropped from some inconspicuous pipeline to ambush them in open space. Just a split-second to comprehend, but Vincent's mind blanked out, petrified in face of a midair assault which spelt catastrophe.

Next thing he knew, Vincent felt this gruesome whip-like force crack against his exposed side. A froth of blood jumped up his throat. His entire body snapped in to absorb the impact. Strange. It didn't hurt as much as he thought it would. Or maybe the blow had been so brutal it shocked his nervous system into complete numbness. Either way, Vincent was sent topsy-turvy on a wild trajectory path. They went high over the balustrade and plunged into the ominous void below.

Indeed, upon catching his helpless enemy wide open, the crafty Professor had whiffed a thick bundle of thorny tentacles for the coup de grace. Vincent was spiked at a sharp angle as Hojo descended upon them. With the stunned man to lead and the demented monster close behind, all three followed a collision course. They went diagonally straight through the tall glass colonnades, towards the ground which now seemed miles away.

For any spectator, no description could ever convey such a savage sight. First Vincent went shattering through back-first, still tumbling head-over with Aeris pressed against him. The maniacal scientist pursued the same path after them. He smashed through the glass column in one side-out the opposite, undaunted by the shards which lacerated him or as gravity reeled them in faster. Murder. His thirst for murder blinded him to everything else. In fact, he'd chosen this route on purpose, if only to watch their last hope of escape destroyed along with the colonnade.

Hojo had won the war.

-End of Chp.79

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.80

It was a moment Aeris would never forget. Though out of control, Vincent had kept her hidden deep inside himself, where no one and nothing- not Hojo, not glass- nothing could harm her.

He'd always been there. He the only one she ever wanted, his embrace the only shelter she had when the storms gusted too hard. Everytime, he was there, pushing her above these tempestuous seas. He'd never let her sink to the bottom like the rest of them, even when she resisted him, even when she herself wanted to just drown and end it all.

"YOU are the image!"

"...and what's 'inside' of him that makes him so different from me?"

"...if I put my faith in you, and for once believe I'm not a monster, will you....?"

...snowfields...

...what's beneath the ...

It was a terrible moment Aeris would never forget. Their legs, bodies, logic itself whirled at top velocity. She felt Vincent huddle her away just before they literally went busting through the column with a resonant crash. Glass shattered. A million daggers flew by. They tore the rim of her dress. They sprayed his backside, shred his muscles and skin. She saw red. Blood. His blood. Falling. To her it seemed they were falling forever...

...for once.. just once, I'll...

First glass. Then a gritty stone floor. The spinning Vincent didn't realize they'd slammed into earth until the force of impact rammed flat into his senses. But he always held onto Aeris. He held her even when they suddenly collided against solid ground. Together they tumbled onwards in a messy heap, trailing dust and debris behind.

Over and over and over. The centrifugal violence rolled them like a runaway barrel across rugged terrain. Angry forces jolted them on all sides. Aeris lost herself in the mayhem. Still, this warm shell of heart and muscle covered her from the blows around.

Everything spun wild. Through the madness, Aeris somehow saw Holocaust Hojo make a grand landing just moments after their crash. There he squatted in place as glorious glass and metal scrap rained down. All the while he watched. Watched and yes, enjoyed.

Over and over. By the time friction brought this tumbleweed pair to a halt, they'd already reached the far end of this new arena. At last, they stopped. Aeris opened her eyes to find herself an aching, trembling wreck. She lay sprawled supine upon the dirty floor- crushed, without hope, without escape.

At first, her mind hung in shambles. The dazed girl squirmed to prop herself onto one elbow. Something heavy lay on top of her. It seemed to stir on its own. From the upper platform, through a glass portal onto the lower deck hall, followed all the way by a terrible demon- Aeris almost believed the entire journey had been some awful dream. That she would wake up in bed, amidst the quiet and calm of the bedroom, back home...

But no. Instead her hazy vision bounced off sinister dungeon walls. Worse, Aeris discovered a black, limp bloody sack sprawled across her body. It was breathing, moving. Just then her senses snapped wide open. At once, the panic-stricken girl bolted upright, where she tended to the battered, disorientated, half-dead Vincent thrashed over her.

The sight of him upclose, like *that*, petrified her. Especially his intense glare; such a frightening mixture between human and devil. Already he had slid off her. Already he was writhing clumsily to get up and continue.

On the opposite side sat Holocaust Hojo crouched on all fours; that deformed monstrosity, his grace reduced to open wounds and broken armour, his acid-burnt face tied in a deranged knot. He blistered with rage. All he saw was Vincent.

Vincent ignored the insane voices inside and the pain wrangling both lungs. He ignored Death's seductive call. Most importantly, he ignored her- Aeris. No, he wouldn't give up. No, he wouldn't back down. In fact, he tried to stand. His hand groped blindly for his gun- not there. It must have fallen out during the crash. No matter. If this battle was meant to continue, then he'll continue. The fever-plagued wretch rose halfway from the floor, at least to confront Hojo, who now began to advance forward, not too steady himself either.

Vincent's thoughts shone clear through his eyes: thirty-one years ago he abandoned someone very dear to him. Never again. He wouldn't forsake this girl. He wouldn't commit that mistake *twice*!

Touching determination. A shame it didn't impress the ruthless scientist. He merely lashed out a long bundle of tentacles. Though they swacked Vincent clean off balance, it was Aeris who raised a shriek as she witnessed first-hand how physical resistance is shattered. Even before he'd reached his rickety knees, the defenseless man crashed aside in another sprawled mess, this time choking on his own blood.

"Vincent! Vincent!!" she wailed. He couldn't hear her. He was trying to get up again. He still had to continue this war. Aeris scrambled towards him. She protectively embraced this heaving mass, as though she- a sniveling, frightened little child- would keep him down, if not to hold his life together, then keep her own sanity from flying apart.

"You... M-miSeRABLE...BASTARD!!" rasped Hojo's garbled voice against the hapless pair. He wobbled closer and closer, followed by an entourage of hungry tentacles. He only saw Vincent- this man. This pest! This stubborn pest! Somehow, everything was his fault: the wars, Davoren's betrayal, the loss of that key materia Merger Grade-1, and most infuriating of all stealing the girl, his precious specimen, amidst the destruction of the laboratory. Somehow, it was all his fault! All his anger, frustrations, and bitter disappointments pinned themselves on this man alone!

If only Hojo could tell how upon realizing the girl had been spirited away, he'd raised such a thunderous cry. If only he could describe how he'd searched and searched, torn down metal walls, grappled through darkness until finally... finally, he'd found them!

"..finally..," the neurotic madman raved his obsession out loud, "..all those years... and when I'd finally... *finally* come so close...so close I c-could actually FEEL it materialize between my fingers... now you..."

Poor Aeris was caught at the very centre of their conflict. Terrified senseless, she cowered further over Vincent to shield him from those delirious blows. Her thoughts fluttered wilder as she watched Hojo's shadow stretch across the floor towards them. She didn't know what to do. She wanted to scream. She wanted to cry. Still his malice consumed that gasping heap of a man between her arms. Still he approached, slowly but surely, to draw this bloody drama to a close. Hojo craved Vincent's life.

"..you..," he literally growled.

The frantic girl, almost hyperventilating from fear, kept on returning to Vincent in complete desperation. He looked so helpless: disarmed, curled upon his stomach, shaking under pain. Nevertheless, Vincent clung to determination. He hadn't anything else now. He lifted one shoulder, collapsed, but tried again. Each attempt weakened him more. All Hojo had to do was puff to kill him! So why struggle? He was finished. Wasn't it easier to just die?

Yes, but long ago he'd taken the easy way out. He hid in a coffin full of self-loathing and guilt. He buried himself under snow, hoping the cold would freeze this torture like his ageless face.

"M..my experiment... a life's worth of work.. and then you..."

He struggled because he had get up. He refused point-blank to leave her. And because for once, just once, he'd put all his faith in her.

Suddenly, Aeris stopped.

Time ticked on without her. Hojo's evil aura filled the background. Vincent, ever defiant, still writhed to rise. She alone stopped. Only now, as darkness closed in on them, did she suddenly perceive something else within this man which gripped her in place. Past the weakness and desperation, there throbbed an incredible force she'd never felt so strongly before.

Aeris couldn't describe it. Through him shone this splendour only she could see. It arrested the madness within her head for just one brief moment, but forever opened her eyes to the truth- the *real* truth- she'd long striven to find.

Somehow, she understood now.

"YOU!!!" barked Hojo into the scene, "D-do you really think I'll just let you burn everything to ash?! This is my experiment! Damn you, I won't allow it to be destroyed like this! I won't! I-"

A cool, crisp voice interrupted, "It must give you such pleasure."

He halted. Rather unexpectedly, Holocaust Hojo found himself- a flustered, vengeful gargantuan of grotesqueness- suspended by a pair of green eyes. His addresser was a little girl; the same who'd begged him before not to hurt Vincent, who'd still try to stop him from hurting Vincent, but not quite the same person... not quite the same way. Hitherto, Hojo hadn't even noticed her. Now he scrutinized her fully. Seris sat slouched upon the ground. She held Vincent in a loose embrace as he lay a confused, gory heap, yet stared right back at the Professor. Splotches of blood bespattered her dress. Her flowing hair hung in disarray, which added a touch of tragedy to her beautiful, solemn face.

The Professor wrinkled his nose at that bizarre remark, "What?" he demanded.

Aeris remained undaunted, "It must give you such pleasure," she repeated tepidly, "Destroying things.. people.. using their pain and tears to build yourself a shelter. It must make you feel so happy and safe hiding in there."

Mysterious riddles she spoke. For some reason, Hojo remained fortified in shadow, where his outline almost blurred into the darkness around, rather than advance. His facial features were coarse with mistrust. He seemed wary of the change in Aeris' demeanour, especially her eyes.

"Interesting. A shelter, you say?" he snided.

"Yes. This experiment. It's all just a shelter you to hide inside."

"From what?"

She paused, not in hesitation, but to measure him up, "From your own fears and pain."

He paused also; "Huh!" the odious creature snorted utter contempt, "You ignorant piece of cellular garbage! What would YOU know about me or my experiment anyway?"

She gave no response. Instead, Aeris watched fury roll hot through Hojo's gnashed fangs as he re-lived thirty-one years' worth of bitter memories in this present minute, "This is my dream! It's the only thing that's given PURPOSE to my world... PROOF of my own superiority and genius!!" he harangued, "I've sacrificed everything for 'Genesis Retrial'... more than anyone else here! My body, my time, my entire career for the ultimate scientific achievement: creating God from man!!"

Hojo's delirium frothed overboard. His yellow eyes bulged wider to expose one pupil skewed off centre, the perfect analogy of his diseased mind, "Y-you cannot comprehend how it feels to want something so badly it claws at your chest non-stop. This one thing you'd do *whatever* it takes to obtain! Heh.. ehheheh! We're like monsters covered in crime and filth, clinging to this world by a single thread. Each one of us is holding on... refuses to let go... because the minute we do, we lose our very purpose!" The crazed devil blared out at her, at Vincent, at the whole cosmos, "Don't you understand?! Without my experiment, there's no more meaning! No purpose! No dream! NOTHING!!!"

"You are wrong."

Her calm rebuttal struck Hojo off guard. He'd never been one to tolerate defiance. Anyone else and he'd no doubt have killed him on the spot. Yet to hear Aeris particularly refute his views forced him back into stiff silence, whereas it added integrity to her presence. The resolute Aeris stood up. She took firm steps forth to meet the creature halfway. She placed herself between the nightmare she'd dreaded most and the love she treasured above all the rest.

In their desperate hour, when everyone else had been crushed, this girl would confront Hojo alone.

-End of Chp.80

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.81

Seized by genuine anxiety for Aeris, the woozy Vincent overcame a hundred aches to shift aside then climb onto one elbow, at least restore some focus. Had he the power, no doubt he'd have done a lot more than lie sprawled here in this sorry condition. It alarmed him to watch her take a stand unsupported when events had turned bleakest black for them. But also, it intrigued him. She intrigued him more than ever.

The two opponets struck such a contrast: on the darker side posed a war-ravaged gargoyle, breathing hard, just fuming psychopathic dogma. Around him twitched tend of listless tentacles. They all reflected their master's inner state.

The slightest spark could have triggered this bomb suppressed within his chest. But against Aeris, the demon was riveted by her, like her composure kept his calamity in check. She was neither shaking nor crying. She wasn't even intimidated. Compared to him, Aeris looked so harless, so small. He could do with her whatever he wanted, at any minute he chose. Nevertheless, she bore herself with dignity.

"Davoren once told me something," she started from the most unexpected place, "He came while I was locked up. They were only words he used, but they cut me open. Right here," Aeris placed her clenched fist over her bosom. Inside, she still felt those keen pink eyes dissect her amidst total darkness.

She sighed, "It's easier for us to take the selfish view. That way, we can hide from our own shame, anger, or hurt. And in the end, Professor, that's what each one of us wants: freedom from those emotions. And yes, sometimes we want it so badly that we exchange everything we have to attain that freedom, even our 'humanity'."

A low-pitched growl escaped Hojo's throat to betray his increasing discomfort. He scrutinized Aeris closer: one could hardly call this girl an "enemy". She possessed none of Davoren or Vincent's combat skills, not even Rufus' manipulative streak. No, she fought on a completely different level, probably the most devastating level of all. It forewarned of far more ominous consequences- maybe for herself, for Hojo, maybe both of them. Vincent felt it worst. His misgivings weighed so heavy they pressed upon his chest.

"I used to believe that 'kindness' and 'good' made us human. But then, that was just my narrow view," Aeris confessed. She granted herself a small, rather sad smile: how else could she react to her own naivety? "I was still looking at the snow fields, not what's beneath. To me, the past wasn't important. The *entire* truth didn't matter, only what I saw on the surface."

"Davoren taught me it can never be that simple. People hide so much within their hearts... some terrible things they never want others to find. He showed me that in himself!" she exclaimed with rising zeal, "...I.. t-that's when I searched again... really dug hard... until I finally understood what's beneath the snow fields: 'kindness' by itself doesn't make a human. 'Blood and crimes' make a criminal, not a monster. It's the soul, Professor. That's what makes the difference!"

Aeris took another step forward to assert, quite boldly, into Hojo's mean face, "A 'human' is a soul buried under pain and sadness, crimes and sin, but still... he can find some good inside himself... and compassion to share with others. It's when his 'soul' shines through he discovers he's truly 'human' after all!"

Holocaust Hojo held his ground firm behind a frigid wall, though it didn't block her verbal blows, or dampen the stirring power of her words, spoken from a moment of revelation. To listen to her, to sense her indomitable spirit clash against his own; it both repulsed Hojo to the very edge of an abyss and attracted him like some perverse fascination.+

But Aeris had addressed more than the Professor. Indeed, she'd drawn a wide audience of demons and outcasts. They listened perched high up on pipelines. They watched from between the entangled girders

and atop the towers of glass tanks. Everyone here was an exile one way or another; each a lonely wanderer in his own wasteland.

So much lies beneath those cold, barren fields: anger without retribution. Love without fulfillment. Crushed ambitions. Simple wishes, like safety and maybe a dollop of happiness, that didn't reach Heaven. Scars that never heal. Regrets that always kill.

Come spring, however, the wintry-white blanket slowly melts away. From the frosty earth life rises again. Grass, flowers, Beauty itself blooms. If such fields exist within the heart, could there also be a regenerative force as incredible as that?

Was that what she meant by "the human soul"?

Outside the battle zone, Vincent lay thrashed motionless in a trance. His mind seemed to whirl and whirl around her words. The longer he gaped across at Aeris, the more violent shook his core. Her steady voice reached everyone, but it carried something very special from her heart to his, and no one else.

Vincent wanted to tell her something too- what exactly, he did not know. How could he begin to articulate the thoughts and emotions spinning around his head? If only he had the strength! Danger surrounded her. He wanted to disperse it before.. before..

Even so, Aeris upheld her conviction that whatever be the consequences, now was the time truth must be spoken. Demure, with stone set in her eyes, she laid it flat at Hojo's feet, "You've spent years building this false world to hide from your own wounds, Professor. It made you feel safe and in-control. Now your world is collapsing around you, and you're too afraid to admit: all you've ever had were empty fields with nothing beneath." her look hardened even further, "The only 'monster' I see here is YOU, not because you lost your dream; it's because you've murdered your own soul!"

This time, Hojo snarled outloud. His front cracked to reveal the hostility underneath, and the dread from where it stemmed, as if to let her continue meant his destruction. The demon's muscular frame overcast her frail, solitary figure. His insanity threatened to devour her- surely she perceived the hunger in his glare! However, Aeris did not waver. Spiritually, she looked down on Hojo from her new-set position high above.

This was her creator, an unforgettable part of her past. She was his specimen, bound to his experiment. To him, she symbolized the very essence of his dream.

She no longer feared him. Despite the torture he'd inflicted upon her, she couldn't hate him anymore either, not the true person she saw through that massive armor. In fact, a subtle softness relaxed her hard-line front a bit, so contrary to Hojo's pugged, crumpled visage.

Never did Aeris appear more ravishing, pure or regretful as when she lamented, ".....what a sad creature you are, Professor. All that time I wasted fearing you, I should have been pitying you."

And with that gentle finale, the dove broke free of her chains; she flew away from her prisoner, leaving him miles behind, alone to contend with his loss.

Pity; the type one feels upon finding a stray pup dead along the roadside. That's how Aeris regarded him. She'd picked him up. She'd dug him a grave, and placed a tiny headstone there before continuing onwards. That way, should she ever pass the spot again, she'd remember the pup.

Of course, it's always easier to let the carcass rot. Surely with time, snow and mud will burry it under. Besides, why would anyone want to remember such a thing?

Because though its body will disintegrate, its ghost will never rest in peace. Everytime one passes that same spot, the sleepless dog will bark in anger, howl in sadness, or maybe just silently follow behind till the end of the road.

For those who yearn for freedom, keep the past. Keep its sweet and sour memories untainted, but lay the suffering to rest. Anger, fears, sorrows, hurt: dig them a proper grave, mark it, then leave quietly.

Exactly what Aeris had done to Hojo.

He'd been wrong to think this was that same little girl. Not that trembling, tearful wretch who'd escaped one wet, cold night. Before their very eyes she'd transformed into a brave young woman who'd do anything, even confront the Professor himself, to protect the man she loved.

For once, she'd decided, she too would put her faith... *all* of it, in Vincent.

Hojo remained silent a long, long time. He seemed embroiled amidst an introspective war, one dare say shell-shocked from the many blows dealt him. Heaven only knew what revolved inside that brain; what he saw images he saw reflected in Aeris nonchalant gaze straight back at him.

Perhaps he viewed his magnificent dream reduced to useless ruin, just like this laboratory, just like himself. Perhaps he too finally saw the truth: that rather than confront reality, he'd pinned his entire fanaticism on Aeris, rationalizing that if he held onto her, then somehow he could glue the broken pieces together again.

But there were too many pieces.

And he had nothing....

"..d..dedication... diligence... years of.. of..," he stumbled over each noun in a quiet daze. They sounded so hollow now, "Years slaving my life away...heh! 'Building' a reality out of fantasies... and at the end of my endeavors, this is all I have left to show: nothing."

He echoed to himself more softly, "...nothing... and your pity..."

Aeris needn't speak. The anticipation sickened Vincent. He managed to push himself a bit farther up, unsure which direction events would turn now that Hojo's eyes have been forced open.

For a passing moment, the scene hung in limbo, during which the grotesque beast, indeed once a holy terror, now evoked a pang of sympathy. Genuine sympathy. The way he lingered there gaping aside into empty space, not even aware of himself. How despite his glory, his uncontested might, he appeared so lost, so tormented and defeated.

Defeated
Crushed
Gone
All he'd given! All of it...

Suddenly, his demented glare riveted back on Aeris: her "truth" tasted bitter in his mouth. Nor could he swallow it down. It just regurgitated more rage up his throat! No! He'd given too much to lose now! He'd given his EVERYTHING!

Even if you scream from the highest mountain peak, emphasized her calm gaze: you'll still have nothing... and my pity.

She knew it. He knew it. They both saw it, crystal clear through each other's eyes. Now as he loitered among the wastes of "Genesis Retrieval", he saw that all along, he had nothing.

Nothing save nothingness itself and her pity.

The creature began to bristle. With marked difficulty, he forced out, "That may be so. But the fact remains, my darling: you are a clone and the centre of 'Genesis Retrial'. If my experiment is to be destroyed like this...", his tone dripped dark intentions, louder and angrier, "...if I cAnNoT hAvE you...", until he roared the verdict, "THEN YOU'RE NOT WORTH THE LIFE PUT IN YOU!!!"

A violent emotion gagged Vincent. In an instant he saw those huge claws contract full length. The maniacal demon charged faster than a blur to take a swipe at Aeris, who hadn't even a time to react. Somehow, the frantic Vincent scrambled onto knee, about to shout Hojo's name before he...

Too late: in one fair swoop, those murderous daggers slashed Aeris clean across the thorax; deep from her right shoulder, chest, and out, splattering fresh blood high into open air.

Her eyes blanked wide to accommodate such exquisite pain. Her conscience disconnected from her body as she buckled under brutal impact. Aeris had foreseen her gruesome fate the moment she'd confronted Professor Hojo. Still, she knew he could never defeat her; even if he took her life, he could never take this new strength she'd acquired tonight.

Maybe it was better this way. To die yet to live. Strange how she felt neither fear nor regret. Only freedom. Only victory.

In herself, she'd found indestructible truth. In Death, she'd found triumph.

And in Vincent... she'd... fou..n...d.....

-End of Chp.81

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.82

When confronted by Truth, there are those who can accept it. The less strong-hearted shun it. Others, probably the most dastardly, most desperate of all, destroy this truth and anything else associated with it, even another's life.

Vincent's pupils constricted to pinpoints. Horror paralyzed him stone rigid as he'd arisen halfway off the floor, but too late. Infront, the bloody scene rolled past his eyes like a tape in slow motion. Every frame, every detail engrained itself forever into his memory.

...you never came...
...you didn't protect her...

He'd sooner have burned himself blind than witness those sharp talons tear her flesh. He'd have given his own body rather than watch hers wrung into a disorientated rag-doll, already lurching backwards towards the darkness which awaited her.

...Lucrecia...
...you didn't protect her...

Once he'd ruthlessly slashed across the defenseless girl, Professor Hojo, intoxicated with fury, did not hesitate a heartbeat to deliver the finale. Poor Aeris hadn't even absorbed the first blow when the maniac belted a vicious bundle of tentacles. She involuntarily yelped a harsh shriek as it whipped her hard against the waist, ripping flesh, cracking bone. The brutal force swept her aside clear out of Hojo's way, into oblivion for all he cared.

...it's your fault...
...monster...

Vincent watched impact set this girl spiraling mad through air. She was so small compared to the Professor's towering bulk. So delicate and lightweight. All it took was a single strike to send her gliding meters across the stone floor, whereupon she crashed and tumbled over several times.

He watched her loose hair, floppy limbs and broken body whirl around and around on a long gory streak. Finally, after what felt like ages to him, she rolled to a halt at the very opposite side of the arena.

Aeris lay sprawled aside upon her stomach, arms cast outwards, pallid face half-buried against the dirty floor. Her eyes were closed. From afar, no one could determine whether she was dying or already there. Either way, it was done. In a mere matter of seconds, she'd been reduced from an impressive figure to that lifeless mess. Even then, a somewhat mystic aura enshrouded her corpse.

Greed. Deceit. Murder. For "Genesis Retrial", an evil built on a hierarchy of crime could only end in crime. Aeris lay there alone in a crimson pool, the dying heart of a dying experiment; the blood-sacrifice that destroyed it.

An unnatural hush spread throughout the atmosphere. No movement made. No breath released. Time itself stopped at such a tragic sight, during which the still flustered Professor and the shell-shocked Vincent, enemies on opposite courts, shared the same view of that carcass. To each his own reaction.

The war-torn Holocaust, sullied by Aeris' blood, sent a derisive snort in her direction. Stupid chit, he seemed to think behind that spiteful visage. She said he'd lost everything long ago. That he'd always have nothing save nothingness itself and her pity. Her pity! With those simple words, through her

unconquerable gaze, her "truth" had stripped his dream of all meaning and magnificence..... no! He refused to accept it! Not after all he'd given!!

No one could quite say what revolved in the Professor's deranged brain. But to him, Aeris had always embodied the aesthetic aspect of the experiment; it was she who'd bring his "God" into existence. Perhaps inside that warped genius mind of his, a side of him had actually fallen in love with his own creation. He'd kill anything that threatened this passionate obsession, even a little girl like her. Indeed, Hojo had massacred that detestable truth through her rather than concede an inch to it.

Meanwhile, on the other side of this blood-streaked stage, Vincent dropped under his own weight to sit there hunched upon both knees, lost in a daze. The silence suffocated him. His conscience spun miles out of orbit. Longer and longer gaped the man over at Aeris. She did not stir. His haggard, wide eyes called her name. She made no response, and his pleas bounced back as tiny shards of insanity.

...you didn't protect her...
...this is your punishment...
...this is your punishment...

Louder buzzed the discordant chorus around him. They trampled over his logic until it began to crack under strain. They pounded against his heart until he heard his pulse throb across both ears.

...you let her die...
...you didn't protect her...

Too entangled in mental mayhem, Vincent didn't even apprehend this inner force rattle his chest, harder... and harder... its intensity metastasized like cancer throughout his wrecked body. Its hellish heat literally gnarled up his form, coarsened his features to raw beastliness...

...it's all your fault...
...rot in guilt...
...beg for forgiveness...
 ...Lucrecia...
...you didn't protect her...
 ...Lucrecia...
...you let her die. You just watched her die...
 ...Lucrecia...

He'd already lost someone very dear to him. Thirty-one years later, he had to watch Death snatch her away again. Now he beheld her body flung upon the cold ground, bleeding, motionless. Still he gaped at her. Still she never moved.

With Aeris, how had it felt to be needed again?

How had it felt to turn and find her walking by his side, smiling, content just to be with him?

And how had it felt when she confessed she loved him, enough to give herself away to Death, whereas he's always despised himself for all he'd done?

Another circle complete, another loss, and the torture started anew.

...fear. Are you afraid, Vincent?...
...you'll never be free...
...you'll just go on repeating the same cycle forever...

...everytime, you won't protect her...
 ...Aeris...

...everytime, you'll let her die...
 ...Aeris...
...everytime, you'll watch her die...
 ...Aeris...

...again...
 ...and again...
 ...and again...
 ...and again...

...this is your punishment...
...this is your punishment...
 ...monster...

His mind sped out of control. Just the same ramble a zillion times. He couldn't breathe. In this delirious moment, the beleaguered man whirled his vacant eyes towards Professor Hojo, who'd only just released his contemptuous snort.

At that exact instant, as he viewed the blood-stained gargantua, all those discordant voices blared unanimously across Vincent's conscience: How does it feel? How does it feel to lose her ALL OVER AGAIN?!

Then suddenly, something snapped.

Vincent buckled over to let out the most unearthly, blood-curdling scream, its timbre no longer human, but of a primal rage now set loose upon the world. The entire Reactor quaked on a catastrophic scale. The flabbergasted Professor was almost thrown off balance. During the verbal confrontation against Aeris, he'd practically forgotten his original enemy!

Holocaust Hojo turned around. He barely managed to brace himself in time as a flesh-shearing aura swept him like a blast of wind further back. Even then, his astounded eyes could hardly comprehend the spectacle. Where before there'd only been Vincent's ragged carcass, a phenomenal superpower seized his body by the very spine.

The sheer contact between flesh and fury unleashed such geyser force it literally swept Vincent whole into midair amidst an upward swirl of blazing gust. Superior hands mangled his form. They distorted his scraggly frame beyond human proportions. His skin darkened to leathery purple. The rage strained his face into a diabolical terror, and burned his pupils red out of their sockets.

Vincent was no more. Chaos assumed control.

Two black wings ripped through his back. Each stretched its glory three meters wide. Free at last! And plenty of anger for fodder! The airborne Hellspawn announced itself with a resonant roar so destructive, the sound waves shattered glass and tore metal and stone apart. Everything rumbled. The Reactor groaned; how could a fortress built by mere humans ever withstand a demon sculpted by the Devil himself?

Chaos stirred a paradox of emotions within all who beheld it, be they living, inanimate, or supernatural. Its graceful gargoyle figure evoked fascination. Its presence aroused fear. The creature itself was hideous, but simultaneously represented the beauty of evil, and glory of wanton destruction.

Gliding upon the same winds that had uplifted it, the crazed calamity made a backward loop, whereupon it swooped diagonally straight towards earth again. An infernal aura encased Chaos. Behind, shockwaves of pure havoc followed suit. Suddenly, Hojo realized he was the target.

At first, the victorious scientist had been stunned blank, not by the dramatic transformation as much as the timing. He'd always known how keenly Vincent detested Chaos. Since his Turk days he'd been a man of stern mental control. In fact, Hojo had wagered himself he'd kill Vincent before the man would even consider exchanging his mind for muscle. It was an advantage he'd exploited to the full.

Hitherto, he'd considered Vincent a dying (if not plain dead) wreck; that is until that outspoken chit had intervened. Still, had this change happened earlier, professor Hojo probably wouldn't have been too concerned. He'd created Chaos. He knew its weaknesses. But the war had dragged on far beyond expectation. He too had sustained many grievous injuries.

And unless he acted *now*, those injuries would soon become fatal.

The agitated scientist instantly belted a hefty bundle of tentacles at his incoming assailant; he hoped to strike it off course. Chaos, however, wouldn't be deterred. the creature merely swacked the vexatious diversion aside, shredding it to fleshy strings.

Holocaust Hojo hadn't even grunted his disbelief when this demented demon descended upon him at terminal velocity. Chaos drove one claw straight in for Hojo's skull, talons ablaze with murderous energy. Indeed, the alarmed Professor rallied up all his resources into a force shield. It absorbed the blow, but the impact almost crushed him under (not easy considering his massive size), nor would the weight ease off. In fact, the wailing calamity from Hell continued to drive its gnarled claw against this shield. They may be separate entities, but both Chaos and Vincent shared the exact same persistence.

The two enemies radiated such powerful auras. Neither side would yield. The resultant deadlock cut a swath of destruction round a twenty meter radius: the floors, walls, machinery and columns; nothing was spared.

Chaos, airborne and roaring mad, kept pushing downwards despite this vortex of energy and debris. Holocaust had no choice but to resist upwards. he exerted his mental capacities to the max just to hold this protective barrier together. The strain showed clear on his crumpled face.

The seconds ticked by. In the end however, something had to give. Hojo could not maintain output at such high frequency, not in this state. Sure enough, the shield, once a solid dome of glowing particles, actually began to "crack" under pressure. Those dagger-nails slowly penetrated through. The crazed creature persevered, even though the heat eroded skin and underlying muscle off its own arm. Hojo's head would make sweet compensation. Inch by inch, they reached their target.

Professor Hojo sorely needed breathing space. Desperate, he pumped that extra bit into his failing shield. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction: the sudden burst of force not only pushed him backwards out of danger, it also repelled Chaos away with a stunned shriek.

Both sides broke off. Chaos faltered a moment in disorientation, time enough for the scientist to mount an immediate counter-offence. He charged in fast. Simultaneously, thick ropes of tentacles wound themselves all along his right arm and beyond to form a knotted, thorny extension. Complete with those bony forearm and knuckle shears, the grotesque distortion made a lethal "sword" indeed.

Holocaust took a big swing at the unwary creature. In effect, the brutal slash sent Chaos flying further back with one messy gash across the torso, spurting scarlet blood all the way.

Still at maximum momentum, Hojo pressed on for another assault. Again he swung that armored appendage at his enemy. But Chaos had already recovered its poise, a lot sooner than Hojo expected. As graceful as a ballet dancer, the treacherous demon flipped over right-side up and landed upon a cushion of air with both wings folded together like a shield, just in time to absorb the incoming impact.

Holocaust Hojo was absolutely stunned. His astonishment doubled when Chaos, having received the blow unharmed, suddenly snapped both wings wide open again to whiff Hojo backwards off co-

ordination... and also reveal a little "surprise": a searing hot swarm of energy gathered within one claw, so concentrated it actually resembled a light saber.

Chaos lunged in faster than a blink. If it's a sword game Hojo wanted, then that's what he'd get: one jab clean through his exposed flank, twist, then rip it out sideways, effectively bestowing upon him a hideous open gash. Pain erupted loud from the depths of Hojo's lungs; a scream no human could ever produce.

Holocaust crashed to the arena floor in spastic agony. For now, Chaos left him sprawled there, at least to enjoy a moment's glory before finishing off the job. The vindictive fiend shot straight up into free space again, spreading catastrophes wherever it passed.

Even this vast Reactor could scarcely contain such diabolical powers. The earth shook more violently as if it might crack open. The heavens rained mangled steel, electronic garbage, and meteorites of stone. Meanwhile, Professor Hojo struggled frantically to collect himself off the ground. He certainly did not appreciate getting KO'ed with one attack. Nor could he afford to grant the opposition any aerial advantage. In fact, he'd have to hammer in a good series of consecutive blows against Chaos, enough to overwhelm it back to submission. Only then had he any hope of winning.

His wound dripped gore. He snarled another curse. A computer console smashed nearby. One of the column specimen tanks lurched over. nevertheless, Hojo managed to stagger halfway up. he looked skyward. Amidst the bedlam, he perceived Chaos head towards the crumbling pipe network high above. Angry, twice indignant, the gargantua discarded his injuries to pursue his wily adversary. Hojo moved swiftly towards the opposite wall. he took the alternate route up the cableline and support system.

In a race to reach the top, he used all his nimbleness and stamina to keep pace. Holocaust passed the upper deck level, the devastated arbors of perservatory tanks. He leapt across to land on the scaffolds, then scaled up this convoluted jungle-gym architecture better than any monkey. Amazingly, it only took him a minute to reach such high altitude; he arrived upon the new battle site just after Chaos.

Indeed, Chaos had barely landed one steel beam when in came danger at a sharp angle; Hojo threw his entire force into his mighty sword-arm. No good. The artful Hellspawn sprang upwards, and the attack struck metal instead.

Annoyed but undaunted, the professor raced three levels farther up. In effect, he intersected Chaos' escape route from above, just the position he needed to swing that merciless blade of bone and thorns crack against its shoulder.

The unanticipated strike, well delivered, almost shattered the joint as it sent Chaos spiraling over like a wrecked paper plane. Luckily, the monster collided against a slanted support girder. There it grabbed hold, mounted, and quickly clawed its way up this unsteady structure; that is until it sensed Holocaust swoop in amidst a fleet of tentacles. Chaos dived out of harm's way, after which those relentless ropes lacerated the girder to utter scrap. Close but still no luck.

The frustrated Professor dropped safe onto another pipeline nearby. his glare darted across the battlezone towards some ledge located further below. There Chaos landed, and squatted in place. Its wounded shoulder hung limp, yet sadistic amusement burned bright through those ruby-red eyes. It seemed to enjoy the strife... crave more carnage, more pain. No sooner had it touched down, than the deranged fiend instantly sprang back at Hojo for a second round, this time wielding energy sabers in both claws.

Together, the two evils danced a deadly duel throughout the duct system. They waltzed a crescendo of violence, devoid of rhythm or harmony, just murderous animal instincts. The world itself heaved on the verge of collapse. Neither side cared. Amidst the falling debris they clashed on and off. Blood was splattered. Flesh was torn. They ripped each other apart, chased one another across the multi-leveled battleground, met again, broke off...

Their delirious conflict endured only a few moments, though the repercussions reached far more than imagination ever could. Professor Hojo followed his strategy. He led an all-out offense against the enemy, casting himself and his resources into the fray.

At first, Chaos held its own. But the artillery escalated to such a frenzy that the hard-pressed creature could just about keep on the move, retaliating whenever opportunity allowed.

Next time that sword-arm whiffed by, Chaos managed to dodge whilst delivering a clean slash alongway; the weapon was thus reduced to a sprawling mess of ropes and blood. That never deterred the equally-demented Holocaust. He lashed out a big interwoven net of tentacles. On the receiving end, Chaos was pelted away with a hundred mini-lacerations across its body.

Victory shone within reach. Holocaust Hojo kept the pressure at maximum. He made a second lunge against the wounded Chaos, but had to reverse gears when a deluge of debris from above suddenly crashed between them. The metal buttress, which hitherto had been their latest battle-spot lurched aside, then succumbed under impact, ripping out more pipes and scrap for a wild ride down. Both enemies were completely thrown off equilibrium. They plummeted towards the deck hall meters below.

Even Hojo could not fight gravity. He lost all orientation of space and time. The wreckage falling with him cut and tumbled him about through free-fall. The defenseless scientist battled on every front for some stability. Just then, something else happened to catch his eye. He looked upwards, dazed, alarmed.

In truth, he didn't dream Chaos had managed to escape the crash in tact. Worst still, he hadn't realized that rather than fight the current, Chaos had taken a nose-dive straight down for him. Indeed, when Hojo looked up, there he perceived that incoming menace silhouetted against the poring rubble, about to perform its most spectacular attack yet.

What followed occurred within mere seconds, right before Hojo's wide eyes: Chaos, riding free upon the winds of insanity, summoned glorious swirls of energy into both claws. With fluid arm motions, this display spiraled beyond any conceivable proportion to form a comet, whereupon Chaos swept its hands downwards to seal the spell; or rather, to hurtle this blazing trajectory straight for the mesmerized Holocaust below.

Had Armageddon struck just then, its impact wouldn't have been much louder or more terrifying. The explosion spewed fiery debris and a thousand destructive wavefronts all around the arena, if not the whole Reactor's parameter. Hojo never could have evaded such a massive missile. Instead, he'd squeezed his alien energy- everything to the last drop in time to materialize a spherical cocoon around himself, after which came impact.

It didn't save him. In fact, Holocaust was almost obliterated when that unholy blaze of havoc collided against him, sending him towards earth with a now shattered shield. But it certainly absorbed enough brunt to protect his life.

Or whatever remained afterwards. The Professor was spiked at such fanatical momentum he seemed to shred through the very fabric of air. He slammed harder than a twelve ton sack of concrete against the upper deck hall, cracking the floor beneath. A rain of debris followed; distorted ducts and other garbage set ablaze, some of which crashed upon him as he lay there, completely thrashed.

The shockwaves continued unabated until Judgement Day seemed at hand. In the wake of it all, Holocaust wrestled raw pain just to hold his fragmented senses together. He tried to stand again: he wouldn't allow one setback to change the tides against him! Damned if he'd succumb to defeat, not to Chaos, to that girl, or any of them!

Meanwhile, the situation deteriorated from bad to disastrous: louder rumbled the earth. The hall moaned in upheaval. It took this gargantuan of broken armor and open wounds forever just to rise from under the

rubble. He wobbled some steps away, but collapsed halfway again, wheezing harshly for oxygen, bristling pure derangement.

Soon, Hojo noticed something. Confused, he shot his suspicious glare around this scorched battlezone: why hadn't Chaos followed up his attack during this time? In fact, *where* was that confounded...

A sudden shriek from above answered. Hitherto, Chaos had patiently waited in the shadows for Hojo to recover, so that it may *then* attack. Not out of any sense of warrior's honor; rather to satisfy its own cruel sense of humor.

The scientist, absolutely startled off guard, had just looked upwards when in swooped the belligerent demon with wings wide apart. Chaos literally landed upon Hojo's shoulders; the latter was thrown into turmoil. But nothing compared to the gruesome moment Chaos, having anchored its feet-talons into his flesh, jabbed one claw right into Hojo's bad eye, and gouged it out by the roots.

The roar which exploded from Hojo's lungs rocked the Heavens themselves, so viscerally charged it twisted one's entrails to hear him. Blind, frenzied by pain and rage, Holocaust's automatic reaction was one haphazard strike against his assailant. His assailant had just embarked with that gory trophy when, quite unexpectedly, the blow slammed in the midriff. This time, Chaos lost orientation. The maniacal Hojo delivered such power so suddenly; he effectively spiked his airborne enemy clean across open terrain at the speed of a blur. The stunned demon couldn't re-adjust itself. It flew straight over the upper deck parapet, and like a cannonball smashed back first against the opposite wall.

The impact not only left a huge crater in the unfortunate wall, but visibly jarred Chaos into a state of blunt shock. No pain. No anger or blood lust. Just total numbness. From there, the flaccid creature slipped off the wall to unconsciousness. During the fall, its wings shriveled away, its figure re-humanized until Vincent crashed upon the stone floor.

He emerged from the transformation a shaken mess, choking on the unpleasant after-effects. He writhed for some amidst his confusion. raucous dins and clangours surrounded him. The ground beneath him quaked. Vincent groggily raised his head. To his further bewilderment, he found himself sprawled thus upon the arena floor, with the hall on the brink of a massive cave-in.

The alarmed Vincent bolted up onto one knee. His eyes darted all around to comprehend the shambolic scene. The ceiling was falling. Scattered fires crackled about in glee. Deluges of dirt, glass and metal bombarded the ground. Amidst this mayhem, Vincent thought he glimpsed holocaust stranded on the upper deck; the creature seemed to be wailing, convulsing like an erratic animal to make a getaway. But Vincent lost sight of him again when one of walls finally avalanched and crashed down between them.

He wracked his brains: what exactly had happened? How did he end up over here?! He remembered this fissile anger exploding inside. There'd followed a terrible scream, yet the voice not his own. Then everything had stopped. Literally, it just jammed to a halt. Of course. Chaos. He must have surrendered to that fiend without even realizing it. He'd just lost himself in rage. The rest Vincent could guess, not without a profound sense of self-disgust. But right now, he had a far more important matter to attend to: Aeris.

He quickly scanned the battlefield. Vincent gave a faint "Ah!" of recognition when he spotted a rumped carcass over there. At once, he scrambled like a madman under fire to reach her. Aeris hadn't moved all this time. Even when the frantic man shoved some fallen metal bar off her and gathered her into both arms, she never stirred

"Aeris!" Vincent called hoarsely. When he turned her over, Aeris' head flopped back to reveal an ashen face, eyes closed, with only a tint of pain upon her otherwise lifeless expression. Blood seeped through her wound. Of all the things he'd beheld tonight, this death mask probably disconcerted him the most. Vincent almost hesitated to check a pulse. Thankfully, he found one against her neck; very weak, but certainly better than none.

Again, the man looked around himself at a loss. Who knew how far Chaos' reign of terror had spread or how much of the Reactor it would destroy. He didn't know the laboratory's layout. Even if he did, there were no guarantees the exits (or this entire madhouse for that matter) wouldn't collapse before they've reached safety. So what *now*?! They were being buried alive in this maze fortress, and he had only himself to blame. How could he hope to escape, wrecked and lost, the girl in dire need of treatment? He didn't know what to do!

A suggestion came from above: some belligerent heap of pipes crashed just a meter away, almost destabilizing Vincent had he not supported himself in time. He decided to at least get the hell out of this trap. He'd worry about the rest later.

He collected the unconscious Aeris off the floor then beat a hasty retreat across no-man's land, dodging the hailstorm in search for any escape route. By chance, Vincent discovered the remnants of an exit crushed under stone blocks, marked only by a crevice in the wall. Good enough. He scuffled through the cracked exit and hurriedly limped down the long corridor. The path ended at a stairwell. Vincent descended the steps into complete darkness. He had no idea where he was going. He'd no gun to protect them; he'd lost it somewhere during the great fall, nor had he had the time to search for it. Far behind, Vincent heard the battlezone disintegrate to oblivion.

-End of Chp.82

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.83

One by one, Reno's vagrant senses began to return. At long last, he opened his blurry eyes halfway. To his great bemusement, he found himself a rumpled mess flung upon a composite of metal garbage, the world around him in upheaval, and the stench of Mako fumes up his nose. The dazed man struggled to sit up. Meanwhile, the clamorous din continued to pound against his eardrums. The ground beneath him wouldn't stop trembling, nor could he disperse this clinging dizziness to grasp the situation.

Reno grunted a curse: where was he anyway? How long had he been out? More importantly, what the HELL had happened?! Desperate, he tried to string the last few events into chronological order. Explosion. Reno remembered an explosion. The rest fizzled to black. For all he knew, he could be dead. However, as he sluggishly climbed onto all fours, a sudden pain pierced his left temple, blatant proof he was very much alive. Reno pressed that side with one hand then peered into his palm. It was smeared bright red. His head was bleeding.

"Shit," he hissed.

No word better described the situation. Reno's clothes were singed and tattered, jeans torn at both knees. His hair resembled a nervous wreck. Every inch of his bruised body ached pure agony. Nevertheless, the determined man rose onto his feet. He hobbled a few steps across the shaky terrain until he reached an upright steel bar. There he leaned against it for support.

Reno felt nauseated. He knew not where he was or how he got here. Plus God! He'd such a headache! Lost in the heart of chaos, the miserable ex-Turk rubbed his temples to clear his focus. Still leaning against this sturdy prop, Reno took a few moments to acquaint himself with his surroundings.

First thing which struck him was to learn he stood not on solid ground. In fact, it wasn't a "ground" at all. Rather, a knot of beams, bridges and other architectural scrap woven together into a monstrous complex. Confused more than ever, Reno searched further for better comprehension. Until now, he'd always thought "Hellhole" was a mere expression. Tonight he found himself stranded inside one. Reno soon realized they'd somehow crashed into a colossal vertical tunnel way; colossal indeed, both in diameter and depth, travelling straight down to obscurity.

As for this magnificent mishmash of debris, it had wedged literally wedged itself midway down the tunnel like a plug. To be more poetic, it seemed as if a hungry giant had crumpled up a bolus of metal, swallowed it, only for the mess to lodge halfway down his throat; and here lingered Reno a mere flea trapped amidst this indigestible meal.

Reno did not appreciate the analogy. He turned his sights skyward. Hundreds of meters away, a cragged orifice as big as the moon gaped back at him. Deluges of raw Mako and rubble poured from its margins. They cascaded through the unstable complex like green waterfalls. Their poignant odor suffocated the atmosphere.

He knew better than to look the opposite direction, but Reno couldn't help himself. Staring straight down from his superior position, he suddenly appreciated just how deep this metallic knot extended; about forty feet according to his estimates: twisted girders and mammoth beams. Collapsed walls, torn sheets of iron, smashed electric equipment, even a crane and its control booth toppled upside down. There were scaffolds of broken pipes and mangled bridges, cable, gantries, and other unrecognizable garbage, all tangled up into a forty meter-long kaskasque jungle.

It got worse. Reno cast his gaze deeper beyond this complex. He beheld an ominous abyss at the bottom, its mouth stretched wide open in anticipation of a delicious meal: metal, Mako, and human lives.

"Shit!" he growled again.

Not good. Definitely not good. The same questions spun unanswered around his head: What was this place? How did he get here? Where was everyone else? What happened?! The confounded man struggled to piece his shattered memory together.

Since the demise of ShinRa Inc. (felt like eons ago to him right now), he and his two fellow ex-Turks had been semi-content to lead their own mundane lives in peace. That's until a mysterious stranger appeared with an extraordinary scrap of information: their young president may still be alive. At first, Reno had flat refused the idea. As far as he was concerned, Rufus ShinRa had perished during that WEAPON attack on Midgar.

Much to his annoyance however, Reno couldn't quite set his mind at rest either. No matter how hard he argued, there WAS this minuscule chance it may be true. He'd decided only an investigation would settle this bothersome affair for good.

How could he have known they'd end up here, in a pit full of dirty secrets and schemes, some more than thirty-one years ago? Soon, both he and Rude became embroiled amidst a deadly game of many players: a former enemy, with a private agenda no doubt, turned ally just for tonight. A girl clone of the last Cetra. A young man, once the most powerful figure on the Planet, now degraded to a troubled, amnesic prisoner. A sadistic gunman thirsty for blood. And a genius scientist twisted by obsession. All linked some way or another to an "experiment".

Reno fast-forwarded through events: the gunman, feeling rather playful, had ambushed them in the depths of the Reactor's delivery network. With no other options, he and Vincent formed an alliance. Together they'd waged a long-drawn war against a common foe to crack his invincibility "shield".

Things took a bad twist when Rufus, genuinely torn between both sides, tried to restore his so-called "friend's" senses, only to become Davoren's hapless hostage.

Reno recalled that critical moment when he and Rude, who'd crept onto the scene undetected, struck a silent deal with Vincent; he got their president to safety in exchange for a massive blow against the gunman. Vincent consented. Next blink, Rufus was snatched away just as both men brought the whole catacombs down upon Davoren. Afterwards, they had to burrow their way out from under the rubble. Then they took an alternate route to meet up with their ally on the other side.

But it seemed only Rufus had survived. Reno didn't remember spotting Vincent or Davoren on the scene. So what had happened to them? Had they both perished in the network? Did the Professor kill them?

In any case, Hojo had turned his sights on the boy. Luckily, they'd arrived in time to fend off the scientist, at least until Rufus confusedly made his getaway. Not that their valor mattered much. The Professor beat them both to bloody pulp and thrashed them all way back to the Mako reservoirs, where he finally lunged in for the kill.

Then when Reno thought things couldn't get any worse, they did. Rufus interfered. In fact, the lunatic dared Hojo come confront him, a challenge the latter gladly accepted. Everyone knew a single slash would kill him. Yet no one expected him to possess two powerful weapons: the "Merger" materia and a manipulative business nature.

They exchanged words under an air of tension. Questions were answered, intentions clarified. Rufus spoke of himself, his role in this experimental abomination, his father, Davoren, and at last his decision: in

total defiance to the flabbergasted Professor, he tossed the mystical orb into the Mako pit. An explosion. The violence hurtled them to the floor. After that, Reno recalled nothing.

He could only speculate about what followed next. That explosion must have destroyed the entire reservoir area. Judging from that hole above, Reno also reckoned it blasted the hall floor wide open, whereupon everything fell through: Mako sludge, fiery debris, and themselves. He concluded they'd crashed into the drainage system. A round vestibule several miles long, it linked the reservoirs above to the underground stock below.

Yet even this rotunda couldn't swallow such an enormous bolus at once. Indeed, the mess had tumbled downwards, shredding through the walls. Along the wild journey, they'd collided upon the network of connection pipes that extended across the tunnel's diameter. This "safety net", though itself wrecked under impact, nevertheless had halted the onslaught so as to form a clot.

The complex must have then lurched heavily across open space, and smashed against the opposite wall. Thus it languished, wedged between earth and Hell. Reno did not know what happened to the Professor. In all likelihood, he'd escaped the fiasco.

Returning to the present, Reno found this archipelago of junk lacked any kind of stability. What with these sporadic earthquakes plaguing the area, Mako waterfalls and rubble rain crashing down, the complex continuously groaned in agony. He knew it was only a matter of time before this fragile clot disintegrated. In fact, the entire Reactor heaved on the verge of an irrevocable cave-in.

As he reflected upon this hazardous environment, a certain eeriness chilled Reno's blood. He couldn't quite explain it. Just something in the air didn't seem "right". No. These tremors definitely felt unnatural. He frowned in dark premonition: sure, the explosion Rufus instigated had probably wiped out a section. Yet it couldn't have reached such catastrophic levels as to flatten a Reactor. Something else must have happened... something terrible. Whatever it was, it emanated enough havoc to reduce a stronghold like this to scrap.

Which lead him to the only logical decision: he had to find Rude and the boy FAST, then evacuate! The man frantically scanned all around... for his friends, assistance, a solution... ANYTHING! In vain. No sign of either Rude or Rufus. No escape within reach. No deliverance out of this deathtrap.

Reno refused to surrender. He wouldn't even CONSIDER the possibility his friends may have perished during the crash ("or I'll kill 'em *both*, so help me!" Reno threatened anxiously) Nor would he accept the hopelessness of his situation. There had to be SOME way out!

Up? Reno snapped his head back to look: no. He couldn't scale the walls to reach that blast hole. One, he possessed neither strength nor skill for such an undertaking. Two, the height was too great, and the walls too damaged to climb.

Down then? The man cast his eyes into the black pit. Several meters below, he happened to spy a panel of windows located on the opposite wall. Behind its smashed glass panes lurked some surveillance room. It overlooked the mangled complex outside in calm dignity. Between them stretched a huge gap of air.

At first, Reno thought he'd discovered their salvation. He calculated the distances from here to there, but the result yielded a frustrated curse: no. He couldn't hope to reach that room. The metal bolus had lodged in such a skewered manner as to render it inaccessible. Even were he to descend to its level, about halfway down, and leap across, he'd never make it to the other side.

Reno tackled the problem from different angles. He sought any alternate route. Same result. Same curse. And the panel remained out of human reach, each window silently ridiculing his predicament. The man took one last panoramic view all around himself in search of any hope. Nothing.

So what did that mean? Was he actually... trapped here? Could there really be no escape? Is this how it ends for him? What to do then? Calmly accept his fate? Freak out? Damn! What he wouldn't give for a good drink right now!

Just then, a groan floated past his ears. It originated from somewhere below. Very faint, but he recognized its owner at once: Rude!

Reno instantly abandoned post. The nimble man descended this nightmarish jungle-gym like a monkey, dodging in between tangled pipes and cable vines, pushing junk out of his way whilst he sought the source. Chance brought him to a steep cliff of garbage. From atop this peak Reno scoured the wasteland below for any life signs. Sure enough, he spotted his friend sprawled there flat, buried up to his chest under debris, his ordeal rendered even worse by a girder which had collapsed askew upon him. All this time, he'd been struggling to free himself; if not then just ease the pressure off his crushed rib cage.

"Rude!" cried the alarmed Reno. Spurred into urgent action, he dashed off to pursue the quickest route downhill. At the bottom, he then hurried forth across the cragged terrain. He ran so fast, avoiding falling debris, that he tripped over some obscure rubbish. Yet in his haste, he simply scuffled onwards on all fours. Finally, he reached his trapped friend, flustered and sweaty, but still in tact.

Reno dispersed some loose metal bars away to get through. "Rude! Yo! You alright?!" he called out loud as he leaned over to tend to him.

Rude grunted back some unintelligible answer: obviously not. The agony showed clear on his crumpled face. The strain taxed his well-toned muscles until every vein bulges out. First Reno dug a bit at this mound; maybe he could unplug it. No good. He tried another way. With a supportive "hang in there", he scrambled off. Reno tackled this troublesome girder at an angle. He pushed against it at maximum force. It refused to budge.

"Goddammit!!" he spat his frustration.

"..u..use your.. right sho..ulder..," instructed the trapped prisoner feebly, "..push outwards, not upwards.."

So Reno tried again. His teeth gnashed hard as he squeezed his entire strength into the task. Rude also exerted an effort. Soon the heavy load began to shift. At this rate, the two men managed to displace it offside, far enough for the prisoner to slip away. Even then, poor Rude needed assistance. Reno, by now awash with worry, had to tear at more debris before he could pull his friend to complete freedom.

Rude emerged a heaving, scruffy carcass, more dead than alive and twice as bewildered between the two extremes. Meanwhile, Reno dragged him away from the immediate danger zone. Once clear, he carefully laid his friend on one side then dropped onto both knees in close attendance.

Rude groaned something. He writhed onto one elbow, yet still couldn't quite collect himself together. Reno helped him sit up.

"Rude! C'mon!!" he wrapped the man's arm around his own neck for extra support, "For God's sake! Say something! Are you OKAY?"

"Urgh! I..I don't..," he slurred groggily, "Ah! Goddamn shit.."

His mind whirled ten thousand miles a second. He bowed his head into one hand just to slow it down. Reno held him steady lest vertigo toppled him over again. Both relief and concern strained his face as he watched on.

"I think I'm.. o-okay," Rude forced out.

"Easy now. Just take it easy," he reassured.

Rude tried to move, when a sudden pain stabbed his flank. He reeled over to clutch the site with a sharp wince. Reno certainly did not like that sign. He scuffled closer in genuine alarm, yet Rude gruffly insisted "I'm fine! I'm alright!"- A blatant lie he nevertheless had to respect.

Reno granted him another minute or so to restore his equilibrium. After all, it **had** been a pretty wild ride. They were lucky to even be here (though inside he wondered what value survival bore in light of their bleak situation). Nor could he dispense this grave sense of apprehension as he studied Rude's shabby state in profile. His garments, especially his leather jacket, had been lacerated to rags. Underneath bristled countless injuries, from superficial cuts to shrapnel wounds and open gashes dripping gore. Still, he'd found his friend; rumped-up and bloody, eyes haggard with agony, but thankfully very much alive.

By now his gasps had abated to harsh breaths. Rude looked around. The catastrophic scenery bewildered him, not least as he discovered themselves two insignificant lives sitting amidst a vast mutilated mishmash of metal.

"What.. happened..?" he asked dazedly.

"The explosion. Remember?"

He needed a second to think, to organize his logic: the Professor... their desperate battle.. an earth-shattering blast, and an upward gush of violence, followed by utter blackness. Looking around again, he could only reach one conclusion.

"..then?" Rude hesitated.

"Yeah," confirmed his friend, who'd deduced the same some time ago, "I'm not exactly sure what happened, but that explosion. Friggin' Hell, man!" he shot his wrathful glare skywards, "This is probably the drainage system. The blast must've spewed the whole damn hall down through that hole. In fact, I reckon so much shit fell in, it got stuck... sorta like a clog in the kitchen sink."

And they a pair of cockroaches huddled together, waiting to be flushed to their deaths. Rude remained silent. He didn't need Reno to also tell him they were trapped. Nor would Reno admit that to himself. He still clung to the hope of some deliverance. But what? How? Everything right now seemed so-

"Where's the President?" inquired Rude abruptly.

Good question. Reno turned to him, yet before he could speak, the man had already scrambled onto both feet and hurriedly limped away.

"Rude, hey wait!" called his agitated friend after him. He sprang up in pursuit.

A sense of urgency spurred them onwards. Supporting his injured side with one hand, Rude hobbled across debris-infested terrain. His hard eyes raked the premises for any signs. Reno trailed some distance behind. The two men searched about here and there. Reno remained on high grounds. Often he paused to check the ruinous surroundings. The other ex-Turk drifted towards lower levels.

Their efforts yielded nothing. A few more minutes, still nothing. Rude stopped to rest. His despairing gaze floated around the cavernous hellhole.

Not a trace. He peered downwards, just a careless glance to sort out his thoughts. Suddenly, he spotted something.

"Reno!" the man hollered.

From his location, Reno peeked over down at his friend and immediately understood, whereupon he bolted off to catch up. Rude didn't wait. Instead, he rushed downhill until the path terminated at a range of cliffs carved out of gnarled steel. He dropped onto this destitute construction then dashed to the very edge. The spot from here provided a panoramic view of the lowermost parts of this interwoven mess. Absolutely breathtaking. Reno arrived moments later. Both men directed their sights downwards. More specifically, towards some metal buttress which lurched unhinged from the main body over open space. There lay Rufus sprawled upon his stomach, completely motionless. He was either unconscious or dead. It looked like the latter. They preferred to believe the former.

Rufus had been extremely fortunate. As the explosion sent him on a free-fall course, the collapsing debris must have partially protected him during the journey. Therefore, when the bolus finally lodged midway, this "entourage" softened his impact just enough to keep him in tact, after which the comatose young man had tumbled along onto that buttress ledge.

Any further, and the abyss would have swallowed him.

The two ex-Turks faced a serious dilemma. On one hand, they'd found their president. On the other hand, they could find no way to reach him. They stood at the very brink of this accursed meshwork; "the edge of the world", so to speak. And Rufus lay down there, well beyond their access. Nor would the infrastructure hold for long. Already they perceived his lifeless body slide slowly as the buttress began to creak. Meanwhile, the atmosphere continued to growl in misery, and the prospect of escape ever so remote.

Reno chewed on his frustration. He hated this uncertainty, this inability to act. After all of tonight's crazy events, he'd come to consider the boy a friend. They couldn't just abandon him. But then, what COULD they possibly do?

At a loss, he looked towards Rude. Much to his amazement, he saw the man hurriedly slipping off his tattered leather jacket.

"Rude, what the hell are you doing?"

"I'm going down there," he stated the obvious.

"W-wha?! Are you nuts?! You can't-"

-End of Chp.83

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.84

It was dark. Rufus could hear them. Voices. Tiny butterflies of madness which fluttered about his ears. The boy wallowed within this tomb-like existence, neither dead nor alive, awake or asleep. He didn't even care. To him, it just didn't matter. Instead, he lay here blind and absolutely still, listening to his own thoughts battle each other.

~...it's so cold here...~

~...it burns me up, but I'm so cold...~

Yes, he dully acknowledged. That same icy disease crawled beneath his burning skin. Hadn't he experienced this paradox a thousand times before?

~... am I really all alone?...~

Alone. Vacant. Heavy. Low; his heart felt so unbearably low.

~...it doesn't matter anymore...~

No. It doesn't.

~... "Inside, Sir, you're exactly like me" ...~

It's our blood. Our ShinRa blood.

~...it's too late...~

He knew.

~... you're already one of them...~

He knew.

~... "Inside, Sir, you're exactly like me" ...~

He hated him.

~... "That man was your brother" ...~

Stop. He wanted it to stop.

~... "your brother" ...~

Stop.

~... "MY GOD, DONAL!! WHAT HAVE I DONE?!!" ...~

Out of no where reverberated that terrible scream, fired like a gunshot straight from a heart wrenched by anguish. It struck Rufus point-blank in the core. At that surreal moment, when his entire psyche froze

amidst these raging flames, he beheld those tearful pink eyes, all that wretchedness, staring right back at him.

"My God, Davoren," the horrified boy whispered to himself, "..w..what have *I* done?"

With strong resolve and a steady balance, Rude shimmied along the perilous cliffsides quickly yet cautiously, always staying close to the wall. There was no clear path. That man had to carve his own way down this mountainous terrain scaffold by scaffold. Loose debris beneath him. At one stage, the ledge under his foot broke, almost ambushing him had his wits not been faster. Keep moving. He reminded himself not to look below, just keep moving.

Reno watched on with worried rigidity as his friend scaled further and further downwards. In truth, he knew not what to think. Granted, Rude possessed greater skill and a far more powerful physique for free climbing. Still, Reno mistrusted that injury in his flank. The manner he'd clutched it suggested deeper trauma, maybe even a fracture. Add to that the man carried twelve tons worth of fatigue on his shoulders, plus all those injuries. The odds certainly did not look favorable.

Regardless, Rude persevered. He knew what he had to do. He clambered down the escarpment's disfigured façade. Along the way he encountered a gantry which traveled slanted from here towards an islet of garbage nearby. The ex-Turk vaulted onto this skewered bridge. He scampered across to the other side, then followed another highway into the jumbled latticework of girders below. Deeper ventured Rude through this nightmarish architecture until he reached the bottom. There, he swung onto the final scaffold.

Beyond this point, Rude could go no further without falling in. He crouched onto all fours, where he leaned over the edge as far as possible whilst maintaining equilibrium. By now, the man was drenched in sweat. His senses blared danger on every side. His target lay down there just a few meters away, oblivious of the deathtrap he'd been cast into, which only added frustration to Rude's anxiety.

"Sir!" he called sharply, "Hey! Sir!!"

No response.

A harshness knit his brows. Rude bellowed louder, "Rufus! Dammit, c'mon kid! Wake up! Rufus!!"

This time, his agitated cries dragged the boy out of absolute darkness to a dim awareness. Rufus winced. His eyes opened to these grey, shaky surroundings. The pandemonium and raucous shrieks so befuddled his logic he couldn't distinguish between the bedlam outside and that still ravaging his head inside. The boy awoke as a wreck; his scrawny carcass cut and bruised, one arm burnt and a gash streaked alongside his dirty face. Clothes were singed and torn, and his hair hung a mess.

Rufus clumsily propped himself on one elbow. The world and ground never stopped rattling. He felt sick. He agonized with every breath just to stay conscious. All the while, Rufus heard someone hollering nonsense at him, or so it sounded to him. He pushed himself further up with one arm, and let that voice guide his foggy sight upwards. He perceived a man, at first a mere blur, positioned upon the scaffolding above.

"..R..Rude..??" he faltered weakly, unsure of his own eyes. Indeed, Rude had been calling him this entire time.

The agitated ex-Turk shouted, "I can't reach you from here. Quick! Try to climb over to me and I'll haul ya the rest of the way up! Just hurry!!"

His urgent plea passed by Rufus in fragments. Nor could the latter string them into any meaning. Without aim or orientation, the beleaguered lunatic struggled to rise. Rude was still yelling. He thought he also heard Reno in the distance; he too was screaming down at them. Questions assaulted him from every angle: what happened? Where was he? That explosion... why hadn't they left? How... how could he still be alive? No actually, WHY was he even alive??

~...it burns me up...~

~..."That man was your brother"...~

~..."inside, Sir, you're exactly like me"...~

~...My God, Davoren. What have I...~

A fresh shockwave suddenly swept the premises. The complex buckled in a spastic fit. Everyone was thrown into disarray. Reno fell back. Rude, who'd huddled in place to protect his head from raining rubbish, reacted violently when he witnessed the buttress beneath Rufus finally collapse at one end. Thus the disorientated boy went sliding downwards with a alarmed cry. By sheer instinct, Rufus grabbed hold of the remaining structure, which lurched further towards the pit yet thankfully stayed hinged the main trunk. Gasping, bristling pure delirium, the boy clung to this mess with both arms. Meanwhile, his legs dangled free above the void.

Despite the commotion, Reno soon recovered his co-ordination. He scrambled back to the edge of the escarpment, only to view the fiasco below "Holy shit!! Kid!!" he blared outloud, "Are ya alright?!"

Whether he meant physically or psychologically, the answer was no. Rufus grunted. He attempted to climb up to safer grounds, but in his confusion only crashed back to an even worse state. More than half his body now hung in the open whereas he, a shaken, destitute shipwreck, held on with arms wrapped around some garbage piece. Rufus never appeared more perturbed or mentally wrangled than at that terrifying moment. The tumult outsidewirled into that inside until, quite overwhelmed, the boy hunched overslightly to bury his face in shadow. Rufus didn't try again. Any additional movement might break this flimsy lifeline. Besides, soon the buttress, the entire Reactor in fact, would collapse by itself. It didn't matter to him anymore. He wondered why he should continue holding on either. Why, when by surviving that explosion, he'd actually failed?

Rufus clung in flustered limbo. Rude however had already made a snap decision; he could no longer bear this uncertainty. He waited for the storm to recede a bit. Then much to Reno's further consternation, the man clambered off his scaffolding and deliberately dropped feet-first onto the garbled junkyard below. Rude crouched in place as the structure complained beneath his weight. Still, it did not collapse. Once certain of himself, he crawled forth very, very warily towards the buttress tip. There hung Rufus, wretched and isolated. .

The fragile architecture groaned continuous warnings. Rude refused to be deterred. He edged to the last inch possible. With still a distance between them, he stretched his big, strong hand as far out as he could, "Rufus," he commanded, "Gimme your hand."

Rufus had either lost awareness of him or simply ignored him. He did not respond.

"Rufus!" the ex-Turk insisted. His gruff voice forced the boy to peer aside at him, but in a rather apathetic manner, as if to ask 'What do you want from me now?'

"Gimme your hand!" Rude repeated, "I'll pull ya up!"

The environment tossed between sporadic tremors. The extensive metallic plug lurched closer to catastrophe. Anxiety strained Rude's face. In return, Rufus seemed perplexed. He viewed this man- a stranger from a past he'd only discovered tonight, who be he foolish or brave had rushed over to help him. But instead of comfort, his expression darkened to an anguished look tainted with trouble and misgiving; like he couldn't understand the gesture. Or maybe he scorned it. Indeed, the boy cast a sidelong glance at that hand, then flicked his intense blue eyes away to the other corner.

"Why?" he snapped abruptly.

The ex-Turk blinked at the question: why what?

"Why should you pull me up?" Rufus persisted, disdain boiling hot underneath his icy demeanor.

He seemed to expect an answer. When the baffled Rude failed to provide one, the avoidant young man hissed, "Don't you understand yet, Rude? 'Genesis Retrial' may belong to Professor Hojo, but the crime itself is entirely mine! Dammit, I could've stopped him!" a frustrated glower contorted Rufus' face. He shot his glare back to the ex-Turk, "There was so much I could've done. But I'd already become one of 'them'. Inside everything was frozen. I had so much blood on my hands that I'd stopped noticing or even caring. I just wanted power. I wanted it all to myself," he seethed, "I wanted to make that bastard- that man who called himself my 'father'- ah! Dammit! Dammit! I wanted to make HIM suffer!!"

Rude never once dismissed the boy as a loony or his words a madman's ramble. Regardless of the calamity around them, he pensively listened without interruption. He watched grief, self-disgust and bitterness surge within until Rufus, tortured breathless, rasped out his most rueful admission, "But I.. the only one I made suffer was Davoren! What's worse, *I* killed him! I killed Davoren! The only person who hid me from punishment, even though we both knew I deserved it, AND I STAB HIM RIGHT THROUGH THE HEART!!!"

The ex-Turk maintained a sangfroid front despite all these acrid lashings. Rufus, delirious with rage, scoffed back, "So tell me, Mr. Rude, why should I let you pull someone like me up? Why are you even here? I ordered you two leave because for the first time I realized what I had to do! I'm no different than the rest of 'them'... those monsters... hypocrites...liars... damn you anyway! It was my decision!!"

"And neither of us would have left you, even if it was your order," stated Rude calmly.

He snarled, "Because both of you are STUPID!!"

"Then I guess Davoren was just as stupid for caring so much about you."

His cool rebuttal struck the furious young man into blank amazement; he'd never considered his own words looking at them from that angle. Nor had Rude intended to demean the importance the gunman bore to Rufus. On the contrary, he wanted him to realize how highly he valued Davoren. Rude continued on the same solemn, compassionate note, "I.. I can't begin to imagine what you've been through: that WEAPON blast, the 'fire', living like.. some wild animal with your mind raped every minute, and now losing your friend like that. But kid, you gotta listen to me" he urged, "You cannot just surrender to those demons pulling you down. Get your act together! Fight back! And let others help you along the way. But don't you give up like this! Otherwise, all Davoren ever meant to you becomes worthless!!"

These words were the most Rufus had ever heard out of Rude. Yet in truth, their candor exerted a profound effect upon him as regarded the earnest ex-Turk, who'd taken all those destructive emotions

inside and remolded them into something different... something strangely more comforting. Rude bore nothing but the sincerest intentions as a friend. Again, he offered his hand to the bemused young man. However, he couldn't make him take it.

That Rufus had to do of his own accord, at least for Davoren's sake.

Indeed, before he realized it, Rufus found himself slowly reaching out for that hand.

By now, the rotunda had begun to convulse in wake of another disaster. The distance between their fingertips narrowed. Rude gnashed his teeth with effort. The buttress was already disintegrating. Plus he could see Rufus' grip and consciousness fast on the wane. Closer. Closer. Just a few inches more...

Too late. The long-suffering structure finally broke.

There followed an avalanche of debris as the entire archipelago shifted geography. The latticework collapsed. Both men went keeling over. Rufus lost consciousness somewhere in the chaos. Meanwhile, Rude had less than a second to act: in an incredible burst of adrenaline, he thrust himself out that extra bit to grab the boy by the wrist. Just as quickly, he reeled both his own weight and Rufus' carcass back up, only to beat a hasty retreat. Before gravity took full effect, Rude had long since leapt off this degenerate branch onto another one, his parcel always clamped under one armpit. He scurried across this mangled road like a maniac towards the main trunk up ahead. Destruction chased hot on his heels. He'd almost reached his destination when this branch also began to lurch. Mad with desperation, the man sprinted till the very end of the girder, whereupon he sprang forth just as it collapsed. Thus he clumsily landed against the mainland junkyard. There Rude struggled to hold on. By chance, he discovered a crevice. At once he grappled his way up and huddled deep within, the comatose Rufus protected in both arms.

Holy Hell rained down. All the while, shrieks of metal, shaking grounds and a terrible sense of foreboding choked the atmosphere. Rude kept his head low and eyes squeezed shut as the onslaught raged on a few minutes until it subdued again. Still, only after the din ringing inside his head had abated did Rude, gasping and heart pumping hard, induce himself to peek outside. The latticework had disappeared. The scaffoldings wasted to ruins.

Looking around, the lower parts of this complex had been eroded, adding more instability to the upper regions.

"RUDE! HEY! RUDE!!" a frantic voice cried.

Bewildered, the man whirled his eyes towards the scarred escarpment high up there. He spotted his friend gaping back down from over the brink, lurched so far forward he risked falling in. To Rude, the distance between them seemed infinite now; he cramped inside this crevice with a magnificent view of the abyss below, another almost ballistic with worry.

Indeed, the brutal earthquake had forced Reno to also seek shelter, during which he'd lost sight of his two friends. Now that the tempest had dissipated again, he'd returned to the cliffsides to scour the wastelands below. The distressed ex-Turk had tossed between hope and pessimism until at long last he found them both still alive. Relieved, he bellowed, "YOU TWO OKAY?!"

"..y..yeah..," the man fumbled, unsure. He checked the lifeless boy supported close against him. Rufus seemed fine. However, as the excitement began to fade, Rude became increasingly aware of his own state. He knew he's pushed himself too far. His muscles ached. An invisible corset of pain constrained his chest, turning respiration into a chore. Plus the realisation of the danger he'd just narrowly escaped finally began to catch up to his nerves. In truth, Rude marveled how he'd even survived this far!

Meanwhile, Reno fumed alone on top. He searched for a solution to this new dilemma. Rude had saved the young president. All well and good. But now, BOTH men lingered over eminent death, the latter unconscious, and the former injured and bereft of strength. And here he stood here completely helpless!

"Shit! Shit! SHIT!" Reno muttered. Sweat streamed down his angry face. He felt his sanity cracking under pressure: what should he do? He had to do SOMETHING and FAST!

"Rude! Hang on, okay?" desperate for ideas, he took a diffident step towards the cliff's edge with intention to descend further, "I'll climb down there and h-"

"NO, YOU IDIOT!!" his friend barked, effectively pushing him back up into place, "How the hell do you expect to climb down here when all the scaffolds are gone? Besides! These parts will collapse any minute! Just stay where you are!!"

Reno stood there at his wits' end, "B-but.. what about you?! If the scaffolds are all destroyed, how're ya gonna climb back up?!"

Rude fell silent. He'd been so determined to rescue Rufus that he'd charged into this deathtrap without once considering how he may return. True he'd calmed the boy and saved him. But what good was that when he'd only gotten them trapped inside this hole, cut off from help or any means of escape. Then all he'd done was prolong their torture.

So much for heroics.

"NOW who's the idiot!!" exclaimed Reno at his incredible lack of foresight.

"Well, the poor kid was confused and suicidal! What else should I have done?!" the aggravated Rude retorted in self-defense, "Just let him drop to his death?!"

"No, but at least think before ya do something risky like that!"

"Huh! Now that's pretty rich coming from you!"

"What the hell are you babbling about?"

Rude thrust his neck out to shout up at his preachy friend, "In case you forgot, Mr. I-gotta-be-cool, YOU were the ass who made a grand entrance, raised the alarm and got us into this pickle in the first place!!"

"That was a totally different situation!"

He snorted, "Funny! You seem to make an ass outta yourself in ANY situation!"

"Oh, izzat so!" the indignant man shot back, "Well, at least I'm an ass with a brain!!" but Reno stopped short: somehow, that retort didn't sound right.

"Yeah! Some brain!" praised Rude with cutting sarcasm, "It's probably rotted dead from alcohol... that's IF all that dye-shit you put in your punk hair hasn't already killed it!!"

Strange how moments ago, their friendship seemed stronger than steel. They'd always stuck together no matter the odds. Neither man knew why they were bickering right now, especially when death loomed so certain upon them. However, Reno did know one thing for sure: nobody insulted his hair!

At once, he exploded louder than a volcano, "SHADDAP, BALDY!! The closest YOU ever came to having hair was when Elena dragged us on her stupid picnic'n I dropped that dead squirrel on yer head!!! Oh! And since we're on the subject of animals, lemme tell-

"Hey! Hey, you guys!" interrupted a new voice.

Both warring parties, caught completely off guard, turned their attentions towards the speaker. High up there from the forgotten surveillance room, they perceived a tall, imposing figure. His appearance was rough and unclean, yet his visage nonchalant as ever, most striking those cool pink eyes. He carried two guns; an assault rifle in one hand, another gun tucked in that double-holster strapped around his shoulders. With the other hand gripped on the windowsill, the man leaned forth to better view the chaotic scene far below.

It was Davoren.

-End of Chp.84

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.85

"Y-YOU!!!" exclaimed Reno the instant he recognized the gunman.

Davoren remarked dryly, "It's a good thing you two were arguing so loudly, otherwise I'd never have found you here."

By instinct, the hot-blooded Reno flipped his nightstaff into battle mode. Rude, helplessly confined within this crevice, drew the boy nearer as he tensed in place. Apprehension and equal hostility hardened their demeanor.

In truth, they'd thought Davoren long gone. Now to discover him alive, poised up there with the perfect advantage to snipe them all dead, set them both on red alert.

"You damn bastard! What the hell do ya want?" demanded Reno outloud.

Not exactly the warmest reception. The gunman addressed him, "You can put that toy away, sonny. I didn't just spend the last two hours or so searching for another fight. I've actually come to help you."

Had he dropped another one of his mini-bombs instead, the impact wouldn't have struck them as hard as this unexpected announcement. Help them? Rude's face darkened with intrigue, not least as he contrasted this demure man against the sadistic maniac they'd fought before. Of course, they couldn't just forget this was their enemy. Still, intuition told him something had changed. Whether he could bring himself to believe Davoren remained to be seen. For the moment, Rude kept silent.

Similarly, Reno's front had wavered to absorb the shock. To be honest, he had expected a full resumption of their battle, not a truce, *especially* from that ruthless lunatic. No. It had to be a trap!

"Bullshit!" he spurned Davoren's offer, "You try to kill us, come this close -THIS CLOSE- to blasting my head off, now you wanna save us? That's bullshit!!"

"I understand your suspicions," cried the gunman in earnest, "But given the current circumstances, I'd say it's wisest we set aside our differences and trust each other right now!"

In return, Reno flicked up a certain finger, accompanied by an unrepeatable string of cusses all directed at Davoren. He certainly wasn't buying those words.

Nor had Davoren the time to bicker. Hoping the other man would be more sensible, he directed his questions down to Rude, "Where's the boy? Is he alright?"

"..he..he's here," he complied rather uneasily, "I don't know how bad he's hurt. He blacked out a few minutes ago, but overall, I th-"

"Don't answer him, you dumb-shit!!" Reno attacked his traitorous friend below, "Who's friggin' side are you on anyway?!"

And Rude retorted at his brash stubbornness, "Well, I don't think we've any other choice, Reno!"

"Oh, okay!" he exclaimed sardonically at this choice, "So instead of just plunging to a horrible death, we *chose* to be slaughtered, THEN plunge to a horrible death!"

"But he's got a point! We'll just have to trust him for now!"

"TRUST HIM?! Am I the only one here who remembers this psycho using us for target practice?!"

"Then give him the benefit of doubt!!"

With such impudence, a new earthquake suddenly rocked the vestibule into disarray, thus cutting their squabble short. The metal meshwork keeled sharply under strain. Rude was jarred off coordination. His lower half had already slipped out into open danger before he managed to grab hold again. There he languished in a very unstable position, flustered and gasping, the unconscious Rufus still clamped tight against him.

"Rude! Goddammit!" boomed his friend in alarm. He teetered further over the edge.

"..R..Reno..," the poor man grunted, "I c-can't hold.. on.. much l-lon..ger!" little strength remained, and the agony gnawed deeper into his injured side. A second earthquake followed, cruelly jolting him further out. Below, the voracious pit howled in hunger.

If his anxiety levels rose any higher, Reno knew he'd suffer a heart attack. This time, he decided to descend the cliffside- consequences be damned! He couldn't just watch his best friend and the kid die!

Davoren perceived the same situation on an even wider scope. The Reactor was crumbling fast. Down there two lives hung at stake, a third soon to follow unless he devised a quick plan.

Spurred into action, especially by his concern for Rufus, Davoren scanned the rotunda bottom to top. Like any good tactician, he assessed the resources available, recognized his own abilities, and made the necessary calculations, all in one sweep. Finally, he decided. The gunman retreated some distance backwards from the window to make himself a runway. He dropped the assault rifle on the floor, then yanked up both sleeves and unbuttoned his collar more, urgency in his every move.

Indeed, the desperate Reno had just stepped forth to pursue his own decision when his attention shot straight up, only to witness Davoren, having charged full speed, hop onto the window ledge. From this "springboard", the gunman gracefully leapt forth across the wide vestibule in an arched path; he almost seemed to glide on air towards the opposite side.

The acrobatic stunt mesmerized Reno as it passed high overhead. At the end of his aerial journey, the determined Davoren landed vertically against a steep slope of junk. With all fours he steadied himself then immediately began to scale up this architecture better than any monkey.

"You there!" he paused to shout down at Reno, who gave a confused, "uh?"

"Don't just stand there, man!" Davoren cried authoritatively, "Move it! C'mon! We have to help your friends!"

He resumed his climb upwards. Meanwhile, Reno watched him at a loss. In truth, he knew not what to think: they'd spent the whole night battling that enemy, only to end up working alongside him? Was it really a change of heart? Or simply a ruse? Reno personally neither trusted nor liked the gunman, much less fancied an alliance with him, nevermind take orders from him.

The frustrated ex-Turk raked his fingers through his hair. Then again, what choice did they have? He either accepted Davoren or died.

"Aw, screw it!" he growled, defeated. Reno resentfully backtracked up the complex in pursuit of his new comrade.

Long after Vincent had left him to find the girl, Davoren had still languished alone in that dark room. For what seemed centuries to him, he'd sat there, thinking. If asked about what, he couldn't have remembered: his beloved brother? His own wrecked life? He'd felt so numb with misery, so lost in melancholia for so long one wondered whether he'd ever return to reality.

But he did, slowly, gradually. Much to his bemusement, for he'd been out of contact with the surroundings for quite a while, Davoren found the Reactor in a state of anarchy. He could hear vicious wars rage deep in the earth. However, their repercussions spread havoc on a greater scale; the entire fortress in fact.

He could never quite fathom what had happened down there or how fared Vincent since they'd parted ways. Yet as these tremors grew more belligerent, so did the certainty that something terrible had occurred somewhere, with disastrous consequences for them all.

His immediate thoughts had turned towards Rufus, who as he last recalled was left alone to confront Professor Hojo. Davoren didn't know what had happened to him either. Now with catastrophe at hand, the concerned gunman had finally mustered enough strength to climb onto his feet: he had to find the boy.

Upon leaving the room, Davoren had first headed for the weapons vault located in another section. There, extra firearms were stored. The stern-faced man had selected the best assault rifle, loaded it, then slung it over his shoulder. He'd also stuffed a handgun into one holster, after which he took off again.

He'd already spent about two hours on the hunt when by pure chance, Davoren discerned two familiar voices engaged in heated argument (though he couldn't hear them clearly- something about an ass and a dead squirrel...).

Anyway, he'd followed them until he reached the surveillance room, where he discovered his two former foes and the boy, thankfully still alive.

Back to the present. Even before taking that bold leap into danger, Davoren had set his mind on a specific target. He clambered up and up this grotesque, gnarled tree trunk to higher altitudes, his backside always exposed to the tense atmosphere below.

He ignored the Mako cascades. Nor would he allow the shaky terrain to slacken his pace. Instead, Davoren concentrated on conquering this hazardous mountain. The slope broke into crevices and irregularities as it arched backwards. Thus it formed the underbelly of a promontory, which pitched itself sharply towards the ominous abyss. Davoren had to crawl almost upside down until he found a ledge. He ascended to the top, where sat a battlement of machinery and pipes, mowed under an avalanche of more steel-infested rubbish.

Such a slanted wasteland offered nothing remarkable to the casual observer. Davoren, however, had in fact spotted something of potential interest. Secure on top, he now scampered further up the garbage hill until he stopped at his destination. It appeared to be a cubicle or some strange cockpit, chewed up and capsized into a terrible state. It was trapezoid-shaped, large enough to fit three men at most. Construction-wise, this compartment consisted of a sturdy metal framework and glass facades, all smashed open. Only one tip jutted out at an angle. The rest, for whatever remained, was buried under trash. Out of all the wreckage mess here, Davoren had recognized this particular one solely by its cables; several wires and electronic vines, some of incredible girth, fed into its body.

In fact, this humble compartment had once formed part of a bigger control center, used to regulate Mako supplies in this section. The explosion must have literally ripped it apart. The cubicle had crashed here wrong side up. Thus, where there may have been a door, nothing remained now but a rectangular hole that gawked skyward. Davoren swiftly swept some severed cables out of his way. He slipped through the doorway and dropped inside onto both feet.

The interior demonstrated technology smashed topsy-turvy. Davoren needed a moment to orientate himself in relation to this capsized chamber. Everything was slanted. Computer consoles outlined the cubicle's parameter. All around he found panels of buttons and levers, gauges, fuse boxes and broken monitors, one which emitted grey smoke.

As he stood uncomfortably askew to maintain balance, the gunman scanned the room. He seemed to search for something specific. Indeed, he approached one of the fuse boxes. Davoren tore the lid open to find numerous switches.

He flicked some on. He repeated the task on another box. That done, he squatted in place to attack the console beneath him.

By now, Reno had reached the site. He poked his head upside down through a smashed window, his pigtail dangling free. He watched Davoren from behind as he opened the rusted cover, then began to operate on the wires inside.

"W..what're you doing??" Reno asked in bewilderment.

"I'm opening every channel this Connection Station has," spoke the demure man, too busy to even turn around for him, "Some of the cables have been cut. A great percent of the computer equipment has also been destroyed. But the station overall should be able to provide enough."

"Enough what?"

"See that crane up there?"

Reno looked up. He spotted the crane, entangled in other trash, its anchor gently swaying loose.

"It's run on electricity," Davoren stated as he worked along, "Everything here runs on electricity. And every section in the Reactor has a Station like this one. It used to (and hopefully still does) relay power. If we can feed that crane enough energy from here, we should be able to reactivate it."

Reno didn't see where this was leading. He swung into the cubicle and crouched down beside his assiduous ally, "But.. I thought this place had no electricity," he argued.

"That is true," affirmed the latter, "The transformers and main cable links were permanently shut down when they abandoned this place a year ago."

"Then how the heck are ya gonna 'reactivate' that damn machine without-"

"I won't. That's your job."

The blunt revelation caught Reno by surprise, more so when the somber gunman abruptly stopped to look him straight in the eye, "It was you, wasn't it?"

"Huh?"

"Back there while I was fighting Vincent in the delivery system," Davoren reminded, his tone tight as a knot, "**You* were the one who booted up the security program and had me blasted out."

Reno's face paled. Suddenly, he became too, too aware of his position: here he sat next to an armed psychopath- yes, the same he'd splashed beer on; the same he'd electrocuted; the same he'd ambushed thanks to his technical skills.

Oh, very bad. In fear of retribution, Reno tried to dispel any remaining enmity between them before things got hairy, "Ah! H-haha! C'mon, Davoren! Buddy! Pal! Chum!" he laughed nervously, "Let's not dwell on the past right now! We gotta-"

"No. That's not what I meant," interrupted the gunman, "I actually want you to do it again."

"Wha? Again??"

He nodded, dead serious, "Dunno what trick you used, sonny, but I want you to do it again: restore the electricity to this station, just like you did with the security program, and relay all power to the crane. I'll use it to save your friends. After that, you'll have to move us over towards the surveillance room," his eyes narrowed in significance, "It's our only ticket out of here."

He'd given clear and concise instructions. NOW if never again was the time to trust each other completely. Davoren awaited a reply. His keen gaze remained fixed on the young man, whose expression had darkened to grave contemplation. Reno understood his plan. Quite clever too, he had to admit.

Still...

After a long pause, Reno pronounced his judgement, "It ain't gonna work."

"Why not?"

"One: my nightstaff is running low on energy. Two: even were it fully charged, it couldn't supply such a huge machine. See, a computer program is okay 'cause *it* does the hard work. I just feed it electricity. But shit! Operate a station and a crane? By direct input? You'd need a voltage amplification of at least a thousand-fold to work something that massive!"

Davoren fell silent, inside gutted by this obstacle. He deliberated within himself for a way around it. Sure, he knew basic electronics, but remotely enough to meet such demands. How then could they procure so much energy?

Similar thoughts preoccupied Reno. The plan was good, yet on a technical side, impossible. His jaw stiffened to contain his frustration: they hadn't sufficient power, nor had they much time either.

Just then, like a flash of light, Reno got an idea.

"Wait a minute!" he started, gripping Davoren's shoulder to regain his attention, "You said this cubicle is a 'Connection Station'. What's that mean?"

Puzzled, the gunman nevertheless explained, "Like I said, a 'Connection Station' receives a given percentage of the Reactor's output to run its own section. The Professor needed electricity to operate essential laboratory equipment. He'd positioned many generators all over the place. And they're linked to each other through these stations. The generators give the power; the stations distribute the power. That way, he could regulate where it goes and how much to which machine."

The attentive Reno dissected every word upclose, "And these generators are still operational?"

"I'm not sure. The whole place is falling apart. Many of them have probably been destroyed by now."

"Then that's a chance we'll just have to take."

Indeed, he immediately scrambled deeper into the capsized chamber, followed by the eyes of an amazed Davoren. Reno sifted through debris and busted machinery until he exposed what seemed to be the master computer console underneath. There he squatted down to a hunched posture and wrenched the lid open. Reno paused to assess the nightmare inside: shelves of circuit boards, microchips, plugs, resistors and capacitors, plus God knows what else entangled in a jungle of colored wires. Undaunted, the young man flicked out his jack-knife out of his pocket, then began fiddling with the system.

"My nightstaff's got enough power to boot up the control program in this station," he explained during the surgery, "If I can keep it running long enough, I can hack into the central database from here and rearrange the circuit pattern."

Tight for space, Davoren had to stand behind and, with one hand gripped around an overhead rung, leaned forth to look over Reno's shoulder. He watched those dexterous fingers cut wires and tie them to different partners, flip switches and alter circuit boards, "But... what good will that do?" the gunman inquired.

Intensity strained on his face, Reno answered while both hands worked their skill to the bone, "Every generator... well, every functional one will pour its whole reserve into the database at once. Provided I get the pattern and frequencies right, then all their energies will sum up to one big value. THAT should give this station enough electricity to operate the crane," he wiped the sweat off his face, "In fact, this entire shit hole- Reactor, lab, whatever- should light up for about..oh.. twenty minutes? Half an hour at most. After that, total darkness."

Davoren beheld the ex-Turk, quite bewildered, "And you... can do all that?"

"Yeah, in theory," the latter emphasized. In truth, he'd simply expanded upon the original plan: they would still use the crane; Reno left the channels as Davoren set them. However, rather than he directly provide power, he'd manipulate the central database to obtain supplies. It was worth a shot.

In the end though, Davoren had to say, "..wow."

"What?"

"Gotta give you credit, son! You're a lot smarter than you look!"

Reno glanced askance, unsure whether to consider that a praise or an insult, "Of course I'm smart!" he scoffed, "Electronics are my specialty. From toasters to time bombs, I know 'em all. Furthermore, Sir," he informed him with majestic relish, "As proof of my high intelligence, I will have you know: I've received distinction honors on the International Examination for Advanced Electro-physics & Applied Mathematics."

"YOU?!"

"What's with the big shock?"

"Well, it's just..," Davoren hesitated, but then declared good-humouredly, "I sorta thought you were a dead-beat punk or some brainless alcoholic off the streets!"

The confession stabbed Reno's dignity so hard he almost lost balance. He snapped his head around to bark pure outrage, "HEY YOU!!! Just because I dye my hair and enjoy a good drink doesn't mean I'm STUPID!!!"

"Okay! Okay!" the amicable man reconciled with a wave of the hand, indicating he'd only meant to tease him, "Heheh, guess it's just another generation gap thing I'll never understand... kinda like your 'Bottle Song', eh?" he winked meaningfully.

Reno kept his frown, though his eyes did betray a small twinkle of amusement. Pleasantry aside, the gunman's demeanor soon sobered back to calm authority. He said, "You just concentrate on accomplishing this task. I will take care of the rest."

They regarded each other a moment, as if their eyes sealed the pact, after which Reno coolly turned around again and resumed work. Likewise, Davoren had his own job to do. Leaving his comrade at the console, he backtracked through the wrecked chamber. He climbed up a garbage mound, from which he gained access to the exit above. Yet before he could haul himself out, he heard Reno call, "Hey, Davoren!"

Davoren paused. He directed his quizzical eyes towards the young ex-Turk. Though Reno remained crouched in his same position, he'd peered over his shoulder to look back at the gunman, on his face a big, crooked smile.

"You're actually alright, man!" he gave him one thumb's up approval, "If we make it outta here alive, I'll buy ya a drink."

Davoren blinked. Finding himself thus inaugurated into Reno's favor, he could only return the honor with a smile, "Okay!" he accepted, "As long as you don't splash it in my face."

-End of Chp.85

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.86

That said, the gunman vaulted out of the station to pursue his task, and now Reno reapplied himself to his own job with harder resolve. Ignoring the turmoil outside, he spent the next minute or so operating on more circuits.

When finished, he slipped out his nightstaff into full length and snapped the slot open. With his trusty knife, the assiduous man tinkered with its interior until he produced a red wire, the same he'd used before. Reno inserted the prong into the master socket, then cranked the staff to maximum output.

Through this single artery, energy flowed straight into these technological ruins. The console instantly burst to life again, spreading its joy to other associated equipment around. Buttons lit up. Monitors bleeped on-line. The purr of living machinery never sounded better to Reno.

No time to enjoy it, however. The man next turned his attention to the switch panels on his left. Reno punched in some numbers. In return, the screen overhead flashed scrolls of jargon only he could interpret. He procured more such data on another monitor before assuming command of the central keyboard. All ten nimble fingers went to work. They took him deep into system files and programs, through which he sifted quickly and systematically in pursuit of his goal. Reno's face, blood-spattered and sweaty, radiated enough mental activity to start a fire. He adjusted the circuit patterns, fine-tuned the dials, checked through heaps of information- no room for mistakes. He had to get everything 100% right. Their lives depended on it.

Meanwhile, the daredevil gunman scaled higher and higher up this precipice of trash despite the raucous surroundings. The pit below roared in outrage at such blatant defiance. It sent several shock waves after him, butchering the complex apart. Davoren nearly lost footing under a slough of debris.

For a moment, he had to huddle close and keep his head low as rubble hurtled downhill. He then resumed course upwards. He refused to let danger or strife thwart him. He'd enough determination to vanquish them both.

The cragged path lead Davoren up into a sprawling ghetto made of metal branches, girders and magnificent buttresses. Ensnared there amongst the foliage hung the crane, roped in black cables. Quickly the gunman scurried over these destitute slums towards that wreckage.

The artifact consisted of two parts: a control booth, crunched-up and reduced to a useless wad of scrap; and a detachable rotor sitting upon some mangled rail, which traveled from this ghetto out across the Hellhole's diameter. The huge chain was wrapped tight around the rotor, and locked in position by a decrepit pair of clamps. At its end hung the large anchor.

Davoren reasoned that if the security mechanism were unlatched, then the anchor's heavy weight would unfurl the chain to full length, hopefully long enough to reach those two men trapped below.

But first, to eliminate the clamps. Davoren whipped out his gun. He stepped back, and blasted the nuisance thrice in the heart. The rusted clamps shattered open, whereby their prisoner instantly bolted free. Indeed, the metallic lifeline lunged downwards at top velocity. Its loud clank-clank-clank filled the air as the spool spun mad on its axis.

Rather than manually journey to the lowermost regions, Davoren instead accepted a free ride-expressway, no less. The acrobatic man thus hopped onto this speedy train, where he straddled himself secure in an upright position and waited for them to arrive at the terminus below.

As the chain continued to unravel at a rapid rate, its sole passenger descended deeper and deeper into the perturbed vestibule. The ugly scenery zipped by like a blur. Meanwhile, Davoren held on tight. His white hair swayed about mad, some strands dancing in front of his eyes which glowered at the world far beneath. They'd cut a great distance in record time. He just hoped this train would get him to the lowlands. They traveled down alongside garbage jungles. They lunged past the Connection Station where labored Reno, past the gnarled escarpments and further still.

During this trying period, the despondent Rude clung to his own and Rufus' life while death waited below. Damned then if he wouldn't make it a long wait. Having been almost tossed out by the tempest, the man had managed to withdraw himself a few inches back into whatever remained of the crevice. At least it provided some shelter from the fiasco outside. Inside again, Rude dug one heel against a side ledge for better stability, and pressed his back against the cavern wall. He held the boy from behind, arm clamped tight around him just above the waist. His other hand was flexed up so that he may grip a steel handle overhead. Indeed, this handle alone prevented them from sliding downhill into oblivion.

Languishing here, he could feel the complex lurch more and more towards its doom amongst these endless aftershocks. Rufus, his head bowed and body as loose as a rag, remained blissfully unaware of the situation. To contrast, Rude braved it out on every side. He perceived the flooring begin to crumble inwards towards them like some cancer. Cracks branched throughout the walls. His grip had tightened so hard on the handle his knuckles turned white. If this shelter didn't give under first, then surely it would cave-in upon itself. Either way, they were cornered.

Out of all the background clangor buzzing around his ears however, one particular noise soon caught Rude's attention- a repetitive rattling sound. It grew louder as it approached them from above. In truth, he knew not what to expect. The weary prisoner looked up, only to see help descend in the form of Davoren riding a chain.

Having achieved maximum length right then, the train jolted to a sudden halt, where it hung about two meters away from the target site. It was an awkward midair meeting, to say the least. Perched there lingered the cool gunman. Cramped inside the crack on the opposite side, a rather bewildered Rude gaped straight back at him. To be honest, he'd been so overwhelmed by his own plight, struggling to survive amidst the adversity for so long, that he'd simply lost contact with events above. Plus to meet an old foe here, like this, certainly took him by surprise.

A surprise Davoren strove to dissipate, "'Rude', am I correct?" he greeted politely.

By pure reflex, the ex-Turk stiffened behind a wary front, neither accepting nor refusing this man.

Not that Davoren didn't understand. After all, he HAD tried to kill them. Plus he never explained his reasons for helping them. Still, he'd come to regard Rude as a levelheaded person with a reliable sense of intuition; and while he hadn't exactly given his entire trust to the gunman, he'd begrudged enough to realize he meant them no harm.

"How bad are you hurt?" inquired Davoren.

At last, Rude forced out weakly, "I.. I'm not sure.."

"Can you hold your balance?"

"I think I can manage.. a bit.. longer."

"Okay," he decided, "Give me the kid."

Davoren stepped onto the anchor. He leaned forth as far as possible whilst keeping grip on the chain. He extended his other hand the rest of the distance towards Rude. The latter moved in accordance. Though at a lack for stability, he managed to raise himself up using the steel handle. Now standing astride at the mouth of the crevice, Rude surrendered his parcel.

Davoren took the senseless boy into custody. He slung him over one shoulder and secured him with the greatest care. That done, he cast his free hand out towards Rude again.

"Hurry!" he cried through the mayhem. The shelter was fast disintegrating.

Rude reached across to grab hold. Their hands clasped firmly around each other's wrists, whereby Davoren reeled him in just as he leapt forth, thus ensuring the last passenger made it safe on board.

The rescue operation couldn't have come at a better time, what with havoc metastasizing at such a frightening pace. No sooner had Rude latched onto this lifeline, further supported by Davoren, than the area suffered a major shockwave. The battered scrap-yard archipelago screamed. Its lowermost regions, including that tiny crevice in the trunk, collapsed from under, causing the complex to double over in acute agony. More garbage rained down. The three shipwrecks dangled by a thread, which now swayed about confusedly amidst the falling bedlam. They were exposed on every side. Rude shielded his head as wild shrapnel lashed against him. The din of destruction drowned his senses. Many times he thought he'd lost hold. Though in a chaotic state himself, Davoren nevertheless took responsibility for his group. He huddled everyone together. Not only did he protect the unconscious boy under his wing, but also kept his shipmate upright and steady.

The gunman had fulfilled his end of the bargain. The rest was up to Reno.

Despite the raging storm, however, Davoren could no longer delay all his burning questions, "I suppose if I don't ask now, I'll never know," he addressed Rude upclose for him to hear, "But what the HELL happened here?!"

The ex-Turk squeezed out, "Ah.. there was an.. explosion.."

"Explosion? Then the Professor-"

"N-no. The President caused it."

Davoren looked at him significantly.

Rude recounted events in brief, up until when Rufus confronted the Professor. He described to the attentive Davoren his impression of the young man at that dramatic moment. Rufus had radiated this strikingly authoritative aura, like he'd reconnected to his former self. At the same time, he seemed bitterly melancholic, tortured inside, perhaps to the point of derangement. The situation became more complex when he procured some materia orb, which played a key role in Hojo's experiment. He threatened to toss it into the reservoirs unless his questions were answered. Rude didn't catch all the details. From what he gathered, the President and the Professor had been in cahoots on this experiment; but WEAPON took the former out before the completion of that materia. And since Rufus alone had known the entire blueprints, Hojo had no choice but to save his life, and place the amnesic young man on a brain scanner to retrieve the required information.

Davoren stayed in silent brooding at the conclusion of this story. He'd always known the main framework of "Genesis Retrial", or so he'd believed until tonight. Indeed, many details had been concealed from him.

Some he'd already learnt. Others were new. Quite frankly, Davoren had never really understood how ShinRa's president fitted into this mess. He'd only been informed that Rufus bore great importance to Hojo's work- something in his mind made him valuable- and that the boy's life fell under his responsibilities. Now matters became a tad clearer.

"But I think Rufus really confronted the Professor for *your* sake," Rude cut into his thoughts.

"M-my sake??" echoed the gunman, rather taken aback.

"Once the President got his answers, he dropped the materia into the reservoirs. He'd already ordered us to leave him; he *knew* there'd be a massive explosion! But that was precisely his plan: to kill himself along with the experiment. Even though it failed, he still wanted us to just let him drop to his death," Rude's expression intensified. If anything, he strongly felt Davoren needed to know this, "I think Rufus saw it as the only way to punish himself for.. for stabbing you through the heart."

"Those.. were his words?"

He nodded affirmative. The grim gunman said nothing.

Surrounded by chaos, neither man was prepared when the mutilated network above suddenly skewered further off course, jolting them into a flurry. Rude almost lost foothold. Davoren's alarm soared sky-high as their chain began to groan. The engorged rotunda shrieked outloud. Earthquakes continued unabated. They churned them about in open danger until Davoren angrily bellowed upwards, "RENO, HURRY UP!!!"

His cry fought the downpour to reach the station high above. Inside, an equally flustered Reno raced time to make final modifications to the circuit design. Though he couldn't hear anything through all the commotion, he certainly felt Davoren's agitation whip the back of his mind.

As if he needed the extra stress! He hadn't stopped toiling since the gunman left him here. Nor did he need to look outside to realize this dump was heaving its last breath. Around him, the contents of the room shook harder and harder. The entire promontory in fact was disintegrating.

He had to act... NOW! Barely had he entered the last set of codes into the computer than Reno scrambled back to the master console. Whatever happens, happens: he crossed himself quickly for luck, then with a resolute "Here we go!" slammed the lever forward.

With no more weirs to impede its flow, electricity rushed in raw and hot like blood fills empty veins. Every generator he'd recruited online participated in the grand revival. They collectively pumped their energies through the computer network, which in accordance to the new circuit design, reached the same destination at once: the central database. The comatose system was instantly restored to full commission, whereby Reno's set of commands took effect. Therefore, the database augmented the power manifold, then distributed it out to all parts of the kingdom, including this drainage Hellhole.

Indeed, as the disconcerted shipwrecks braved the blustery winds of mayhem, they witnessed an incredible life force suddenly spiral up the premises, converting darkness and inactivity to luminous liveliness. They saw severed cable wires crackle with rapture. Lanterns and signal gantries brightened up. The entangled technological fun house and that Connection Station above reawakened from their slumber, all at a phenomenal rate. Electricity charged free through the abandoned halls, across the wards, from the deepest pit to the highest tower top. Soon the Reactor became a magnificent fortress lighted underneath an inky black night sky; one final glimmer of former glory before death enshrouded it forever.

The sight struck one as a strange paradox: to behold such a dazzling power rejuvenate these decrepit ruins, only to appreciate the terrible amount of destruction, and to feel more acutely than ever one's insignificance in relation to it all.

But in the end, their idea had worked.

Even the nettled, breathless Reno had paused in awe of the magic unfolding outside. A relieved smile crept across his lips as the realization finally sunk in: yes, it worked. Their idea had actually worked!

No time to celebrate, however. He'd yet to transport the crew below. At once, Reno assumed command of the revived station. He activated the channel output system already pre-set by Davoren, which delivered a high dose of energy through the cables right up into the crane above.

The response followed immediately: the motor sputtered sparks before it cruised to a smooth hum. Next the ex-Turk gripped the control gears. He jerked them back. Thus the spool reversed rotation, reeling the men upwards.

Through the smashed glass façade, Reno watched the mechanical procession below until they reached about halfway. He stopped them there, then shifted both handles leftwards. In effect, the rotor separated from its base to travel forth over the mangled railway, guiding the chain and its three passengers along. They journeyed over the black void below, cutting across pandemonium, towards that surveillance room on the opposite side.

Meanwhile, Reno rapidly unhooked his nightstaff from the master console. He restored the red wire to its proper place before beating a hasty retreat, at the same time flicking his knife back into one pocket. The generators would hold everything together till they burned out. He had a ride to catch.

Reno evacuated the station through its window and clambered on top, just in time to see the chain trek by. The irate man made a quick dash for it. He sprinted across these ravaged battlements till the edge, after which he leapt forth, and landed on the chain. Once steady again, Reno began to climb downwards to join the others.

Their airborne voyage became increasingly unstable as they traversed turbulent storms. Tension played with their nerves, tossing them between uncertainty and dismay. Around them the world continued to degenerate. Clouds of dust, falling hazards, and Mako mists hampered their view. Each man just hoped the crane would survive long enough to deliver them to their destination. Unlike their worrisome state, the confident rotor rambled along its tracks despite adversity. Soon it reached the end of the line, where it automatically decelerated to a halt.

From here, the disheveled shipwrecks lingered but a leap away from dry land. Davoren helped Rude jump across to the ledge; the ex-Turk then hopped through to land on solid ground, which felt so good that he dropped onto all fours, if only to soothe his anxiety level. Reno still scaling his way down the chain. Nor would the gunman abandon post until his other comrade arrived. With time fast running out, he militantly hustled the straggling ex-Turk to move faster. No sooner had poor Reno reached the end than Davoren collared him and practically flung him across into safety's arms.

He then followed suit.

They came hurtling through the broken window, Reno first, the gunman a close second, and crashed against the hard ground, upon which they continued tumbling forth. Davoren made sure his back alone took the impact to protect the boy. The flabbergasted Reno was left to go rolling and cussing until he finally sprawled to a graceless halt. Rude rushed over to his assistance. To contrast, the nimble gunman

had already used his own momentum to somersault across the floor and recovered onto one knee, only to dive straight forth to scoop up his discarded rifle, all in one sweep.

"What're you waiting for?!" he barked at both men, "Keep moving! GO!!"

They'd made it here alive, but they weren't out of the woods yet. Scarcely had Davoren finished his sentence when a belligerent force seized the area, like the Heavens had just crashed in upon them. Even their sanctuary couldn't withstand such violence. The walls around them lurched over. The machines began to explode. The ceiling started to crumble. Outside, the garbage archipelago was shred apart as the upper regions of the Reactor caved-in upon the scene, literally cracking the vestibule to pieces.

The disquieted group scurried for the exit before anarchy buried them under. Clear of the room, they doubled their speed, for next the corridors began to collapse over their uncovered heads. Davoren kept everyone moving with shoves and shouts. Through the commotion, they somehow reached the other end, which took them down a stairwell into another hall. Behind them wailed the forsaken rotunda in misery. Soon it plummeted into the black sea below, and drowned out of existence.

-End of Chp.86

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.87

Once they'd put enough distance between themselves and that deathtrap, the group slackened their pace to a trot. Davoren lead the small expedition, assault rifle in hand least any "unexpected surprises" dared thwart their advancement. He also carried the unconscious boy slung across his shoulders like a dead lamb, whose carcass hung floppy loose, secured around there solely by the gunman's firm grasp. Reno, tired and dirty, trailed just behind. He supported his injured friend along the way.

The survivors bore a demeanor of grave urgency, especially their leader. His eyes confronted the path ahead with stone-hard determination. Thus far, Davoren hadn't given his teammates a chance to recover, even after that crazy rescue operation. They couldn't afford to lollygag about with a catastrophe literally hovering over their heads. Indeed, no man wouldm congratulate himself on their success just yet. They may have escaped that vestibule, but certainly not danger, for they still roamed inside the inflamed bowels of the dying Reactor. Till then, everyone kept their guard up and their feet moving.

The place rumbled in a state of constant perturbation. Eerie noises and crashing mayhem, mixed with their galloping footsteps, re-echoed throughout these empty corridors as havoc continued its rampage. They still hadn't been able to explain what exactly had happened to trigger such a destructive response; what force so powerful that it could level an entire Reactor. Davoren did have an idea, more like this dark premonition which continuously tugged at his mind. However, he couldn't worry about that problem right now. He had his own to contend with at present.

The group sped down long, labyrinthine halls, their path lighted by overhead lanterns that blinked with every tremor. A fine drizzle of debris whiffed past them as they ventured through these trembling catacombs. Reno felt increasingly uneasy. Not that he still mistrusted Davoren. If anything else, his genuine concern for Rufus had brought him to their side. But for all this running about, he'd yet to learn where they were headed. They just followed their guide.

At an intersection of corridors, the company stopped to consider which path. "This way" Davoren decided. Onwards they continued.

"You DO know where you're going, right?" inquired Reno.

After a pause, he admitted, "...kinda."

The latter man frowned: not exactly a reassuring answer.

Davoren said, "I don't know how much of the Reactor's been destroyed so far. It's most probable though all the main exits are blocked now," he added, rather mysteriously, "However, there may be another way."

The gunman did not elaborate, nor did his puzzled allies ask. They flew down two more flight of stairs, which lead them onto a devastated hall littered with damaged forklifts, shipment containers and transportation tracks. Davoren took the expedition across this wasteland under some arched entrance. They rushed further down an extended corridor, passing by many rooms, until finally they reached the opposite end. There, the path terminated at a storage ward.

The ragged survivors stopped in the middle of this rectangular room. Around them stood crates, delivery packages stacked on metal shelves, and dusty file cabinets asleep in one corner. Useless junk. Davoren took another step forward. He appeared a bit miffed. He scanned this squalid hovel as one who cannot find a specific object but knows for sure it existed somewhere close by.

Behind him lingered the company, exhausted to dullness and gasping hard, for unlike their guide, they were humans with more humble limitations. Reno surveyed these dismal surroundings. Nothing. He spat a curse. Meanwhile, Rude, who relied heavily on his friend to keep him upright, floundered in an inner vortex of fatigue, injuries and stress. Indeed, they'd been roaming around non-stop since they fled that Hellhole. Small wonder then why the man, wrecked inside out, suddenly keeled over towards unconsciousness. Reno gave an alarmed "Hey!" as he tried to hold him up, which also brought Davoren's attention to the scene. At once, both men tended close to the weary ex-Turk. "I'm okay..ugh! J-just need to catch my.. breath..," he faltered. But Rude could no longer maintain the lie. He was heaving so harshly, and clutched his side in such agony that Davoren ordered he be seated on the floor before he actually passed out.

Rude was thus settled upon the ground. He continued to gasp unsteadily. His eyes squeezed tight to control the pain. For the moment, Reno's sole concern fell on easing his friend's suffering. With kind encouragement, he leaned Rude back against the wall, and had him tilt his head back for better airflow.

While Rude was being seen to, Davoren propped his assault rifle upright against the shelves. Next he unloaded Rufus off his shoulders and carefully laid him on the side near the ex-Turk, after which he squatted down in place. The gunman felt for his comrade's misery. Ever gentle, he slightly adjusted Rude's position so as to lessen the strain on his wounded flank, and had Reno support him there until his ordeal eased off. They gave him a quiet minute to find some co-ordination again. When the man's breathing had calmed and he seemed in better control, Davoren instructed him, "Rude, you rest here. Just keep an eye on the kid, alright?" the former nodded in consent. "Reno, you come with me," he then motioned for the other man to follow.

Reno didn't understand, but complied. Once certain his friend could manage unattended, he left him with a firm pat on the shoulder before trotting after Davoren, who determinedly marched towards the opposite end of the ward. There, Reno was asked to help push these crates away. Again, he obeyed.

Together, they toiled about displacing boxes and shoving furniture around. At first, Reno thought they were searching for something inside the crates. But soon he noticed Davoren to show far greater interest in the space they occupied, not the boxes themselves. Whatever the objective, Reno wondered how "spring cleaning" this place benefited their dire situation. He didn't even know what the heck they were looking for!

Similar thoughts probably revolved inside Rude's head. He for one couldn't perceive any way out of this dead-end dump or what their strange teammate hoped to uncover. Still, he appreciated Davoren granting him a respite. Plus he'd no strength to ask for explanations. Instead, he languished in tired silence watching those two work. Under his guard lay the boy, wan and senseless to events around him.

"Hold on! I think we found it!" cried the gunman all of a sudden.

Indeed, they'd been pushing a particularly large crate when Davoren at last discovered his objective hidden beneath. He told Reno to keep pushing. With redoubled resolve, they managed to shift this obstacle farther and farther aside until they'd exposed a square grate underneath. Nothing new there. They'd passed hundreds of vents on their journey. What made this one, in this room, so special? Lingered around its parameter, the baffled ex-Turk looked to his ally for an answer. The latter only nodded towards the grate. Thus Reno crouched down and removed this barrier to see what it hid beneath.

Nothing. Just a square, empty recess in the ground.

For a moment, he thought it might be some kind of weird joke. But no. Davoren stood there grimmer than death, not a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. Puzzled, Reno asked the gunman, "W..what is this?"

"Our exit," came his curt reply.

Things were not quite as they appeared. Davoren obliged a demonstration: he delivered one mighty kick straight down into the recess floor, which to Reno's amazement, smashed wide open and hung devastated upon its hinges; this "floor" was actually a disguised trapdoor. Beyond this point stretched a man-made tunnel deep into the earth. Metal rungs followed its course downwards, lighted at equal intervals by small, glass lanterns.

"Damn," marveled Reno softly. He edged in for a closer inspection.

His comrade squatted near him, "This is a secret passageway the mercenaries used sometimes whenever entering or leaving the Reactor," he revealed in a calm undertone, "We didn't want anyone to suspect we were, hiding out here. It leads down through the drainage system then onto the city sewers. After that, well-"

At that moment Davoren, discerning a particular pair of eyes fixated hot upon him, happened to glance aside when he abruptly stopped short; not alarmed, rather caught off guard by the unexpected sight. Baffled, Reno looked over his shoulder towards the opposite end of the room.

Over there they beheld Rufus, unkempt and dazed, yet wide awake, having regained consciousness less than a minute ago. As he sat slouched upon both knees, loosely supported by an awkward Rude, he gaped right back at the gunman. Acute consternation rendered him equally speechless. He appeared visibly shaken, unsure whether to believe his own eyes or his memory.

In truth, neither man realized the boy awakened until this very minute. While Rude had been watching them shuffle crates around, he'd detected a faint movement by his side, only to discover Rufus already writhing to get up. Of course, assistance came immediately. Rufus had sustained no additional injuries. Yet a haze of confusion so beleaguered his senses that the attentive ex-Turk had to hold him steady. The boy knew where he was or how on earth he got here. These new surroundings bewildered him, more so upon finding his supportive friend in an even worse state than he last recalled.

Roused to alarm, Rufus had tended to the battered man with a barrage of fragmented questions, wanting to understand everything at once. In the rush, Rude managed to reassure him that yes, he was okay; they'd been saved during his short coma and brought here.

The boy had yet to clear his befuddled logic when a familiar voice drew his attention to the far end of the ward. The sight of Davoren had petrified him stiff: how could this...? Was he really...? It was not until the busy gunman actually noticed him did Rufus, as startled as he by the eye contact, at last realize that yes, Davoren was still alive. Alive!

Right then, an uncomfortable hush befell the group. The situation resembled a previous one they'd experienced, bright pink locked on stormy ocean blue, yet with far greater complexities since their last encounter. Here was one man who'd served his cunning father the President of ShinRa Inc.; the same who'd brutally revealed to him his sordid past, and shown him first-hand the darker, callous side to his mask. There was another young man, more like a boy in Davoren's eyes, whose dignity and sanity had burnt in a fire; the same who'd witnessed him break down to a tearful, miserable wretch, having discovered the truth too late.

They viewed each other plainly, lost in a moment of uncertainty. But unlike his belligerent reaction last time, Davoren's surprised look gradually softened to one of demure thoughtfulness the longer he beheld Rufus. The latter struggled all the more to comprehend. He'd watched both Davoren and Vincent plummet over the bridge into the void. That scene still raged inside his memory. So how had...? What should...? When..?

Having just recently regained consciousness, only to confront Davoren and these heavy emotive bearings point-blank, Rufus reacted faster than his giddy state could handle. His own perturbation almost toppled him over had not Rude supported him upright again. The kind-hearted man temporarily sheltered him from the main scene. He provided many words of comfort, to which the boy listened with head bowed in one hand. Rufus was alright. He simply needed a minute to collect himself together.

From his place, the morose gunman clearly perceived what a profound impact his presence had on the boy. However, Davoren himself seemed at odds as to what he should do. Rude had already informed him how Rufus, believing him to be dead, had deliberately wrecked Hojo's experiment for his "sake". That story always occupied the back of his mind. But at the same time, so many issues remained unresolved between the former leader of the Turks and New Age President Rufus ShinRa. Hurtful words, ugly truths, their pasts and this present. Maybe deep inside, Davoren felt just as intimidated as the boy did. They were two shattered criminals whose lives fate had intertwined together under the strangest circumstances. And yet Davoren realized they just...

"You should go talk to him," suggested Reno softly.

Davoren flicked his eyes back to the ex-Turk, who held his pensive gaze with steadfast solemnity. Reno had been studying his face all this time. He couldn't fathom what went on inside his ally's head, but he did know that between his loyalty to the Professor and his affection for the kid, Davoren had chosen the second. And they could just hop down this tunnel way without another word. Yet they both knew that unless he and the boy opened up to each other right now, then they never would, nor could their minds rest easy afterwards. He left the matter up to Davoren.

After a long inner deliberation, the gunman leaned closer to Reno and muttered something only audible to his ears. Whatever was said, Reno looked at him very significantly, almost alarmed. The latter however maintained a stern visage; his intense pink eyes beseeched him to accept.

Reno's expression darkened. In the end, he nodded in consent.

Their hands slipped by each other as Davoren rose to his feet again. He walked over to where sat the pair.

Reno also stood up, "Hey, Rude!" he called, "C'mon! We gotta get a move on!"

Rude glanced towards him. He perceived Davoren approaching them and tacitly understood the man wished to have a private moment with their young president. By now, Rude had mollified Rufus' agitation; at least the boy could hold his own despite the internal turmoil. As for himself, he decided he'd rested enough. So with a final reassurance, the ex-Turk bid a quiet retreat. On his way, he met Davoren, who gave him a curt nod in passing, as if to thank him for his kind consideration.

Rude paused to watch the gunman continue his own path. His brows knit in grim scrutiny, like he'd just discerned something hidden behind that man's composed demeanor. Not evil; he knew Davoren bore no harmful intent on the boy. No, what he'd detected felt more like...pain.

The ex-Turk soon resumed course. Onwards he limped until he reached his friend; the latter helped him sit down again upon some box. Neither spoke a syllable. Reno stood on edge, arms crossed, roasting under a contemplative fire as they viewed Davoren march away. Rude didn't ask either. He hunched over to support his wounded side, content to follow events from the corner of his eye. Together they watched, and waited.

Davoren's walk ended at the other side, where he halted right in front of the solitary boy. He lingered there a silent moment, during which his gaze, a tranquil pink lake of meditation, rested squarely down upon Rufus. Meanwhile, Rufus' head remained bowed, disheveled hair strands dangling free before his pale face. He was quite aware of Davoren's presence. He wanted to speak. But then, what could he possibly say? Out of rigid anxiety, or maybe plain fear, he couldn't bring himself to look up at this tall man. Instead, he stared intently at his two fists that sat clenched upon his knees. He noticed they were trembling a little.

It wasn't long though before Davoren simply plopped onto his knees too and sat there upon the dirty floor at the same level as Rufus, hands loose in his own lap to prove he'd nothing to hide. Such easy mannerism rather startled the boy. He looked at this gunman despite himself, only to be greeted by his sunny, amicable smile.

"So," he asked at length, "How are you feeling?"

Rufus instantly shot his eyes away again, "Fine," he answered. After a pause he faltered, "I th-.. I mean, we all thought you were.."

"Dead? Heh! Well, we could say I thought the same for you, son," chided Davoren in jest. However, his tone warmed back to its gentle friendliness as he dismissed, "But that doesn't matter now. I'm just relieved you're safe 'n okay. God! You sure had this old geezer worried sick about you the whole time!"

Rufus said nothing. The reference to his failed "suicide" escapade, plus the frivolity of this conversation brought a painful strain to his face. They'd seen each other at their very worse and their most pathetic. What should they do now, pretend nothing between them has changed? How when his mind felt repressed under such torture?

"Your friends over there, I got a chance to meet them. They're good men, y'know," Davoren praised the two unwary ex-Turks, for they loitered far out of hearing range, "Both of them were quite concerned about you too. In fact, I couldn't have rescued you without their help."

Rufus remained disconnected from this trivial chat. Dark gloom hung so thick over his head that the gunman, himself beginning to feel a bit dispirited, proclaimed, "Geez, kid! If saving you from certain death doesn't cheer ya up, then I don't know what will!" Again, he tried to instill some humor into this depressed soul, "Heheh! But man-oh-man did you have everyone in a tizzy! We were struggling like mad just to get outta there ali-"

"Davoren," Rufus cut in suddenly.

He stopped short.

"I.. have to tell you something," the boy admitted after great hesitation.

The intuitive gunman was quiet. Though his smile had faded to a solemn expression, Davoren's demeanor always remained affably open as he edged a bit closer to Rufus, bracing himself for whatever he had to say. The troubled young man indeed carried many burdens he wished to unload, if only he knew where to start or how to begin. Davoren waited. He gave him all the time he needed to speak.

"I know you loved your brother Donal very much," he finally confided in a hushed undertone, eyes downcast yet brimming like his heart with melancholia, "And I know that no amount of money or bloodshed, not even destroying myself with the Professor's experiment, will ever compensate your loss."

The gunman knew that too. Put simply, Donal had been his whole family wrapped up into one person. With him at the center, there'd been a purpose, a reason. He'd made Life for Davoren worth living. And after he'd lost him, his own world had just... crumbled around him.

Entangled in deep thought, Davoren reflected long upon this boy. He watched Rufus, at a struggle with himself, hang his head lower; the self-hatred and disgust had become intolerable to the point of suffocation, "W.. what makes it even worse for me," he lamented, "..is that ShinRa robbed you of everything, and I.. I've nothing to give in return... nothing except an apology."

The gunman, stunned blank, reacted at once, "Ah, Rufus! Now wait! That's-"

"I have to tell you how sorry I am, Davoren.. truly and deeply sorry!" he insisted with rueful fervor, squeezing his downcast eyes tight as if to force these words onto the man despite any protestations. Indeed, such a passionate assertion rendered the latter silent again. He just didn't know what to say.

Rufus realized what a contemptible figure he'd become by apologizing. A year ago, he probably would have cut his own tongue out rather than admit any remorse. But then, behind that proud, arrogant mask, he'd always been nothing more than an isolated lump of hurt; trapped inside a hateful prison without the courage escape it. Why should he care now? What good did "sorry" do? Hadn't he desired more power, more wealth, all to make his detestable father suffer? Didn't he always used to tell himself the costs never mattered?

But they did matter. Davoren mattered. Those tears he shed over his dead brother mattered. Rufus faltered a moment to balance his emotionality again. He didn't want to make a scene. He just wanted to speak his thoughts, "I.. I know they're just a few pathetic words, hardly worth Donal's life," the embittered boy told his attentive listener at length, "Just by supporting 'Genesis Retrial', *I* become the one who took him away from you. *I'm* the one who caused your tears. And I can say 'I'm sorry' a thousand times more, still it wouldn't change a thing. But Davoren, what else can I do? You're not just my friend. To me, you're like the..," his fists tightened. He whispered wistfully, "..you're like the father I wish I had."

Davoren's eyes tensed bright at this artless confession, like it hadm etched itself deep into his being. Still, he did not respond.

Nor could the crestfallen young man bring himself to look at him. Instead, they sat here suppressed under silence's heavy weight. But even without any eye contact, the gunman read straight into Rufus. He mused profoundly upon all that torment raging inside his miserable soul. Everything Rufus had said ached from heartfelt sincerity. He had apologized to this man not because he wanted forgiveness. No, he'd just wanted Davoren to know how sorry he was. That he regarded him as a father-figure, and that he'd have given anything including his own measly life were it to compensate his loss.

With so many emotional scraps lying exposed between them, Davoren pensively studied the despondent boy. All this gloomy talk about death and regrets, that's not what he wanted. In the end, he let out a small sigh as his upright posture slackened again. That same benevolent smile returned to his face.

"I know a way you can 'compensate' me, if you're willing to try," Davoren offered at last, placing one gentle hand upon his shoulder.

The riddle mystified Rufus as much as that supportive touch. His bemused gaze lifted to meet the gunman's dead-on.

Yet there was no mystery or haughtiness to Davoren's words, just a soft-spoken honesty which, like Rufus' apology, flowed straight from the heart. He told him, "Re-enter Life. Live the rest of it as best as

you can, happy and proud. But most importantly, I want you to make peace with yourself," he squeezed his shoulder as he repeated compassionately, "Please live your life at peace, Rufus."

In all his memory, Rufus never remembered seeing such a kind, brotherly warmth like he did at that bewildering moment, with Davoren's supplication still re-echoing in his conscience. For the very first time, he felt connected; as if the man had forged a bridge between them that reached deeper than anger, agony, or angst could ever go. Yet for some reason, Rufus also began to discern an eerie dread creep up his spine. Something terrible was about to happen. But... but what...?

Indeed, searching past that smile, the perplexed boy thought he glimpsed a bittersweet sorrow in Davoren's benevolent eyes. He seemed to wish he could say more, that he could change things and make them different... better for them both. At the same time, he seemed unsure how to express himself, whether he should, or even if Rufus would be able to grasp it. Maybe, he decided, this was just the way it had to be.

"I know at first it will be very difficult for you," the wistful man forewarned Rufus in closing, "You won't understand. You'll get angry at me, probably end up hating me for a while."

A frightening enigma to which the latter anxiously stammered, "Davoren, w-what are you-"

"But I will always be there by your side, Rufus," Davoren reassured him uninterrupted, "And I hope with time, you'll finally come to understand."

The boy never had time to anticipate or even realize what followed next until it was too late. Davoren had actually lied; he did have something hidden. At that exact instant, the quick-handed man yanked out the nightstaff hitherto concealed within one holster and jabbed it straight into Rufus' stomach; he kept an iron grip on his shoulder to make sure he hit the mark.

When Reno lent him his weapon in secret, per request he'd deliberately set it on "stun" then shortened it for Davoren to hide. The moment that prong touched him, Rufus felt this exquisite pain rip through his entrails. Three seconds later, Davoren withdrew the device, leaving its victim in a numb, voiceless, wide-eyed state of shock.

The betrayed boy watched Davoren's grim yet serene face recede into obscurity. He keeled over towards the floor... falling... Suddenly, everything went black.

-End of Chp.87

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.88

More than thirty years ago, Vincent gave his heart to Lucrecia. She was a distractingly beautiful young woman, bright and dedicated to her work. It happened such a long time ago, like a dream from a distant era. Vincent however still loved that woman as passionately as before; nor could he forget how much it hurt to love her: to crave her yet never be satisfied, to feel all these heated emotions for her yet always suppress them, and to fear for her yet never act; those conflicts were wounds Time never quite healed.

Yes, he'd loved Lucrecia. Though circumstances had dictated they be apart, he'd always hoped that someday, somehow, things would change and bring them together. But then, that's all he ever did, right? Just sat there wishing, wallowing in self-pity while darkness slowly engulfed her. Vincent had felt her suffering, but didn't comfort her. He'd sensed the dangers around her, yet didn't come for her. He'd simply watched her drown. And by the time he finally decided to help, it was far too late. Lucrecia was dead.

Throughout the years which followed, every minute he lived on without her, the same relentless questions had dogged Vincent's mind: why hadn't he acted sooner? He could have stopped it. He could have prevented it. He should have protected her. He should have saved her, or at least console her in her hour of need.

Yes, many "coulds", many "shoulds"; not one followed.

He blamed himself and no one else. Her sadness, his fault. Her misery, his condemnation. Since her death, not a day had passed that he hadn't cursed that man named "Vincent Valentine". He detested him for abandoning Lucrecia. He despised him for what he really was: a criminal, a hypocrite and a monster. Most of all, he hated himself for still being "Vincent Valentine"; the same who instead of acting had just sat there, dumb and pathetic, watching the tides sweep his beloved away.

Indeed, nothing had changed. Thirty-one years later, he'd found himself in the exact position again: a feeble wretch, paralysed with horror as the cycle repeated itself before his very eyes. Once more, he'd failed to protect her. This time though, it was Aeris.

...how does it feel to lose her all over again?...

Vincent staggered through the tumultuous halls in a visible state of agitation. He carried the injured girl in both arms. Aeris' dirty face had long since waned to an expressionless, pasty-pale mask, eyes lightly sealed and wavy hair in dishevelment. Her condition deteriorated by the minute. Despite Vincent's every attempt to support her, that gory gash streaked across her bosom continued to seep copious red life. He even feared to check her pulse again least he may not find one.

Instead, he chose to believe she was alive. Even more adamantly, he insisted he could still save her. So the man stumbled along as an invisible orchestra played its symphony of havoc throughout the Reactor. The cacophony rose in destructive crescendos then receded for a while, only to return twice the power. Vincent's two heavy feet led him across unknown territory. To be frank, he'd no clue where he was going. All the corridors looked the same. Somehow though, he kept moving, heaving harsh breaths with every step.

His mind raced thousands of miles ahead of him. Vincent had entered this madhouse with one objective: to retrieve Aeris. He'd waged a long, hard and gritty war, only to lose everything in the end. Holocaust Hojo had smashed both he and any hopes of victory right through a giant glass column. Vincent couldn't recall a time he'd felt closer to Death than at that moment, as that gargantuan beast approached him. However, that was the same moment Aeris stood up to defend him from Hojo's ravenous claws. Indeed

this girl, who'd always been terrified mad of the Professor, finally confronted him, if only to protect the man she loved.

Love. She said she loved him. How strange it felt: for her to exclaim she loved him, and that she'd built her world around him, whereas he could never love himself, or feel that he'd any place in this world to call his own. Her passionate confession still left Vincent torn between several emotions, including anger. Not at her per se, but at this predicament she'd entangled him in.

Vincent recalled once scolding her, quite severely too, about not wanting her sacrifices. But regardless of what he'd thought or said, Aeris had dared step forth to face the Professor when nothing else would. Though smaller and frail looking, she'd emanated such strong presence. Hojo himself had seemed powerless against her. With "truth" her sole weapon, the girl's bold words had wrenched everything away from him. In the end, she left with nothing except nothingness itself and her pity. And rather than concede an inch to her damning truth, the crazed beast tried to save himself by destroying her.

Vincent would never forget how his entire being froze solid when the monster slashed Aeris across the chest; the sick "crack" of that tentacle against her bones, or the way she'd rolled across the floor on a long, bloody streak. The scene must have flashed a zillion times across his mind by now. And yet, everytime he rewound the tape, Vincent found himself doing the same thing: just sitting there watching the cycle had repeated itself without any interference. Once again, he'd failed to protect the person who mattered most to him. Once again, it was all his fault. Once again, he'd lost her because of his indecisiveness, his weakness, his....

The devastation, anguish and trauma had been so blindingly intense that Vincent quite honestly couldn't recall what happened next. He still made the correct guess, though: before either he or Hojo could anticipate it, Chaos had exploded out of Vincent like a volcano of hot emotions. The ensuing battle had been short- the Professor has actually managed to defeat this new enemy too- but the consequences were great. When Vincent came to, he found the Reactor in upheaval and Holocaust Hojo mutilated to madness. As the grand hall began to collapse, both sides had bid a hasty retreat. Now here he was, human again, alone to deal with the disastrous aftermath.

At present, the man hurried along. He could barely maintain coordination; how then could he contend with this apocalypse his "alter-ego" had created? To make matters worse, he'd lost his gun in battle. Should Hojo chance upon them, they'd no means of fighting back. Then again, Vincent hadn't an ounce of strength to endure another battle. Just staying on both feet required all his focus. Besides, the scientist had sustained such brutal injuries, he'd probably be more concerned with tending to his wounds than seeking them out. One thing for sure though: he had to escape this place. More importantly, he had to get the girl some help. He wouldn't give up now. He could still save her! He had to save her!!

...you know you cannot...
...that is your punishment...
...watch her die again...
...and again...
...and again...

No! Vincent gnashed his teeth: no, he wouldn't allow the same cycle to repeat itself. He couldn't bear to lose her again. The sweaty man pressed onwards through the hail of debris and inner voices pelting him from behind. He shielded his precious parcel from both enemies; he'd let neither harm her. The path stretched down another hallway. Vincent kept going, avoiding falling garbage and pipes as invisible forces tore the place apart. He couldn't stop. To do so seemed like a concession to defeat, and he couldn't lose Aeris too. Everything was rattling. Nothing made sense. Vincent realized he'd long since plunged into a feverish fit. He fought to suppress the coughs. Pain drilled non-stop into his skull while cruel hallucinations teased his logic. He was running yet going nowhere. Shadows surrounded him. They tried

to hamper his progress. They wanted to take the girl away from him-no! He wouldn't let them! Voices swirled in with the mayhem. They accused him. They ridiculed him. They reproached and laughed at him.

...it's all your fault...
...monster...

Aeris. All he saw was Aeris. He had to get her to safety.

...but you won't...
...you'll watch her die again...
...that is your punishment...
...monster...

A sudden tremor seized the area. Vincent didn't realize he'd lost balance until he clumsily crashed to the floor, Aeris still clasped against him. At once he swept her underneath him and kept his own head covered as trash showered them from above. The hall up ahead caved-in completely. Another soon followed, spewing forth more rubble and smoke into the stuffy atmosphere. Meanwhile, Vincent was already struggling to get up. They couldn't stay here. They had to continue! He managed by some feeble attempt to stand up halfway, only for a fresh earthquake to destabilise him again. This time, Vincent landed bottom-first upon the floor; the injured girl flopped out onto his lap but remained secure in his grasp.

He didn't opt for a third attempt. Vincent slumped, or rather collapsed aside against the wall for support, hacking and gasping for air as the hellish pain shredded his lungs to bloody ribbons. Overwhelmed, the despondent lunatic searched around for hope. Not a speck to be found. The world around them wailed and groaned. Everywhere he looked, destruction greeted him; corridors clogged with madness, cracked walls, and crumbly ceilings shedding chunks of debris. No way out. No place to hide. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't go on but they couldn't sit here either, not with these halls threatening to become their tomb. So what then? What should he do?!

...you let her die...
...watch her die again...
...this is your punishment, Vincent...
...Vincent...

"..Vin..c..c..ent..," he heard a faint voice call out.

The man broke free of his demented monologue and scanned his immediate surroundings. Who had called his name? At first, Vincent thought he'd imagined it. He peered downwards, where Aeris lay like a tattered rag doll in his lap. However, her eyes were now half-open, rolling in a fog of bemusement. She seemed to be searching for something. Or someone.

"Vinc..en..t," she moaned again. A pitiful expression of distress clouded her face; she couldn't see him anywhere.

But she was still alive. Alive! A surge of excitement reinvigorated Vincent. He quickly shifted onto his knees and gathered her up closer.

"I am here," he reassured her in a raspy yet tender undertone.

The clangour and rumbling din in the background muddled poor Aeris' mind. She understood nothing around her; how she'd moved from the wide battle arena, where she was now or who'd brought her to this

place. Despite these overwhelming adversities, however, Vincent's familiar voice guided her lost eyes up towards him. He hunched over further to prove that, indeed, he was right here with her.

It took the girl a moment to focus on that blood-spattered, wan face staring fixedly back down at her. Vincent wondered if she would recognize him; he looked such a ghastly waste the angels themselves might have mistook him for a devil. But Aeris did recognize that face. Yes, he was here. He was alright. That alone melted all the anxiety away, leaving her with a small yet very happy smile.

"Ah, t-thank God," she croaked, "You cou..ldn't fight him anymore...the Professor, he-UAGH!!"

Vincent reacted in alarm when Aeris tried to sit herself up, only for a sharp pain to cut her off mid-sentence. The girl keeled back into his arms at once, breathing fast and clutching her wound as blood spurted out. Still she struggled to say something.

"Sh! Aeris, please don't speak!" begged Vincent in desperation. He tended to her closely, though Heaven help him- he knew not what to do!

"I w-was afraid," she wheezed through the agony, "he was going to kill you-AH!! I... I couldn't le-"

"Aeris! For the love of God, don't say anything!!"

She needed to conserve her strength until they'd escaped this place. He didn't want to hear what she had to say. He dreaded it more than a death sentence. He just didn't want to listen!

For the first time in his life, Vincent began to feel panic. Real panic. He couldn't hold his thoughts long enough to make any sense of them. He wanted to believe they could still make it together, that he could still rescue her despite the odds. He wanted to believe it so badly he grit his teeth in frustration. Damn! He couldn't stand to see the girl's face crumpled up with pain or feel her writhe and tremble in his arms. She could barely draw breath. And blood. She was bleeding so much! Why couldn't he make it stop?! He couldn't just watch idly as she-

But Vincent stopped short when something light touched his feverish chest. He looked down to discover Aeris' hand placed upon his pounding heart. Her eyes, a green ocean of tranquillity, held him in a steady gaze.

"It's okay, Vincent. It's alright," she comforted him with such compassion he wondered whether she'd actually heard the tribulations inside his head. Aeris' kindly demeanour softened further at his evident bewilderment, "You're safe," she whispered, "You're here, safe and alive... nothing else matters to me right now."

All the panic seemed to subside at these simple words. Uncanny how her serenity soothed his overheated mind to a state of silent consternation. He sat slouched there studying this girl, who made no more attempts to move but languished quietly in pain. By now, the entire front of Vincent's exposed undershirt was soaked wet with her blood. The girl closed her eyes a moment to rest; even those few words to calm him had cost a great effort. But she wasn't afraid anymore. In fact, Aeris never appeared more content. She'd vanquished her fears. She'd protected Vincent and he was here with her. The rest didn't matter.

They lingered thus a long minute. The earthquakes had subdued, though it would only be a short while before they returned. In the meantime, Aeris lay peacefully under Vincent's guard. Nor did the man disturb her. Instead he dwelt inwards again, on these many feelings tearing him apart like hot knives. His expression strained to that of anguish, sharpened further by bitter self-hatred. It was his fault. If only he'd acted sooner. If only he'd tried harder. How could anything be "alright" when he was here, safe and alive,

whereas she was...? Dammit! He'd already lost Lucrecia. Now to lose Aeris as well, this punishment weighed far too heavy for him to carry! Even for Vincent, who'd usually borne matters with certain stoicism, this torture proved too intense to mask.

A stinging sensation began to flood his eyes. The brooding man scornfully cast his glare askance. Right now he despised himself so much he couldn't even look at this girl anymore. His failures, his monstrosity- he hated it all!

Ironic how he'd always been the calm one to mollify her in times of distress. Now he'd become the pathetic little child in need of solace. But then, he'd known the facts from the outset. He'd just been too frightened to admit them until this moment. Vincent knew that most probably every exit out of the Reactor had been destroyed by now. Not that it made much difference. They were lost beyond hope anyway. He knew he could never escape this hellhole, not in his miserable state, not with the whole place in such uproar.

Worse of all, he finally admitted to himself he could never save Aeris. They'd both known it from the very start. She had bravely embraced her fate the instant she'd stood up against Professor Hojo. But he... God, how could he ever accept this?! She was dying in his arms and there was nothing- not one bloody thing- he could do except watch!

...yes. Like you watched Lucrecia die before her...
...this is your punishment...
...you'll just go on repeating the same cycle...

...everytime, you won't protect her...
...everytime, you let her die...
...everytime, you'll watch her die...

...again...
...and again...
...and again...

...this is your punishment...
...monster...

"Sno..w Fie....'," murmured Aeris suddenly.

The strange interjection rather startled the delirium-drenched Vincent, who at once returned to the girl. Her eyes had re-opened. He wondered how long they'd been lingering on him. Not that she needed sight to discern all the angst and harsh rebuke broiling inside him. He forgot she still had her hand on his heart.

"B-back there at the 'Snow Fields'," she reminded him, "..you called yourself a mons...'monster'..."

Vincent knew not how to reply. But yes, he did remember.

"Tell me. You, with all your hatred, and guilt, and sadness... why do you go on calling yourself that?" she asked him rather nettled, "W-why... do you believe you're still the same man as before?"

The same man who murdered, threatened adults and small children alike, spied, sabotaged and tortured in the name of Orders. Like Davoren once said, Turks were demons dressed in suits. They sullied themselves in sin so that their superiors remained clean.

True, he'd served ShinRa Inc. Part of the blame fell upon the company as much as his own. But who else could he blame for abandoning his beloved Lucrecia except himself? What justification could he give for that heinous crime except that he was and always will be a monster?

In response to Aeris' question, Vincent almost blurted 'because I AM a monster! Look what I've done! I've allowed the same cycle that took her to steal you from me as well!' But before the words got passed his clogged-up throat, the girl argued softly, "..ah, you're wrong. You too...you're wrong..."

Her mind seemed to drift further and further into that memory they shared long ago, leaving him behind to listen under suppressed emotion. He doubted she'd hear him even were he to speak. Nevertheless, Aeris' fading eyes obstinately clung to his face. Through them glowed compassion, understanding, and above all else solid conviction that every word she told him was true.

"You're not the same 'Vincent' you were before," the girl revealed between gasps. Her voice became so weak he had to stoop closer to hear, ".. that man... his fields were empty. J-just snow and ice. But Lucrecia, she planted a tiny seed in those fields. Your love for her... and... and your suffering after losing her," Aeris coughed on some blood, then barely squeezed out, "..they helped that seed grow into a flower..."

Again, she broke off to cough. All the while she trembled like mad. It tore his heart to listen as much as it racked her body to talk.

"..c-cold...it was cold. So much... snow..." Aeris struggled. The ever attentive Vincent followed her ramblings with eyes shining bright and jaw locked shut, "You didn't believe ah.. anything could grow there. But I told you: something new... a beautiful, kind soul... had grown inside you. And... and even if you can still transform into a monster, you have to know, Vincent, that the real monster... the one who did those...all those horrible things in the past- he's dead. You've already killed him."

By the time she'd finished, Aeris' tired eyes had closed by themselves. She nestled her head against his chest. Dawdling her last minutes away, warm and well protected in these arms, the girl whispered breathily to him, "If only possible, I'd give my own life up for you to have Lucrecia here instead of me," to which Vincent, as if stabbed clean through, choked out, "Aeris, don't-"

"I know she'd tell you the same things I've said now," she persisted uninterrupted, " She'd say that she's forgiven you.... she forgave you a long time ago... and n-now that you've found your soul at last.... It's time you... finally...for..g..ave ...yourse..lf..."

Her words faded as soon as they'd left her pale lips. Aeris spoke no more. Those lovely green eyes which hitherto had carried him through this ordeal did not open again. Gradually, her blood-soaked body sagged and her face relaxed. It was over.

In fact, the girl had slipped into a deep coma. Another hour, two at most, she would be dead. And Vincent could do nothing about it.

The man slowly sat upright again. He languished there in limbo, holding her lifeless body, staring and staring dully at her with scarcely a blink. For one surreal moment, he thought, felt and understood nothing. He just sat there as still as a statue. Perhaps she'd reawaken, or he'd discover this was another bad dream. But Aeris remained the same. He still loitered there, vacant, cold and so frighteningly alone.

It was over.

He seemed to gaze at her longer than an eternity when, quite suddenly, Vincent noticed something: tears. Tears in his eyes, streaming down his face.

He'd been crying without even realizing it.

The man blinked. He wiped one cheek then viewed his wet hand, completely stumped. Yes, they were tears, flowing hot and salty. Yes, he was actually crying.

No sooner had he acknowledged this fact than all his feelings- grief, sorrow, pain; awful, excruciating emotional pain- burst forth out of his throat as a terrible wail. The distraught Vincent doubled over to embrace Aeris, whose head lolled aside to accommodate him against her neck. Eyes squeezed tight couldn't stop the flood. Pitiful, heart-wrenching sounds emanated from the depths of his chest into the open air. His shoulders quivered violently. Vincent gnashed his teeth lest he screamed. All the while, he cradled her back and forth in his arms. From a distance, shadows silently watched him hugging something no better than a corpse. They listened to him weep, and weep, and weep over the girl until they believed he'd never stop.

. Vincent remembered only one other time he'd cried like this: the first night he exiled himself into that coffin at Nibelheim, so many years ago. Inside there, he'd mourned Lucrecia's death, and all the things he could have done to prevent it. In a way, he'd never really stopped crying since then. But now with this second loss, tears seemed to come out double force: the girl was dying, and he could do nothing about it.

Several painful minutes passed before the outpour began to subdue. By then, his anguish had sunk to a level no amount of tears could relieve anymore. Having cried himself to exhaustion, the despondent man mechanically sat upright again. He kept Aeris secure in his protective embrace. Vincent rested his weary head over hers and remained thus, a lonesome wretch languishing in these cavernous corridors. He seemed terribly aged now. Shell-shocked, his hair in disarray and blood-shot eyes gazing dully into space, he didn't look too sane either.

Strange though. Inside he felt quite calm. Or was it emptiness? Vincent wasn't sure. He loitered here in the thick of doom, but his mind, like his woeful eyes, had drifted miles away from this scene, where no sound reached him save the echoes of his thoughts. He registered each one as it came: what to do? Vincent didn't care. Should he not try to save himself? Or at least find shelter? No. There was no point. Then what? He didn't care. He just wanted to stay here. He wanted to stay with Aeris until the-

Suddenly, Vincent stopped. By pure chance, his gaze had happened to fall upon an electricity box fitted in the wall just opposite him. Its façade had been smashed open by falling rubble; the damaged interior revealed flashing buttons and severed cable lines, some which sputtered electric spittle into the air.

Not that Vincent had never encountered such a box before. However, hitherto he'd been so engrossed tending to Aeris, he'd simply failed to notice that electricity- vibrant, raw electricity- had been fully restored to the place.

He must have gawked at the box a full minute before this startling fact sunk in. His confounded sight turned up towards the ceiling. The light fixtures blinked affirmative back at him. No, this was not another hallucination. Somehow, the Reactor had resumed operation.

Vincent looked around the empty, lit hall in apprehension: Where did all this energy come from? Who? How was this even possible? And why now of all times?!

Questions, questions, but no answers. The bamboozled man went back to brooding over that box. In his heart, vague ideas began to form. He had to do something, what exactly he'd no clue. He just had to do this one final "thing"; to ensure Aeris' sacrifice would not be in vain, to justify her faith in him, and to set this newfound "soul" of his at peace.

The longer he viewed that electricity box, the farther back his mind retreated. For some reason, Vincent fixed his focus on Professor Hojo, as if a secret lay hidden there waiting to be discovered. He replayed their messy battle in the laboratory, in particular the moment that demented beast had pinned him over the computer console with one claw. Vincent recalled struggling to break free to no avail. A generator had stood close-by. So in his desperation, he'd...

Suddenly, it clicked. He knew exactly what he had to do.

Never did a goal appear more clear or right in Vincent's mind. Whether he's reached a genuine insight or just cracked into a lunatic, he'd made his decision. Thus, he hustled to work.

He acted with unnatural composure. He carefully laid the unconscious girl down upon the shaky floor. He placed her on her side close against the wall, where hazards were less likely to crash. The man then ambled a short distance away. Vincent exposed his metallic arm in full. With his bare hand, he literally ripped off the cover and tossed it aside. Next his solemn eyes surveyed the mini-metropolis of neuro-circuits and connections inside this artificial limb.

War had certainly dealt enormous damage to his arm. Besides several nasty dents, bullet punctures and ruined knuckles, the traumatized interior fizzed in pain and crackled angry sparks at his negligence. Indeed, Vincent had thus far ignored the grievous condition of his arm.

Now he took an active interest. Hunching over, the man began tinkering with the circuits. His face radiated rigid determination. Vincent uprooted a tangle of wires. He lost all sensation of that limb at once. Step one complete; he then groped around for the sharpest piece of rubble available. His hand found a flint-like stone. Perfect.

He'd no gun to do the job. So he bared his elbow, where flesh met metal, and stabbed this junction at full force. Thankfully, he felt nothing. He attacked his elbow again and again. Every jab hit the exact same spot. The brutal self-mutilation continued until control of his arm had been reduced to the barest minimum, after which he flung the murder weapon away.

By then, Vincent could just barely move his claw. He took great care not to let it contact anything, including his body. He was ready to go now. However, he stole one last look at Aeris.

The man couldn't resist edging close to her again. Vincent studied every detail of her face until he could've drawn it blind-folded. He beheld her like a convict regards a loved one before his execution. The man tenderly stroked her cheek a moment, then stooped over to plant a kiss upon the spot. But the comatose girl did not flinch. And Vincent, much as he hated to, decided it was time he left. So with a silent farewell, the man quietly departed. He did not look back.

Vincent never knew how he managed to climb back onto his feet, what with a heart so heavy and his balance racked between pain and fever. Of course, the tumultuous grounds did not help either. Using the wall for support, he limped off towards another corridor. His mauled arm dangled a dead weight by his side, still spitting indignant protests. Vincent took no notice. Onwards they journeyed.

He'd no intension of saving himself or seeking shelter. No. Right now, only one purpose shone bright in front of him: find Hojo. He had to find Professor Hojo.

-End of Chp.88

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.89

Over the course of one night, two men with a thirty-one year old animosity between them had waged an unholy war inside this abandoned Mako Reactor. Neither enemy had yielded an inch to the other. Each had immersed himself deeper and deeper into conflict until little of the original remained. Their dispute had centered on a young woman. As the battle progressed it spread beyond her to involve the importance she bore to each man, her ties to their pasts and present, and the different passions she evoked within them, Vincent determined to retrieve her no matter what the odds, Professor Hojo just as resolved to keep her here, all to himself, even if it ultimately meant killing her.

The night-long war had taken them on a tour throughout this fortress. It reached climax point at the grand hall, when Hojo delivered the coup de grace by sending Vincent smashing through that giant glass column. But instead of sweet victory the scene disintegrated to disaster with the girl's unexpected intervention, her slaying followed by the advent of a third adversary.

Chaos.

The Reactor hitherto had endured hours of their gritty conflict with good grace. To contrast, the demon's resurgence lasted only a few minutes, yet during that short period rocked the entire place into a perpetual state of pandemonium. So much so that both Vincent and Hojo had to abandon their battle in wake of the turbulent aftermath.

Even now, destruction and sister havoc roamed the area free and wild. They tore down stone walls. They cracked floors open, toppled over machinery and danced amidst an ecstasy of earthquakes. Indeed, though Chaos has long since fallen prisoner again, its legacy to this world raged on unabated.

As the Mako Reactor tossed between boisterous cataclysms. Holocaust Hojo hurriedly stomped along on all fours through the collapsing wards. After a short, gruesome encounter for which he paid an eye, the scientist had just barely managed to escape Chaos alive. Whatever befell his enemy he did neither knew much less cared. Deep into his precious laboratory he sought refuge

Not once since fleeing the hall had he paused to rest. Something so disturbing happened to him back there. What precisely he couldn't say. Not defeat. Hojo had in fact won the war against Vincent. The beast he'd swacked out of existence, the man he'd left to drown under turmoil. No, it wasn't Vincent. Not Chaos either. Something else, a force far more powerful. It had pried him wide open, seized his essence and refused even for a second to let go.

The girl.

For some inexplicable reason, Hojo could not shake her off. Nor could he push her words, those plainspoken, detestable words out of his head. Though he'd left her a ragged carcass upon the floor back there in the hall, something she'd instilled in him still chased him around; this sinister, invisible stalker he dared not stop to identify, as if recognition might spell his own ruin. Instead he hobbled on with his mind locked shut, all the while growling unintelligible nonsense. He seemed engaged in a heated conversation with himself.

A serious unsteadiness marked Professor Hojo's gait. He'd a fractured elbow to rely on, although that physical instability compared little to his demented mental status. Behind him dripped a trail of blood. His glare burned upon the path ahead. He'd sustained a range of injuries, from trivial abrasions and cuts to acid burns blistering alongside his gargoyle face. There were gunshot wounds, glass shards embedded within his flesh, and a gory open gash on his flank, courtesy of Chaos' energy saber.

This conflict, its length and uncompromising brutality had eroded him to such an extent that the border between his inner and outer beastliness had blurred beyond distinction. The corridors dithered and

whined. Squalls of debris lashed against him. Once or twice a belligerent earthquake tossed his sideways. Hojo trundled forward at a manic pace, a half-blind, armored tank of menace intent on moving despite his lack of any clear direction. To be honest, he had no idea at all where he was headed. He just yearned for a quiet place within this vast madhouse where he could hide far away from everything and everyone, including himself..

And yet...

While he craved peace, Hojo marched in the thick of anarchy unable to extract himself from it, like they'd merged into one large, disconcerted creature, him and the surrounding upheaval. Every corner he turned, harrowing live images of his laboratory crumbling to pieces filled his sight. He did not want to watch. However, the horror-stricken scientist could not help but watch. He felt the agony wrangling his beloved sanctuary, the screams and savage spasms, wrangle him too to desperation. Hojo's remaining eye, a yellow fire of evil, swiveled about in search for anything stable to anchor his erratic mind to. He kept on snarling "no" ...

No to this destruction.

No to these relentless thoughts knocking on his brain for entry.

No to the loss of a dream.

And no- NO- to her.

To the Professor, "Genesis Retrieval" meant more than an experiment. It represented a long, hard path, the only path worth pursuing, for which he'd offered everything of value. He'd built his own world around this experiment, cementing its foundations with blood, sweat and constant sacrifice. "Genesis retrieval" was his life. It kept him alive. It let him feel alive. Without it, he'd shouted at Aeris, there was no meaning, no purpose, nothing. Without it, everything would cease to exist. He would cease to exist. No, he would not let that happen.

And yet...

No! No! The path couldn't lead to a dead end. After everything he'd given, after everything he'd committed, he would not let it collapse like this. The laboratory. The experiment. The girl. They all belonged to him. Him alone! He'd let no one take them away from him. Not Vincent or Chaos. Not her or her so-called "truth"- damn them both! All this belonged to him. He'd let NO ONE take it away!

And yet...

And yet Aeris' calm voice still echoed inside his head: "You're too afraid to admit: all you've ever had were empty fields with nothing beneath."

No matter how far he plodded, Hojo could not shove the ghost of that Cetra-clone out of his mind. Back there in the hall, she'd unceremoniously stood up to confront him. A small weepy chit like her, transformed by an incredible conviction into a fearless force which had aroused in him a paradox of emotions: fascination and infatuation by her demeanor, foreboding and hatred of her words. Those words, straight and simple, had mercilessly peeled him layer by layer against his will until at last, the incensed demon slaked her. One swipe across the chest and she was finished.

Then why did she still torment him?

"What a sad creature you are, professor. All that time I wasted fearing you, I should have been pitying you."

His overheated brain would not stop obsessing about her. She consumed him, the manner she'd stood before him, so beautiful, her bold speech, the easiness of killing her but the impossibility of silencing her.

Holocaust Hojo pounded onwards harder and harder, whether towards her in defiance or away from her in fear he wasn't sure. He wanted her to shut up! He wanted to banish that girl clear out of his mind! Just for her to leave him alo-

His physical state could no longer keep pace with the berserk speed of the mental. The flustered demon gave a sharp yelp when his broken elbow suddenly buckled under strain. He almost crashed to the floor but managed by instinct to steady himself in time. Shaking, bristling, he leaned against the wall for support. Hojo needed to catch his breath. Languishing here alone, this huge, gargantuan monster, hitherto so fierce and focused, doubled upon himself in a moment of visible agony. He'd been trying to outrun his own thoughts. Now that his body finally failed him, thousands descended upon him to rip his reason apart.

"You're too afraid to admit..."

Hojo choked on anger. Again, that girl. That damn piece of cellular trash! He'd sooner kill her all over again than endure her babbling! No! She could not be right. He refused to believe her!

Injuries and a grave weariness afflicted the irate creature. But his worst ordeal emanated from an invisible wound within his chest, from which this hot, intense feeling had been steadily pouring into his aching heart. He knew no word to describe it. Just this troublesome feeling that would not subside.

"This experiment. It's all just a shelter you to hide inside."

So where was he supposed to take them, all these thoughts and emotions swarming around him? The loss of the girl, the wrecking of his experiment, the laboratory and everything else, his reduction to this sorry state, cowering thus in some hallway- where was he to place the blame for all this?

Random questions inside his head. Heaviness upon his heart. Holocaust Hojo felt ready to explode. Still her voice teased his ears: "All you've ever had were empty fields with nothing beneath."

Just then in the thick of such mental tumult, something new alerted Hojo's senses. The monster lifted his head at once. He'd detected a presence closeby. Behind him in fact. Like a thief caught red-handed, Holocaust Hojo shot his attention around to the far end of this bleak corridor. There, through the commotion and junk, he perceived a tall, dark figure of man silhouetted at the entrance. The unexpected sight transfixed Hojo in place. Even his twittering tentacles seized up with apprehension. He did not know how long that intruder had been spying on him. Yet for all this tension, the figure neither advanced nor spoke. He merely observed his target from afar, face obscured by shadow save those two eyes gleaming bright red.

The stupefied scientist and the somber figure observed each other across the distance when, just as suddenly, another belligerent earthquake rocked the scene. A deluge of pipes and bricks crashed between them, throwing Hojo off balance. He huddled closer to the wall for shelter. In the bedlam his sight whirled back towards that grim specter, only to discover, much to his bemusement, that it had vanished into the dusty mist. Gone without a trace.

Holocaust Hojo however remained dumbfounded by the brief encounter. He couldn't make anything of it. Did he really see someone or just imagine it? For a while minute, the nettled monster simply gawked at a complete loss into empty space where the lone ghost once occupied. As he lingered there, still lost within the depths of those red eyes now gone, discord began brewing inside- too great, too hot for the stiff confined of his chest to bear. A harsh, animal glower contorted his visage. His heart pounded louder and faster; one could almost hear it over the surrounding din.

Yes, he recognized that figure. He'd recognized him the instant he saw him.

Vincent.

It made no difference whether their encounter had been fact of fantasy. There and then, he knew. By this intense enmity which linked them together, he just KNEW Vincent lurked about somewhere, alive and waiting. Fury prevailed over injury. Even his fractured elbow lost its significance. Holocaust Hojo immediately tore after his foe. Through these labyrinthine halls he pursued a specific path, as if some wild, vivid instinct was telling him exactly where to go.

Logic would have argued against him. There seemed no point to this chase right now. With Rufus ShinRa having blown up his experiment, the girl cast away as a bloody corpse and the Reactor seized by civil strife, what would hunting down this one, apparently insignificant man whom he'd already defeated possibly achieve?

To Hojo, everything. He hadn't really given his enemy much thought after fleeing Chaos; too persecuted by Aeris, the grievous wounds she'd inflicted upon him, and his tornado of emotions regarding her. He'd been roaming around in search of relief from the calamity tearing at his conscience, and these endless questions about where to take this conflict, who to take it to, and how to hide from it. All this time he'd been wandering blindly unable to respond. But with that ghost's appearance, so punctual it seemed deliberate, Hojo suddenly latched onto the only possible answer: Vincent.

Seeing him hadn't sparked any new fires; rather it had poked at the coal to remind Hojo of that hateful flame still burning hot underneath. It had always been Vincent. No logic to it. He just knew, like he knew his senses were guiding him to that man right now. He blamed him for this- the losses, the destruction, his destruction, as he'd blamed him for everything else before.

He'd spent thirty-one years nurturing his experiment to maturity. In one night- one, single, infernal night- Vincent comes and lays all he'd ever built to ruins. Somehow, he wrecked everything! How then could he achieve any peace knowing that bastard still walked free and alive, in finding him, he could do something yet... something that would change them, make them better, or maybe just numb these raw feelings stabbing his heart.

Indeed, desperate minds cling to desperate hopes.

Faster and faster Hojo galloped towards the ultimate climax. Enticed by his own insanity, the beast exited the last corridor, only to emerge onto a semi-circular balcony which overlooked an enormous round atrium. He stopped short. Ten meters away directly opposite him, the same tall, grim figure stood at the parapet, this time his back completely facing the scientist. It was none other than Vincent.

Reunited at last.

Not a joyful occasion though. The Holocaust monster expressed no surprise to meet his enemy here. But he did not advance any further either, as if a magical barrier held him back. Instead the bedraggled demon, quite breathless after that "chase", crouched down in place and waited behind a mixed façade of caution and hostility. He glowered at Vincent. The latter however remained an aloof statue, standing erect whilst his long black hair swayed gently in the breeze of surrounding mayhem. By his side hung his claw, ripped open and mutilated.

He was aware of that gargantuan menace lurking behind him. In fact, all this time he'd been expecting Hojo; his own instincts had assured him the scientist would arrive. Still Vincent did not turn to confront him. He knew Hojo, despite his coiled up stance, wouldn't attack yet. Even if he did, the man seemed not to care.

Their paths had crossed several times over the stretch of one long, surreal night. Each encounter uncovered another ugly skeleton from the past; each battle pushed the stakes higher, spread the violence further until at last it engulfed the Reactor whole, with them trapped together deep underground. In the final chapter of this sordid drama, here they stood, two war-torn enemies, at the last intersection of roads before Death claimed them both for his kingdom.

The pair loitered upon the fifth, top most balcony. The location offered a panoramic view of this huge atrium below. Huge indeed, enough to fit several giants inside. The balcony system, five semi-circular decks shelved neatly over each other, occupied this half of the hall. It was connected to the opposite wall by a hanging jungle of bridges, beams and buttresses, with rigid steel stairwells scattered throughout to link its many branches together. Looking down from such a great height, one appreciated how this network stretched across open space to reach those doors and rooms stranded on the other side. So complex yet so precise, each highway going somewhere specific, whereas here they lingered, no place to go, no hope in sight.

Vincent had actually passed through here before. It was the laboratory data center, where ShinRa Inc. used to store and process its science information. But gone all the glory this hall once possessed. The angry earth had reduced it to a derelict death trap. Down came rubble and anarchy crashing around. The walls were cracking. The land was breaking to pieces. Still, Vincent did not flinch. He gaped meditatively into the massive display screen which sat embedded in the wall on the opposite side of the atrium, directly across from this balcony. Every machine and console here sent an input to feed that hungry cyclops. Thousands of wires and cables snaked up along the walls to insert themselves into the computer network framing its single, glass eye. Vincent must've stared at that unblinking screen forever. The distance between them seemed so far away. So very far away...

"You've come back then," Holocaust Hojo greeted at last when the silence stretched too long.

"Yes," confirmed Vincent mechanically.

"And the girl?"

Vincent closed his eyes for a brief moment of introspection. Again rolled that terrible scene through his mind. He'd re-lived it a million times by now but it still stiffened his chest. Again he found himself the useless prop in the background, watching Aeris, defiant, unconquerable, get slashed then swept aside like a wad of rubbish. Again he was cradling her body in some filthy corridor, listening to her soft ramblings as she slowly faded away. She never complained about her fate. His sole concern had been protecting her, then at the peak of his desperation, comforting her.

Back to the present. Vincent's eyes reopened. "She is dying," he replied. Though he addressed her killer, his voice carried not a twang of emotion. Not Chaos' unruly rage, or the panic which infected him in the scramble to rescue Aeris, or the crushing sorrow when he reluctantly acknowledged that he could not. After all the man spent, he simply had nothing more to give, as if he'd left his own heart behind to die alongside the girl.

Whatever the case, the scornful scientist snorted, "Huh! Rufus ShinRa is dead, so are his two idiot friends. And that sentimental halfwit Davoren is long gone. I guess you and I are the only ones left, eh?"

"Yes," Vincent confirmed. Still gazing distantly across the atrium into that great screen, he added, "Funny how those who least deserve life survive it the longest."

However, neither side laughed. After another pause, the man inquired, "Tell me, Professor Hojo, why are you still here?"

For a moment, Hojo faltered in a spasm of silent fury, as one who'd so much to say but knew not where or how to begin. Vincent's calm tone made it impossible to decide whether he's asked in earnest or jest, whether he truly wished to know or just feigned innocence of the catastrophe he'd brought upon this place. From that simple question others far more complex arose; no need to be spoken out loud for they both understood already: why hadn't he tried to escape this failing Reactor? Why follow Vincent? What did he think he might find here? Deep down, he knew his experiment could never be salvaged, so why still cling to it, the same way he clung to this enemy and their war?

He could not elucidate any clear reason for chasing the man, much less thread out his own senses from

the anarchy surrounding him. Impulse alone guided his actions. In placing tonight's entire fiasco on Vincent's head, it had convinced the tormented Professor beyond a shadow of a doubt that whatever he yearned for, he'd find it with Vincent, be that peace and resolution or war and retribution. No matter what the girl said, no matter how many battles ravaged him, he would not let go of his experiment. He never could. Again because without it, there was nothing. He was nothing!

But why? Why without this experiment was he nothing?

The Holocaust monster edged a step back. He heard Vincent's voice inside his head, seeding these questions, though in actuality the man had neither opened his mouth nor turned around, but still loitered by in patient wait. He seemed changed. Indeed, one discerned a peculiar difference to his aura from before, darker now and more imposing, intruding into forbidden terrain where no body, not even Hojo himself, dared tread.

The scientist eyes Vincent more warily: he wanted to murder him. He wanted to crush his skull and hew his scraggly body to pieces. The man had no means of defending himself. No gun, no strength, no motivation. One lunge forward would eliminate him. Vincent undoubtedly appreciated his own precarious situation. His foe could strike him down any time he pleased. But this danger strangely failed to daunt him. He remained a paragon of stoicism. Nor did Holocaust, for all the emotional stew boiling within, advance forth. Something inexplicable held him back. He could not attack yet. He just could not.

Meanwhile the original question hung in the air unanswered: Why was Professor Hojo still here? In response, Hojo bowed his head slightly. A miserable expression contorted acid-burnt face to an ugly knot. Black thoughts and vehement feelings circled inside, from which the disquieted demon struggled to articulate sense, "t-thirty-one years," he pronounced, his glare burning into the back of Vincent's head, "It's easy to say, but...but to actually spend them, constantly giving...I gave everything to my experiment... everything to turn it from dream to reality. I could feel it materializing in my own hands," yes, he could. Even now, languishing thus in his own bitter soliloquy, Hojo could feel it. Repressed, he seemed to double in size. He choked, "It was beautiful... complete. The rest just had no relevance as long as I... then you- YOU- came and... and..."

Destroyed everything! Wrecked the Reactor, wrecked this dream, wrecked everything! So intense his rancor he couldn't finish the sentence. He appeared ready to burst. His broken armor of bones and shears splayed their malevolence further. Those talons, ten knives of pure evil, contracted full length into the open. His tentacles twitched madly around him; every one yearned for a taste of Vincent's blood.

The slightest upset- a comment, a look, a sneeze, might've tipped that fuming gargoyle into a frenzy. But far from intimidated, Vincent casually hummed, "That's your reason for seeking me out? Revenge?"

"Isn't it the same as yours?"

To that, the sangfroid man made no remark.

Which only infuriated Hojo more: all because of this one man. Yes, Vincent was to blame. It didn't matter, Davoren's defection, Rufus ShinRa's shrewd trickery, that wretched Cetra-clone trash or her gibberish about "truth". His mind, like the lock of loaded canon, fixed solely on this detestable man named Vincent Valentine. By some twisted logic only comprehensible to him, every mishap, every disaster, this entire fiasco, he placed it on his head alone. Somehow it all HIS fault!! HIS fault!

Over on the opposite end of the balcony, the unruffled Vincent let those fanatical accusations whip his backside sore whilst pondering their meanings upclose. "His fault"? For thirty-one years he'd wandered a barren desert of guilt, telling himself that too. Horrible crimes littered his past... spying, terrorizing, threatening and murdering. He'd obeyed his superiors without question, without judgement, all in the name of duty and orders. The blood of many bespattered these two hands, stains no amount of water could ever wash out. Blood of strangers he did not know. Blood of a friend he cared about, respected and admired as the better man. Blood of a woman, a beautiful woman inside and out, whom he'd loved with

every fiber of his being.

Vincent remembered Lucrecia. He should have protected her. He could have saved her. Instead he abandoned her. She'd needed him. Her voice could not but her heart had screamed for him to at least come comfort her. Still he neglected her, too immersed in himself till time ran out for them both.

Because of him. She'd died because of him. For thirty-one years he'd searched, punishing and hurting himself, yet never finding either forgiveness or a shred of peace. Only more self-loathing, more regret, more pain and isolation.

That had been his sin.

That had been his punishment.

"Monster" he'd called himself constantly.

Perhaps Hojo was right. This world collapsing around them, the devastation and disorder, perhaps this too was his fault, just like everything else.

But then, Aeris had forgiven him. Despite the atrocities he'd committed, the hatred, shame and disgust he harbored towards himself, she said she loved him. A young, lovely white dove such as her loved an old, hideous base monster like him. But no. While Chaos may live within him, she said the real monster had died. Something new, something beautiful which never existed before had grown inside him.

She'd called it... a "soul".

Vincent pulled his wayward thoughts back to this scene. At long last, he turned to confront his stalwart opponent.

Their eyes met each other dead on; Hojo's shining hostility brighter than the sun, Vincent's devoid of emotion, his ashen face as frigid as stone. He cut a paradoxical figure, pathetic with his empty hands loose by his sides, yet at the same time emitting such fortitude through his battle-wearied appearance. They'd reached the finale. Hojo braced himself. He expected the man would immediately attack him, or at least plunge into a rage as Chaos before him.

Vincent did neither. None of Hojo's defenses buffered him from acute shock when the man instead slowly curled his lips into a cruel, most unnatural sneer. The flummoxed scientist gaped wide at him. During their entire war, Vincent never appeared more sinister or least sane than that instant, as he ginned back at his enemy, surrounded by the disaster he -sure, why not?- had wrought upon this Reactor.

The Holocaust beast could hardly contain himself. "What the Hell do you find so amusing?!" he cried in a passion.

"Why you, Professor," countered Vincent. His derision slapped the former clear across the face. Come what may, he then tilted his chin slightly up and, while his mirthless eyes scrubbed Hojo down to dirt, smilingly declared aloud, "You fight so hard for this experiment. You transform into that huge monster to defend it. You and your genius, greatness, yada yada yada. Heheh! Still! You couldn't prevent a 'meddling piece of cow dung' like me from wrecking your whole dream. In just one night, no less. And now? Thirty-one years of your life, wasted! All you've got left is nothingness itself and pity."

Hojo hissed outloud, "Shut up!"

But Vincent taunted him more, "The pity of-"

"YOU..."

"A little GIRL!"

"YOU DAMN BASTARD!!!"

Fury exploded out of the scientist hotter than a volcano. Such acrid mockery far exceeded his endurance, nor could he remain thus stationary and suppressed any more. If his enemy wouldn't attack first then he certainly will! Still roaring at the top of his lungs, the incensed Professor broke free of all restraints holding him back, including his own injuries, and charged straight for Vincent at full speed. His mighty aura tore the floor asunder. In he flew, a dark monstrosity encased in armor, racing forth with his serrated wings spread out, jaws clenched and that single, wrathful eye branding a brutal death upon its target.

Vincent waited for him to come. A stark contrast marked the two enemies; one emotionality turned lethal, the other composure personified. He didn't lift a finger. He made no more to defend himself. He didn't run away. The cool man just waited, no longer smiling but now calmly dignified, expression hardened by an inner resolve. Vincent stood his ground in the same tired, neutral stance, as though he neither cared nor feared what Hojo brought him, even death. Strange, but during these few seconds while he watched that crazed beast galloping fast towards him, his mind abruptly flashed back to something he'd heard long ago: "Ye shalt find thy wandering soul at the end of thine pain, and may the Kingdom of Heaven embrace thee for eternity. Amen."

It was prayer. He forgot where he'd learnt it, though. Actually, he wondered why he'd remembered it now...

Suddenly, Vincent anticipated danger close in on him. Without even attempting to decelerate, Holocaust Hojo hurtled one gnarly claw, further wrapped up in tentacles, right at him. Then and only then did the man snap into action: his mutilated metallic arm, hitherto inconspicuous, was thrown up between them. Not a microsecond later, the beast ploughed into him; thus his talons effectively ripped into this sacrificial "shield" instead of Vincent's skull. Vincent worked fast. Hojo had no time to react. To better secure their link, the artful enemy had already grabbed some tentacles and wound them around his artificial limb, just one heartbeat before a wild surge of electricity erupted out of the forsaken to seize its attacker whole.

Therefore in a mere blink, Vincent had entangled Hojo into an inescapable, electrifying trap: his arm. Sparks flew, unbridled and furious. Meanwhile the astounded scientist, now a blind ball of flaming charge, couldn't stop his own momentum, nor did Vincent resist; he let it sweep him along for the ride. The connected pair literally burst through the parapet like a runaway train and went sailing high across the atrium towards the opposite side, nothing beneath them save meters of air. They traveled together, the stern-faced Vincent gliding backwards, Holocaust Hojo blankly tumbling forward.

Time slowed down. The hall's diameter seemed to stretch to infinity. They cruised through raining chaos and garbage, propelled by their own inertia towards their common destination. The stern-faced Vincent glided backwards. Linked to him, Holocaust Hojo tumbled forward, gagging, frothing at the mouth, jerking uncontrollably all the way as shockwave after shockwave mangled his insides to ribbons. This torment continued throughout their daredevil flight without pause, without mercy. Whirling together in this surreal existence, Vincent happened to look up at his travel companion. Hojo's eye had bulged out to the circumference of a saucer. He fixedly gaped back, not at the man, rather beyond him into a frightening abyss he could never fathom nor ever pull himself out of again.

Then came impact. The airborne pair, sailing forth at an insane velocity, reached the big computer screen on the opposite side of the atrium. They crashed together right into its center, Holocaust Hojo just three inches above Vincent's bowed head. From therein, Vincent let events run their course. He'd merely guided the manner they hit their destination. Indeed, a moment before the collision, the quick-witted man had intentionally thrust his weight down to slide beneath his hapless enemy. Thus on arrival, he'd slammed back-first against the screen whilst driving his own arm, along with Hojo's, through this façade behind him - into the electronic metropolis it protected. Busted glass scattered into atmosphere. Vincent grunted ferociously as his limb rotated backwards a near full circle to follow Hojo, who'd already smashed fist-first through the screen harder than a blazing comet.

All this time, the vengeance-driven Professor had failed to notice one, vital fact: electricity had mysteriously returned to the Reactor. Vincent, on the other hand, had realized this long ago. How this miracle came to pass or who had performed it bamboozled his senses. However, while he'd dawdled in this discovery, he recalled that once during the course of their battle, he'd electrocuted Hojo to free himself of his grip. It had only been a short jolt. Yet the monster, he remembered, had reacted in extreme pain. Perhaps electricity was the "chink in his armor"? Vincent certainly knew his claw's weakness: if severely damaged at the joint, the limb ceases to function; but it may also become overcharged due to short-circuiting, enough to electrocute someone. Davoren in fact had used that same weakness against him the night they first fought.

Still mentally wandering, Vincent had by chance conjured up the image of that huge computer screen he'd come across in some atrium within the laboratory. And in a flash of inspiration, a plan had formed; daring, dangerous close to suicidal, yet if successful, a guaranteed victory. Vincent decided to take the risk. He'd injured his own claw then in provoking the volatile demon to attack him, managed to connect his foe to it. Instant electrocution. That had been part one of his scheme.

Next, part two. With Vincent's metallic arm lodged deep within the computer circuits, it conducted both his own and the energy of the entire data banks straight into Hojo; a powerful surge as fierce as a thunderstorm which ripped through his overwrought nervous system head to toe. This concluded the second part of Vincent's plan: to deliver his victim into the activated computer network. He'd remembered passing by this computer screen. It magnified the effects of the electrocution manifold, in voltage as well as brutality.

The description "brutal" hardly did this spectacle justice. Their assault on the screen would not go unpunished. However, since Vincent's elbow joint also acted as an insulator, he escaped harm. The Professor therefore suffered the consequences alone. They hung suspended from the smashed façade just a few seconds, but during this intense bout of torture Vincent dangled precariously against the glass, eyes squeezed shut while his enemy above him convulsed and thrashed wilder than an epileptic maniac. Whips of charge cracked around them. The pungent stench of burnt flesh filled Vincent's nostrils. Even with insulation, he felt a tingling sensation stream across his body, harshest in his left arm. He didn't know which sickened him more: listening to the din around him, of collapsing walls and zinging electricity, or Hojo's long-drawn, wrangled scream overhead. It was something gut wrenching and inhuman; such a terrible roar that rattled the listener to the very core. And to think, all that separated him from this horrible fate was his elbow.

The screen behind them began flashing bright jargon. A red alert went off. Lights blinked. An acute sense of doom permeated the hall. With so much energy flowing fast and unrestrained, the electrocution rapidly overwhelmed the troubled system. Fuses blew. Wires overheated. Soon every computer and console on the ground floor burst into flames. From there, the swathe of destruction shot up the smoking cables to the screen high above. Another catastrophe followed. The atrium suddenly rocked in sharp agony when its magnificent glass eye exploded to a million shards. The force of the explosion spewed everything meters out into open space. This included both assailants, who were swept into different vortices as the violence ripped their link apart. Each enemy spiraled separately on a mad, free-falling trip towards earth. Down, down they plummeted amidst a shower of debris, no longer connected but still sharing the same destination. They lunged through the hanging garden of bridges, struts and staircases below, Hojo trailing charge, Vincent spinning in senselessness some distance behind. However, he refused to surrender to it. Vincent spotted a gantry coming up. By some herculean effort, he mustered enough coordination to reach out and grab hold on his way down. His journey ended abruptly with him hanging loose by one arm from the gantry. He was safe. Hojo didn't fare so well. His smoldering, heavy carcass traveled several levels farther down until he collided hard onto the main bridge, which rattled as such a resonant impact reverberated loudly throughout the hall. This final battle, from initiation to conclusion, had lasted about one minute. One minute and all the tables had turned. One minute and the deed was done.

Around Vincent the world continued to disintegrate. Far beneath his two dangling feet raged an inferno of havoc and carnage. Vincent decided he wouldn't hang here forever. His left arm felt dead. So using his right one only, the dazed man clumsily pulled himself up the gantry which, he discovered, supported a

long catwalk. He tumbled over the protective railing then crashed onto the floor in a heap. His ears wouldn't stop ringing. He felt sick to the pit of his stomach. Vincent climbed onto all fours. Head bowed low, he took many deep breaths, if only to ease this illness wracking his chest. God, how it burned! He'd managed to ignore it so far. Yet after that crazy stunt across the hall, the pain just kept twisting his lungs tighter and tighter, until nothing save sheer tenacity prevented him from descending into an outright fit. Indeed, the effects of Vincent's escapade had finally started to gain hold of him. His bones hurt. His muscles ached. He trembled nonstop, so weary, so dizzy. The buzz persisted in his ears. No word better described the man's state than wretched. His torn rags with his blood-soaked black undershirt exposed, his double-bent frame, his benumbed mind; everything about him exuded dismal, destitute wretchedness.

The electrocution had short-circuited this whole section of the Reactor. Already a veil of darkness had enshrouded the place. Only the emergency lighting remained operational, with the alarm still whining in the background. It took Vincent another minute before he stood up again. He needed to grip the railing to maintain this upright position; both feet wobbled like jelly beneath his weight. The tired man looked aside at his claw, now nothing more than charred scrap. He couldn't feel or move it an inch. It hung there lifeless by his side. Some tentacles remained wrapped around this limb, faithful to the cause though their master had long since departed. They resembled shriveled strings of rotten meat (sure smelled like it too). No problem. Vincent dully peeled them off. The devastated arm spat and hissed at him, but every reproach passed by unnoticed. He'd already taken a decision. He'd follow it through and endure the consequences, so should his claw.

Once his head had cleared more, Vincent turned his sight skyward. He traced their journey from the topmost balcony over there, across the air smash into that screen, where he beheld black, thick smoke billowing out of its busted façade, then down a great distance to here. Vincent had survived. In fact, he'd won. This outcome however filled him with neither joy nor regret. He'd merely scored an empty victory against Professor Hojo. It didn't mean change. It just meant he had to drag himself along a bit longer.

While brooding upon these morbid thoughts, Vincent next searched for his enemy. From his location, he spotted him down below on the main bridge, where he lay sprawled flat upon his back, jaws stuck wide open, dribbling frothy sputum, and his eye rolled back in its socket. The electrocution had been so vicious, so severe, that the senseless scientist had metamorphosed three-quarters back to his original form by the time he'd hit the floor. The other quarter remained on display: a couple of tentacles played about. Scraps of shears and bony spikes jutted irregularly out of his beaten body, his knuckles, forearms and legs; once such a glorious suit of armor reduced to this depilated waste. Indeed, a certain bestiality still clung to Hojo. It showed most keenly in his coarse facial features. The Professor looked neither fully demon nor quite human, rather a breed between the two, like some misshapen creature born out of a nightmare.

Thus he lay supine in full view. Total stillness surrounded him. But was he dead or alive? Hard to tell from up here. It seemed the former. Vincent however retained his suspicions about the latter. He leaned a bit further over the railing and, observing the prostate monster below, waited for the final answer. Time slowly ticked by. He watched and waited until at last he perceived Hojo's burnt, atrophied claw twitch, after which the dazed scientist groaned a response. He was alive, though his body, battered and broken, could barely sustain any life. He labored hard to breathe; his left lung must have collapsed. Hojo coughed as his head, vault of throbbing aches and nonsense, rolled to one side. Pain. He'd awoken to find himself strangled by such exquisite pain! It twisted his face, his whole demeanor, into a woeful knot.

Vincent remained stationary at his vantage point above. He pensively observed the Professor shift onto his belly and squirm weakly across the floor, still moaning in desperation. It didn't surprise him to discover the scientist had survived. To be frank, he'd expected it. The electrocution may have defeated him, the crash shattered him, but if anything, hard-core determination kept that madman alive. It was torture in itself how much of this incredible resolve his skeletal frame. It wouldn't let him die. All for a spoiled mistress named "Genesis Retrieval".

Vincent knit his brows: yes. It was that same determination which drove him to murder Aeris, to

experiment on Davoren's younger brother till death, to wreck so many things and so many lives... all for "Genesis Retrieval".

And there he was, still struggling, still determined.

Vincent now limped off to overtake his foe below. Slowly and unsteadily, he hobbled forth along the catwalk until he reached a staircase. It led him down onto a minor side-bridge, which stretched through the air to merge with the main one at a perpendicular angle. He perceived Professor Hojo writhing over there at the far end. He walked towards him at the same limp pace, the most solemn expression upon his haggard, blood-spattered face.

By the time Vincent reached Professor Hojo, the beleaguered creature had already managed to drag his undead carcass to the edge of the bridge. A gory trail marked the short distance he'd traveled. Pride induced him to use the railing to sit himself up, but weakness and pain again caused Hojo to heavily slouch sideways, almost collapse, against it. He wheezed for air. His chest rose unevenly in-out, in-out. Meanwhile Vincent stood over him; he studied his agony with cool impassivity.

How the mighty have literally fallen

Hojo's befuddled senses groped backwards through a haze of amnesia to remember what happened after he'd contacted Vincent's claw. Out of control. Through the parapet then the air. The screen. Glass and electricity. Falling down. Bit by bit, these cut-scenes assembled into a short film he played across his mind. He began to realize the events which brought him to such a state (though the restoration of power remained a mystery). He saw, too late, Vincent's clever ruse. Ironic really, how that metallic claw- his own invention- had bested its maker. Such ingenuity deserved praise. Professor Hojo however only had anger and frustration to spare; not because he'd been tricked, but because he'd physically surrendered to injury whereas his mental state, frenzied emotions and insanity, still raged strong. This ineffectiveness humiliated him. What accentuated his shame more was the realization that the man responsible hovered over him, watching him struggle. Hojo flashed his good eye up towards Vincent. Despite himself, the miserable scientist pressed further back against the supportive rail. He waited for whatever followed.

Their positions had reversed. Now the enemy dominated this confrontation.

Yet Vincent felt no rush to speak. Instead the statuesque man beheld Professor Hojo a moment longer. It struck him how ancient and mummy-like the scientist appeared. With his mane of unruly black hair, wrinkled green skin and tattered clothes, he cut such a sorry figure, more so as he wallowed there wheezing and bleeding.

And all for what? An experiment.

Vincent spoke at length, "This experiment," he reflected demurely, "was never really about science, was it?"

Hojo was rather taken aback by the question. He croaked, "W..what?"

"Fact of the matter, it's really been about you all along. Now that I see that, I think I've finally come to understand you, Professor."

The statement mystified its listener dumb: About him? Understand? man. For a whole minute, Hojo stared at this tall, serious man. He just gawked emptily as he churned those words about. Soon, a terrible, soft noise gargled out of his chest along with a froth of blood. Vincent may as well have told him a joke. Indeed, though it hurt like Hell, Hojo could not help laughing.

"Hurh! Hurhuha-haha...if.. if you're going to kill me, Mr. Valentine," he chuckled, "Then please, do so without the sermon. Uh- "understand" me? Haha!" the sheer idea insulted him! Hojo's sneer instantly soured to a harsh glower. He squeezed out through the anguish, "Understand me! Those years I've

given... ten, twenty, thirty... slaving, s-sacrifice... everything I gave away...dammit! All those things I... then in one night, that damn wench, she just...! And you... all the...," a twang of pain cut him short. Hojo choked. But the longer he dwelt upon his fragmented thoughts, the more his bitterness swelled until the overwhelmed scientist spat outloud, "What.. how can you or anyone else possibly EVEN BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND?!"

Had he only the strength, he would have murdered this man on the spot. Once more, the disquieted Hojo returned to that dreadful moment Aeris spoke her "truth"... NO! She was wrong! That could never be "the truth", because then... then that would mean...

"All you've had were..."

Again no! He'd accept none of it! He wouldn't let her defeat him, just as he wouldn't let this bastard Vincent patronize him or turn him into a mockery. He understood nothing! They shared nothing except hostility and hatred. They'd each taken something precious from the other. And they'd both come here for the same purpose: to take the other man's life. Either he or the enemy died. Nothing else!

In fact, Hojo's mental turmoil escalated to such levels that, rather than endure it a second longer, he finally ordered Vincent, "Kill me."

Vincent's dispassionate demeanor, however, deflected his demand without a reply.

But why the lollygaging? Wasn't this what he'd come for, to kill him? His deference fuelled the scientist's irritation even more. He clutched the lower end of Vincent's torn pants. Looking him straight in the eye, he viciously snarled, "Kill me... before I kill you!"

Whether intended as a threat or a plea for mercy, the man remained unmoved.

Kill him?

Vincent could not help but mull over this option. To kill Professor Hojo, this scrawny corpse clinging to him. He could easily snap his neck. Or bash his skull in. Or rip him apart, like Chaos had, and soak in his blood, like he'd soaked in so many before him. Rectify these wrongs. Compensate the losses. Just end this nightmare once and for all.

Just kill him.

Vincent had watched him slash Aeris then swack her aside. Less than an hour ago, he'd wept a river of grief as he held the dying girl between these two arms. Yet he hadn't stayed to watch Aeris draw her final breath. Instead he'd chosen to act; act while a faint life still beat inside her, act while action still bore meaning. He'd confronted Hojo. He'd sent him to the very doorstep of Death. And now he loitered thus, with this man's fate in his hands. Crush it! Kill him! Isn't that what he wanted? If not for the deceptions, the evil, the shattered lives and misery, wasn't her murder justification enough?

Perhaps. But that's not what he wanted.

"I didn't seek you out for revenge, Professor," Vincent proclaimed over these vengeful thoughts, which all stopped dead at the coolness of his voice.

The announcement incited a similar reaction in Professor Hojo, who froze stiff in place, his expression suddenly contorted from anger to a total blank. His hand unwittingly relinquished Vincent's clothes. The latter however continued to gaze at him. A dark, forbearing tower, as he pondered down upon that anxious face, a certain gentleness relaxed his own; it gave a touch of profound sorrow to his grim demeanor.

"Had I killed you thirty-one years ago, it might have made a difference today," the wistful man mused.

Yes, who knew how matters might have been had he obeyed that impulse three decades ago. But then here they were, stuck in this wretched present, "Now though, killing you would be utterly meaningless. It won't return Lucrecia or Aeris. It won't bring Donal back or undo the mess you and President ShinRa have made of his brother and me. It won't erase the ordeal your 'brain scanner' has put Rufus through," His illuminous red eyes probed deeper into their target as he added, rather mystically"... and it certainly will not end your suffering, Professor."

The scientist made no answer. He blamed this man for everything. He'd sought him out to kill him, expecting he bore him the exact same intentions. They'd battled each other an entire night. They'd robbed and hurt each other. To Hojo, Death seemed the sole way out of it, either his own or Vincent's. Therefore to learn that they didn't share the same desire, to instead be shown mercy without the slightest hint of malice not only astonished Hojo, but also strangely unnerved him. He sidled closer against the rail, barricading himself behind hatred and mistrust. His large, slanted forehead furrowed up. His eyes glowered harshly back at Vincent, as if he'd just ripped out of his chest something so guarded and private then flung it into the open for everyone, himself included to see. Hojo did not know what exactly Vincent meant. He didn't want to know either. He kept pushing him away with his malicious glare, the same way he'd pushed Aeris.

For some reason though, despite this wall he'd erected to bar them all out of his mind, Hojo couldn't stop trembling. It wasn't electricity still strumming his nerves, rather that statement churning within. In particular that word "suffering". It reminded him of something the girl once told him, about his experiment being a "shelter" to hide from pain and fear. To hear it spoken again stirred up such a flurry of dread and agitation, not even his steel front could quite conceal it from the enemy's crimson gaze.

By this time, what little remained of the atrium had descended into sheer bedlam. The dusty atmosphere reeked danger. Debris and deluges of fire pelted everything below. The suspended complex swayed in tune to the earthquakes. The two loitered amidst this cave-in. Its finality hung over their heads, soon to crush them both under. Yet despite the crashing and destruction, raucous din and trembling structures, an air of total silence separated them from the environment. At that instant, they viewed each other only. The rest receded to the far background.

. Vincent regarded Professor Hojo: the scientist had always been a piece of the past he just could not unravel. He'd fought a lifetime for this experiment "Genesis Retrial", so consumed by its completion that logic and conscience no longer bore any significance. Without, he'd shouted, there was nothing.

But why?

Who was Hojo? No, beyond these dogmatic obsessions and animosity, who was he really?

It had occurred to Vincent that he never asked these questions before. From the day they met thirty-one years ago until tonight, he'd simply carried this riddle of a man along without once considering solving him. Not even as they waged terrible war against each other did he try to break the sealed box named "Hojo" open. He differed from Davoren, who'd been another puzzle of the past. Vincent had seen the lock in the gunman for a long time couldn't find any key. With Hojo, he held the key -the experiment- yet found no lock. Vincent guessed that he never asked those questions because until now he did not want to ask. Unlike his concern for Davoren, he did not want to solve or understand Hojo. The task seemed too daunting, the enigma too difficult, and the kind of insight required far, far too elusive for him to grasp.

Aeris however possessed such insight; that uncanny, spiritual ability to reach someone's essence guided by truth's light, no matter what adversities thwarted the way. Even though she'd foreseen the consequences, still she'd stood up, armed with this weapon alone, to confront her own nightmare. And through her actions, words, and bravery, the faith she put in Vincent, the gentle love she bore for him, and her kindness in comforting him, in opening him up to this "truth" of hers too, that young woman had passed her insight onto him. For the first time since they'd clashed, Vincent could look straight through the scientist's perturbed psyche, into a place where he beheld him as he truly was. He watched the three decade old puzzle unfold upon itself into clarity. Vincent finally understood this "truth" Aeris died

upholding.

And now, he decided the Professor would understand too.

The man squatted down to Hojo's level. The latter tensed back not knowing what to expect. Yet Vincent posed no threat. None of Chaos' rage touched his heart. Nor did he return any of Hojo's hostility. With solemn eyes anchored upon their disconcerted target, he composedly explained, "'Science' to you is more than a passion. It's your identity. It's how you esteem yourself and also where you find security. Basically, 'Science' is what gives your life meaning. To succeed in it means to succeed in life. Looking back, I can see how much it hurt- no, more than that. It must have burned you inside every day for thirty-one years: you, with all your intelligence, talents, dedication and ambitions, always being compared to Professor Gast. Professor Hojo, never quite good enough, always second place, always demeaned and slighted," Vincent's eyes narrowed as he murmured further, "Even after all these years, you still cannot let go of the past or Professor Gast."

is tone contained neither derision nor snubbery. He spoke not as an enemy, but as a kindred spirit; someone who genuinely felt for another's plight. This new insight, without which he never would have succeeded, lead Vincent deep into the scientist's head where at last he discovered the lock that hitherto had kept Hojo bolted off safe from scrutiny. That lock was Professor Gast. In fact, he recalled Hojo mention Gast several times whenever he let his anger roam free. His mind had seemed fixated on this particular man, around whom he'd built layer upon layer of fanatical obsession. Vincent wondered why he never noticed it before. Again, probably because he never wanted to before.

Who had not heard of "the Great Gast"? Vincent remembered him from Nibelheim as a charismatic, pleasant speaking, distinguished man. Professor Gast, the world's finest scientist. In life, a genius renowned for his work, the pride of ShinRa Inc., winner of countless awards, acclaim and admiration. In death, he became a legend, immortalized by his discoveries and achievements.

But as for "that second-rate scientist" Professor Hojo...

The sheer mention of his famous predecessor stirred up a mental whirlpool so intensely violent, it cast a shadow of keen angst across Hojo's already beleaguered face. He stared agog at Vincent, floundering between hatred and confoundment. He wanted him to shut up, to go away. No more of this. Vincent however calmly empathized against the creature's will "The kind of pain you're in, I understand. It's the pain of being rooted to the past. People die, things change, but you remain the same. You can't let go. Even if you wanted to, you don't know how, because pain becomes all you have. Soon your whole life becomes about ending that one pain, because after that you know you'll be free. It's like you've buried yourself deep beneath a field of snow. You feel cold, alone. You spend your time- years even, Professor, digging for a way out again. See, all of us here are stuck somewhere in the past. And we're all suffering, seeking redemption from that past, digging and digging with this pain inside. But then, each of us digs differently. For you, this experiment was your own way of reconciling with the pain of the past. In fact as far as you're concerned, it is the only way."

Vincent just kept on extracting secrets out of Hojo, speaking with unfeigned sympathy while he strung them into one necklace for the overwhelmed scientist to appreciate, "And I understand your desperation as well. Believe me, I do. You cling to this experiment because you gave it your everything, and so it has become your everything. It's the means of freeing yourself from the past and all the hurt. Without 'Genesis Retrial', you stay stuck there forever. In fact, without it, you become nothing. And that terrifies you. At first, I didn't want to admit this to myself. Still, truth of the matter, you and I are quite similar. Both of us have spent thirty-one years desperately seeking an end to our own pains. But we're also opposites. You gave into that pain long ago. Me, I...", he hesitated, still a bit bemused by the expression Aeris had used, then continued, "I 'grew' something new out of it. And in the end, it all comes down to her. She leaves me with a... 'soul'. You she leaves to what you've become: with nothing save nothingness itself and her pity."

That sentence again, the "truth", spoken with grim candor instead of mockery as before. The speechless Professor beheld Vincent in a daze, face distraught by fear. The man rose to his feet. Standing tall, he

studied that disfigured, troubled face looking back up at him awaiting what he would say next, as if his entire future depended on it. Vincent reflected how simple it had been to think of him as just "the enemy". How easy it was to trust one's eyes only, to remain safe in one's selfish views, to be deceived by the surface of a field of snow without ever searching beneath for the truth, either out of hatred, prejudice, arrogance or fear.

Who was Hojo? Before he probably would have simply answered: a brutal bigot and a megalomaniac. Now though, Vincent could at last see what Aeris had discovered before him, the real answer: Hojo was an embittered, pitiful lonely man; he was hurting like the rest of them for his own peace of mind, a shelter to hide from the painful past, torn to madness between ambitions for greatness and latent feelings of inferiority. Somewhere during the search, he lost his humanity, his "soul", this mysterious force which separated men from true monsters. He really did deserve pity. Indeed, Vincent had learnt more about this man in one night than he'd even known in thirty-one years.

Three words he uttered, three words which comprised his final verdict: "It's over, Hojo."

And with that, the composed man turned to leave. He never looked back.

He'd already said those words once, though Hojo could not recall Vincent ever addressing him by his first name before. It somehow confirmed the finality of that ominous statement. At first, the Professor had refused point-blank to accept it. For an entire night he'd fought against it, its meaning, and most fiercely of all against the person who'd spoken it. But he couldn't contain this fiasco anymore. Too many pieces. The experiment had shattered into too many pieces for him to hold together. He was tired, burnt and broken. Still that fateful decree echoed within his ears: it's over, Hojo.

And this time, Hojo believed it.

He sat slouched there clutching the rail, weary, shaking. Yes, it was over. He felt that admission liberate him from a fantasy he'd long hidden behind out to a cold, devastating reality he'd just realized. The Professor plummeted into catatonic shell-shock, overwhelmed by all that was said, while he blankly watched the crippled Vincent limp out of his life again. With him, he took Hojo's last hope that somehow the experiment might still be salvaged.

But no. No, it was over.

Vincent had left Aeris and traveled here not for revenge. Perhaps slaughtering her murderer would have been easier, even justified. Yet once he'd finally come to understand the Professor, killing him not seemed pointless, but wrong. He regarded Hojo as the alternate version of himself, what he could have become had he let pain swallow him whole too. To kill him would be like killing part of the truth.

And ultimately, what he wanted was truth. He had returned to honor Aeris. Ever since she'd spoken out, the Professor had been staggering around embroiled in conflict, having slayed her yet not quite silenced her. This "truth" she'd died for, Vincent would not let him fling it aside like he'd done with her corpse. By understanding his enemy, he'd make him see it, grasp it, and above all else accept it. He'd come to engrave that truth deep into Hojo's core, so that no matter what he did, even slayed her a thousand times more, she would still win, and he'd know that she'd defeated him, utterly and completely. To grant her total victory over her murderer seemed the sole way to ensure she did not die in vain.

One knew not whether to consider Vincent's act charitable or cruel. On one hand, he'd spared Professor Hojo's life. On the other hand, he'd abandoned him with a shattering revelation for company. He had not lied though when he said he actually understood him. He understood how painful it felt to still seek redemption from a past long gone. To Vincent, it was Lucrecia. To Hojo, it was Professor Gast. No, not just Gast. All "those fools", always admiring the latter scientist while slighting the former, discrediting him, mocking him. Even when he assumed leadership of the department, he never quite measured up in their eyes. It must have hurt Professor Hojo terribly. For someone like him, science indeed meant more than mere achievement. He equated it with his self-worth, dignity and respect. He wouldn't concede to pain,

however. Most likely, he never even allowed himself to feel anything save hard determination: to outshine his detestable predecessor, to exorcise the ghosts jeering at him, and to prove his mettle to "them" all with "JENOVA Project: Genesis Retrial". After all, to create a superior being- a God- would catapult him to the pinnacle of scientific achievement. Not even Professor Gast could best him then.

But underneath, science never really factored into the equation. It had always been about him, his ego and this monstrous, cancer-like pain gnawing non-stop at his subconsciousness. Hojo regarded this experiment as the only means of ending the injuries of the past, the same way Vincent saw punishing himself as the only means of obtaining forgiveness. Yes, he also understood his despair in clinging to "Genesis Retrial", even as it came crashing down. To let go meant to trudge on through perpetual agony. It meant never resolving the hurt, never attaining peace. How well did Vincent know that road.

After his final statement, Vincent had no more to say, nor would he have anything else to do with the scientist. He began his journey back to where he'd placed Aeris. The girl was probably dead by now. Still, Vincent wanted to be with her. He wanted to continue hugging her corpse for what little time remained. He'd long since recognized the impossibility of fleeing this Hellhole. Escape held no meaning without her anyway. He knew if the collapsing reactor didn't crush him first, then his condition- the wounds, the exhaustion, and this wretched fever cooking his interior- surely would. It didn't matter. Right now, he just wanted to rejoin Aeris.

This war was finished.

Maybe for him, but not for Hojo.

In these few seconds, Hojo was left behind to rot in his own devices. He felt as though he'd been turned inside out; like everything- secrets he never realized, the true ugliness within, the misery he'd kept locked away even from himself- everything his being ever contained spilt out onto the floor for an invisible crowd to see. Yes, it was over. All this time he believed he'd been giving to the experiment: his youth, his career, his body, his mind, his very soul, it emerged he'd actually been feeding pain. Over the years, the insatiable demon inside had kept on demanding. And he just kept on giving and sacrificing until at last he realized, too late, that he'd lost everything. Everything.

"You're too afraid to admit: all you've ever had were empty fields with nothing beneath"

Nothing except nothingness itself and her pity. And yes, pain. He still had the pain.

It was over.

All because of him.

As he'd plunged deeper and deeper into a bottomless pit of despair, it only took that tiny thought to whip Professor Hojo into acute delirium, in which he clutched fast to the ensuing obsessions like they were his very last hope; a false ray of light a despondent wretch madly grabs that it might yet rescue him from falling. Yes, it was over, but it was STILL Vincent's fault, more so than before! In fact, it was over BECAUSE of him! He'd destroyed him, humiliated and exposed him. Now he leaves him an empty shell, with only her hurtful truth reverberating nonstop inside. None of this would have happened were it not for him. It was still all his fault!

Rage, hatred and the same unforgiving blame flooded the chasm that enemy had ripped across his chest. More obsessions pranced around. Hojo began to bristle. He clenched his trembling fists. He glowered hard at Vincent's backside, struggling in a vortex of raw emotions while "they" loomed about: the girl, the symbol of all the beauty his experiment represented, pitying him; Professor Gast observing him, behind him a rabble of faceless, nameless people of his tortuous past, some jeering, others dismayed, everyone waiting for him to collapse.

No! No! He refused! He wouldn't let them beat him! Right then, all he saw was Vincent walking away. The

farther the distance stretched between them, the harsher grew Hojo's discord, and the more anger he transferred upon him; instead of an enemy who'd destroyed the Reactor, he promoted him to the embodiment of everything he'd ever loathed, feared and suffered. No matter what was said, no matter what was understood, no matter what was over, the blame still fell on his head. His head alone!

So that was it? He just lets him saunters in, take everything away, then simply leaves? Was that it?

No! He would not let him! No! No! No!

In this moment of uncontrollable insanity, his mind kept screaming "NO!" over and over, over and over, again and again until denial suddenly converted to action. Faster than an instant, Professor Hojo scrambled onto both feet whereupon he, despite the understanding, the truth, the physical and mental anguish, charged straight after Vincent like a roused beast, roaring murder all the way.

Thus that deranged battlecry announced the unexpected resumption of their war. Vincent was completely caught off guard. No sooner had he whirled around, eyes wide open, than the scientist, powered on pure fury, tackled him full impact. The astonished man grunted out a froth of blood. Together they flew halfway down the length of the bridge and tumbled the remaining distance across the grated floor till the end. Vincent crashed flat against his back. He'd yet to comprehend what had just happened when something hard and hot grabbed him by the throat. Danger buzzed loud in his ears. Gagging, he looked up. He found himself straddled underneath Professor Hojo with that burnt claw clamped around his neck, thus holding him pinned to the ground.

Not three seconds ago he'd been walking along. Now here he lay struggling breathlessly with this psychotic demon on top of him, barking nonsense into his face. Never would Vincent have imagined Hojo still capable of such treachery, especially after that brutal electrocution. Nor had Hojo himself. Yet anger imbued him with overwhelming strength. His scrawny frame seemed unable to contain it. He wanted Vincent dead, dead, dead! Vincent writhed and hacked for freedom, better yet just a whiff of oxygen. He tried to pry those fingers loose. No good. A disturbing haziness started creeping into his vision. Hojo became a blur of green, yellow and black. So grotesque... so incomprehensible...

While his helpless victim thus faded noisily into semi-consciousness, the mad creature continued blubbering in an unsteady fit, "So TheN, thAt's it?! YoU jUST waLK away?! NO! It's ALL beCAUSE of You!! YoU've D-DesTroyeD EVERYTHING!!!" poor Vincent choked outloud when the merciless maniac leaned over him more, thus both crushing and squeezing his windpipe. Hojo snarled, "You Think I'll jUST leT YOU WALK AWAY?! BASTARD!! MY EXPERIMENT!! IT'S ALL BECAU-"

Suddenly, a small clatter interrupted the scene.

All attention immediately turned around. Even Vincent, strangled between life and death, rolled one bleary eye sideways, only to witness a grey handgun literally go skittering by. The weapon stopped a few inches away from him. It just lay there upon the floor. For a moment, everything fell dead quiet. Both enemies stared blankly at the inanimate intruder, Hojo flummoxed by this little mystery someone had obviously tossed into their fray.

But who...?

The answer came in the form of a loud gunshot, delivered with cold accuracy straight into Hojo's left shoulder. The bullet shattered bone. The stunned scientist raised a sharp yelp as he violently keeled aside against impact; in effect he relinquished his victim's neck to grip this new wound.

Vincent gasped: air at last! But he knew the surprise attack would only distract its target for a minute. Thus at once, without thinking, the man groped for that gun flung nearby. He couldn't reach it. Vincent writhed weakly upon his back. Dazed, frantic, he stretched his hand farther out towards the weapon. Closer. Closer. Just a little bit more...

Meanwhile the flabbergasted Professor Hojo had already recovered position again. He peeked into his bloodstained palm holding his slumped shoulder, then growling, craned his neck around towards the source of such treachery. At present he forgot the enemy sprawled beneath him. He didn't even notice him struggling, so adamant on finding this brazen sniper instead.

His attention darted high up to a bridge that ran parallel to theirs. There he spied a tall, dirty, ragged man, his white hair blowing in dishevelment. The sniper stood at the parapet with a precisely aimed assault rifle in both hands. His pink eyes, one locked behind the scope of the gun, gleamed cool, calculated concentration back at Hojo.

The next five seconds passed as a surreal silence; no sound could be heard save that single gunshot still echoing across the air. Of course Hojo recognized Davoren at once. Vincent too, though he noticed that the man only wore a white sleeveless undershirt now. For some reason he'd discarded his double-shoulder holster, tie, shirt and suit jacket. Still in those tatters, he struck a rather impressive figure, beaming fortitude, like a battle-ravaged soldier determined to persevere despite any adversity.

Neither Vincent nor the Professor knew where Davoren came from. He seemed to have just materialized out of the shadows. In actuality, after delivering Rufus and those two ex-Turks to safety, the gunman, rather than accompany them, had set off again to find Vincent. He did not know how, but some sense had warned him he was still in the Reactor. Thus through the turmoil and earthquakes he'd rushed. The road eventually led him to this crumbling atrium, where he discovered, as feared, Vincent in dire need of assistance.

He had tossed his gun into the skirmish. He'd fired that shot at Professor Hojo. But to Davoren, that bullet meant more than mere help. It was also for Donal: for the torture his beloved brother endured in the name of experimentation; for those thirty-one years spent in ignorance, serving both his murderers. The wrecking of his life, the tears and degradation. It all ended right here and now.

Indeed, Davoren's interference did not shock Hojo as much as the emotional intensity of this piece of lead lodged in his shoulder. He last recalled the gunman collapsing to the floor in tearful anguish. Since then he'd dismissed the whimpering sod from his mind as having either fled the Reactor or been buried under rubble. Yet now he beheld the gunman poised high up there neither sniveling nor dead, but actively challenging him with gritty resolve.

During these tense few seconds of total silence, the whole history between them shone bright through their mutual glares. Davoren had already betrayed his master once; he'd chosen a traitor's path rather than kill Rufus ShinRa as ordered. For Hojo, the realization that he'd been so defiantly betrayed again swept him under a huge tidalwave of fury even he could not withstand. Clutching his bloody shoulder tighter, the scientist tremulously rasped out his venomous wrath, "D-DaVoR-Ren, yoU sON oF a B-"

Davoren however cut him short with another shot. He hit him square in the neck.

A spume of blood and saliva regurgitated up Hojo's throat instead of that curse. He didn't scream. He probably didn't even comprehend what happened. The shocked creature just reeled off side at a loss for balance, bewildered by this sudden and total abolishment of speech. His single, glazed eye clung to the gunman. At the same time Vincent, after squirming an eternity finally grabbed the weapon Davoren had flung to him. The contact triggered an instant adrenaline rush. All his senses tuned into the present, into this exact moment as he lay here pinned down and straddled by the enemy. Don't think. Just act!

With one powerful kick, he knocked Hojo completely off position. The disorientated monster crashed to the floor in a tizzy. Meanwhile Vincent had regained his freedom; he seized this opportunity at once. Quickly beating both legs back to put enough distance between them, he then sat up and, gun in one hand, opened full fire upon the beast just a meter away. He saw the first bullet blast Hojo's opposite shoulder, this time sending him tumbling away before the second, third, fourth, and God knows how much more pelted him further back. Vincent kept shooting, crimson eyes harshly set behind this weapon. Davoren, his face hard as if chiseled in stone, provided support from his vantage point. The shots came

one after another. Blood spurted into the air. Together these two men, once such bitter enemies, delivered a terrific battery of lead against their common foe, one at close proximity, the other long range.

Indeed, they rapidly overwhelmed Professor Hojo. They gave him no chance to retaliate or even re-orientate himself. Their combined forces savagely beat him back and back until the creature, traumatized to lunacy, retreated in a frenzy rather than be blasted to bits. The long-suffering atrium began to cave in. The walls buckled then collapsed under the weight of the ceiling. Down came the balconies, the screen remains, mangled steel and chunks of stone upon the hapless world below. Hojo maniacally hastened towards an exit on the opposite end of the bridge. Bleeding and seething, amazingly still alive despite all those wounds, he scrambled away through falling debris into a thick curtain of dust and fire, after which Vincent lost sight of him. He could not tell whether the scientist managed to escape, got crushed, or just vanished into the smoke. Unimportant. What mattered was the enemy had dispersed.

Vincent had somehow held himself together so far. Yet scarcely had the messy affair ended when a terrible weakness seized him again. He'd long since passed the threshold into a realm well, well beyond his own limits. After this grand shoot-out, Vincent felt his whole interior finally implode. No more resilience, no more strength. No more anything. His eyes lost their focus. The gun dropped out of his trembling hand. Soon the devastated man collapsed to the floor, where once more he languished flat upon his back, gasping out loud. Fever and hallucinations, injuries, pain, exhaustion- they'd all become too heavy for this battered, numb carcass of his to bear.

A strange detachment separated him from these tumultuous surroundings. Hazards crashed around him without sound. He retained an awareness of the danger, but could not squeeze the smallest ounce of energy to move himself away. In fact, he couldn't even muster the will power required. He just lay there in the warzone apathetically gazing upwards at nothing.

He wondered if this was dying.

Davoren had also lost Professor Hojo in the commotion, which suited him fine since he had more pressing matters to attend to, namely Vincent. Already he'd descended some staircase that connected the higher bridge to its sister below. He rushed over to his fallen ally amidst the raining rubble. As his consciousness receded further and further into darkness, Vincent saw the anxious gunman run up to him then crouch down in close attendance. He held his face in both hands. He was saying something. Vincent felt so groggy. He didn't understand.

However that prayer, about the "wandering soul" and an end to pain, he suddenly remembered where he'd heard it: it was years ago, after they'd stormed the Mako Reactor and slaughtered those terrorists. Of course. He'd stood quietly in the background listening to Davoren chant that simple prayer over one of the corpses...

Vincent let his mind sink into this sea of blackness, lost in triviality, until the hungry waves swallowed him under. The atrium faded away. Davoren, by now shouting at him, faded away too. All of tonight dispersed into the far distance.

His last thoughts turned to Aeris. She said he'd served his punishment. This new soul he'd grown had bought him Lucrecia's forgiveness. Now, she'd told him, it was time he forgave himself....

She said she knew what's beneath the snow fields....

Vincent's eyes gently closed. He remembered no more.

-End of Chp.89

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields –Chp.90

Her senses, scattered and stagnant for so long in a swamp of darkness, finally stirred. Bit by bit, they began to gather at one place, an ever growing jumble of faces, voices, flashes and impressions. Slowly they raised her towards the surface. She drifted upwards, but at the same time, something felt amiss. What, she did not know. Just this special something very precious to her, she realized it wasn't here with her anymore. She looked around in desperation.

She had to find it!

Where could it be?

Why wasn't it here with her?

Amidst such a chaotic congregation of thoughts and questions, she pushed her way through until she discovered her lost treasure floating right there before her: a man.

Beneath the frost, she'd uncovered within him guilt and ever-consuming sorrow. Beneath that she'd found gentleness, warmth, and the most beautiful soul of all, cultivated out of love and its own suffering. She beheld his face. She yearned to touch it again. Yet to her dismay, a wide gulf seemed to separate their hearts. Gazing back at her, the man appeared troubled and forlorn, uncertain of some matter he would not share with her. Nor could she fathom what tormented him so; his eyes barred her out. Yes, those crimson eyes. They could always see into her. She however never completely penetrated through them. He never quite let her that far into himself.

She wanted to find out what's wrong. This distance between them, the way he beheld her, it perturbed her greatly. She reached out for him. She could see her own hand; five fingertips trembling to close the gap...

In vain. The man had already receded to oblivion as if purposefully avoiding her- *her* in particular. Meanwhile she floundered behind, still aching to caress his face. She tried to swim after him when a powerful current swept her far away in the opposite direction. She tumbled and struggled. Soon her mind emerged out of the black waters of unconsciousness to the shores of dim awareness.

Aeris' green eyes opened halfway. A white, stoic ceiling greeted her hazy vision. She blinked. She found herself lying supine underneath a warm blanket in an unfamiliar bed. Steel railings bordered its parameter, beyond which the world dimmed to obscurity. A mask covered the lower half of her face. Her breathing sounded so loud within the confines of this plastic case. Several machines surrounded her. They held her prisoner via wired electrodes applied to her chest, tubes connected to her mask, and fluid-filled cannulas, one inserted in her forearm, another in her delicate neck. These electronic sentinels watched over her. They beeped results out regularly as if praising each other for a job well done.

A grey grogginess still coated Aeris' brain. She did not know where she was. She could not recall what happened or how fate dumped her here. Everything inside her head hung in tatters. Even the contents of her dream just now eluded her, although the emotions it had aroused persisted as a vague fog, especially this feeling of separation, of loss without reason.

The weary girl remained quiet and still. She stared up while sensation seeped back drop by drop to her numb body. She wondered where she was. The machines around her, the wires and tubes, it reminded her of the Professor. But no, this wasn't the laboratory.

The where...?

As she dawdled longer in consciousness, Aeris gradually discerned a presence nearby. The girl rolled her sight sideways. There at the foot of the bed she perceived a young man in profile, no more than a blur to

her haggard eyes. He gazed far off into empty space with arms crossed. Aeris silently watched him rub his temples then fold his arms again, as if so worn out by his own irritation he knew not how to bear it anymore.

His wayward attention happened to then fall upon Aeris. To suddenly discover her awake jolted the man clear out of his reverie. He immediately scurried to her side, where he stooped over the railing to observe her upclose.

Aeris could distinguish his facial features much better now, though in her befuddlement struggled to decide whether he too was another dream or real. He had a shock of blond hair spiked on end. His intensely blue, bright eyes fascinated her. Aeris gazed up at him as she rummaged through her shambled memories in search for him. The young man waited, jaws clenched, repressed stiff under anxiety. A name. Just for her to say his name would set him at ease.

The girl didn't find him in her head, but preserved safe within her heart. A good friend, how often had he come visit her to keep her company. Him, with his infectious sense of humour, amazing adventure stories and that wonderful smile she loved so much. Yes, she remembered him.

Aeris weakly raised her free forearm up to him. The man clasped it at once into his strong hand and drew it near him.

"..Cloud," she identified. Her own voice shocked her; it squeezed out not above a whisper.

Yet even if Cloud hadn't heard her, he caught the spark of fond recognition in her eyes, and that sufficed. A big, relieved grin spread across his face. "Well hey-hey there, gorgeous!" he welcomed Aeris.

His friendliness flowed through her hand to warm her to the very core. No, not a dream. He was real. This was real. As the confused girl fumbled with this realisation, Cloud, still beaming happy sunshine down upon her, motioned aside for someone else to come quick. Suddenly Tifa scuttled into Aeris' field of vision.

The unexpected encounter took them both by surprise. Tifa clasped her mouth to contain the excitement of seeing Aeris thus awake; the feeble latter whirled in a bigger daze to meet her at all. Aeris searched her heart again to find Tifa's memory snuggled safe next to Cloud's. Of course she remembered her too. The glimmer in her eyes indicated so.

Both of them dear friends. Both of them here with her.

By now, emotion so overwhelmed Tifa that regardless of the rail or wires, she bent over to embrace her friend as best as she could. Aeris wriggled her hand out of Cloud's to pat her shoulder in return.

"Oh Aeris! Thank God!" Tifa exclaimed rapturously, "Thank God, thank God you're alright!!!"

"Heh, you sure had us worried SICK!" Cloud chimed in, "I think I got a couple of grey hairs because of you!"

The joyful reunion bewildered Aeris speechless. It seemed *ages* since she'd last seen her two friends. Another lifetime, another person.

She studied them as they happily hovered about her. Tifa had managed to compose herself again. She stood by the bedside, smiling, her face relaxed at last after an eternity of tension. Aeris noticed how rather unkempt she appeared. Her blouse was a bit creased; her long hair hung in a careless braid. She looked like she hadn't slept properly for days. Aeris turned to Cloud. He appeared even more tired. Dark circles hung underneath his eyes. Exhaustion weighed heavy upon his shoulders, though now that she lay safe and awake, his ecstasy could vanquish anything fatigue attempted on him.

With better orientation came keener self-awareness. Aeris reflected upon her state as she rested upon this bed. A pervasive stiffness plagued her joints. Dryness kept her throat constricted; how she craved for a sip of water. She felt sore all over, especially her thorax. It kind of hurt to breathe. Every rise of the boson drew in a muffled pang of agony along with air from the mask. Her thin body, barely traceable beneath the blanket, was wrapped up tight in bandages and dressings. These shackles of white cloth wound thickly around her right shoulder and chest, braced her back then bound her limbs. All this conquest beneath a simple cotton gown.

Her senses next lolled about the room. It was square and white. A couple of chairs cowered in a corner; high above them a TV imperiously sat upon a shelf. Aeris' bed occupied the centre of the room. It thus put her in the crossfire between two windows which antagonised each other from opposite walls. She looked to the left. This window offered a view of the city skyline. Tall, grim buildings and modern complexes. Into these sprawling battlements a dying sun had already begun to sink, casting hues of orange and pink upon Midgar as night slowly invaded the sky.

Aeris glanced at the opposing window on the right. Through its glass façade she watched life bustle about in the corridor outside her room. Unfamiliar people walked past. Wheelchairs and trolleys rolled by. She did not understand any of this. What was this place? How did she get here?

Her perplexed mind drifted back to this private room. Questions persecuted her. Aeris forcefully dug through the darkness enshrouding her memories in search for answers. She last recalled herself... in some... hall. Noise. There'd been a lot of noise, crashing and shaking. At first, she was anxious. But then, she found him. He was with her, holding her, listening as she spoke to him about... about...

The rest fizzled to blank. She could remember nothing afterwards. So what happened? How did she come to be here, amongst her friends again?

"..where am...I?" she inquired at a loss.

Tifa, keen to the girl's confusion, immediately leaned over to reassure her, "You're in the hospital, sweetheart. Don't worry. It's okay. Everything's okay."

Hospital? What...? How?

Aeris' bewildered sight wandered around the place again, still uncertain and wary, when an even more important question struck her poor heart into sudden flummox, "Ah! Vincent!" she started, "W-where's Vincent?!"

Tifa blinked. A flutter of hesitation, quite perceivable despite the manner she cast her brown eyes askance, gravened her expression. She faltered, "Vincent... he's..."

However Cloud, who'd stepped out of the room for a moment to fetch someone, now returned. An older woman in a white coat entered after him carrying a file and some papers. Behind her walked a tan-skinned nurse.

"Check it out, Doc! She's awake!" Cloud announced the good news.

The nurse frowned at such informality. But the doctor, a good-humoured lady, boomed back, "Well now! Let's see!"

Tifa's answer would have to wait. She mumbled something then retreated as the entourage assumed command. She and Cloud loitered in one corner. From there they attentively followed the main scene at hand. The nurse, a diligent busy-bee, removed Aeris' oxygen mask with a professional smile. Next off she went copy new information from the machines into the charts. The physician lingered at the end of the bed. She flicked through the file while speaking to the nurse in their cryptic medical language.

Aeris viewed this woman. She was of slender build, with reddish hair piled on top of her head. She had a plain but honest face. It glowed amiability when she turned to greet her patient.

“Good afternoon, Miss Aeris. I’m the senior doctor here. My name’s Dr. Moira Marshall. And how are you now that you’re back in the land of the living?”

Aeris knew not how to respond. Nor did the good doctor insist on one yet. Instead she let the girl enjoy her first breaths of natural air while she reviewed the file more. The assiduous nurse handed her the finished charts. Dr. Moira, upon receiving them, gave her a set of instructions; the latter scampered out of the room to obey at once. The doctor now focused all her attention on her patient.

“You know, you are one very lucky girl, Miss Aeris,” she declared, “With the state you were brought in, to be honest many of us were afraid you wouldn’t make it. But I’m so delighted you’ve pulled through after all,” the pleasant woman opened her file to a new page, “Tell me, how are you feeling?”

“Tired,” sighed Aeris, her voice barely audible.

“Well, naturally you would be,” Dr. Moira scribbled away, “But how’s your shoulder? Is there any pain?”

“A bit. It... it hurts more in my chest when I breathe.”

“Okay. I’ll have the nurse give you another pain killer.”

She wrote further notes into the file. Dr. Moira then turned towards Tifa and Cloud with some question, to which the man duly replied, his girlfriend occasionally adding a remark to assist him. The details of their conversation escaped Aeris; a slight numbness still tingled her ears, plus her interest did not lie in their discussion. Instead during this time, the lonesome girl quietly contrasted the doctor’s cheerful words against her own dim recollections. She tried to elucidate a clear explanation as to what exactly happened.

She’d been injured. The Professor. He’d slashed her across the chest. She saw those talons again, long, hideous knives whetted on malice. Lying here, that moment God knows how far behind her, Aeris could still feel Hojo’s claw cut a swath of gruesome pain across her body. Her mind had then plummeted into darkness. She only resurfaced once, whereupon she’d found herself supported between Vincent’s arms. Something terrible had happened after she’d fallen, what though she still could not say. He’d carried her away to some hall. Together they’d loitered upon the floor, she fading but happy, so happy knowing he was safe and alive.

That’s right. She remembered now: Holocaust Hojo had wanted to kill Vincent. After an eternity of cowering, she’d stood up to protect him, even if it meant her own death.

And death was precisely the fate she’d received.

Yet here she was, alive and secure, surrounded by friends she never dreamed she’d see again. So someone had brought her to hospital. But one point rather troubled Aeris.

“Who?” she interrupted the conversation.

Cloud, in the middle of his sentence, stopped short. Both he and Tifa looked towards her. Dr. Moira also turned back to her patient. She asked, “Sorry, what?”

“You said... I was brought in. Who brought me here?”

She thought maybe Vincent had found an escape route out of the Reactor after all. Maybe he’d carried her to this place. But that scenario seemed highly unlikely. Huddled in that hall, rubble raining hard and earth trembling beneath them, they’d both known that he could never get her out of there in time. It was her fate to die there.

So who? *Who* had defied fate itself?

"I don't know," the physician admitted, "He didn't give his name. Uh, really tall fellow, with white hair and strange pink eyes."

No name needed. Aeris recognized him at once: Davoren.

A cold chill suddenly shot up Aeris' spine. The description petrified the girl stiff, so much so that her breath froze inside her tense bosom. Her stunned mind conjured up his image. Davoren, the Professor's obedient puppet. The hound dog who wouldn't rest until he'd dragged her back to his master. She'd never borne more than two feelings for him: absolute, mad fear and equal hatred. But now, to hear she owed her survival to the very same man, it left Aeris staring agog at the doctor. She had to know more!

Dr. Moira in return perceived how dramatically this simple revelation affected the girl. So she had the kind grace to stop writing in order to divulge into the full story, "This man, he barged into the ER early morning. He had you flung over one shoulder. Your wound was wrapped up tight in a shirt. My guess is that it belonged to him, because he only had his undershirt on when he came in. He'd also used his own tie as a sort of 'rope' to support your injury better, just to keep it all together till he got you here. See, you'd been slashed pretty badly across the chest, Miss Aeris. There'd been a tremendous amount of trauma: to the shoulder joint itself, the collar bone, ribs, lungs and blood vessels. Plus you received some mini-fractures to your pelvis and lower back. The way that man had you wrapped up with his shirt and tie as one bandage, he's quite clever I must confess. It didn't stop the bleeding, but it sure slowed it down long enough for us to save you. Anyway, you weren't the only emergency he'd brought in."

"I...I wasn't?"

"He was carrying you across one shoulder and another man on his other shoulder. A young guy, as I recall, with long black hair and this..." she waved one hand in search for a proper description, "This busted metallic 'arm' thing. He was in far worse shape than you. Well, this white-haired man dropped you both off here. Everyone was rushing around. I went away for just a minute. When I came back," the doctor concluded mystically, "he was already gone."

Aeris struggled to register this flood of new information, "And... how long ago was this?"

Dr. Moira checked the chart in hand. She calculated, "About three weeks. That's how long you've been in a coma."

Silence.

The girl, rigid as wood, fixedly viewed the doctor a moment longer, but all the details had been disclosed. Nothing else to add. Aeris whispered, "I see," then twisted her head to one side, where it stayed thus. She asked no more.

Not once throughout the anecdote had either Cloud, looking on with arms tightly crossed, or Tifa interrupted. They'd obviously heard it before. They remained two pensive spectators in the background. Tifa especially seemed immersed in morbid preoccupation, during which she'd riveted her disconcerted eyes upon Midgar's skyline rather than keep them inside here.

A heavy hush descended upon the room with the completion of the story. Only the consistent bleeps of the machinery prevented its weight from crushing them under. Dr. Moira clearly could not understand the uptightness of this lot. However, being the amicable woman she was, she attempted to diffuse some of Aeris' tension with a smile.

"Well, what's important is that you get better," she dismissed the topic, "It hardly matters who brought you here as long as you're alive now, right?"

If only it were that simple. To learn that she owed her life to that man- *that* man of all people- confounded Aeris mute. She spun in a whirlpool of thoughts and emotions. He who's mercilessly torn her away from this world, from her friends, from Vincent's arms on that cold, dreadful night. He was the same who'd saved them both from a sure death.

Aeris returned to that frightening instance inside the dungeon, when she'd stood pressed back against the wall with Davoren towering high over her. She'd called him a monster. Foolish little child that she was, she'd thought she knew what that word meant until he made her touch his skin; he actually took her trembling hand and ran it alongside his face.

She remembered the words he carved deep into her soul; words which altered her perception completely. She remembered his intense stare boring straight into her. He'd then lit his cigarette lighter and held it between them. Through those pink eyes he'd let her glimpse another person trapped behind there. Him but not him, burning amidst such sorrow, such pain it struck her more so now that it did before.

Aeris realized that was the last time she spoke to Davoren. They'd parted ways without her ever understanding that part of him. That part buried far beneath the brutality and blood-lust.

Was this the part which finally emerged on that night to save them?

The entry of two orderlies disrupted Aeris' reverie. They wheeled a bed-trolley into the room. Dr. Moira acknowledged them with a quick "Ah, right". She turned to give the head orderly a list of commands. He grunted something then with his partner began to prepare their vehicle for loading. Amidst the bustle, the physician had a brief opportunity to explain to Aeris, "These two gentlemen are going to take you to the X-ray room downstairs. We just need a couple of shots of your shoulder and hips, okay?"

The girl nodded. By now, the tan-skinned nurse had returned to help the transfer. So the doctor bid Aeris a temporary farewell before departing. She walked out into the main corridor with the file.

"Dr. Moira?" called Cloud.

She looked behind to perceive him and Tifa, both having also left the patient, trotting after her rife with questions. She understood at once. She motioned for the couple to follow her. Down the hallway the three marched until they reached a door at the very end. The physician unlocked it then escorted her guests through. They entered a small office, consisting of a desk, some chairs and an overstuffed bookcase in one wall. Tifa and Cloud were politely requested to sit. They obeyed. Dr. Moira closed the door then, dumping Aeris' file upon the desk, assumed her own place behind the table. With fingers intertwined upon its shiny surface, she waited for either visitor to commence.

Cloud cut straight to the chase, "Tell me, Doc, is Aeris gonna be okay?"

In addressing such uncertain issues as prognosis, Dr. Moira adopted a more solemn front. "Well, she's made it through the worst part, but she's not out of the woods yet," she proceeded cautiously, "Her chest is still in pretty bad shape. The wounds haven't completely healed. Plus we've detected various chemical substances in her system, but the dialysis has fortunately removed them completely. The damage they've done though is difficult to assess."

"Chemicals?" he echoed, perplexed, "What kind of chemicals?"

"Some we've identified. Drugs, like sedatives and muscle relaxants. Others we just don't know their purpose or even what they are. That, and there are markings; I mean like rope marks, needle injections and other bruises all over her body," Dr. Moira rubbed her temples at the list of harm, "It's like she'd been tortured as some kind of... lab-rat or something."

She'd hit the mark a lot closer than she realized. Tifa pressed one hand against her distraught heart to

steady herself. The horrific image of Aeris poisoned and senseless, tied up with Evil hovering around her, touching and hurting her so perturbed the young woman. Cloud leaned forward in his seat; he absorbed the doctor's every word. His weary, stern face radiated contemplation.

The physician however had some hope to offer, "Aeris has suffered multiple traumas. As I'm sure you're aware of, the New Government has implemented that 'Natural Resource Protection' law which severely restricts the use and sale of materia. It's not like the old days anymore. Even in hospitals, material is used only in extreme emergencies, and it's not the highest grade either, more of a supportive measure. But her condition has stabilised now. We will continue our treatment plan with a couple more pulses of materia. It'll heal her wounds better, even prevent scarring, and most importantly help mend her broken bones. I cannot foretell the future of course. But like I said, the worst is over. She's conscious and holding out reasonable well. Hopefully, she will be alright."

Towards the end of her speech, Dr. Moira had re-opened Aeris' file to record the rest of her assessments. Still scribbling away, she tossed an extra comment into the discussion, "That man white hair... Heaven help us. If he'd brought her in any later, she definitely would have died. We still don't know what happened to that other man he carried in, though... the one with long black hair."

A certain nervousness crept into Cloud at the mention of this "other man". He and Tifa exchanged a significant glance.

"Come to think of it," the physician realised, "We never found out his name either. He had no wallet or ID card on him. I told you before that he was brought in with Miss Aeris," she looked at Cloud, "You wouldn't happen to know him too, would you?"

"No, afraid not," he apologized, a little too quickly.

"Hm."

Cloud straightened up in his chair, "But, uh," he tried to maintain the smoothness of their conversation, "You say he was in even worse shape than Aeris, right?"

"Mr. Strife," she announced, "I have worked here for seventeen years, and never, *never* have I seen anyone in such a critical state as THAT man," she momentarily lowered her pen to recount this amazing anecdote to her two listeners, "Severe haemorrhage, fever, multiple trauma to bones and internal organs, an assortment of wounds throughout his body, from cuts to slashes to gunshots. He was unconscious but still breathing. It simply boggles the mind to wonder who could endure so much abuse and still be *alive*. Not an ordinary human, that's for sure," she reflected deeper upon the matter, "Actually, that man made an extremely intriguing case."

Cloud shifted uncomfortably. All this talk about Dr. Moira's "intriguing case" put him ill at ease. Tifa however inquired, "How do you mean?"

The physician turned to her, "Well, besides the fact that he was alive at all, we discovered many- how shall I put it? Unique finding about him. His particular physiology just didn't seem to fit with norm. His body had these incredible ways of coping with blood loss and injuries. With just basic therapy, his wounds began healing a lot faster than usual," Dr. Moira resumed writing, at the same time saying, "Anyway, we treated his messy condition as best as we could. I was going to summon some consultants and scientists from another hospital to come have a look at him. I'm sure they would have been interested in his 'abnormalities'. Unfortunately, he disappeared on the third day after his admission."

"Oh," remarked the young woman quietly.

"Nobody knows how. I wouldn't be surprised if he just woke up and left. But what's so bewildering is that shortly afterwards, everything we had about him disappeared too. The medical file we'd written on him, his findings, even his details on the computer system. All gone without a trace. So technically speaking,"

she emphasized the conclusion to the two, "This man never existed."

Listening to this story, the silent couple had a good idea about who had erased that data, although both would not reveal the perpetrator's identity to the befuddled physician. Turks were skilled at sneaking around just as much as covering their own tracks and destroying evidence. Yes, Cloud regretted lying. Then again, behind their grave façades, he and Tifa were sure glad this particular Turk managed to escape before he fell prisoner to endless investigations and curious probing.

They watched the tireless doctor inscribe more notes into Aeris' file. Notes about her condition, her results, her outcome. Cloud frowned. To sit thus with Aeris' case on display, surrounded by many questions still unanswered, evoked especially strong feelings of frustration within him. He stared down at his clenched fists while mulling over his own emotions. When he could bear it no longer, the man asked straight out, "Doc, how soon before Aeris can come home with us?"

Dr. Moira raised her head. She looked kindly upon him, "Now Mr. Strife, that's-"

"Not that we're ungrateful for all you've done," he interrupted, resolved to convey his thoughts across the table to her, "I mean, you've taken excellent care of her. It's just that Tifa and I have been worried crazy about her these past few weeks. It's really been pure Hell for us. So we'd feel a lot better if you let us take Aeris home. Plus I'm sure she'd rather come with her friends than stay here alone in the hospital. We got an extra bedroom she can live in. Tifa is a top-notch nurse. She'll make sure Aeris is properly cared for. I'm no medicine whiz, but I'll look after her too, you can count on that."

His earnestness seemed to impress the good doctor. Indeed, she spent a moment revolving his request inside her head. She glanced meaningfully at Tifa, who nodded to show she supported her boyfriend's decision 110%. Yes, both of them very much wanted this.

Dr. Moira returned to Cloud. "Let me consult the other doctors, okay?" she smiled, defeated but still benevolent, "We'll keep her for a few more days. If she shows enough improvement, then we'll consider discharge, deal?"

The compromise worked for them. They discussed Aeris' treatment plan a bit more until Dr. Moira received an urgent phone call; some new admission in the ER required her immediate presence. So she excused herself. The three left the office. Cloud and she shook hands on their agreement, after which she hurried away to attend other business.

Meanwhile, the couple strolled off back to Aeris' quarters. They stopped by the visitors' lounge which served hot beverages. Cloud purchased a cup of black coffee. Tifa did not want any. Onwards they wandered down the long corridor, solemn as a funeral procession. Between them hung a gloomy silence neither cared to break. Together this morose pair walked into the ward.

By now, Aeris had returned from her trip to X-ray. But her two friends, rather than enter the room, loitered outside in the corridor. They watched her through the observation window, like they'd done a dozen times before over these past weeks.

They lingered side by side behind this transparent wall, Cloud glumly sipping his coffee, Tifa with arms loosely folded across her chest. They both studied Aeris as she lay supine in bed, her head turned slightly away so that she could watch the television; one of the nurses must have switched it on after her return. The girl had been hooked back to everything except the ventilator. She did not move. Nor did she make a sound. She just rested there in perfect stillness, watching that flickering screen, unaware of those two pairs of eyes in turn watching her.

Tifa sighed to herself. She rewound events to the beginning then let them roll across her mind again. This was how she'd always passed the hours while observing Aeris: remembering, just struggling to keep her sanity from cracking.

About four weeks ago, Vincent and Aeris had both disappeared. It curiously coincided with that infamous shoot-out at the Midgar Public Park. The following morning, while the city buzzed with talk about the brutal incident, Cloud had set off to visit the two, only to come back bearing odd news: neither was home. At first, Tifa had dismissed his uneasiness; she said they'd probably went out together to the shops or for a walk and would return soon enough.

But they never did. Twice Cloud went; twice he came back with the same report: neither was home.

They bombarded the place with phone calls. Still nothing. The next morning they'd marched up to Vincent's apartment. Half an hour they wasted slamming their fists against his door and calling for him. He didn't answer. They contacted the landlord, a reclusive old gentleman who occupied the ground floor. He did not know where Vincent might be. He usually kept out his tenants' businesses as long as they paid their rents on time. With Tifa's persuasion, he agreed to unlock Vincent's apartment for them to search inside. No one there. No Vincent. No Aeris.

Cloud had then traveled all the way to Sector 1, where he found the gunsmith shop his missing friend worked at. He'd only reported there once in the last few days, apparently to obtain powerful ammo for his weapon, and lots of it too. He made an excellent gunsmith, the manager had admitted to Cloud; many customers came asking for him. But he'd always been a strict loner. Besides work, he shared nothing with his colleagues. So if he had gone off to some place, doubtful he'd tell anyone here where.

At this stage, anxiety had infested Cloud and Tifa's minds. Something terrible must have happened. Their fretful imaginations concocted all sorts of possibilities. Days dragged by, an eternity of waiting and wondering. They'd finally decided to alert the police when late one evening, a little more than a week since the disappearance, Tifa received a phone call. She'd recognized the tired, calm voice on the end of the line at once: Vincent.

He wouldn't answer the hailstorm of exclamations and questions which followed. Instead he assured Tifa, quite composedly, that he was alright and would explain everything later. For now, she and Cloud had to go to the Midgar Hospital. That's where Aeris lay; she'd been there for the past three days. He'd then hung up.

Three weeks had passed since that chilling phone call. She and Cloud had frantically rushed here, only to be guided to this room, where through the window they beheld an unconscious, wasted Aeris connected to those machines. The scene so terrified Tifa that she still vividly remembered disintegrating to tears. Dr. Moira had told them the story about the white-haired man. She kindly kept them updated throughout the ordeal.

God knows how they kept their restaurant running in the meantime. They slept very little, thought of nothing else besides their friend. Three weeks traveling to and fro, holding vigil by her bedside, praying she'd wake up soon.

Now here they stood, still watching and waiting.

"Damn him," muttered Cloud at length, unable to contain his seething vexation anymore.

Tifa heard him. However, she continued to view the oblivious girl without comment.

"He should've got us involved, Tifa. He should've let us help him. Damn that bastard."

"Don't," she begged softly.

"But Vincent should have at least told us from the start what happened, not leave us hanging like that!"

"I know," Tifa agreed, "Just please, don't."

Her gentle supplication indeed placated some of his wrath. For now, the sullen Cloud returned to drinking his coffee in silence.

Tifa meanwhile reminisced about events following Vincent's phone call. Several days later, the man himself had appeared at their doorstep unannounced. The second Cloud spotted him, he'd lunged at him in a fury and grabbed him by the front of his shirt. He'd shook him, hurtling raw anger into the man's face. He felt such rage at him for vanishing like that, for what happened to Aeris, for leaving them in a state of mad worry. Vincent never resisted. He let Cloud shout at him till Tifa had to intervene; she mollified the latter into allowing the former to speak.

In truth, Vincent's miserable demeanor had struck a strong cord within her. Not just his appearance, with his morose, wan face and mutilated claw wrapped up in some strip of cloth. Through his ruby red eyes, she'd perceived a wretchedness gnawing on his insides too. Whatever happened had changed him in ways she couldn't begin to fathom.

Vincent looked like he'd fought in some demonic war. He soon revealed that he actually had. Seated at the kitchen table, the demure man gave them a truncated version of the story. He'd confessed to his involvement in the explosion at the abandoned ShinRa Headquarters some time ago, along with the shoot-out at "Snow Fields" park. In both cases, there'd been an attempt by the Professor's minions to recapture Aeris. The first try, he'd foiled. The second, they'd succeeded.

Vincent told his two disconcerted friends he'd spent about a week searching for her on his own; hence his disappearance. He'd followed what clues he amassed until the path led him to one of the Mako Reactors, where a secret laboratory thrived underground. It emerged that this "Professor" Aeris had spoken so fearfully about was none other than Professor Hojo, a revelation to which Cloud reacted in alarm. There he'd battled the scientist to save Aeris, though in the end he couldn't protect her from his claws. Vincent assumed full responsibility for the destruction of the Reactor. He did not know what befell Hojo. He he'd woken up, he'd found himself in hospital. It took him three days to muster enough strength to escape (though by no means, Tifa noted, had he recovered from that war), after which he'd contacted them.

Vincent explained the Professor's experiment "Genesis Retrial" in brief. Yet he left a significant amount of detail surrounded by an impermeable haze of mystery. Certain facts he deleted completely: he never mentioned the ex-Turks or Rufus ShinRa. That part he deemed better kept to himself. When Tifa inquired about "that man with white hair", he'd brusquely passed him off as "a friend" and refused to divulge any further.

"So this 'white-haired' guy," Cloud suddenly cut into her thoughts, his tone rather icy, "Who is he really?"

"Vincent only said he was a friend of his."

After a deliberate pause, he asked, "Why didn't you tell me before that you've already met him?"

"I don't know," Tifa mumbled, "I guess it didn't seem important to me at the time."

Indeed, it was only after Vincent's explanation did she confess to the confounded Cloud that she'd encountered this enigmatic man before. She recounted how she'd went to the café as requested by that anonymous note. There she'd met him, a genteel, tall man with white hair and pink eyes. The description matched Dr. Moira's. He never disclosed his name. He'd just wanted information on Vincent's whereabouts. He even showed her a file picture of the man back in Turk days.

True at first she'd made little of it: she'd denied any knowledge of her old teammate's location. He believed her then left. Hardly worth bothering anyone about.

But as time progressed and events unfolded, Tifa's suspicions about this stranger intensified. She'd mentioned this meeting to Vincent once. His apprehensive reaction had only deepened her misgivings further. She knew more existed to the man than Vincent let on, but how much more? Was he actually an

enemy? Did he serve the Professor or work with a private agenda? How did he fit into this mess? Who was he anyway? How did he Vincent know him?

Questions piled upon more questions. For now however, Tifa reckoned they would just have to accept the vague term "friend".

Maybe she did, but the ireful Cloud sure could not. Vincent's revelations and Tifa's confession had both hurt and incensed him, emotions which burned on till this moment. It was one of the few times she'd ever tasted real anger from his usually generous heart. He'd felt as if the pair of them had kept him in ignorance when he had the full right to know what the heck was going on.

Cloud tossed his empty coffee cup into the trashcan nearby. He spat, "So. You meet this guy and just decide I needn't know, even when you start suspecting he has something to do with this mess. Vincent gets HIM involved, a stranger we have no clue about, whereas US he leaves in the dark for a whole friggin' week," the very statement raised his temper almost to boiling point. He chided her aloud, "What the Hell were you thinking, Tifa! And him! Didn't he think we'd worry about him?! Or about Aeris?!"

"Sh! Lower your voice," she implored.

A nurse trotting by cast a warning glare upon the quarrelsome two. Cloud suppressed his voice to sharp hiss; his fury though, still fixated upon Tifa and the absent Vincent, expanded further and further by its own harsh heat, "Dammit! Aeris and Vincent are my friends, Tifa! I care about them too! Didn't it occur to you that I might wanna know about this? Didn't it occur to that selfish bastard that we might wanna help him?! Or that we should know what's going on? He just takes off with telling us shit then suddenly reappears, THIS close to being de-

At this, Tifa whirled her sight around. "Maybe the reason he didn't tell us was because he cares about us too and didn't want us to get hurt like him and Aeris! Maybe he was trying to protect us!" she exclaimed back up at Cloud, who seemed rather taken aback by her passion. She understood his anger at Vincent. Beneath that, she saw the genuine concern he bore for the man as a friend. Yet Tifa, for all the anguish within her soul, couldn't bring herself to share Cloud's sentiment, because she'd come to understand Vincent as well; or at least she understood that part of him which thanked her very humbly, almost guiltily, for caring for him during his feverish illness. Right then she'd realized he in turn had accepted them as true friends, both her and Cloud (the one who rather than let him burn spent hours soaking him in the tub).

In Vincent's eyes, she'd glimpsed dark secrets which weighed heavy upon him. Yet he wouldn't allow her near them: "There are many, many things," he'd confessed to her, "I can't tell you about now because I don't want any of you involved. I don't want to endanger your lives when you can be safe as you are now."

Vincent hadn't kept his distance out of callousness or inconsideration. Reviewing his words, Tifa found it to the contrary. He knew if he told them, they'd want to help. But then, even he couldn't imagine what precisely he was facing. Keeping a distance had been his way of protecting them from all the madness which had already engulfed both him and Aeris.

"There's no excuse for what I did," Tifa desperately accepted her own guilt in front of Cloud, "I'm sorry for not telling you about that man sooner. I didn't mean to conceal anything from you. But Cloud, please don't be mad at Vincent. We don't know all the facts yet. We don't know exactly what happened or what was going on in his head at the time. We'll find that out later. What matters is that they're both safe and alive. Can't you just let it be for now?!"

Cloud could say nothing to her plea. Yet to behold her sleepless face so taut with distress and brown, wet eyes beseeching him for some kindness, the young man's expression gradually softened to cooler contemplation. Without anger, he perceived more acutely how tired Tifa was. Tired of this constant worry. Like him, tired of revolving the many puzzles and questions in her head. Just tired of everything.

Tifa turned away from him to stare through the observation window at Aeris again, who thankfully remained oblivious of the quarrel outside. She recalled when she first saw her friend: an emaciated rag-doll, wired to those electronic guardians with an ominous ventilator pumping air in and out of her damaged lungs. The stark contrast had shocked her witless; that lying in there and the vivacious person she last remembered, so full of hope for a new life, so gentle and childlike it seemed inconceivable anyone could harm her.

But someone had.

The admission poured a cold feeling upon her anxious heart. Tifa chafed her arms a bit. She muttered tremulously, "God, whatever they did to her must have been horrible. Chemicals and torture. They hurt and experimented on her... like... like some filthy 'lab-rat'. All this was happening to her and we never knew a thing about it," she bowed her head, quivering, "Look at her. She seems so frail and... helpless. I'm just so happy she's n-not..."

Tifa couldn't complete the sentence. Just thinking about the alternative still sent her to the verge of tears.

Cloud regarded her. He felt a pinch of regret for venting such anger upon her and Vincent without ever considering either's point of view as well. "I'm... sorry too," he apologized quietly both to her and his missing friend.

Tifa knew she should be stronger. Yet this wave of emotions so overwhelmed her that she covered her mouth lest it gushed out. Cloud stepped closer to her. He slid one arm around her shoulder and pulled her near. "Hey, hey now, Tifa," he said, his voice a soothing comfort to listen to, "Get a hold of yourself. You heard the doctor. The worst is over. Aeris is gonna be okay."

Yes, he was right. As she struggled to regain her composure, Tifa let him rest her weary head against his shoulder. After four weeks of torment, it felt wonderful to hear those words "Aeris is gonna be okay".

"Heheh! But geez, what a mess that Vincent made of the Reactor," joked Cloud into her ear, "The old man sure knows how to 'bring down the house', eh?"

Tifa giggled despite herself. That felt nice too, to laugh together after their ordeal. She looked up at him.

"Thanks, Cloud," she smiled.

He lovingly kissed her hair, then with a gentle "Come on", escorted her back into the room.

-End of Chp.90

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields –Chp.91

During this time, Aeris had been watching the television high up there on the shelf. It had been left on some news channel, which never stopped blaring about the “Reactor Incident”: about three weeks ago, a bizarre series of events befell the Mako Reactor. It started around four am, when a violent explosion rocked the reservoir area. The blast completely destroyed that part, without which the North section caved in upon itself. Some time later, another calamity far more dramatic than the first swept the building bottom to top. Sources described a strange force emanating from underground. Opinions however clashed about the cause. Most cited an earthquake, even though no such natural disaster had ever passed Midgar's way before. Others proposed some complex chemical chain reaction due to the accumulation of untreated materia waste over the year. An act of terrorism could not be dismissed either.

Whatever the cause, its terrifying power shook the Reactor into a permanent state of turmoil. The shockwaves wreaked havoc upon everything within a one hundred meter radius. Both the Fire Department and Police were summoned to contain the site. Soon electricity, for some reason yet to be comprehended, returned to the troubled Reactor. Underneath an inky-black night sky, it transformed into a brilliant beacon of light to be seen for miles around. Yet not long afterwards the scene deteriorated into anarchy. The power flickered then died again as the proud building finally collapsed to the ground. The area had to be evacuated amidst the ensuing miasma of dust and rubble.

By sunrise, the Reactor no longer existed.

The story must have been told a million times since it occurred that cold, early morning three weeks ago. Aeris passively viewed shaky footage of the Reactor, a heaving colossal tower of technology, engulfed in flames.

That's where it all happened, she pondered.

It felt surreal, resting here observing events from the outside, when she'd also lived them inside that fortress. Aeris saw scenes of amazed crowds in the streets, barred off the site by the Police, watching the infernal Reactor like her from far away. Yet none of them knew a thing of the people inside, the laboratory, the facts or the revelations.

The haziness which first obscured her mind had slowly dispersed as time drifted by. She remembered events better now. Thus while the news raged on in the background, Aeris sifted aimlessly through her memories of that night.

She still recalled standing- no actually, she'd been struck to the ground. Davoren had to support her upright as Professor Hojo laid her whole world to waste, and in front of Vincent no less. She brooded a long minute upon her origins: a clone of “Aeris”. Her purpose, to be the mother of Professor Hojo's “God”.

Aeris recalled the heat of the brutal war she had to witness between the demented scientist and the obstinate Vincent. Her arguments, her supplications to leave her had failed to sway the latter off his mission. Even after he'd learnt the sordid details about her, even on the brink of death, he wouldn't surrender her. Nor, Aeris had decided, would she surrender him.

At that instant, they'd put their faiths in each other. Suddenly she'd seen truth at its clearest. For that, but more importantly for him, she'd stood up.

In retrospect however, Aeris realized that she didn't know everything of what happened in the Reactor. She wondered what befell Professor Hojo. Was he crushed under the rubble? Did he manage to escape? And Davoren, her mind dwelt upon him too. He'd rescued both her and Vincent. Still, Aeris knew not how to react.

Should she be grateful, when in fact it was he who'd returned her to Professor Hojo's cruel embrace?

Should she be angry at him for leaving her so confused? Suspicious about his motives? Hateful?

No. Aeris could not induce herself to feel any of those. She could not sincerely thank him without hurtful memories interfering. She couldn't trust him. And yet, no matter how easier the alternative, she could not continue despising Davoren either. Strange, but she just could not anymore. Something new had arisen between them. This uncanny connection she felt to him. What it was exactly Aeris wondered in quiet bemusement.

Her wayward thoughts returned to the Reactor. That first explosion. It probably occurred when that young man, "Rufus" she believed was his name, destroyed the Professor's treasured materia. But that second disaster, the "earthquake". Had it been... Chaos?

Then Vincent, where was...??

The flummoxed girl darted her attention back to the screen. The television had no answer to any of her questions. Instead it showed some excellent pictures of how the Reactor toppled over. It cut to the grim aftermath; a smoldering mountain of scrap and garbage marked where once stood one of Midgar's most dignified landmarks.

Some solemn newsreporter on the scene live next assumed command. He stated that neither the Police nor the Fire Department could establish whether anyone was inside the Reactor at the time. If there were, very, very improbable they'd survived (and yet, Aeris argued, Davoren made it possible). No loss of life reported outside, though. The public was kept at a safe distance throughout the unfolding drama. Six firemen and five policemen received some injuries, none serious since they couldn't get too close to the turbulent Reactor either. Estimates placed the damages at around 20 billion gil. It would take months before any investigation could be carried out on the vast disaster site. Many doubted one would be conducted at all. Unlike ShinRa Inc., the current government lacked the proper financial means and expertise. Plus in a city as problem-infested as Midgar, investigating the collapse of some abandoned building hardly ranked first on anyone's priority list. Therefore whatever truly happened would most likely remain a mystery forever.

But Vincent...

"Sheesh, Aeris. Don't watch that! It'll only make you depressed," moaned Cloud as he and Tifa strolled into the room, only to hear such a grave story pounding the girl flat. He for one had developed an aversion to the news; this stemmed from days spent by Aeris' bedside with that frightful incident and a dozen other worries crushing them under. At once he marched up to the television to switch stations.

Just as well. Any longer and she would have lost her melancholy mind to the screen. Aeris reeled herself back to the present. She turned her head towards the couple. They appeared noticeably more cheerful than before, unlike their bed bound friend who absorbed their geniality behind a pensive visage.

The smiling Cloud loitered at the foot of the bed. He began joking around about how he'd become a serious coffee addict during his many hospital visits. "I tell ya! The coffee here is great!" he proclaimed. Yet upon noticing Tifa's glare, he added, "But hey! My girl still fixes the best coffee in town. THE BEST!" which won her over again.

Tifa then turned to Aeris. "Well, we've got some good news for a change," she announced.

Aeris quizzically looked up at her. Tifa declared in high spirits, "The doctor says you got through the worst part okay. They may let us take you home in a few days. That means you'll finally get to check out our place."

"Hey, yeah!" Cloud beamed, "Aeris has never visited us before!"

No, she never had. She'd always lived with Vincent in his small apartment. She only ventured outside

twice, and both occasions encountered the nefarious gunman. Aeris had long wanted to see their place. They'd told her so much about it. It sounded wonderful.

But now...

Now, things were different.

The silent girl let the enthusiastic pair chat over her head whilst she strayed off into wistful preoccupation, far away from the merry mood of this room.

So much had changed. In just one night.

She'd have to tell them.

"Yep!" nodded Tifa, "You'll see our restaurant 'n I'll cook us the most delicious meal ever made in culinary history!"

"And I'll show you my wicked, bad-ass sword!"

At that, Tifa disapproved, "Now Cloud, you KNOW I don't like it when you sword-train in the house."

The man scratched the back of his head. "Aw, I wasn't gonna fight with it or anything," he deliberately teased her, "Just swing it around near those crystal wineglasses you love so much."

"You do that 'n I'll deck you!" she brandished one pretend fist at him, upon which they laughed together. She chided, "How many times do I have to remind you: if want to practice with that huge weapon, you do it outsi-"

"Tifa? Cloud?" Aeris' timid voice suddenly interrupted their banter.

The two looked at her.

"I..," she hesitated, "I have something to tell you."

Both of them meant so much to her. Dear friends, they'd opened their lives to her. But this was not right. She could not pretend anymore she was the girl they saw reflected in the mirror. She refused to. She'd have to tell them everything. About her "birth", her despicable purpose, everything. They deserved to know that their joy and friendship, much as she cherished them, belonged to another girl, not her.

The diffident Aeris faltered in a moment of visible consternation: where to begin? The beginning, she reckoned. Where was that? Their friend "Aeris"? The Professor? When he created her? The bleak night she escaped him?

Strange, she'd imagined this would be a lot easier. She supposed she'd come to accept herself for the most part, although a small sting still accompanied that horrid term "clone". But then, Aeris found herself afraid of their reaction. She cared for Cloud and Tifa deeply, yet how would they respond to the truth? Surprised? Disgusted? Would they feel she'd deceived them?

"I... I'm not the real..," she wavered, "I mean, 'Aeris' and I, we're not..."

The same? I'm just her copy? No. Nothing she concocted came out right. But she had to explain to them.

Luckily, Cloud saved her, "We know."

Spoken with clear assertion. Aeris gave a small start: they... they knew? The man gazed upon her, his solemn expression proof that indeed he already understood what she'd struggled to say. Mystified, Aeris

peeked back up at Tifa. The latter nodded to further reassure her that yes, they both knew.

“Vincent already told us,” Tifa confessed. She rubbed the girl’s left arm in kind support, saying, “He told us about you, and Professor Hojo, and his experiment.”

Aeris listened in amazement as the two recounted their torture over the past four weeks. They described Vincent’s brusque phone call which led them here, then his visit some days later. He’d revealed Aeris’ origins, her development in some “growth accelerator” machine, and her apparent age as opposed to her true age. He’d clarified her central role in Hojo’s experiment. Actually, Aeris was one of the few issues Vincent had explained in extensive detail to them.

“Now I still wanna throttle that jerk for keeping us in the dark for so long,” growled Cloud half-humorously, “He hasn’t told us everything about what happened or who exactly that guy with white hair is. And we won’t put any pressure on you to explain either. I guess we’ll just... let it be for now,” he glanced at Tifa. She smiled back in thanks.

The man edged closer to Aeris’ bed, offering her nothing except genuine care straight from the heart, “But see, it doesn’t matter to us where you came from, why or how you were made or any of that. We told you from the outset: you’re not alone anymore. We’re here. We’ll all look out for you.”

“Even if you’re not... the ‘Aeris’ we knew from before,” Tifa interjected, “You’re still our friend. More importantly, you are still you, Aeris. You’re the one Vincent went out and fought so hard for. You’re the one we couldn’t stop worrying about, the one we’re talking to right now and the one we want to take home with us.”

“So don’t worry, okay?”

Garbage

Image

Clone

Harsh insults which for an entire night had reverberated inside her head until she almost succumbed to them. In fact, at the peak of desperation, she’d tried to. Vincent however never let her. No matter how she argued or how far she pushed him away, the man stubbornly stood his ground; the same way she’d held hers when he wanted her to call him a “monster”. To him, her origins and purpose never mattered an ounce. Nor, she discovered, did it affect Tifa and Cloud in the least.

The girl viewed the pair for a moment. Their sincerity so touched her that a wet sheen glossed over her thankful green eyes. She’d awoken feeble and unsure, only to find they’d knit this warm shawl of love around her. It felt as though Vincent had planned this for her. He’d predicted that she would want to tell the others, even foresaw her verbal and emotional difficulties in explaining when she herself had just begun to grasp it. So he’d told them instead, probably a lot more eloquently than she could hope to. Thus he’d borne the trouble upon himself to have her wrapped up in such support the instant her consciousness returned; to prove to her that regardless of the horrible facts, Cloud and Tifa would stand like him by her side. Of that, he’d been certain.

Cloud and Tifa had gathered around her to welcome her back into their lives as their same friend despite all that had changed. Aeris never felt more grateful for these two now. Truly she considered them a blessing.

Still, she...

One concern though remained a passionate fire burning within her breast until she could not tolerate its heat anymore. She was safe and sound, completely secure in their friendship like Vincent had ensured.

Still, she wanted...

"I want to see Vincent," Aeris stated in a hushed undertone.

Again that name. Again that acute hesitation. Her abrupt request at once put both Cloud and Tifa ill at ease, in which they exchanged a look Aeris recognized to be quite significant. They were withholding something from her, something important about him. Immediately an anxious premonition stirred the girl into a flurry.

"Is Vincent alright??" she cried. Despite her grievous condition, she attempted to sit up, "I want to see him. Is he okay??"

"Sh, sh, sweetie," the tender-hearted Tifa mollified her back into place, "Vincent's alright. He was a pretty bad mess, but he's healed up by now and he's fine. He's fine."

"Then w-where is he?"

The question Tifa and Cloud dreaded had been asked at last. Indeed, they'd spoken plenty of Vincent, but the man himself remained absent from the scene. It wrangled Aeris just to lie here waiting for the answer. Her friends dawdled in this atmosphere longer than any desperate soul could endure. Cloud had thrust his hands deep into his pockets. He turned slightly away, thus granting the better qualified Tifa space to break such news.

The latter assumed a solemn countenance as she straightened herself up by the bedside. It would not be easy to reply. But then, unavoidable. She had to know.

"Vincent is not here, Aeris. He's gone away," she addressed her gently yet firmly.

Confusion strained Aeris' expression. "Gone away?" she echoed, "Where did he go?"

"We don't know. He only came to visit us that one time. After he'd explained what happened, he left. He asked us not to seek him out or try in any way to contact him. That was three weeks ago. We haven't seen him since. He's simply disappeared again. I don't know what exactly is going on with him. I guess... Vincent just wants to be alone for a while."

Complete silence followed.

At first, the news spun around Aeris. The girl searched Tifa's grave visage for extra information, a continuation. Yet the latter had no more to add. Nor did Cloud, upon peering over to him, have anything to add. Vincent had vanished again. Where or why no one knew. That was all.

Gradually Tifa's story sedimented into sense. Aeris' troubled look relaxed into one of sad pensiveness. The girl sunk deeper into bed, gutted. Not a syllable she uttered for an entire minute. Instead she stared fixedly up at the ceiling; her eyes shimmered intense, private contemplation.

Her friends waited during this heavy pause. At long last Aeris sighed, "I'm tired. I'd like to get some sleep now please."

Tifa understood the meaning behind that request. She clearly wished she could provide some solace to the despondent girl. However, she thought it perhaps kinder just to give her space at present. So she conceded with a soft, "of course."

The pair prepared to depart. The television was switched off and the patient settled snug beneath her blanket once more. Tifa bent over to kiss her forehead before bidding her farewell. Cloud came up to her side too. He asked her to "take it easy". He promised they would visit again tomorrow. In the meantime, did she want anything? Music? Magazines?

"That nurse is pretty strict," he grumbled, "Still, I can try to smuggle in some candy if you like?"

"No," Aeris gave a small wistful smile, knowing he could never get her what she really wanted even if she told him. However, gazing up at his amicable face, she whispered her sincerest gratitude, "But thank you. Thank you both for... everything."

The man returned her smile. He squeezed her hand to reinforce their support. Soon he also had to retreat. The two said their final goodbyes at the door. Together they slipped out, quietly closing the door behind them. Through the observation window, Aeris watched them march across until they wandered out of sight.

Alone at last. Just her and this vortex of thoughts.

Her gaze ascended back to the ceiling. That white canvas high above her, where her mind drifted at random amongst ideas and questions. Weariness slowly closed her eyes. The bed swallowed her into its folds. After a week spent in a dank, dark cell, she'd forgotten how fantastic it felt to rest upon a bed rather than a stone floor.

Aeris lay there perfectly motionless, dull and languid, listening to her thoughts above the hum of machinery. She could not capture any particular one. They all wafted about too fast for her torpid senses to grasp. Let them play free then. Thoughts about what she'd learnt these past couple of wakeful hours, about the various stories she'd heard... the Reactor on television...

Holocaust Hojo crumbling before her, unable to tolerate the truth...

Her friends...

"Aeris" and herself...

Vincent...

"Miss Aeris?" peeped a gentle, feminine voice into her meditation.

Aeris stirred awake again. She rolled her sight towards the source. Indeed, several minutes had passed since Cloud and Tifa's departure. She must have unwittingly dozed off, during which some plump, affable nurse had opened the door to poke her head into the room. Aeris perceived this new visitor lingering halfway past the threshold with her hand still on the knob. She seemed unsure whether to proceed or retreat now that she'd unintentionally disturbed the patient, though also rather eager about her mission here.

It mattered little to Aeris anyway. She rubbed the sleepiness out of her eyes then motioned for her to please enter. Relieved, the cheery woman skipped over to her bedside, grinning with a small surprise in her other hand.

"You got a special delivery from someone," she announced.

Aeris hadn't yet comprehended her meaning when, much to her confusion, the nurse presented a sealed envelop to her. The girl stared agog. At first she dithered to accept it. She could think of no one who might write her a letter. Perhaps there'd been a mistake? The nurse however insisted. No, no mistake. The note was definitely meant for her.

But who...?

The girl received it without choice. Lying flat upon her back, she held this envelop up to her befuddled face. External scrutiny yielded nothing. The sender remained anonymous, the envelope's contents a mystery she still wavered to explore. She couldn't quite justify her own hesitancy; nor could she explain

the next moment when as she gazed up at this letter, lost in wonder, an eerie sensation suddenly pierced her conscience straight through. Not a premonition, more like a sharp intuitive force which shot out of nowhere right into her. So vivid it startled her blank out of her reverie.

"Wait! Please wait!" she begged the nurse, "Tell me, who sent this?"

The latter, who was already exiting the room after a successful errand, paused at the doorway and looked behind at the perturbed patient. She mused, "Hm... well, he didn't tell me his name, but—"

"Did he have white hair?"

"Why yes, he did. Actually, he was outside in the lobby just a second ago. He came up to me and asked me to deliver that letter to you. He seemed like a nice fella," she added with a playful wink, "Handsome too."

If he was, Aeris most certainly would not have noticed, not while he'd aroused such dread and distress within her since the day their oaths first intersected. Her grip reflexedly tightened upon this note. Yes, she knew that white-haired man.

Davoren.

Many times that artful gunman had battled Vincent, never aiming for anything less than a bloody murder. He'd always derived exquisite pleasure from tormenting her. And it was him- solely him- who'd dragged her back to Professor Hojo.

So why? Why would he risk his own life to rescue theirs?

What did he want from her?

How was she supposed to feel about the gunman? And this new, indefinable something binding her to him, what was it? Why had it formed? What did it mean?

Now that the experiment had disintegrated to dust, where did they stand?

In the instant of urgency, when desire for answers exceeded injury or prejudice, Aeris suddenly sprang up. She tossed both the letter and blanket aside and hurriedly scrambled out of bed. Weakness plagued her body a lot more than she'd first imagined. No sooner had the flustered girl escaped the bed than her two scrawny legs wobbled underneath her weight. She almost collapsed in a heap had she not gripped the railing on time. But physical debility bore no importance to her.

She had to find Davoren!

She had to go find him now!

Aeris detangled herself from the wires applied to her skin. Wincing as pain chewed her right shoulder, the persistent patient gripped the IV stand nearby which fed fluids through her arm cannula. This mobile prop served as support. Rumpled up, wavy hair in dishevelment, Aeris limped out of the room with her IV stand into the corridor.

Down the hallway she hobbled. Her entire focus honed in on reaching that lobby. Ironic how she'd always run away from the gunman, whereas now despite her wretched condition she hastened forth on a quest to seek him out. The cold floor stung her bare feet. Her neck catheter flapped loosely in the open. Aeris rushed to the end of the ward. At last she emerged upon the foyer, a grand, bright centre which to any newcomer seemed abuzz in perpetual activity. Even the resolute Aeris stopped short at the entrance rather than venture any further into that whirlpool.

She'd only wandered a short distance from her room, yet already a terrible agony had spread across her torso; punishment for depleting her meagre strength supply. Aeris ignored it. She clasped one fist upon her pounding heart. Breathing fast, the girl cast her frantic eyes around this confusing, noisy place. White coats fluttered about. Nurses dashed forth with endless work. Patients and visitors drifted by.

So many people, none aware of her ordeal to find this one man amongst them.

Aeris jumped from stranger to stranger, every failure goading her into more anxiety, when quite abruptly she spotted her target. The girl froze to a statue. Over there at the opposite side of the crowded lobby lingered Davoren in plain view, both hands stuck deep in the pockets of his open trench coat while his mesmerising pink eyes drilled straight into her. She wondered how long he'd stood thus observing her. In fact, he seemed to have been waiting for her to come.

But now that they'd met again, Aeris, for all the excitement which drove her search, remained rooted to the spot in a mystified trance. Nor did the cool gunman approach her. People bustled across the wide space which separated them. To Aeris, they seemed to meander by in slow motion, ghost-like and unimportant. The din, the lobby itself regressed to the far corner of her mind. Only the two of them, her and Davoren, stood locked within this surreal existence.

The tormentor and his victim.

The prey and her hunter.

Yet so much had changed from that night.

The encounter struck Aeris as chillingly similar to their first. She remembered what insane terror he instilled within her that dreadful day. Just one look at him and she'd realized his exact intentions. And yet, the stark *contrast* between the Davoren she spied across the street so long ago and this present one bemused her beyond description. It was the same man externally. Internally though, Aeris a change within him so powerful, so absolute that it illuminated his eyes bright for her to see. Indeed, the difference showed best in those pink eyes. Before cruel and vacant. Now gentle... alive.

Yes, it was Davoren, but not the same man at all.

Within the confines of such an extraordinary moment, Aeris' own eyes, wide and green, beseeched him to disperse the flock of questions swarming around her. The whys, whats and hows, she wanted an answer to them all!

Across the lobby, the composed gunman brooded over her inquiring look. He could've marched up to her and recounted the story: while on the hunt for Vincent amidst the collapsing Reactor, he had chanced upon the girl lying bleeding and senseless in some filthy corridor. At once, the alarmed gunman had skid to a halt, then with a curse dashed over to her aid.

By sheer observation, Davoren had quickly acquired a notion about the circumstances of this tragedy. That gruesome slash across her chest indicated the perpetrator. He couldn't elucidate any clear reason. He'd only this feeling that something intense and tempestuous had happened between and Professor Hojo, for which she'd paid the ultimate price. He'd then realized the full meaning behind this unnatural catastrophe that had besieged the Reactor. Vincent had either found her slain or, worse still, witnessed her murder first-hand. Whatever the case, Chaos was definitely to blame.

Aeris wouldn't have remembered how the disconcerted gunman crouched down beside her. He'd called her several times in vain. The brutality of her injury, her wasted appearance had certainly made him fear the worst. However, upon checking for life signs, he'd found them present. Faint as a ghost's, but there. Indeed, not much time had passed from when the grief-stricken Vincent had left her there till his accidental discovery. Desperate to keep her alive, Davoren had promptly torn off his ragged tie and shirt to assemble a dressing for her wound. He'd then scooped her up into both arms. With this new

companion held close against him, the man had resumed his search for Vincent, more anxiously as both time and dark premonitions pressed hard upon them.

Davoren could've described to Aeris how during the hunt an apocalyptic explosion had suddenly reverberated throughout the area. Undaunted, he'd rushed over to the source. The path led into some atrium. Down there he'd perceived Vincent in acute danger with the deranged Professor on top of him.

He had to temporarily leave the comatose girl near the entrance to keep her well out of the fray. Having selected his vantage point, Davoren blasted Hojo into retreat, after which he'd hurried down to assist his friend. Vincent's condition had alarmed him ten times more than Aeris'. Never before had he seen a body as bedraggled and ravaged as his, just lying there sprawled upon his back in breathless disorientation. Nor did Vincent respond to Davoren's calls. Instead the man left him behind to follow Aeris into unconsciousness, soon death unless he acted fast.

That had totalled two bodies for him to contend with. Not good. The crumbling Reactor of course didn't improve their situation either. But then, the determined gunman had refused point-blank to surrender. First he'd gathered everyone together. Some hours had passed since his last battle, enough for both his invincibility and strength to return to full capacity. So he'd slung one carcass over each shoulder, stood up then raced the destruction all the way back to the storage ward, to the secret exit he and Reno had uncovered earlier.

Down into the sewers they'd ventured. The clamorous din of quakes, crashes and explosions pursued them quite a distance before it finally abandoned the chase. By then they'd cleared the immediate danger zone. Onwards the gunman had sloshed through the murky, ice-cold waters at a steady pace. Like a stern trooper, he'd carried his double load with forbearance. Time dragged by. He never stopped marching. Only when the road terminated did Davoren clamber up one of the manholes to the surface.

They'd emerged onto an empty street several blocks away from the tumultuous Reactor. He'd even paused in awe of the inferno from whence they'd just fled. Truly it appeared as though God had vented his entire wrath down upon that hapless fortress. But Vincent and the girl's grim condition had soon drew back his attention. Off he'd hustled in his dirty undershirt, wet and dishevelled, through the alleys of the city until he'd reached the hospital.

The rest, Aeris knew.

Yes, Davoren could've told Aeris this story. But then, he saw that's not what she wanted. She wanted him to settle her questions, to explain both himself and his answers to her now that everything—everything—had changed.

To all those wants and inquiries however, the man only gave one reply: a kindly, somewhat apologetic smile spread across Davoren's face as he regarded Aeris for the last time, having already reached his own decision about their relationship. The enigma behind that look, both wise and compassionate, intrigued Aeris further.

She sensed a serenity to his spirit not there before. To her it almost felt like he'd somehow... found his lost self again...

"Watch it, kid!" a gruff voice rudely warned her.

Aeris gave a start. She barely managed to make way for some mean orderly pushing a medicine trolley, who glared at her as he wheeled by in a huff. The incident distracted her for only a second. She whirled her sight back to Davoren. But the man had already disappeared. Gone, just like that.

Aeris remained in her place, though. She gazed pensively into empty space where just a blink ago he'd stood smiling back at her. She didn't attempt to search for him again. She knew she wouldn't find him this time. Thus the last shadow of her nightmarish past had dissipated to a mere memory. Still the same

questions echoed after him unanswered.

How was she supposed to feel about him now?

Why did he rescuer her that night?

What... what did it all mean?

Aeris heard someone call her name. She looked aside to see a flustered nurse come jogging up to her; it was the same tan-skinned nurse who'd assisted Dr. Moira, although a distinct displeasure marred her expression as she viewed the patient.

"Miss Aeris!" she scolded, "You should know better than to go running around like that, and in your condition too! I got get into serious trouble here!"

Indeed, she had hardly left another patient's room when, much to her shock, she'd spotted Aeris loitering over there at the lobby entrance. Not only had the girl escaped bed, but also roamed around barefoot in nothing save her gown. The sight of her! At once, the vigilant nurse recaptured Aeris. No excuse would appease her. She promptly escorted the prisoner and her accomplice the IV stand straight back to her quarters, all the way lashing out worried rebuke.

"I'm sorry," Aeris apologized for the third time.

"Just don't wander off again, okay? Geez, you gave me a fright."

They returned to the room. The nurse helped Aeris back into bed. She reconnected the feeble patient to her electronic guardians then covered her up snug and warm beneath the blanket.

"Now you be good and stay there," she ordered, fists propped against her hips, "No more sneaking around. Get some rest, okay?"

The girl obediently nodded. Her warden left to resume her duties elsewhere. She shut the door behind her.

Once more, Aeris found herself alone to think while staring up at the ceiling. That encounter with Davoren had etched a poignant impression deep into her mind, upon which she dawdled in a state of numb perplexity for several minutes.

She re-visited the Reactor, that Hellhole where various paths- hers, Vincent's, Professor Hojo's, Davoren's, Rufus'- paths so different, had convened under one roof in the name of "Genesis Retrieval". And now, the paths had separated again. But by no means were they the same as before. Be it physical or verbal clashes, facts admitted, buried truths and emotions unearthed or even the expression upon a dear face. These interactions had altered their perceptions of themselves and those around them.

So what about her and the gunman? The original connection between them had shattered. How then to proceed, he longer an enemy or even the same person, she feeling this powerful new link to him but still, *still* unable to decipher its meaning?

Everything inside her just flitted about in a tizzy when she suddenly discerned something hidden beneath the blanket near her thigh. Aeris reached under to fish out Davoren's letter. She held it up again. Aeris reckoned in her rush to seek the gunman, she'd flung his note away where it frowned beneath the bedcover. Truth be told, she'd completely forgotten about the letter until now.

Those misgivings about its sender no longer troubled Aeris as much as stiff anticipation in what he'd actually written. She wrestled her hesitations a full minute before she finally decided to tear it open. The girl pulled out a single sheet of paper. Jaws clenched, she unfolded it. Davoren's neat and elegant

handwriting at first danced in front of her tense vision. Soon they settled into sentences, which she read slowly in total silence. He confessed:

"From the moment you and I met, I have caused you nothing but grief, hurt and terror. I dare not imagine that just because I carried you here, it will rectify all my past evil actions towards you. Nor do I expect you to magically start liking or even trusting me. However, I do sincerely hope that we will meet again someday, under better circumstances; when we've each rebuilt our own life and understood it more. If that day comes, I know then I will get down on my knees and beg for your forgiveness. Perhaps even if your generous heart can accept me, I will also ask for your friendship instead of your fear and hatred.

But until then, please take care, Aeris."

She re-read the note then put it down by her side. The girl sunk into profound contemplation, within which she soaked for a long, long time. It struck Aeris how well Davoren empathized with her; he knew she could not forget the past. But through his smile, through these words he'd also shown her that he too realized- perhaps even sensed as vividly- a fresh relationship born out of the old. All of a sudden, it occurred to her: at the conclusion of his message, Davoren had called her "Aeris". This was the first time he'd ever addressed her by her name. Before it had always been the condescending "my dear", "girl", sometimes the callous "A-25".

Uncanny how such a simple realization opened the door to an even more simple yet fundamental one, before which she stood awe-stricken. The gunman, though he'd escaped her many questions, had in fact given her the only guidance she really needed to obtain an answer by herself.

That instant when she confronted the Professor, Aeris now appreciated how she'd more than just destroyed him or cut herself loose from those ropes trying her to his pitiful, insane psyche. She'd actively terminated the road she'd always followed, a road fraught with fear and anguish, for another one which stretched out beyond the door she'd just opened. A different path than her old one, unexplored and shaded under a forest of uncertainty, waiting to be traversed by her two feet.

While the girl thus loitered at the entrance, neither retreating nor advancing, she looked behind towards Davoren. He stood there in the distance, still smiling sagaciously as she'd last seen him.

Yes, so much had changed. He knew that too. They'd changed; their perception of themselves, their surroundings, their pasts, present and futures, the very terms which defined who they were in accordance to "truth" had all irrevocably changed. Perhaps that what had drawn them together into a final meeting: their mutual need to show this new self and hold the other's under the same honest light, if only to help re-shape their tattered old relationship. Indeed, Davoren no longer regarded her as Hojo's lab specimen or his prey, no more than she deemed him an enemy. She'd become "Aeris", a remarkable young woman in whom he'd discerned a new found strength before she even went out searching for him. And in a way, she was his kindred spirit too.

It suddenly dawned on Aeris how much she and Davoren, the last person she would have imagined, actually shared. For such a long time they'd both suffered a life shackled whole to the experiment, around which they'd constructed themselves. Hers she'd built on a false identity, always running and hiding, always too afraid, weak and pathetic to do anything else. His he'd based on violence and evil because his true self, that man she'd beheld burning behind those intense pink eyes, harboured too much misery for him to bear. Different foundations, but both of them had desperately craved the same goal: a refuge from the storms raging within their hearts. In one night, she and the gunman had been shattered to pieces. Everything inside them, the ugliness, sorrow and secrets had burst out into the open of all, themselves included to see.

But on that same night, both had also derived a formidable power to finally break free; free of the Professor, "Genesis Retrial" and the charred remains of their own false worlds.

And now?

Rebuild.

“Rebuilt our own life and understood it more”, Davoren had written. Aeris didn’t realize it before, but that was exactly what she wanted. In fact, it was they both desired most: to build a new self around a new life, strengthened by truth and yes, suffering as well rather than weakened by them. Not only that, but they wanted to understand better this new life, both themselves and those living or dead, friends or foes, who’d come to form a part of it.

Maybe that’s why Davoren rescued her. Sure, kindness counted. But maybe because he’d seen such similarities bonded them, he’d wanted her to survive so that, like him, she could follow her own road away from her ruined former self towards the new. He wanted her to have the same chance he did. And she in running after him, in beholding him across the hall without enmity or fear, she’d silently given him final confirmation: that while they couldn’t *yet* reconcile the past, his victim had come to acknowledge his change as genuine, and validate him as a human being again, not the puppet or soulless monster she’d hitherto thought him.

Aeris believed she understood better now, who this man truly was, what this connection between them entailed. She even began to wish she’d had the opportunity to... get to know him more. To know the Davoren who carried them out of the crumbling Reactor, that “good man” Vincent once spoke of to her with great veneration.

Perhaps one day, she told herself, you will. If their fates ever intertwined again, perhaps then she will learn more about him and finally thank him, even grant him her friendship without a twinge of mistrust in her mind. In the meantime though, their ways had diverged. He’d left to walk along one road. She, gazing forth at the uncharted terrain before her, had her own to travel.

And yet, a part of Aeris still could not.

She remembered that strange dream she had, or rather premonition just before awakening: yes, him again. Vincent.

He was not here.

With the recollection of that fact, a fresh emotional tidalwave crashed hard against the girl, its intensity re-echoing across this void his absence had carved into her heart. The desire to touch him- not just his face but his essence and all it contained as well, overwhelmed poor Aeris to the extent that she caught her breath least it emerged a sob. Aeris wanted to see him again. She wanted to talk to him, to reach him through this black fog she sensed enshrouding him. If only she knew what it was which kept him far away from her.

If only... if only he’d...

But the man remained absent despite her wishes. Where he’d gone, why he’d disappeared, when or even if he’ll return, nobody knew. And she found herself here, still lonesome and dismayed, floundering in her own futile deliberations.

The girl sent a sigh up towards the ceiling. She suddenly felt very, very tired. All these discoveries, storied, questions and emotions had eroded her to exhaustion. She’d have to stop thinking for now. Just shelve everything for tonight and try to get some sleep.

Aeris placed Davoren’s letter in the top drawer of the night table by her bed. She cast one final glance over towards the left window. Evening had long since wrapped its vast cloak around Midgar. The city lights shimmered in the distance. She couldn’t help but wonder where Vincent was this very moment. Wandering those endless streets alone in the cold? At home by the window, gazing at the same scenery as her?

She wondered... what was he thinking about...

Enough, Aeris ordered herself, stop thinking! The forlorn patient forcefully looked away and sealed her eyes shut. She concentrated on the low beeps of the heart monitor nearby. It sung its monotonous tune at a regular pace. She counted the beats. One... two.... three.... four....

Soon, Aeris sailed off into a deep slumber.

-End of Chp.91

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields -Chp.92

The deed had been done in three seconds. Quick and simple. Davoren, having jabbed the nightstaf by surprise into Rufus' stomach, yanked it away again. The short electric jolt instantly eroded the boy's nervous system to complete numbness. His eyes, fixed and wide open at first, revealed the intensity of his shock. It extended far beyond the physical aspect- of raw energy ripping through his entrails, buckling his spine over. It pierced deep into the emotional realm as well- anguish, incomprehension at being thus deceived by this man.

This man, who amidst a world full of torture and madness had been the only one with the compassion to shelter him under his wing, even when they both knew a cruel, depraved lunatic like him deserved this punishment.

More importantly to Rufus, he had come to fill the hole another man had carved into him long ago- his father, a hateful shadow still stalking his mind. He himself had scarcely begun to realize it. He'd only just confided it to Davoren a minute ago, and now...

Now this...

For all the time they'd known each other, the gunman and Rufus had never spoken heart-to-heart as tonight, where circumstances had the two sitting upon the floor in some crumbling storage ward. One was a desolate man, old inside, so persecuted by his own misery he'd delved into the darkest depths of evil just to escape it. The other was a young man, in Davoren's eyes more like a boy, pushed by angst to the very brink of insanity. They were completely different. Different generations, different pasts, different stories to tell.

t then somehow their paths had merged into a common road. Here they'd sat on the same level, two wretches soaked in crime. Between them hung such gloom: Davoren's murdered brother, his grief, the memory of his tearful breakdown at the bridge still quite vivid; Rufus wracked by anger, guilt and overwhelming sadness... unable to bear his awful past or even himself because as it turned out, he and his company had caused that grief and everything else.

By the end of the night, all this hurt, revelations, turbulent feelings and destruction had burnt them both to a waste. Strange, yet it had also drew them together into this final meeting, where face to face they'd forged a new connection between them. It had felt so much stronger and more profound than ever before, like a bonding of spirits, not just friendship.

But then came that nightstaff to cut everything off.

The voltage robbed his awareness faster than he could comprehend. Rufus didn't even grunt out his surprise. He just slumped off in a heap, almost crashing to the floor had not the attentive gunman caught him first and carefully placed him there upon his side.

Three seconds. The task was finished.

But not its consequences. Davoren remained slouched upon his knees for a long time afterwards, gazing down ever morosely upon the comatose young man cast before him. His silence reflected the deep loss his action had cost him. Truly in viewing him from afar, as the two ex-Turks did, it seemed no matter what the right decision was, no matter how he'd compelled himself to trick Rufus, that neither lessened the man's sorrow nor eased the difficulties he'd have to confront alone from here on.

The Reactor meanwhile continued to degenerate. In the distance, belligerent earthquakes could be heard ravaging this once mighty fortress. Creaks and moans of mangled garbage, some so horrid they twisted one's stomach, echoed down the corridors. The entire storage ward seemed to shudder in anticipation. In fact, a subtle tremulousness had already begun to infest its walls.

Reno glared suspiciously up at the cracked ceiling, which shed more loose rock with every passing minute. Not a good sign. Soon another wave of destruction would reach this cluttered room, and another and another until it caved-in like the rest of this place to oblivion. Their only chance of escape was that floor trapdoor Davoren had uncovered for them earlier. Its square mouth awaited wide and open, beyond which its gullet would deliver them down into the sewers. At present though, their salvation remained neglected in the corner.

Despite the impending doom, a grim hush not even those clamours could defeat hung heavy in the air. Reno returned his eyes to the sight straight up ahead, where he studied the forlorn gunman from behind, like he had throughout his private conversation with Rufus. Both he and Rude in fact had stayed mute spectators at the opposite side of the room. Not once did they intervene.

Rude had always maintained his premonitions. He'd sensed something about to happen, what though he couldn't quite say. He'd just discerned this... this dark burden within the gunman. Nor would this uneasiness subside as Rude, sitting wrecked and weary atop some wooden crate, observed Davoren from the corner of his eye.

Then came that moment of electrocution. The instant Rufus lurched over, the alarmed ex-Turk had sprang onto his feet. At once he'd turned to his friend for his plan of action.

The plan, quite bluntly, was do nothing. Reno did not even glance back at him. He just stood there statuesque with folded arms. His blood-spattered face from the side exuded a particular sternness not to be challenged. Only then Rude understood: Reno had lent Davoren his nightstaff with full knowledge of his intentions. Neither of them were to interfere.

So the ex-Turk lingered next to his friend, clutching his wounded side tightly, self-restrained despite his obvious consternation. He stole another sidelong glance at Reno. He could practically palpate the intense deliberations still raging behind that austere façade.

"Rufus ShinRa may still be alive," Vincent had informed them only yesterday. In a secret laboratory somewhere within Midgar. Reno had to admire his shrewdness. The man sure knew how to select his bait. Even after they'd denied knowledge of any such place, even after the little sneak had apparently left them, Reno had found himself growing more and more preoccupied with this tidbit of news. They all knew WEAPON had blasted the top of ShinRa HQ to rubble. They'd all been told, despite the lack of material evidence, their president had perished in the explosion. He couldn't have survived!

Nevertheless, Reno couldn't rest pondering the remote possibility that Vincent might- just MIGHT- be correct. And so, he and Rude had snuck off to the lab on a quest for truth. Yet what had started out as an innocent investigation evolved into such a mess of facts and dirty secrets.

Then there was Rufus. They'd found him alive all right, just like Vincent said, though hardly the same man they'd served. Their once confident, formidable leader reduced to a tormented, almost schizophrenic, amnesic wretch. Reno recalled how they first met here (it hadn't gone too well, as he soon recalled slapping the boy in a flash of rage). It was also when Davoren's name first cropped up.

Rufus had described him as a mysterious man who'd always looked after him. Reno did not know him. Hours later, and he **still** did not know who Davoren was, not really. At first, he'd been a riddle. Then he became their enemy; Reno still had plenty of injuries to remind him of his brutality (not to mention a close fatality averted solely by a flask of beer). Finally that same man, in one strange twist of fate, had turned ally. He'd risked his own life to extract them out of that debris-clogged Hellhole. He'd lead them across hostile terrain to their only passageway to safety.

Everything however terminated here. Viewing Davoren more grimly, Reno realized that his path with Rufus separated from now onwards. And he also knew that in lending his nightstaff, he'd thereby participated in splitting those intertwined paths.

Reno's expression darkened. One particular issue kept pestering him over and over until at long last it compelled him to move forth. Indeed, the morose Rude watched his friend advance at a deliberate pace across the room towards the gunman. He did not follow; intuition advised him to stay out of this. So he remained a spectator.

Reno stopped directly behind the hunched-over Davoren. He waited. Lingered thus, his keen gaze fastened down upon this man. He couldn't help but wonder what thoughts tumbled inside his head. Better yet, he wondered how he looked right now. He could barely trace the side of Davoren's face at this view. Plus the man kept it bowed, shadowed from scrutiny behind stray hair strands. Reno did notice however that he still clutched the nightstaff.

The ex-Turk stole a glance beyond Davoren upon the boy lying comatose at his knees, but looked away again as if stung by something sharp.

"How long will he be out for?" Davoren spoke at last. His voice was steady and dry.

Reno stared into the back of his head, "I set it on a small voltage. He'll be unconscious for only a few minutes."

"I see."

Another pause followed.

"The kid cares a lot about you, y'know," remarked the ex-Turk suddenly.

The comment sounded rather stupid to Reno's ears- Ah well done. Aren't you the perceptive one tonight? he berated himself. He could not determine whether his words had affected Davoren or not. The gunman did not look behind at him. He just continued to brood in silence.

Still, Reno squared his shoulders. Above his own awkwardness, he felt the necessity to lay bare all facts, even the most obvious, at Davoren's feet before their time expired.

"While all of us- me, Rude over there, and Vincent were fighting against you, Rufus was the only one who kept defending you. He said you were his friend. Didn't matter what you did or said. He still kept his faith in you. Hell, the damn loony was even prepared to throw his own life away to avenge you. Can't say I know that much about you, man. One thing I *do* know for certain though: this kid means a great deal to you too. Otherwise you never would have betrayed Professor Hojo to save us."

Reno's green eyes narrowed upon their target, "All I'm asking," he said, "is if you're sure. You sure THIS is how you wanna end it?"

As to what "it" referred to, Reno supposed he meant this faith and affection he and the boy shared. His tone harboured no resentment towards Davoren's decision. Nor did he intend to stand here and drag out his reasons; somehow in a way Reno couldn't quite explain, he felt he already understood those reasons, even though the gunman never articulated them. He'd simply asked Reno to please lend him his nightstaff. Davoren had seemed so certain of his choice, so dead certain it was right, that the ex-Turk not only couldn't dispute it, but had found himself (albeit reluctantly) agreeing with him.

It was just... the circumstances kept pecking at the back of Reno's mind. He understood what Davoren was trying to do, yet remained unsure of the way he'd chosen to go about it.

Ultimately, Reno reckoned he wanted assurance; a guarantee that despite the deception and many issues still floating about, this- THIS- would always be the best method to sever his ties with the boy. He needed to know because he'd come to consider Rufus his friend too, and the prospect of living afterwards in doubt, wondering whether or not he'd made the right choice to help him daunted Reno a lot more than

he cared to admit. Whatever Davoren would say, he decided he'd trust his answer as the final word which lays everything to rest.

So, was this how he truly wanted to end it?

The gunman addressed Reno without turning towards him, "This boy... he.. he's like a little brother to me. And to him, he said I..," yet Davoren paused; he realized the futility of such an explanation, for he alone could ever appreciate the full significance of his own words. He tried another approach, "No. This is not how I want to end it. Rufus was the prisoner. I was his caretaker. Truth be told though, I was a prisoner just as much as he was... both of us stuck in our own Hell for so long. We let it turn us into someone else... someone ugly, cold... and monstrous. The boy and I, yeah, there are many special- I don't know... special threads that connect us to each other. And now that we're not prisoners anymore... now that we're free, those threads have to be cut."

Davoren lifted his head slightly and craned it sideways to look at the solemn ex-Turk behind him. His face reflected the absolute conviction in his own beliefs, "But then, the best thread he and I share is also the strongest, and that one can never be cut no matter where we go from here. I'm just sure that... this is what I must do. This is how I must end it," his keen gaze dug deeper into Reno's as he added, "You understand. You wouldn't have helped me unless you do."

The ex-Turk knew not how to answer. Nor did Davoren expect him to. The latter finally rose to his feet again. He handed the nightstaff back to its owner with a polite, "Thank you".

Reno couldn't be sure whether he'd thanked him for lending him the weapon or for understanding. Either case, he accepted it. Davoren stood before him with hands loose by his sides. Despite his scruffy demeanour, he struck quite the noble figure, accentuated further by his impressive height. The gunman closed his eyes for a moment- just this brief, quiet moment as if to lock it all safe within his memory forever- then regarded Reno. He flicked his sight over to Rude, who all this time had been attentively listening to their conversation from across the room. The boy lay the same upon the floor. Davoren cast one final look at him.

The deed was done. Time to move out. And so, Davoren turned to leave them.

The sight of the gunman walking away so carelessly back towards the entrance, back towards *that* calamity outside, instantly whipped both ex-Turks into rigid shock. Until now, they'd thought Davoren would accompany them down the escape shaft and part ways in the sewers. But off he marched, putting them, Rufus and salvation all behind him.

"Y-you're going back there for Vincent and that girl, aren't you?!" cried the incredulous Rude.

Davoren needn't reply. He just continued onwards.

"Man, you must be more insane than I thought!!" Reno shouted after him in a fluster, "How do you know he's still here, eh?! What if he's already taken the girl and split?! Think about that! You'd be searching for a needle that may not even BE in the haystack!!"

"He's still here," said the calm gunman, "I just know it."

"And where the Hell are ya gonna start looking anyway?! This place is friggin' HUGE!!"

A valid point. But his earnest entreaties all fell on deaf ears. Davoren coolly stopped to take his assault rifle, which hitherto had been waiting propped up against the metal shelves. Such nonchalance irritated the hot-blooded young man, so much so that he dashed forth to grab Davoren's shoulder before he could sling the gun on.

He snarled outloud, "Goddamit, would ya take a look around?! LOOK! This entire shithole is falling apart

and here you-“

Yet he stopped short when Davoren, instead of arguing, merely twisted his head aside to meet that glare with a small, serene smile. He didn't appear the least bit ruffled by Reno's brusqueness. Nor did he attempt to wrestle out of his grip, even though they both knew he could have easily flung him off. Once again, they lingered in this silence, the gunman's hand still clamped around his weapon, Reno's still on his strong shoulder. Those eyes shimmered a tranquillity the ex-Turk had never seen the likes before, so clear with purpose, not a ripple of worry or trouble.

Reno suddenly realized one of the reasons Davoren had to rob Rufus' consciousness: he knew the boy would have tried to stop him from going back, just like he was trying right now. Davoren knew the risks. He knew he might perish searching for Vincent. His calm façade however told Reno that he had made his decision and did not want anyone to interfere. Please, he seemed to beg, I appreciate your concern but this is how it must be.

Please.

Though Rude stood at a distance, he sensed just as keenly as his friend this clash between apprehension and the growing bond they'd forged with the gunman. It surprised Rude a bit to realize he'd actually come to like this enigmatic ally. He knew Reno shared his sentiments too. Amazing how Davoren had so quickly won their favour when only a few hours ago they'd been battling each other bloody. The man possessed this talent at drawing strong trust and admiration from those around him. Leadership just seemed to come naturally to him. He'd sure demonstrated it well throughout their alliance, from rescuing them from that death-trap to bringing them here.

But upon regarding Davoren right then, Rude also saw the futility in trying to dissuade him from going back. He returned his solemn eyes to Reno. They drilled into the back of his head, persuading him to relinquish the gunman, to respect his choice without letting his own emotions intervene. This was how it must be.

The message seemed to reach the latter. Indeed, Reno became acutely aware of his disquietude. His furrowed brows relaxed. Yes. Yes, perhaps this really was how it must be.

So in the end, he released his captive.

Davoren resumed like nothing had happened. He slung the loaded rifle across one shoulder while the two men watched him in silence. He moved to leave, but suddenly stopped again as if he'd just remembered something of utmost importance. He turned halfway around to view both ex-Turks in full.

He asked them, "Can I trust you to take care of the boy after I'm gone?"

The two men stood at attention, yet neither the morose Rude nor Reno, still burning contemplation, replied.

Davoren chuckled weakly as he realized how silly his question had sounded, "Heh! Of course you'll take care of him," he answered himself, "I know every Turk must swear his loyalty to the ShinRa president. However, the company no longer exists. Rufus isn't your boss anymore. Still," Davoren smiled benevolently at them, "You came here for him. You always stuck by him no matter what came your way. Both of you are loyal to him because you *want* to, not because you *have* to."

statement carried sincere commendation, which rather took its two recipients aback. Not once, they realized, had either of them wondered- really, really questioned- how far their duties should extend to their young president. True, Reno at first had tried to sweep it away from his mind. But deep down, he knew he was only lying to himself. The possibility of Rufus being alive somewhere had weighed as heavy upon his heart as upon Rude's. That's why he couldn't sleep. That's why he and his friend had ventured here.

They'd fought the deranged Professor Hojo. They'd joined forces with former enemies, Vincent and then Davoren. Hell, mused Reno, they'd even disobeyed a direct order from Rufus to just let him die... twice. They simply did whatever they had to do to pull him out of this place.

In effect, Davoren had revealed to them a truth subconsciously they'd already known: their steadfast loyalty and more importantly their desire to help- genuinely help- now bound them to the beleaguered Rufus. "Duty", the sense of strict obligation to their superior... that had long since ceased to be a factor. For these two ex-Turks, to have this truth exposed to their conscious minds by such candid words let them both quiet with reflection and equally in awe of the speaker's incredible insight.

In return, Davoren's expression softened upon them. Humbly, he made his last request, "You two are good men. For all you've done, you have my respect. And I know you'll look after Rufus. But if you really care about him, then please... be his friends, not his bodyguards. I think... he needs that more so now than ever."

By this time, fresh tremors had begun their onslaught upon these hapless wards. The room convulsed. Nevertheless, the atmosphere retained its solemnity while the ex-Turks still studied Davoren another moment. His plea contained such a melancholic quality, like a parent about to part with his child, but at the same time trust and confidence in these two men. Reno did not need to consult Rude to know they'd both reached the same answer. He thus straightened his back and gave Davoren one assertive nod: yes, they will honour his request.

Through his chaotic white hair, the gunman smiled back at them; a broad smile of heartfelt gratitude. Then, as simply as that, he whirled around again and dashed away... away from the ex-Turks, the boy... out of the room and beyond. He never looked back.

Reno would always remember the sight of Davoren running down that ominous hall till he'd vanished into the darkness. He'd always wonder what befell the man afterwards. Did he find Vincent? Did he actually manage to escape the doomed Reactor in time? Or did he just disappear amidst all the destruction crashing about? Did he live or die that night?

They'd probably never know for certain. As Davoren rushed through falling garbage, that was the last Rude and Reno ever saw of him.

-End of Chp.92

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields- Chp.93

It amazed Reno how they managed to escape the Reactor that night. Davoren had left the group to make their own way to safety. The wounded Rude, despite his visible agony, insisted he'd recuperated enough to walk unaided. Reno of course didn't believe that lie for a second. Then again, they also had their comatose president to consider, and he could only handle one body. So Reno accepted.

Besides, the impending destruction, the sheer *urgency* of the whole situation allowed no room for argument.

They had to act fast and NOW. The quick-witted Reno crouched down to haul Rufus up onto his back, at the same time barking behind at his friend to "Move your ass!". Rude instantly obeyed. He hobbled down the open shaft. Reno, having secured his load, sprinted away and followed the first man in, just as another ferocious tremor seized the room.

Down the ladder rungs they scrambled like a pair of escaped convicts. A miasma of dust poured after them through the vent's mouth. Bits of debris pelted their exposed heads. Rude almost lost his footing twice. Reno couldn't stop cursing. Nevertheless, the men scurried downwards at the same determined speed. No time to worry. No time to think. Just move, move, move!

The shaft ended some meters below at a huge, perpendicular pipeline. The fugitives dropped into its round lumen. They rushed straight ahead, blind and breathless, till this road also terminated. Thus they emerged, as Davoren had told them, upon the dark, smelly caverns of Midgar's sewer system.

Neither man had a clue which direction to take. But what with anarchy still hot on their trail, it didn't matter where the Heck they went as long as it was far away from here. They bolted off into some tunnel on the left. Reno, filthy and dripping sweat, led the expedition through these wet burrows. He carried the oblivious Rufus flopped across his shoulders like a sack. The ex-Turk bore his load with a bent back and a hard, forbearing attitude. Danger pounded after them, insanity ran amok- but hey! At least the kid's not heavy, the disgruntled Reno tried to look on the bright side.

Onwards they pressed. Some half a mile down the tunnel, the tremors finally receded again to their previous grumbings. Lucky indeed, for Rude, who hitherto had been rushing alongside his friend, gradually lost momentum until, quite abruptly, all strength expired. He would have collapsed had he not leaned against the wall first then slid down onto the floor, panting and spinning in a mental vortex. He refused to lose consciousness- now certainly was not the time. But even he had to admit he could go no further on his own.

Reno of course had stopped the instant he's noticed Rude fall off the race. He anxiously called his name. Still the man could not gather himself. Reno, awash with agitation, set the boy down on the ground and ran back to tend to this new concern.

It took a few minutes before they'd re-established any kind of stability to Rude's frayed senses. Reno meanwhile had squatted down in close attendance. He held his head up, urging him to get a grip on himself. Inside though, he knew Rude had expended all his endurance. That wound continued to torment him. He looked terrible. No doubt he would get dangerously worse unless he received immediate treatment. For now however, Reno could only offer his friend constant encouragement.

"Hold on," he kept telling him, "Goddammit, Rude. We've made it THIS far alive. You die on me now 'n I swear I'll kill myself just so I go bust your sorry ass in Hell. You hold on, got that? Hold on!"

Amidst these agonies and reassurances, Reno happened to glance back to where he'd left Rufus. There he discovered, much to his sudden apprehension, the boy already stirring back to life. He watched Rufus fight the grogginess to sit up. Those bewildered blue eyes darted all around the strange new surroundings, paused to reflect inwards a moment, then searched again until they found Reno.

Their gazes interlocked for a mere fraction of a minute. The silent ex-Turk confronted him straight on- no melodrama, no explanations, only this solemn, harshly honest visage which said nothing yet at the same time said everything. Right then, Rufus, haggard and mystified mute, realized what had transpired as intensely as knife straight to the core: they'd fled the Reactor without Davoren. In fact, Davoren had deceived him to get rid of him; he'd used the nightstaff on him. And Reno, that man over there staring back at him, he'd-

Rufus' whole face strained with an emotion Reno could not quite describe. It was like dismay, incomprehension, anguish and consternation knit into this one expression of such poignancy, such candour. The ex-Turk felt a profound discomfort stir within him, as if that look alone had...

But then, more important matters needed attention right now. He broke away from the boy and returned to his suffering friend with more words of encouragement. By then, it had become blatantly obvious that Rude could not continue this journey on his own. The pain and exhaustion had eroded too much; he dangled on the very border of unconsciousness.

Reno, without looking aside at Rufus, barked, "Sir, can you stand up?"

It was an order, not a question. All the same Rufus, still a bit shaken, scrambled to obey. The stern-faced Reno meanwhile had wrapped Rude's arm around his neck and hauled him up to his wobbly legs.

"Move it. C'mon, we gotta find a way outta here," he ordered as he brushed past the boy.

Again, the latter obeyed. Down the dank tunnels they trudged. To have the group mobile once more greatly relieved Reno, though he had to admit Rufus' full compliance rather surprised him. He'd expected lots of questions, a big argument, even resistance against which he'd have to employ his nightstaff again.

But he'd only received that haunting, inscrutable look. Reno avoided direct eye contact with Rufus for the rest of the trip. Instead he invested all his focus into supporting Rude and keeping this party on the move. Nor did the boy utter a single syllable. He just marched along, ghost-like, his wan face overshadowed by gloom.

They drifted through the labyrinthine sewers until they reached a steel ladder fixed to the wall. It stretched up to a manhole. One by one, the group climbed up. Reno removed the grate and clambered onto some dingy alley in an unfamiliar part of town. He helped Rude out, after which Rufus emerged- for the first time he could remember- upon the open world.

His eyes whirled around the grim scenery only to rest, like Rude and Reno's already had, on that metallic fortress burning wild in the far distance. The sheer ferocity of the spectacle gripped the boy by the throat. Yes, that was the Reactor. That was the inferno they'd just escaped.

For a long moment, the trio simply lingered there in a collective daze. They beheld torrents of smoke billow up the night sky. They heard the Reactor's moans echo across the horrified city. Soon the sirens of police cars and fire trucks joined in the cacophony. Reno peeked askance at Rufus. He could tell from his face how the fiery spectacle perturbed him: everything incinerated to a memory right before his very eyes. The fire burning... burning, and somewhere in there Davoren...

"We better get going," said Reno.

They left the catastrophe behind and wandered down another street. The path emptied into an abandoned square. Reno recognized it at once. They'd actually travelled a great distance through the sewers, right into the heart of their own sector. From this square, navigating the rest of the journey home would be a cinch!

Reno therefore took the expedition through a knot of black alleys, supporting Rude along the way. The

latter by now relied almost completely on his comrade for balance. Rufus just tagged behind the pair in quiet dismay, feet on automatic pilot while his downcast eyes gazed at nothing.

They reached a thicket of apartment blocks with the first rays of dawn. At long, long last Reno caught sight of their building: home! There it was. Never before did it look as good as right now!

The dishevelled group lumbered their way up to the apartment door. Reno could have kissed it. Just an hour ago he'd wondered if he'd ever see this door again. God was he tired! And dirty. And come to think of it a bit hungry. He probably looked a proper mess too, all tattered and bloody. Maybe he'd wash first and eat something before retiring to bed for, oh mused Reno, a few months...

Yes, they'd spent one unbelievable night running around, battling for their lives, narrowly escaping a death-trap then scouring the putrid sewers for an exit. And people complain there's nothing fun to do in Midgar after twelve, he thought sarcastically. It didn't matter though. They'd made it out in one piece. They were home. Reno thus unlocked the door certain they'd put all peril far behind them.

Little did he know the worst danger yet would swoop upon them the instant he opened that door: a hysterical Elena.

At the sound of their entry, Elena, still in her night shirt and without any make-up, poked her head out of the kitchen. She immediately flew down the hall in a flurry, where by pure instinct, she pounced upon the confused man to hug him tight. "AH! Reno!!" she wailed, then upon noticing the miserable load he supported, gasped out a horrified "OH GOD! RUDE!!"

Reno struggled to uphold his friend while trying to calm this tearful woman: yes, they were okay... Rude was badly wounded... no, his own injuries weren't as serious... again yes, they were alright...

But no sooner had Elena's anxieties been alleviated than rage seized her senses. From weeping to outright wrathful, the woman suddenly shoved Reno away with a loud, "AND WHERE THE HELL WHERE YOU GUYS?!"

An avalanche of questions followed: where were you? What happened? Do you know what time it is? Why didn't you call me? And God almighty, what IS that awful stench?! Her endless barrage practically slammed both men up against the wall. Neither dared speak back- they knew better than to cross a woman with a temper *this* hot.

"You assholes!" she fumed mad at the pair, "Leaving me here to go nuts, wondering where you'd snuck off to! I was so damn worried I skipped work today! And you think you can waltz in and just shrug it off?! Like Hell! I wanna know what's going on! And as for YOU, Mr. President, I-"

But the rest of her rebuke froze on her lips when she suddenly realized who she was addressing. Indeed, for the first time since their arrival, Elena noticed Rufus. He stood slightly apart from the two ex-Turks... just stood there staring blankly back at her. On the journey home, Reno had told him in brief about this woman. Elena had only joined the Turks a short period before the company collapsed. Afterwards she, Rude and himself had rented this apartment together. He assured him she was a good friend, trustworthy, quite tender-hearted, though volatile sometimes and a bit naïve.

Rufus did not remember her, even now as he beheld her with a mixture of perplexity and caution. Elena on the other hand had immediately recognized that scruffy, thin figure as the former ShinRa president. She also remembered he was supposed to be dead. Yet there he lingered in plain view, very much alive.

Yes, it was him. It really WAS him.

Dumbfounded, Elena turned back to the ex-Turks, who'd been observing her reaction suppressed under an awkward silence. She folded her arms and arched her eyebrows expectantly. From her demeanour alone, they understood she wanted a full explanation.

But that would have to wait till later.

Rude's grave condition had demanded immediate attention. For now questions were suspended. Elena, assuming command as head nurse, had the feeble man taken to his room while she dashed off into the kitchen. Reno had led his friend to his bed. He helped him clamber in, after which Rude fell backwards flat upon the sheets, gasping in visible pain. Reno began peeling off his tattered shirt to expose the wound beneath. There it glared back at him: one horrible, obscene gash streaked across his flesh.

"Oh boy," he muttered to himself.

Only moments later, Elena rushed into the room with the medicine box she'd just fetched from the storage cabinet. She pulled up a chair to the patient's bedside. Together she and Reno went to work.

As former Turks, they'd each received basic training in injury management. Reno loaded a syringe with some fluid. Gently he encouraged the man to "Hang tight, okay? This is just a quick pain killer", after which came the injection like a small bee sting. Elena, who'd already donned the latex gloves packed inside the kit, now prepared to a suture. Once analgesia had totally eradicated Rude's agony and his body relaxed, she started stitching his torn flesh together. Or at least tried her best to. She'd only learnt the simplest pattern- and even in that she lacked confidence. A surgeon she sure was not. But then, better to stitch the wound badly than leave it open. Meanwhile, the assiduous Reno tended to Rude's less critical injuries. The pair worked quickly yet effectively. Neither spoke a word. For some forty minutes, Elena poured all her concentration into suturing, Reno into cleaning and bandaging.

Rude let them do their jobs. He savoured this pain-free rest with easy, deep breaths. It gave him an opportunity to re-organize his mind. No matter how often he assured himself, it still confounded him how they'd survived tonight's madness... no, wait. By now, it was morning; he'd just noticed sunlight creeping through the half-drawn curtains. So it was actually yesterday. And only the day before, they'd no idea, not even the vaguest suspicion, of Hojo's "experiment", or that president ShinRa still lived. At the thought of Rufus, Rude looked around. The boy wasn't here; he must've been placed in another room...

Having finished the final stitch, Elena now began patching Rude's wound. "So," she suddenly broke the silence, "Which one of you boys wants to tell me what you were up to last night?"

Rude tacitly whirled his eyes to the far end of the room, thereby escaping any interrogation. He decided to entrust that tricky matter to Reno. After all, *he'd* lead them into this mess. He should do the explaining.

Thus Reno found himself, much to his own chagrin, the sole prisoner under Elena's glower. His friend having deserted him to face her alone, Reno decided he'd break both of Rude's kneecaps later. At present though, he would have to explain everything.

So began the long saga of their "adventure", from when they slipped out of the apartment to their escape from the crumbling laboratory and all in between. The restless ex-Turk shuffled about behind Elena while she finished dressing her patient's wound. She listened attentively to him talk about Rufus, about Professor Hojo, their alliance with Vincent and the enigmatic Davoren. He described how they fled the Reactor via the sewers (hence the terrible smell), the route they followed home, etc etc etc. Everything.

"And that brings us up to this point in time," Reno concluded, "Can I go get some sleep now?"

"Wait! Just wait!" the stunned Elena backtracked, "So Professor Hojo... THE professor Hojo, he was alive in some laboratory working on this 'experiment'?"

"Yep."

"Isn't he supposed to be, like, dead?"

"Yep."

"But you saw him alive."

"Yep. Alive and kicking."

"Kicking our asses, that is," interjected Rude wryly.

"And the same goes for the President?"

"Yep."

"That guy, Reno, that guy you brought here with you: that's New Age President Rufus ShinRa, genuine-certified-100%-guarantee-or-your-money-back HIM?"

"Yep."

Elena paused. Clearly such an incredible tale mystified all logic. One particular detail however soon caught the woman's attention, "Hm, this lab," she asked Reno, "You said it was in a Reactor. It wouldn't happen to be the same Reactor that collapsed this morning?"

His quizzical expression told her he'd no idea what she meant. Nor did Rude. Their ignorance merely vexed her further. Rather than elaborate, the miffed Elena reached over to switch on the radio by Rude's bed. At once, an excited voice boomed out. The speaker raved about some horrific disaster.... an explosion had struck one of the Mako Reactors early this morning... only hours later, it suffered what is believed to be a massive earthquake... authorities still haven't made a formal statement... one other oddity which has everyone completely stumped: shortly before the reactor's ultimate collapse, electricity- yes, electricity- returned to the building. Not since the demise of the ShinRa Empire had Midgar witnessed a Reactor at full power. Lit up in a dazzling glory, truly it took one's breath away. But as of yet, no one seems able to-

"Heh! Y'hear that?" Reno bragged smugly to his friend, "That's MY handiwork they're praising: they reco'nize mah skills, brotha!"

"So it WAS you guys!" the outraged Elena slammed the radio off and sprang up, "You wrecked that Rector!!"

"Er, y-yeah. I mean.. well, we're not *entirely* responsible for that," the startled man tried to weasel out of his unintentional confession. Rude just slapped his forehead in agony: Elena was sure to massacre them now.

"And what about this 'secret lab'?" she demanded, hands on her hips, "I distinctly remember you saying there was no lab. After that Vincent fella broke in here and asked about the lab, you told him there was no such place!"

Having joined the Turks only shortly before ShinRa Inc.'s destruction, Elena never had the opportunity to learn many of the company's "classified" information, certainly not of this laboratory. Nor had either of her more experienced comrades cared to enlighten her until today. But as for not telling Vincent, the nettled Reno declared, "I lied to him, okay? I didn't trust that vampire-freak at the time!"

"What about me?! Why the Hell didn't you let me in on this? I used to be a Turk like you, dammit! You should've at least told me what you were up to!!"

Indeed, Elena had woken early today to find Midgar in turmoil. While preparing for work, she'd flicked on the television by chance. Instantly, news of the disaster had blared back at her. She even caught footage

of the Reactor's collapse. Such a horrific catastrophe had sent the woman into an immediate flurry. She'd rushed off to wake her two friends only to discover, much to her bewilderment, an empty bed in each room. Both men had completely vanished. No note, no trace. Nothing.

The distraught Elena had thus languished in acute mental distress for the next two hours. The television kept her company throughout her ordeal. Intuition had warned her something was "up". Something bad. Reno and Rude wouldn't just sneak off into the night like that unless it were so. But what was it? Where did they go? How come they didn't tell her? Why hadn't they returned yet? What if they were in danger??

By eight o'clock, Elena's imagination had concocted all sorts of frightful possibilities: they drank themselves stupid and fell into a ditch! They got hit by a runaway truck! They were abducted by a sect of kooky female chocobo worshippers who used single men as bird fodder; yes! Like that story her (even kookier) tabloid-addicted colleague at the office once told her! Or-

Thankfully, the turning of the front door lock rescued her sanity just in time. Who should enter but her friends, ruffled and wasted after a whole night frolicking Heaven-knows-where. And here she'd wasted her morning driving herself mad!

It just confirmed what her mother had always warned her about men: their genes were a paradox- the X chromosome could make them lovable, caring sweethearts, but the Y chromosome could turn them to insensitive bastards.

"Have you jerks any idea how worried I was about you?!" exploded Elena in passionate indignation, "I was going insane, in-friggin'-sane wondering what happened to you! My God! I even thought you'd been turned to Chocobo chow! I actually thought rabid birds were feasting on you while these nutty, half-naked witches chanted some evil hymn!!"

The two men exchanged an odd glance, each one wondering exactly how she'd acquired such a ...bizarre notion as THAT (then again, best not to ask). Nevertheless Rude, who'd managed to sit himself up over the edge of the bed, tried to mitigate her anger, "Ah see, Elena," he reasoned, "We thought it might be too dangerous. Reno 'n I didn't mean to get you worried. We just didn't want to risk you ge-"

"THAT SHIT DON'T CUT NO ICE WITH ME, BUB!" her retort almost knocked him back flat, "You think leaving me behind in this state was any better?! I miss work, I stress myself sick, 'n then what? I discover you two macho-morons were out vandalizing public property!"

"We were NOT vandalizing!" insisted Reno.

"Point is, you acted without the slightest consideration for my feelings. And to make it up to me, once you've healed up, you're both doing ALL house chores for a month!!"

Not if Reno had anything to say about it. A heated argument rapidly broke out: he was all for making it up with Elena- yes, maybe they should have told her. Yes, they were real sorry for her ordeal, but damn! House chores for a month? ALL of them?! He may as well have died a grisly, bloody death back there in the Reactor!

Reno declared outloud he'd rather have his own spleen extracted through his left nostril and shoved down his throat than endure such inhumane punishment! At this stage, Rude had to intervene for fear Elena might actually grant his request. He stood between the quarrelsome two. The man had to use all his skill to negotiate a compromise. The terms were simple: for one month, they would devote themselves entirely to bathroom and kitchen duties. In return, Elena would let them keep their heads. Everyone's happy and nobody has to get hurt. Now wasn't that fair?

"Hmph. Fine!" she consented.

"I'll scrub toilets and mop floors," grumbled Reno sourly, "But no way I'm cleaning up after her cat's damn

hairballs.”

Their punishment thus settled, the vexed ex-Turk folded his arms and retreated to the window, where he brooded with his back to the group. After so much talk, he needed a minute of quiet introspection to detangle his many thoughts. His friends needed the same. Rude sat down again on the bed. He leaned over to rub both temples, then cast his gaze aside, already lost in contemplation. Elena, who'd turned slightly away from the main scene, loitered alone in her own reflections. Amongst the three of them stood a long, heavy silence.

Elena breathed a soft sigh. By now, she'd vented all the rage out of her system. Only profound relief and happiness lingered inside now that her friends had returned home safe and sound. The woman hated to imagine what she'd have done if she'd lost either one of them. They meant so much to her, like two big brothers- though fat chance she'd ever tell them THAT! After all, she had her “tough girl” image to maintain.

Nevertheless, trouble continued to tumble inside Elena's kind heart. The story her friends had brought back with them astounded her beyond words. The person they'd returned with... *that* matter, she just did not know what to think.

Elena looked towards the bedroom door, which had been left wide open throughout their discussion. Her worried eyes drifted down the hall outside to the living room on the opposite end. She could see Rufus in profile, sitting there slouched on the sofa alone and frighteningly still. The boy didn't discern her scrutinizing his despondent demeanour from this distance. Nor did he seem at any point aware of their argumentative conversation. He either had not heard it or simply did not care, himself so engrossed in his own dark stupor with eyes fixed on his boots.

During the previous scramble to treat Rude, Elena, while rummaging about for the medicine box, had managed to spare a few minutes for Rufus. He didn't seem to understand when the benevolent woman awkwardly asked him if he was hurt anywhere. He'd just looked back at her in confusion. In fact, studying Rufus right now, Elena wondered how much sanity still dwelt within his mind.

Anyway, his injuries hadn't appeared to warrant any immediate attention. She did notice however his hands shaking a bit. Thus she'd guided this wreck to the living room. There he was seated on the sofa. Elena had quickly fetched him a glass of water and a woolly blanket, which she'd wrapped around him with the utmost care. After that, she'd dashed off to tend to Rude in the bedroom.

More than an hour had passed, but Rufus sat there exactly as she'd left him. The glass remained untouched, the blanket draped around his shoulders as if to protect him from this alien world surrounding him. He looked dreadful, pale and shell-shocked. What a contrast that young man struck against the president ShinRa she remembered.

Yet there he was: Rufus ShinRa.

“God, I...,” faltered Elena suddenly, “I can't believe he's been alive all this time. Still alive after that blast and...”

The sheer reality of it overwhelmed her before she could complete the sentence. The compassionate young woman pressed her fingertips to her lips to compose herself again. Reno had already told her about the array of torture Rufus had suffered for the valuable information locked somewhere within his head. Accounts of beatings, drugs, delirium and constant, relentless mental violations; those still weighed heavy upon her heart. The grave Rude looked from her over to his friend, but the latter remained silent by the window.

“And,” Elena asked softly, “He really doesn't remember a thing?”

She turned to Rude. He shook his head and muttered, “His mind is all tattered and foggy. When we found

him, he didn't recognize us. He didn't know who he was beyond his first name. He couldn't remember anything from his life before the accident and he certainly didn't know why the Professor bothered saving him. He'd even forgotten that he used to support Hojo's experiment. I'd say most of his memory has been wiped out. I don't know; maybe some bits and pieces remain. But it's not only that, Elena," Rude's solemn gaze now strayed beyond the open doorway to rest on that solitary figure in the living room. He mused, "Rufus... he's not the same person as before. Everything inside him, *he* himself, is just so completely..."

"Shattered," Reno finished the sentence.

Rude frowned. He would have preferred a more discreet word, but then none would have described Rufus' state better: utterly and completely shattered.

Another silence descended upon the group. The same question occupied their three minds: what to do with Rufus?

Still facing the window, Reno furrowed his brow as he tossed the issue about. He admitted in the beginning, when they'd just met Rufus, his prime focus had been to simply "get the kid out of there and to somewhere safe". Indeed, from fighting Davoren to Professor Hojo to that abyss to fleeing that Reactor, he never quite had enough time to plan beyond this objective. "The kid comes with us. We'll figure out what to do later", Reno recalled himself once saying. Well, later was now. So what where they going to do? In his mind, one and only one answer existed. Besides, he'd promised Davoren.

Reno spoke his decision clear and sure, "Rufus stays with us."

Both Rude and Elena regarded the morose man, who finally turned around to face them; his expression radiated quiet determination stemming from a sincere heart.

"He's got nothing. I mean yeah, none of us here like our lives: boring jobs, underpaid and overworked, outcasts in a city that hates us. But hey, at least it's A life. We've got other things to help us get by," Reno's voice then dropped to a solemn undertone as he peered intently between his two friends, "But this kid, he's really got nothing: no home, no family, no money and no memory. Just us. *We* are all he's got right now."

As far as Rude was concerned, Reno needn't have explained his answer. He himself had reached the exact same decision. To them both, this matter had long since evolved from loyalty to their leader to genuine care for a friend, just like Davoren observed before leaving. Rude nodded at Reno in full agreement: yes, Rufus stays here. The two ex-Turks then consulted Elena, who smiled understandingly and nodded too: damn right he stays. She'd never have accepted any other option.

"I still say you guys should have taken me along though," she insisted afterwards, if only to squeeze one final rebuke into this discussion.

"Take you along?" Reno poked fun at her, "Are you nuts?"

"Why not?"

"You've very limited combat experience."

"So?"

"So you wouldn't have lasted five seconds in there. I mean, look at what happened to Rude 'n me, and we've been around A LOT longer than you, sweet-cheeks. Heck, we already had our hands full watching after the kid. Babysitting a rookie like you as well woulda been damn impossible, I can tell ya that. And besides!" Reno lashed out the final point with relish, "Knowing you, you probably would have just dawdled there making ogely-eyes at the enemy!"

"What are you yapping about?"

"When that freak Vincent broke into our apartment yesterday, you were all like 'Wow, he's so polite. Eee! He's so cute'."

"Well, he was!"

"The guy's *supposed* to be your enemy. AND he'd just broken into your home. Geez! If you'd taken on someone like Davoren, you'd probably have ended up... I dunno, hanky-pankying around 'n flirting with him instead of fighting him!"

"Yup. All over him like bees on honey," Rude chimed in jest.

"Hell! Maybe even turn against us just for him."

"Yeow! Really? Was this 'Davoren' fella that hot??" the eager Elena blurted lustfully, only to realize the trap she'd jumped into, "Er, I mean- no! That is so not true!"

The two ex-Turks just stared at the embarrassed young woman. Of course, neither believed her for a split second.

"Well, whatever," Reno dismissed the topic, believing they'd teased her long enough. He was actually very happy to be back home bickering with Elena; they both were. Many times during last night they'd feared they might never see her again. "Look," he said, "I'm gonna hit the shower then get some sleep, okay? Wake me sometime next week."

Reno shuffled off towards the door. Much to his confusion however, the astute Elena snagged his arm to draw him back, "Ah-ah!" she declared, "You can do that *after* I've looked at your wounds."

"Wha? But-"

"No buts! I still got you and the President to treat. C'mon."

No use trying to squirm out of her attentive care. Elena didn't like that bleeding gash alongside his temple or his stiff shoulder. At the very least, she would clean and dress those injuries. Thus Elena escorted her second patient by his arm to the chair.

"Rude," she ordered, "You lie back down. No getting up till I say so. Reno, you sit here. Sit! Now then, lemme patch that up for you," as she tended to his head wound, Elena smiled deviously, "And the in the meantime, you two boys can tell me *all* about this 'Davoren' guy."

-End of Chp. 93

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields- Chp.94

The next few days following her friends' return from their "adventure" proved hectic for Elena. Alone, under constant pressure, it was up to her to fend off agony and illness from their feeble carcasses. Not an easy task, given the sorry state they'd staggered home in. Indeed, remarkable how much a man could achieve with adrenaline pumping through his veins. He can rush across a warzone intact, leap across the widest gorge, fight the devil himself before doubt or fear even gripped him. And in this case, Elena reckoned both ex-Turks and Rufus had been riding high on this natural drug almost all night. It sure had helped them escape that catastrophe alive. But by the time the trio had at last reached home, just after dawn, their adrenaline supply had been exhausted dry.

Thus defenseless, the full gravity of their conditions, hitherto ignored, finally caught up with them.

The two ex-Turks had sustained a variety of injuries. The worst had been treated first, on the very hour of their arrival. She'd stitched Rude's side. She'd patched up that nasty gash along Reno's temple. Still, many more abound. They needed lots of attention and further treatment.

Elena embraced the task without a second's deliberation. It meant sacrificing a week of work. But to her that meant little compared to nursing her "boys" back to health. In fact, she'd called the office that same morning to request an extended leave from her boss; "family emergency", she'd cited- not entirely an untruth. Happily her employer, an affable old man, accepted her reason as valid enough. He granted her ten days with only a quarter pay deduction.

So for the rest of that week, Elena devoted herself whole to her patients. She managed their wounds and medicines. She checked their progress and looked after practical matters, such as feeding them and changing their bed linen.

Amongst the three, Rude consumed the greatest share of Elena's energy; his injuries ranked more serious. Indeed, he'd taxed his strength well beyond its limits. He'd bled a fair amount too. Everything hurt. To talk, to move, to breathe. Elena found it near impossible to watch over her friend, his face so grey and limbs shivering, without herself suffering a pang of anguish. His plight simply tore her to pieces.

It got worse. Later that evening, on the same day they'd returned, Rude spiked a temperature, which persisted for days; an infection had probably infiltrated his body through one of his open wounds. With this new complication, Elena's worry level hit the ceiling. She spent countless hours by his side as he languished in bed, a flaccid, sweaty wreck. During these times, Rude received regular doses of pain killers to alleviate his agony, a remedy for the infection, and loads of TLC (tender love & care).

Elena inspected his flank everyday. It delighted her to find the wound healing nicely, although her poor suturing technique meant he would probably have a permanent scar. The other injuries however healed better under her diligence.

Elena fretted a lot about Rude. But she knew her friend possessed a robust constitution. With her constant attention, the man's fever abated by the weekend and his precarious state stabilized again.

A generous reception of hugs and relieved exclamations awaited him when he finally awoke, much improved and quite famished. Elena just had to celebrate. She ordered take-away from his favorite restaurant and spoon-fed it to him herself. Afterwards, she insisted on giving him a nice, slow massage to soothe his stiff muscles. Such exquisite care secretly made Rude almost happy for his own terrible affliction. Almost.

As for Reno, the minute Elena had finished treating his wounds, he'd retreated to bed for one long sleep. Nobody disturbed him during his slumber, though no doubt the vigilant Elena checked on him from time to time. Seventeen hours elapsed before Reno's eyes opened again. Another three passed before he even considered venturing out from under these cozy blankets.

In fact, the man half-regretted waking at all: no sooner had he shifted in bed than he realized for the first time how much it hurt to move. God almighty! Every joint must have rusted stiff during his sleep. An awful, pervasive ache plagued his bones. And his head- holy mother of all migraines! Add to that, hunger kept pinching his empty stomach. Reno moaned outloud. He lazed around a few more minutes until the combined forces of pain and starvation at last coerced him out of bed.

Elena received this rumped, famished mess in the kitchen. No words necessary. She knew exactly what he needed. She sat him down upon the high stool by the counter. Reno automatically swallowed the pain killers she offered him. Next Elena served him a big, steaming-hot meal she'd prepared earlier. It made quite a sight to behold Reno, normally so averse to her cooking, devour the food within minutes. He made no fuss, not even one snide remark.

Once his hunger had receded, they talked a bit. It worried him greatly to learn of Rude's fever. He would have visited the latter at once had not Elena insisted he get more rest. He was not to fret; she'd look after everything.

Reno, like his friend in the other room, received constant care throughout his ordeal. Elena really did look after everything. She followed up his wounds as they healed. Each night, her delicate fingertips rubbed a cool, medicinal ointment into his bruises and cuts before replacing the old bandages. Bit by bit, he regained his vigor. Of course, Elena kept him updated about Rude's progress. As for Rufus, Reno seemed particularly wary when inquiring about him. Nor did Rufus, she noted, ever seek his company or even ask about him. She sensed something grave had happened between the two. Still, Elena reckoned it best not to pry.

Besides these two, Elena also had the new "guest" to consider. Their miraculous return home after such an eventful night had whipped this household into a frenzy. She had put Rufus in the living room while tending to Rude and Reno. That consumed most of her morning. When the first ex-Turk had settled and the second retired to bed, only then did Elena return to the living room, with medicine box in hand ready for the last patient.

Elena would always recall her first encounter with the former president of ShinRa Inc: she stopped at the entrance a minute to behold that disheveled, catatonic wreck sitting on the couch, still wrapped in the blanket she'd draped around him. Rufus had not moved since she'd left him here hours ago. He just kept gazing down into an imaginary pit, unaware of anything else save the gloom insulating his mind from these unfamiliar surroundings.

Indeed, Rufus didn't notice Elena until she'd crept up and gingerly sat next to him. Roused out of his reverie, the boy turned to discover this stranger looking back at him.

"Crazy day, huh?" she greeted nervously, "A-all this running" around and... stuff. But you don't have to worry about any of that now, Sir. You're safe here," after a pause, she blurted, "Oh, I'm Elena, by the way. I used to be a Turk as well. Not that you'd remember me. But, uh, that's okay. I mean, I'd only served you a short while before you...um..."

Elena, upon realizing how stupid her chatter must sound to Rufus, trailed off into a long, embarrassed hush. She didn't want to say "before you died"; she feared it might upset him. But then, how the heck was she supposed to approach him? What could she possibly say to him?

The woman fidgeted, red-faced, staring hard down at the medicine box as though it might contain some solution. Honestly, Elena couldn't decide which discomfited her more: the stiff silence between them or this acute sense of awkwardness pecking at her non-stop. Here she sat in her nightshirt next to Rufus ShinRa, her former boss, who until yesterday had been considered a dead body buried beneath tons of rubble.

Yes it was him, she'd been assured, Rufus ShinRa but not the same person as before; "shattered", Reno

had described him.

Elena decided to try again, this time with more caution, "Mr. President," she began, "I know all of this may be confu—"

"Rufus," he corrected gently.

It was the first time she'd heard him speak. The surprised Elena blinked, "What?"

"You don't have to call 'Mr. President'. I'm not your boss anymore. 'Rufus' will do."

One year ago, Elena would never have dreamed she'd be asked to address the president- THE ShinRa president- by his first name. Somehow though, this dropping of formalities helped ease her tension a bit. She realized Rufus, despite his own bemusement, actually appreciated how daunting this felt for her. They were complete strangers, but he'd wanted to show her they stood on equal ground. No superiority and certainly no titles.

Elena felt her heart warm up to him. "Alright... Rufus," she smiled, "You've got a couple of wounds there. Would you mind if I had a look at them?"

He did not. So she proceeded. Elena unwrapped the blanket then, with his permission of course, helped remove his ragged sweater too. She sat on the coffee table, directly in front of him. Medicine box open, she thus began tending to her patient.

Rufus resigned himself to her care. Mute, pre-occupied, he stared downwards while the assiduous Elena cleaned and dressed his injuries. They did not speak during this period, though all the time Elena gathered various observations about him.

She noted the emaciated state of his body, the array of old scars carved into his flesh- each one a silent testimony against the brutality he'd suffered during his year-long imprisonment. Reno had already described to her the amount of physical and mental damage his captors had inflicted upon him. It disconcerted her to imagine a slight, lamentable waste like this boy under such torture. That plus these new wounds he'd acquired over the course of one night. Elena discovered a lot more than she'd first anticipated: small cuts down his face and neck, gashes, dirt and oozing blood, lacerations across his arms, sides, and to her horror, his lower legs too. She mapped out the extensive bruising along his left shoulder- he must have sustained this after his fall into that garbage-clogged pit.

Yet what truly amazed Elena was Rufus' utter indifference to his own condition. Old injuries, recent injuries, neither affected his solemn countenance. He hardly flinched when she rubbed disinfectant against his raw flesh. The pain killer she injected into his muscles roused no response. Rufus just loitered there unaware of everything, himself included, once more lost within his own mind.

As Elena studied him, she wondered what thoughts so black could obliterate one's perception of pain altogether. Indeed, that too struck her: the impenetrable aura of sorrow around this boy.

A good hour passed before Elena could be certain she'd treated all his injuries. That done, she asked Rufus to please wait here while she dashed off a moment. She wanted to rustle up some decent clothes for him; he certainly could not continue wearing those pitiful rags. Rufus agreed. The tireless woman scuttled away down the hall.

The hunt invariably led Elena to Reno's and Rude's closets. She rummaged through each wardrobe until she managed to extract some garments for their destitute guest. Within minutes, she returned to Rufus, only to pull him onto his feet and escort him by the arm to the bathroom. There, she instructed him to wash himself then change into these, whereupon she handed him his new clothes. Again, Rufus automatically complied. He limped into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. Elena waited for him outside; she lingered close by just in case he needed any extra assistance.

A short time later, Rufus emerged again. He looked notably cleaner, though rather awkward in this plain jumper and faded black jeans.

Elena apologized, "I won't be able to go to the shops today. I have to look after the guys. Plus the entire city is in chaos, what with the Reactor's collapse 'n all. I'm afraid we can only give you cast-offs," Rufus looked at her. Elena, fearing that word might have offended him, hastily added, "B-but you won't have to wear them for long. I promise I'll get you completely brand new clothes first thing tomorrow."

Next she offered to cut his hair; if not then perhaps just a small trim. Rufus consented to the latter. So back to the living room they marched. There he was seated at the round dining table, upright and towel around his shoulders. Rufus never interfered; his vacant eyes hung down upon the floor. The attentive woman meanwhile hovered around him. Her fingers flitted through his untame hair with a pair of scissors, snipping and combing this mess back into order. Only when trimming the fringes did Elena, with a good view of his now clean face, appreciate how handsome Rufus actually was. He also seemed a bit younger than she recalled. It made his despondency all the more poignant for her to behold.

"There we go. Finished," Elena declared upon cutting the last hair strand. She stepped back to admire her work, then joked, "Heh! I'm no professional hair-dresser, but even I think I did a pretty good job."

To prove it, Elena flashed a square hand-mirror in front of his face. Rufus, at best apathetic until now, gave a small start at the sight of the stranger staring back at him. He gazed long at the reflection. He deliberately ran his fingers down along his face to confirm his vision. Still he didn't recognize himself.

After a moment, Rufus abruptly tore his eyes away from the mirror. A sharp bitterness constrained his throat. He couldn't bear to see that face any longer.

"You... don't like it?" asked the concerned Elena, thinking he'd looked away because the cut displeased him.

"No," replied Rufus curtly, "No. It's fine."

Elena regarded him. She proposed to fix him some food. He declined.

"Not even a sandwich?" she persisted.

Again no; he wasn't hungry.

She could sense the exhaustion growing ever burdensome upon his shoulders. Indeed, Rufus hadn't slept for almost an entire day, nor did he seem completely rooted in the present, his mind no doubt still roaming back there at the now deceased Reactor.

"Why don't I show you your bed then?" suggested Elena at length, "You can't tell me you're not tired."

Rufus glanced up at her. He nodded in consent.

By "bed," Elena had meant the living room sofa. They could offer nothing better, she explained apologetically. However, the hospitable woman endeavored to make it as comfortable as possible. She procured some pillows and a second blanket, which she arranged into a cozy nest.

"You just kick off your shoes and lie down here. C'mon," she invited her silent guest, who obeyed.

Elena meanwhile took another minute to tidy up the place. She drew the curtains then flicked on the heater. She even fetched a pitcher of water with a glass and left them on the table nearby, in case he got thirsty during the night. Once the boy had settled under the covers, Elena, now at the doorway, extinguished the lights. Darkness at once engulfed the room.

"If you need anything, Mr. Pr- I mean, Rufus, I'll be down the hall," Elena assured him, "I gotta go check on Rude again, okay?"

"Okay."

With that, she retreated.

"Thank you," said Rufus after her. He meant it.

She paused to peek behind at him, a bit surprised, for she'd never heard the ShinRa president express any gratitude before. His earnestness however brought a benevolent smile to her lips. She nodded in acknowledgement then resumed course. Rufus listened to her footsteps echo down the corridor until they died altogether.

He was alone.

The first night in this new life did not pass well. Though fatigue had eroded his mind to numbness, Rufus remained awake for a long, long time afterwards. He lay there motionless, wrapped within these blankets. How odd it felt to rest on cushions instead of the usual stone floor. His eyes slowly explored the room in quiet contemplation.

It wasn't his old cell, with its thick, cold walls and that lantern lynched from the ceiling- his sole source of light. Totally new sounds prickled his ears: the monotonous tick-tocks of the clock, a single dog barking in the distance, the occasional car whooshing along the street below. No guards muttering outside the door. No creaks of metal or the ceaseless hum of machinery.

No, that world had perished. Everything buried beneath a smoldering mountain of rubble. Rufus realized, to his great shock, that a day- a whole day- had already passed.

Only yesterday he'd been languishing underground in captivity. Between then and now, an onslaught of changes had occurred- meeting the two ex-Turks, witnessing the dark side of Davoren, learning of his own sordid past, watching the gunman collapse before him in inconsolable grief, destroying Hojo's experiment beyond repair, his apology to Davoren before the latter suddenly...

Did all that really happen in one day?

And where did it leave him? How could so much have changed within such a short time? The troubled boy still could not understand how yesterday had lead him to the present.

His thoughts ran at random. It felt... strange, shedding his old clothes for these new ones. The texture, the smell, the sheer sensation of it against his skin was so foreign.

Then he remembered Elena propping that mirror in front of him. Rufus realized that had been the first time he'd seen his reflection in a year. He had sat there scrutinizing that ashen boy on the opposite side, with his sallow skin and tense ocean-blue eyes hiding behind free hair strands.

No, he hadn't recognized himself. But it was him. The face he loathed most. The face of a monster named Rufus ShinRa.

Strange, yet at that moment of self-to-self eye contact, a sudden premonition had shot out of no where straight across Rufus' conscience- an image, frozen, so quick but so vivid he couldn't tell whether he'd actually lived it or just recalled a dream he'd had long ago: he'd seen a mirror. Bigger than the one Elena held out to him. He'd stood in front of it, glaring at his stoic reflection, inside burning anger yet repressed-

always repressed- under an unbearable silence.

A sink had waited beneath that mirror.

&White.

Clean.

It was waiting for him to decide.

;And then... then he'd...

Then he'd looked away, from both the mirror and that intense vision.

Nothing made sense. His lying here on this couch, this place, these clothes, these bandages, these thoughts, nothing!

Yet he was alive. The Reactor had collapsed. Fire had destroyed the remains. And Davoren-

But Rufus instantly shut his eyes. He did not want to think about the gunman..

-End of Chp. 94

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields- Chp.95

Weeks passed.

The two ex-Turks improved greatly over this period. Every few days, another bandage would be discarded to reveal the healed flesh beneath. They required less and less treatment, though Rude still needed the occasional pain killer for his recovering flank. Nevertheless, it gladdened Elena's heart to see her friends on the mend.

Soon they could limp, then walk about unaided. Their temperaments, before docile from sickness, also returned. The household at last seemed on its way back to normal (or as "normal" as it had been previously). Elena had even once found the duo seated in the living room, playing that silly soccer video game of theirs while arguing whose team could kick whose ass- same old quarrel they always had whenever they competed against each other.

She granted them more and more time out of bed but under strict instructions not to strain themselves. They remained housebound another few days. Not until Elena removed Rude's stitches did she declare them officially restored.

The two men had taken a journey into the depths of a nightmarish forest fraught with peril and insanity. Many times they'd feared it would engulf them. Many times it almost did. Weeks had passed. Still, neither could believe they'd emerged from that Reactor alive. In hindsight, Reno and Rude concurred the only way to celebrate their survival would be.... a good night out on the razzle!

"You're gonna get drunk?" Elena had cried.

"Hell yeah! We earned it!" grinned Reno.

Indeed, the two ex-Turks thoroughly enjoyed themselves down at the bar that evening. Amidst the music and joviality, they drank to their own miraculous escape. They raised their glasses to the gunman, wherever he was, for rescuing them. They raised another to Elena, bless her kind soul, for nursing them throughout their ordeal.

But a mere toast would not suffice. The duo agreed she deserved a real token of their appreciation. In fact, the very next day, the pair had managed to scrape together enough money to buy her a small, silver bracelet from that posh jewelry shop uptown. Elena's face had flushed with rapture when they presented this beauty to her late that afternoon. She absolutely loved it.

Each man won a big hug- "But you're still doing the bathroom and kitchen chores for a month," she warned them least they'd hoped they could bribe her out of their initial agreement.

During this period, Elena had also made a genuine effort to befriend Rufus. She had to admit she found the boy rather eccentric, though in an endearing sort of way. For one, he'd changed dramatically from the self-satisfied snob she last remembered. Rufus often forgot to switch on the lights when entering a room; he told her he felt more comfortable in the dark as his old prison cell had never really enjoyed much light. He disliked beds. They were too soft. He preferred to sleep on the hard floor, like he always had during his imprisonment. The television he thought made too much noise. Silence appealed more to him. Simple matters enthralled him: the sensation of cool, clean water running between his fingers, the colors of the sky during dusk...

Elena accepted all these idiosyncrasies with good grace. She soon came to include Rufus as part of the "family", so did Simon, her spoilt tabby cat.

The mistrustful creature had spent many hours observing this stranger from the shadows. When its curiosity finally prevailed, Simon had crept up for a closer inspection. At the time, Rufus had been sitting

unaware on a chair. Upon feeling something soft brush by his leg, he peeked down only to find this furry animal sniffing about him. He'd remained still for a moment. Then slowly, cautiously so as not to frighten it, Rufus bent over to scratch its ear. He massaged it just right; so perfectly in fact Simon forgot all his previous suspicions and melted into one long purr of pleasure. From thereon, the cat adored Rufus.

"You're a good ear-scratched, probably 'cause you used to own a pet jaguar," giggled Elena when he mentioned it to her later, "That's why Simon likes you so much. That cat is a sucker for a nice scratch behind the ear."

Elena herself had rapidly come to like Rufus. But between them stood this invisible wall she just didn't know how to climb over. Nor did he welcome any attempts to get closer to him. On the contrary, Elena noticed how he shunned human contact. Even a friendly small touch on the shoulder tensed him away. She collected other observations about Rufus too: his appetite, or lack of, alarmed her. At best, he ate a frugal meal of bread and some boiled vegetables. *If* she got lucky, Elena could also coax him to swallow a few spoonfuls of dessert. Vanity mattered little to Rufus. He let his hair return to dishevelment. She'd spent an entire morning shopping for him, from clothes and shoes to a brand new toothbrush. All her gifts received gratitude but no delight.

He seldom spoke. Often while sitting together at the table, Elena found herself carrying most of the conversation along. He simply loitered there, brooding over his tea. Thinking. Rufus always seemed to be thinking about something.

Rude fared a bit better. Indeed, his unassuming nature instilled a sort of gentle solace within Rufus. The ex-Turk often persuaded the boy to come keep him company in his room. Rude himself had tons of paperwork to catch up with after his two week absence. So he'd type his reports or practice boxing against his old punching bag. Rufus meanwhile loitered somewhere, reading or meditating. Sometimes they watched television or played video games together. Rude didn't mind; he just didn't like leaving the boy on his own for too long.

It actually surprised Rude that Rufus never inquired about Davoren. That whole scene in the storage ward remained a taboo. Nor did the ex-Turk ever dare venture into this topic. He noticed, like Elena, how little the boy spoke. If they did talk, their discussion adhered to the strictly superficial: how he was doing, what he thought of the apartment, if he needed anything, etc. Rufus gave short answers- "no", "yes", "Thank you", "I'm fine". Otherwise, he preferred silence.

In contrast to Rude and Elena, whose companionships he accepted, Rufus steered clear of Reno. Whenever their paths met, the former barricaded himself behind a cold façade. The air itself practically turned to frost. Rufus would then either retreat or sit reserved in place until the ex-Turk left again. In fact, another reason he hid here in Rude's room for so long was because Reno seldom entered it. They never spoke. Rufus never asked about Reno as he often had with Rude during their illness. He never visited him or welcomed his company. He wouldn't even sit at the same table with him.

Rufus simply wanted nothing to do with that man.

In return, Reno pretended not to notice. He played it cool and easy. Even Rude had to admire how well he maintained his nonchalant front. But the man knew his friend much better than to allow such a veneer to fool him: Reno cared about the kid, no doubts there. Unbeknownst to Rufus, Reno had labored several hours on the computer gathering false documents for him, from a new ID card and birth certificate to health and financial records. He'd said it would ease his transition into his new life once all the "legal bureaucratic crap" had been removed. Besides, for a former Turk, such tasks came easy.

It was also Reno who'd proposed, when Elena told him how Rufus disliked beds, that they buy him a futon. Thus he could both sleep on the floor while in a bed- a suggestion which worked very well indeed. And though Reno himself avoided the boy, he still kept close tabs on him through his two friends.

Yes, beneath that casual attitude, Rude discerned an earnest concern for the boy. But deeper, he also

sensed this mute tension affected Reno a lot more than the latter cared to reveal. To Rude, it almost seemed he feared to approach Rufus, like one step in the wrong direction, a word, anything might detonate this bomb ticking between them.

Rude knew why. Again, it all came back to the Reactor- the moment Davoren, in cahoots with Reno, jabbed that pre-charged nightstaff into his stomach, thereby ending everything.

Rufus spent most of his time in Rude's room until everyone came to consider it his too. Again, Rude didn't mind. He emptied part of his closet for his new roommate. The futon was rolled out upon the floor each night and packed away in the morning.

Yet for Rufus, this place also seemed the only refuge which could conceal him from his surroundings. Often he'd be found sitting huddled in a corner as if he wished to retreat to into the shadows themselves. Just disappear. Rufus would stay thus catatonic and mute, sometimes for hours. Other occasions, a bizarre demon possessed him. The boy would become uncomfortable in his own skin. Once or twice, Rude caught him in the grips of this strange trance, pacing about restlessly while rubbing his temples.

Rude never intruded. However, as he beheld Rufus from afar, the miasma of despair around that boy seemed so vast, so poisonous, he almost believed it would at last suffocate him.

One incident Rude recalled with particular clarity had occurred a few days ago in the dead of the night.

The entire household had long since retired to bed. A peaceful hush hung like a stagnant mist throughout the apartment. Every light had been extinguished, doors locked and curtains drawn.

Sealed thus within the sanctuary of his bedroom, Rude had been sleeping soundly under the blankets. Not a sound, not a movement had reached his ears. Just soothing silence. And then he'd felt it: an odd premonition prickling his conscience. It kept warning him not to trust this tranquility, that something amiss loomed nearby until at last the man, dazed and torpid, awoke.

He checked his watch- 3:37. His weary eyes rolled around. The whole room whirled by as one big blur of shadows, from which Rude could detect nothing out of the ordinary. Satisfied, the ex-Turk shifted onto his side. Already he could feel himself drifting away...

But right then, that same premonition poked him awake. Rude forced his eyes open again. This time he stared over the edge of the bed straight ahead.

He knew Rufus' futon lay down there parallel to his own bed. He expected to find the boy fast asleep. Yet to his great surprise, Rude instead perceived the silhouette of a lonesome figure sitting slouched up in the futon with his head bowed low. His sight adjusted better to the dark, only to recognize that profile as Rufus'. An eerie stillness surrounded the boy. Rude could not distinguish his features that well, but to him Rufus appeared engrossed in private deliberation while listening intently to something... something sinister no other ears could detect.

Apprehension seized Rude. He raised his head off the pillow to call, "...Sir?"

His initial anxiety however subsided a bit when he saw the boy's head turn towards him. Rude fumbled about the nightstand till his fingers found the lamp switch. He flicked it on.

The dull yellow light immediately dispersed the darkness to all corners of the room. Rude rubbed the last trace of sleep out of his eyes then sat upright in bed.

"I couldn't sleep," admitted Rufus.

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“I have a headache.”

The ex-Turk studied Rufus a moment. While he had to respect his reply, the astute part of him did not entirely believe a “headache” alone had kept the boy awake. Intuition told him Rufus had been struggling against something more than mere insomnia until he’d interrupted. In the faint light, Rufus appeared pale and rather shaken. Even his blue eyes, gleaming bright through his unkempt hair, betrayed a distress suppressed deep beneath forced composure.

Rude’s expression darkened. He began to suspect the boy had suffered some kind of nightmare or hallucination with this headache. It could have been the aftereffects of the brain scanner. Reno, who possessed better knowledge of this frightening technology, even seen a few victims himself, had explained to Rude that it often took time for sufferers to recover. Yes, the mainframe had perished with the Reactor, but the cerebral implant in the victim’s head might emit some late impulses, like a fading battery with an extra ounce of juice left.

Rude couldn’t dismiss the possibility. Inside though, neither he nor Reno believed this technical reason alone explained the turmoil raging within the boy’s tattered psyche.

Whatever the cause, Rude still had to wonder how long Rufus had been awake. Better yet, he wondered how often he’d sat up like that, suffering through the night on his own.

Rufus however did not want to discuss it. Indeed, he sensed the ex-Turk’s pensive gaze rest a little too long upon him. Rufus returned his own melancholic eyes to his lap. He raked his chaotic hair back, then hunched over further to prop his head down against one hand. He lingered thus.

Rude did not know what to do. “Do you... want a pain killer for that headache?” he offered tentatively, “I have some in the drawer over there.”

“No, thank you.”

A pause.

“You sure?”

“Yes,” the boy muttered from a distance, “These headaches come and go by themselves. I’ll be fine in a minute.”

Another silence.

Rude remained at a loss. He couldn’t just resume sleep with Rufus in pain. Then again, how could he help when, from that curt answer, he understood the boy wanted to be alone. Rude frowned: yes, that was it, wasn’t it? The boy was always alone. At that, the ex-Turk felt the desire to speak override his awkwardness, “Sir, can I tell you something?”

Rufus only looked askew towards the man again, head still supported in one hand. His face lacked expression. Rude moved to the edge of the bed. He leaned over to rest both elbows upon his knees. His eyes, serious and so sincere they shone, met the boy’s straight on.

“Those things I said back there in the Reactor, when we were hanging over the pit and you wouldn’t take my hand, I...,” yet that encompassed only a fraction of what he really wanted to say. Rude tried a more direct approach, “All of us, we’ve come to see you as part of our group now. We want to help you out. But there’s a lot going on inside you that you just won’t discuss. Maybe you think we won’t understand or it’s none of our business. And I won’t pry, even though I know at least *one* of the things that’s on your mind,” by that, Rude meant the missing gunman, “It’s just... well, we’re all really worried about you. You

keep pushing everyone away, especially Reno, and I think out of us three, he's the one worried about you the most."

The mention of Reno stiffened Rufus to near stone. Rude, who's anticipated this reaction, hastened to argue, "Yeah, he can be a bit... brash at times. He may like to put on a 'too-cool-to-be-bothered' attitude. That's just his style. Still, he's my best friend. I *know* him: he's loyal and trustworthy. More importantly, Reno's got a good heart, one that always open to his friends," Rude added, almost like a supplication, "Maybe if you gave him half the chance, you'd realize that too."

But Rufus, while attentive, neither replied nor did his hard façade waver.

"I'm just saying... you don't have to keep it all bottled in. You can tell us what's going on. I mean, what you've been through... must have been pure Hell. And besides, we haven't really talked about what happened back there in the Reactor. You haven't even mentioned Dav-"

"Rude," snapped Rufus suddenly. The ex-Turk stopped.

Rude couldn't tell whether he'd angered or upset him. Either way, the mere threat of pronouncing the gunman's name had provoked a strong response. Rufus bristled. He visibly struggled to restrain his emotion least Rude, a complete innocent, took the brunt. He even had to look away and press his throbbing temples a moment, if only to restore composure to his frayed nerves.

"I appreciate your concern, Rude," he forced out at length, his voice soft, toneless, "I'll always be grateful for what you've done for me. But I... I'm very tired. I want to try and get some sleep now, please."

The ex-Turk regarded him. "Okay," he accepted.

He did not press the issue any further. Instead he watched the boy sink into his futon. Rufus rolled away and burrowed deep underneath the covers, so that only the top of his head could be seen. He spoke no more.

Rude lingered a minute longer. He stared down at the back of that head as if he might catch glimpse of the trouble inside. But Rufus remained the same, an inscrutable, motionless lump hidden beneath the blanket. Rude doubted he'd wanted to sleep as much as escape their conversation. Yet once more, he had to respect the boy's wishes.

So in the end, Rude also retired to bed. He switched off the light, then drifted into contemplation as darkness swallowed the room again.

"Whaddya think?" asked Reno.

Rude twisted his head aside to regard the large, enamel pan Reno held up to his face. After brief consideration, he declared, "Nope. Still not clean enough. Give it another wash."

"Wha? But I've already scrubbed the damn thing twice!"

"Well, do it again."

Reno grumbled but complied. He returned to the sink. With both hands wrapped in rubber gloves, he drowned the pan under the hot soapy water, where he began to scrub it furiously. Rude merely shook his head in despair: no, cleaning never was Reno's forte.

Which mattered little to Elena. The austere woman had made sure they suffered their punishment: a month's worth of bathroom and kitchen chores for sneaking off to the Reactor without her knowledge.

Tonight their obligations bound them to the latter. After serving a particularly elaborate dinner, Elena, looking quite smug, had left the two bemused men to contend with the horrible mess she'd created in the kitchen. Reno swore she'd done this on purpose as some sort of revenge. Regardless, a deal was a deal. The ex-Turks divided their tasks by the flip of a gil coin: Reno, as luck would have it, won the dishes. Rude got the floor and counters.

Each took to his job at once. Rude spent perhaps twenty minutes on the second task: cans and cartons needed to be returned to their correct places, crumbs swept away, leftovers wrapped in tinfoil for storage. Afterwards he started wiping the counters with a wet cloth.

Reno meanwhile battled solo against the mountain of dishes. The ex-Turk showed no mercy. Under a scalding hot tap, he scrubbed each prisoner clean then banished it to the rack on the left. The war had been going well until he encountered a big, greasy pan- the last resistance. The utensil proved to be a formidable foe indeed. It refused to surrender. Frustrated, Reno had tried to slip this troublesome enemy into the rack just to rid himself of it. Unfortunately, Rude had caught him and, to ensure he never tried that again, insisted he show him the pan *first* before its deportation.

So the irate Reno struggled on, as he had for the past ten minutes, to vanquish his opponent.

"Goddamit!" he cursed.

"Elena said she wants that pan sparkling clean, so make sure you do a good job," Rude couldn't help teasing him.

"Y'know," spat Reno, "this would've been a whole lot easier if she'd just ordered dinner instead of fixing us that 'Toxic Waste Casserole'."

"It's 'Tussock-West Casserole', named after its two inventors, ya nit."

"Whatever! This crap is stuck like glue!" time for big guns then: he seized the bottle of liquid soap and squeezed half its contents upon the enemy, hissing, "Son of a-! Suck deadly dishwash!"

Rude didn't bother to look around. Behind him, he could hear his friend scraping the pan so ruthlessly one feared he'd erode its floor straight through. Instead, the ex-Turk continued to wipe the counters.

The two worked thus in silence for a minute or so until Reno at last declared, "Hah! Finished!"

Rude glanced back towards the man, who presented the humiliated pan for inspection. Rude nodded in approval: yes, *now* it was clean.

The pan joined its fellow prisoners in the rack. Reno quickly dried his workstation then discarded both rubber gloves. He was done for tonight. But rather than leave, Reno lingered by to ponder some grave matter. This same nuisance had, in truth, been tugging at him nonstop even since Elena had left them alone in the kitchen. Now seemed the most opportune time to talk to Rude; Reno actually preferred her not to hear their conversation.

He looked towards his friend. The man had already resumed polishing the counters, unaware of his scrutiny. Reno frowned slightly. He dropped his pensive gaze to the ground, still unsure whether to hold his tongue or speak; he could no longer bear the first nor had he quite the courage yet for the latter.

Torn, the ex-Turk leaned back to rest against the sink. He raked his fingers through his red hair. It took him another moment of internal deliberation before at last, he mustered enough resolve to venture awkwardly, "Say, uh, Rude?"

"Yeah?"

"How long has it been? Since we escaped the Reactor, I mean."

Rude stopped: not that they hadn't discussed the Reactor in the past. Yet behind Reno's casual question, the intuitive man discerned a significance which had never tainted this subject before. He turned around and, as he beheld his friend in full, replied, "About a month. Why?"

His solemn expression told Reno Rude had already anticipated where he intended to usher this discussion. In return, Reno's frown deepened. He still felt uncertain of his decision to tread into such thorny terrain, but now that he had, found it impossible to retreat. Rude waited patiently until at last he confided, "It's just... it's about the kid. He's been living here for a bout a month. And well... he hangs out with you most of the time. So I wanted to ask, since you've probably seen more, how you think he's coping now with a whole month behind him," his eyes narrowed upon his friend as he added, almost threatening, "And don't tell me 'he's doing fine' because you know that's a lie neither of us will believe."

Rude hesitated to answer. In truth, he knew not what to say. His discomfort only vexed Reno more, who wanted to confront this issue straight on, right now, "C'mon, man!" he prodded, "You know as well as I do all he does is sit alone in a corner like some crazy schizo. He's stopped talking. He's not eating. He's so drawn into himself, I'm starting to think it's just an empty shell that's sitting there!"

Rude digested his words. He realized this worry had been chewing on Reno's conscience for a long time. He understood his frustrations. A part of him even echoed them. He hadn't told Reno either about the other night when he caught the boy awake in his futon.

Yet at the same time, Rude found he'd developed a sharper insight into Rufus since they'd fled the Reactor, if not then certainly a great deal of empathy. With this in mind, he strung together a gentle but firm answer, "Reno, Rufus has been through a lot over the past year. He survived a major explosion. He lost his memory; every connection to his old life has been cut. He's been living worse than an animal. He's been tortured. He's had his mind constantly violated for months. Plus you have to remember, that boy learned about his entire past, cheated death, *and* lost his only friend all in one night. You don't just bounce back to normal after a thing like that. He needs a lot more than a month to adjust to life again."

To which Reno retorted, unmoved, "But that's precisely the point, isn't it? He's not adjusting at all."

He'd nailed the problem blunt and hard. Rude fell silent once more. He watched Reno, restless with inner turmoil, start pacing about the kitchen. He appeared ready to burst.

"We gotta do something," he growled at length, "Shit! It's like we're just standing back watching him drown right in front of us!"

"You think I haven't tried talking to him?" interrupted Rude, a twang of annoyance in his tone, "He wants to be alone. All I can do is remind him we're here for him if he needs us."

"Well that's not good enough, obviously!"

"Then what should we do, Reno? You tell me!"

"I dunno! Something! Better than this wait-'n-see bullshit!"

"Sometimes that IS the best thing to do."

Reno stopped. He retaliated, "And in the meantime what? Kick back while he rots away in that damn corner?!"

His voice cracked louder than he'd intended. A long, stifling silence rose between the two men. Reno glared at Rude before he resumed his aimless pacing about the kitchen. He rubbed his temples, awash with agitation and equal regret for losing his temper like that.

Rude however maintained a cool front. In truth, Reno's outburst hadn't offended as much as intrigued him with its blend of emotions. His thoughtful eyes followed the listless man back and forth, back and forth, until a kind understanding finally softened his perception.

"We can never make up for what he's lost, y'know," he stated quietly.

Again, Reno stopped, though this time, far from starting a new quarrel, his jaws stiffened to granite. He cast a sidelong glance at the solemn Rude, then looked away.

"Reno," continued the ex-Turk on the same subdued tone, "Rufus had a very special bond with Davoren. When I look back on things, I guess, in a way, they were both chained to the same rotten place. They had no one else except each other. It's like two prisoners of war- they rely on each other to stay alive. They build a bond out of their suffering. But besides looking after him, I reckon Davoren... he was probably the only person who'd ever reached out for him. Rufus is our friend, sure, and we want to help him out any way we can. But no matter how much we try, none of us can replace that connection he had with Davoren."

"Huh, yeah," quipped Reno, less agitated but now more sour, "A connection *I* helped break."

After a pause, during which Rude reflected upon his comment, he dared ask, "Is that why you're trying so hard? Because you feel... like you're the one who took it all away from him?"

A heavy silence answered his question. Reno remained pensive, eyes still fixed away from Rude's. He'd never really discussed his involvement in helping the gunman trick Rufus. Nor had Rude mentioned this topic until now. For one, he deemed such a complicated affair strictly pertained to the boy, Reno and the gunman. Indeed, the latter two had excluded him from their collaboration. For another, Rude quite honestly knew not what to think.

He felt Rufus' loss. He understood his reaction. However, he also knew Reno would never have conspired with Davoren unless he'd put his faith in this man and believed, like he did, it was what ultimately had to be done. And perhaps it was. Yet while Reno's convictions matched Davoren's, his sense of guilt for destroying the only true bond Rufus ever had, as Rude now observed, still pecked at his mind.

"Huh!" Reno dismissed the topic abruptly. He cast a small, humorless smirk at his friend, "I'll tell ya one thing though," he remarked, "Life has some twisted sense of humor. I mean, just a year ago, Rufus was our arrogant, smug president. Always sure of himself. Never let anything touch him. Now... geez, look at him."

Rude pondered this observation: yes indeed, look at their president now. Stripped of all his former glory, mangled by suffering until nothing save a melancholic, dark, and utterly lonely shadow remained. Or maybe... "Maybe," Rude mused outloud, "Deep down inside, Rufus has always been like this. Only back then, he knew how to hide it."

Reno regarded him thoughtfully but didn't reply.

Just then, Elena entered the kitchen, thus terminating their conversation. Both men silently watched her carry a simple tray of sandwiches over to the sink. There she dumped the food into the trashcan nearby before giving the dishes a quick rinse. The woman appeared heartbroken. She glanced aside at the two inquisitive ex-Turks then shook her head sadly: she'd left this tray with Rufus an hour ago in hopes it might tempt him to eat, only to find he hadn't even touched it. That made the second consecutive day he'd refused food.

Reno's face tightened to a dour scowl. He looked from Elena to his friend, who despite his clear dismay, saw more wisdom in not meddling at the present time. He thereby shuffled away to resume cleaning the

counters.

That did it. Rude and Elena may repress their anxieties all they wanted. Reno for one had endured enough. He no longer cared whether Rufus wished to be alone or not. He no longer cared whether he desired or despised his presence. Someone had to talk to the boy and if that task fell upon him then so be it!

The ex-Turk left his friends in a huff. He marched out of the kitchen straight for Rude's bedroom, riled up with such resolve it bordered close to outright hostility. Reno barged through the door uninvited. He discovered Rufus huddled in the usual spot, legs drawn up with his right hand under his chin.

Amazingly, Reno's unceremonious entry didn't startle Rufus in the least. He'd been gazing through the window across into the gloom outside when he'd stormed in. The boy cast a cursory glance at the flustered intruder then coolly returned to the window. He probably thought Reno just needed something from the room and would leave again at once. It had nothing to do with him anyway.

Such apathy doubled Reno's exasperation. The man stomped across the room to stand towering over Rufus, arm folded tightly.

"You're a real pain in the ass, you know that?" he spat, "Why the Hell aren't you eating?"

Again, the boy glanced up. Again, he wrenched his eyes away, determined to ignore him as long as possible.

That suited Reno fine- he'd cracked open far tougher opponents in his Turk days. Breaking Rufus would be a cinch and he knew the easiest method: the man squatted down to Rufus' level then simply pinched his arm into a hard twist.

"Hey-OW!! What are you doing?!" yelped the boy in surprise.

"Oh, good! You can still talk," cried Reno sardonically, "You've been quiet for so long we were afraid you might've forgotten how to speak!"

Rufus glared pure scorn at the man while rubbing his sore arm. He said nothing.

"Why aren't you eating?" demanded Reno again.

No reply.

"I asked you a question!"

"Piss off," he growled.

"Withering away in a corner isn't gonna achieve anything."

"I said *piss off*."

"And starving yourself isn't helping either."

"Would you get out of my face?!"

This constituted the first time they'd spoken properly since their return from the Reactor, and already Rufus couldn't tolerate it. He scrambled up onto both feet to escape this confrontation. Yet he'd barely taken five steps towards the door when Reno, having also sprang up, called after him, "You listen to me! I get it, alright? I get what you're going through. You lost a good friend back there. God knows, maybe he was more like a father to you than a friend!"

He didn't realize how close he'd hit the mark. The exclamation rooted Rufus to the spot. He didn't turn around. Instead he stood there, statuesque, forced to listen to Reno continue on the same sincere tone, "You don't know where Davoren is or what's happened to him and now you're grieving. That's okay. You want time to sort things out. That's okay too. But what you're doing to yourself right now, that's –"

"I didn't 'lose' him," Rufus' icy voice cut him short, "he knocked me out cold then took off on his own without an explanation or even a goodbye."

Reno's demeanor darkened to a more solemn shade: of course, he could never have known what the gunman had told the boy before rendering him unconscious. Both he and Rude had loitered well out of that private conversation. However, Reno did distinctly remember Davoren's face before he left them to return to the bowels of the dying Reactor. In particular, he remembered his serene smile, his parting words, both the sadness behind them and also the tremendous strength supporting them.

"It's not like Davoren wanted to trick you," Reno stated this fact calmly, "It's just he... he believed this was how it had to be."

"And you agreed with him."

Beneath the question boiled an accusation, uttered with such disdain that Rufus bowed his head slightly least it burned him alive. Reno beheld him. After a pause, he confessed, "Yes, I did agree with him."

"So you helped him."

"Yes."

"Do you still think he was right?"

Reno didn't answer at once, "Yes," he finally admitted.

"Then maybe... maybe you can explain it to me."

Silence.

"Explain to me why the Hell that's 'how it had to be!'" barked Rufus menacingly.

"I suppose... because he knew no matter what he said, you'd still try and stop him from going back."

"Of course I would've tried and stopped him!" he dismissed that reason. His hands curled into fists as he seethed out harsh wrath, the likes Reno had never heard before, "Davoren... yeah, you're right- I *did* see him as a father. He meant more to me than my real one ever did anyway. I... I sit for hours thinking, trying so hard to figure out why he chose to leave that way. I keep remembering the things he told me. I keep wondering what happened to him. And again, I ask myself why –WHY- that's the way it had to be. But I never get an answer. All I see is the Reactor burning and falling apart and it's like... everything inside me is crashing down too. N-now suddenly you," Rufus cocked his head aside to incinerate Reno with those stormy blue eyes, "of all people," he hissed, "YOU come here telling me 'hey, it's okay. It's alright. I get it'. No, you don't! You don't 'get' anything! You haven't the faintest CLUE what it feels like to have someone who meant that much to you cut you out of their life completely. And how could you, Reno? You agreed with that bastard! Worse still, YOU were the one who lent him that damn nightstaff!!"

The ex-Turk remained fixed in his spot. He could muster no response against such scathing words.

Rufus in turn could no longer bear his own anger. The mere recollection of that event- the moment the nightstaff stabbed him- seemed to stir a real, terrible pain. The boy turned away and stormed out of the bedroom. He did not look back, nor did Reno pursue him. Instead he lingered behind in quiet

contemplation.

He'd witnessed in Rufus' glare an internal vortex of rage, confusion, agony and bereavement. But what had struck Reno most was all the sorrow within those eyes.

Black, crushing sorrow.

It dismayed Reno to discover that, despite the strength of his beliefs, he'd failed to articulate them to Rufus. To be honest, he still hadn't quite explained his own actions to himself. Yes, he'd agreed with the gunman. Everything, down to his deepest intuitions, had told him this deception, no matter how much he regretted it or what personal feelings condemned it, was indeed how it had to end. But why? What made it so?

Much to his exasperation, Reno still couldn't find the answer.

His thoughts returned to Rufus. Rude had been right- hitherto, he had felt as though he'd robbed the sole source of comfort the boy had ever possessed. In fact, Reno now realized Rufus didn't blame him at all; that crime Rufus accredited to the gunman himself. Rather, he fiercely resented Reno for sharing Davoren's convictions, for conspiring with him, and most of all for imagining he could now reach out for him when he understood nothing –not one thing- about him.

Which was true. In retrospect, Reno admitted he knew much about the New Age President of ShinRa. He knew how he'd seized power and how he fell. He knew of his ruthlessness; the man "no one has ever seen bleed or cry". Reno remembered his dedication to his job. He remembered how he floated through society with incredible grace. He'd exuded such confidence, in his style, his words and actions. Men admired him. Women wanted him. Everyone would flock around him.

But Reno realized he actually knew nothing about Rufus himself, nor had anyone else. He'd barged in here in a flash of temper to try and force him back to his former self. Yet in truth, that person he remembered had never really existed... just a clever mask Rufus had worn all his life to conceal his real self- a trapped, tormented, now completely broken wretch- from everyone. And Reno, like the rest of them, had believed the deception. He'd only seen the surface.

Rude's words floated across his mind again: "Maybe deep down inside, Rufus has always been like this. Only back then, he knew how to hide it".

Right then, Reno truly wondered about Davoren. He wondered how he'd managed to reach Rufus. The boy had this unnatural ability to detach himself from his surroundings- a skill Reno supposed he'd had to learn very early in order to survive his, as Rufus had called it, "Doll-house society... with leeches and liars all around". He wondered how the gunman delved into such darkness deep enough to forge a strong bond with this isolated soul.

Reno wondered how Davoren did it. How he coaxed Rufus to eat, what he said to comfort him, how he earned his trust, and above all else, how he got the boy to just let him be his friend....

"When I burned in the fire, only he dared step in to pull me out", he remembered Rufus once rave, though now he found it contained an eerie ring of truth, "No one's ever done that for me. No one... not even my father.

-End of Chp. 95

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields –Chp. 96

Aeris loitered by the window, watching another dull afternoon on the wane. It will be night soon, she thought to herself. Already the darkness had begun to metastasize across the clouded sky. Aeris breathed a soft sigh.

Another day sinking into dismay. Another day without him.

The girl tore her eyes away from the grim world outside back to the confines of this small room. She reckoned she should return to bed. Tifa would be coming up here soon to deliver her dinner and evening medication. She would be displeased to find her thus when she should be resting. But truth be told, Aeris, though certainly plagued by weariness, did not wish to retire just yet. A part of her still clung to the faint hope that he'd walk in any minute.

God, how she wanted him here with her right now. She wanted to talk to him again. She wanted to touch him again...

The silence however merely mocked her despair. He will not come tonight. She could pine all she liked, he will not come tonight, just like the night before and the one before that.

Defeated, Aeris sat down upon the window sill. Her spirit felt so restless, so low as if crushed underneath an immobile rock. The tranquility of the room only fermented these emotions further. Another day, and where did she find herself? Once more, languishing by the window in her nightgown, with the same wretchedness wrangling her senses. Aeris looked around at a loss, but upon finding no solace for her anguish, dropped her troubled gaze to the floor.

Another day gone, still no news from *him*. Once again, Aeris would have to spend the night with neither the knowledge of his whereabouts or reassurance of his safety. Another day, still no closure. Sitting here alone, Aeris faltered as this turmoil began to mangle her heart. And there at its center stood a man- solitary, aloof, and out of reach.

Vincent. Always Vincent.

Aeris blocked him out of her mind for a moment. She sought refuge, however temporary, in mulling over past events. It helped kill time. More importantly, it distracted her from the tumult the sheer thought of him provoked.

Eight- no wait, nine counting today, she corrected- nine days had elapsed since she'd awoken from her coma, only to find herself in hospital, surrounded by her two friends Cloud and Tifa. For three weeks, she was informed, Death had hovered at her bedside, unable to accept this girl had escaped its clutches thanks to none other than Davoren. Aeris herself had struggled with this fact; she too had found it impossible to accept she owed her life to the gunman- THE gunman, that is until she'd received his letter.

He didn't ask for forgiveness. Instead, Davoren spoke of this new bond that had bloomed between them. He hoped they would meet again someday, when they'd each built a life upon a foundation of truth and peace, not falsehood, fear and pain as before. He called her "Aeris" at last. With one letter, his words, so warm and gentle, Davoren had thus quietly shut the last door connecting her to the past.

No more would he stalk her. No more would she have to recoil from the shadows, dreading the moment he ambushed her again. That demon had perished in the Reactor, just like her former self. Perhaps therein lied the power of their bond- their "death" and "rebirth". Aeris would always remember their last encounter with a calm sort of contemplation. The man had loitered across that crowded foyer, smiling so benevolently back

at her.

And then, in a mere moment of distraction, he disappeared. She never saw him again.

Still, Aeris had decided to keep Davoren's letter. It rested safe within the top desk drawer. To her, this paper symbolized the lessons that man taught her, the special link they shared, and the course they'd decided to pursue now that they'd each laid the past, with all its sorrow and hurt, to rest.

Aeris shifted her attention for the gunman to the days which followed. While in hospital, Dr. Moira had guided her recovery at a slow, steady pace. The worst, she explained, had been managed during her coma. But by no means did the treatment end there. Aeris underwent two additional pulses of material therapy. A bone scan afterwards confirmed all major fractures had knit. Everyday, the nurse removed more bandages to reveal the healed flesh beneath.

She no longer required machines to sustain her, though Dr. Moira had insisted on keeping her in the intensive care unit out of caution. With such constant care, life began to trickle back to this frail body. Aeris' face, before so frightfully grey, regained its lovely glow. Movement became easier, pain and incoordination far less restrictive. When deemed strong enough, Dr. Moira permitted her patient to walk again- at first a few minutes, then a full hour- yet always under strict instructions not to exert herself beyond the limit.

"You may be on the mend, but remember," the good doctor had warned her, "You're still in a precarious state. You must take matters slow and easy, alright?"

All this time, Cloud and Tifa has spent every minute available by her side. She could not have received better or more steadfast support. As promised, they never pressured her to recount details of the ordeal she's suffered that fateful night in the Reactor. Instead they concentrated on the present. Both followed her progress with meticulous interest. How great their joy when, after weeks of confinement to bed, she started to walk again. Cloud, overcome by rapture, had even swept her off into a small, clumsy waltz- she'd never laughed so much in her life! Tifa brought a homemade lunch every afternoon; the three of them would sit by the window and chat while enjoying their meal.

Indeed, the memory of the night they'd first rushed here, only to find Aeris a comatose wreck, had carved a horrific anxiety into their souls. The farther away she receded from danger, the greater grew their peace of mind. Both were genuinely happy to have their dear friend back. Neither however would be satisfied until the doctor released Aeris into their care. After four straight weeks of woe, the couple yearned to draw this whole affair to a conclusion.

Dr. Moira had already taken their wishes into consideration. By mid-week, she felt confident enough to discharge Aeris, provided Cloud and Tifa obeyed her treatment plan to the letter, a condition the pair readily accepted. Dr. Moira explained at length what this entailed: Aeris' convalescence period would span several weeks. During this time, she required constant care and regular follow-ups here at the hospital. She would have to spend most of her time in bed; she still needed lots of rest while her body rebuilt its strength. In addition, her medication regimen had to be observed on the strictest terms.

The two assumed those duties at once. Tifa in particular vowed she would obey all instructions given. Thus assured and content, the doctor signed the discharge form.

Tifa and Cloud had treated Aeris' release from hospital as a momentous occasion. They'd closed their restaurant for the day in anticipation of her arrival. The morning had been dedicated to preparing her room. The furniture had to be rearranged, the floor swept and the bed linen changed. Since Aeris possessed no clothes, Tifa had kindly supplied her bare closet with garments from her own wardrobe. Other necessities she'd bought, such as shampoo, soap, a comb, and toothbrush.

Cloud meanwhile had managed to procure the finest bouquet of lilies for Aeris, knowing of course how much she adored flowers. Tifa had placed these white beauties in a vase by the window. Afterwards, she'd retreated to the kitchen to cook, as promised, "the best meal in culinary history". Cloud had helped her with minor tasks until the clock struck five, whereupon he took his leave; it was time to fetch their friend from hospital. Tifa, in the heat of preparation, asked him to go alone.

"I still gotta make the soup," she'd insisted, "You go on. I'll have everything ready by the time you guys get back."

Aeris arrived at her new home just before seven. It struck Aeris, as the cab pulled up near the house that evening, how slender it seemed wedged between the row of large complexes. Despite its humble appearance, the house overlooked the main street with a particular quiet dignity. Cloud and Tifa had already told her so much of this place. They'd bought it about a year ago, then invested all their resources into its renovation. From these modest origins rose "7th Heaven", christened so, Aeris had been informed, honor of Tifa's old bar.

Cloud, upon paying the taxi driver their fare, fumbled out of the car then dashed around to Aeris' side, who'd already opened her own door. The young man, however, would not let her stand for fear it might aggravate her frail condition. Instead Cloud had insisted he carry her up to her room. Aeris of course had no choice but to accept.

Thus wrapped up snug in a woolen blanket, the girl emerged from car to behold what Cloud cheerily called, "Home, sweet home."

The restaurant, as Aeris noticed, occupied the entire ground floor. A couple of steps lead up to a glazed door, guarded by a narrow bay window on each flank. The sign lynched above read "7th Heaven". Through the glass, Aeris spied the interior- one large room interspersed with tables and chairs, some couches and a broad bar at the very end.

Cloud however did not enter by this route, though he did swear to the disappointed girl he'd take her on a restaurant tour later. Instead, they snuck to the side of the house, where after unlocking the iron fence, Cloud carried her up a flight of stairs to the second floor. The two found Tifa waiting there at the door. Flush with joy, she darted forth to embrace Aeris- "Thank God. Oh, thank God," she kept muttering, by now on the verge of tears, for she hadn't quite believed their friend would return to them alive until that moment.

Her first evening here left an eternally warm imprint upon Aeris heart. Cloud and Tifa welcomed her whole, surrounding her with affection, support and care the instant she crossed the threshold into their home.

The couple resides above their restaurant on the second floor. Though small, these living quarters inspired a pleasant comfort within its visitors; the love its two owners bore for each other certainly reflected the care they'd invested in furnishing this home. Cloud had shown Aeris around. The giant sword majestically propped above the fireplace evoked silent reverence within her- that sword, Cloud told her solemnly, was the weapon he'd used to slay Sephiroth. But what truly sparked her interest stood in the dining room- a tall glass cabinet which displayed a menagerie of artifacts he'd collected during his worldly travels: luminous rocks, woven bracelets of colorful feathers, wooden carvings, stone statuettes, a small ShinRa emblem, photos, and other fascinating treasures.

"Heh! I'll tell you all about them later," Cloud had smiled at her eagerness to learn the story behind each object, "But for now, let's get you to bed."

They crossed the dining room into the main hall, where they ascended another staircase to the loft. The steps lead up to a square landing. To the left a door awaited. Upon opening it, Cloud carried Aeris into what

would become her room.

The girl broke away from her reverie a moment to reflect upon her present surroundings. It was a small, cozy room with a sloping ceiling. A rather large bed occupied the center, which compared to this room made the size difference all the more conspicuous. The closet stood by the door. The desk, sad and isolated, covered in one corner while its partner the chair loitered near her bed.

Aeris liked this room. The little paintings scattered across the walls made an interesting study. The vase of flowers, so charming perched here upon the window sill, enhanced the atmosphere's sense of serenity. Her first night here had been wonderful. No sooner had Cloud settled her into bed than Tifa entered, bearing three hot dishes of food in a tray, their smell the most divine to ever tickle Aeris' nose. That night they stayed up till late, eating, chatting, laughing.

And yet...

As the days passed, Aeris learned more about her new home. The restaurant opened at ten sharp. The couple worked throughout the morning till mid-afternoon, whereupon one of them would come upstairs to spend an hour with her. The second shift ended at six, though sometimes the influx of customers lasted until nine. Indeed, fortune smiled brightly upon their business right now. Tifa had only recently hired a part-time waiter and an assistant chef to help her manage this busy place.

It surprised Aeris, with all the hustle and bustle below, that none of it ever reached her ears. Nor in fact could she hear anything from the first floor, where her friends resided. The loft insulated her completely from the world.

She found various activities to pass the time though. Tifa had procured some books and magazines she thought might interest her, along with a small radio, which rested upon the shelf. Early every morning, before work commenced, Cloud practiced his swordsmanship in the courtyard behind the house. Aeris enjoyed watching him from her window, smoothly swinging and thrusting that formidable blade as if engaged in a deadly dance. She wasn't the only one either. Many passer-bys paused to admire such gracefulness and strength. The man always maintained his focus. Each training session endured at least one solid hour, after which he returned inside to help Tifa open the restaurant.

The couple forbade Aeris to visit the restaurant until she'd recovered in full. Much as this disappointed the girl, she had to agree with their decision. Aeris still fatigued easily. Her body hadn't yet gathered enough strength to combat pain and imbalance beyond a couple of hours. Medication kept the former in check. Rest alleviated the latter.

Aeris' two friends insisted she rest as much as possible. Dr. Moira had made herself clear. Cloud helped her cheat on occasion however; he'd bring her downstairs to the living room so she could watch television or peruse the treasure cabinet on her own, but always under oath she would remain on the couch and not roam around.

"Or else Tifa will crucify us both!" he'd warned her, only half-joking.

Whenever work finished, the pair retreated upstairs to spend the rest of the evening with her. By now, Cloud must have told Aeris every travel anecdote he could recall. Tifa described how, once she'd fully healed, they'd raid the shops for some serious retail therapy- "Just us girls," she'd winked. The hour passed thus, with much merriment and discussion, until Aeris had to retire to bed.

Yes, things were good and peaceful. She pondered that awful moment Professor Hojo revealed the filthy truth about her; how he'd destroyed her entire sense of self with mere words... "clone", "image", "mother"; how he'd kept reeling her back to his madness despite all her tears and resistance. At one point, she

remembered wanting to just surrender to him. She would have too were it not for Vincent. Incredible how only a few weeks had passed since then, yet to Aeris it still seemed ages ago. Now for the first time ever, she was truly free. No more fear, no more running, no more hiding. Life was good and peaceful. It offered her endless causes of celebration: her survival, her enlightenment, her friends, her new-found sense of self.

Then why, deep, deep inside, did she feel so....

Desolate? Incomplete? Perturbed? Lonely? Nothing Aeris conjured up quite expressed what she felt as she loitered upon the window sill this dreary winter's afternoon. Perhaps all four emotions had melted into a fifth no one word could describe.

Vincent still haunted her mind like a ghost. The harrowing memory of his battle against Hojo, the diabolical brutality she'd witnessed, often tainted her dreams at night. She's wake in dire need to know where he was, what storm so black kept him away, and why- dear God, why- was he not here. They'd assured her he was fine. By now, his body must have healed entirely. True, the blood and wounds may have disappeared, but intuition insisted a far more fierce war still raged within him. What was it? In despair, Aeris would then return to the very last time she saw Vincent: him holding her close, gazing intensely down at her as the bedlam screamed around them. Despite her physical agony, she'd felt such joy to behold him. He was safe and alive. Nothing else mattered.

But now, everything was such.... such a mess....

Thus much to poor Aeris' consternation, she found herself back where she started, back at the very thought she'd striven hard to escape; Vincent.

No matter what she tried, she kept fumbling against this wall for a door, a passage, even a tiny crack, to reach the man hidden beyond. But it was useless. Vincent had built the wall too thick, too perfect, and for all her desperate efforts, refused to let her through.

The day Aeris regained consciousness, Tifa, albeit reluctantly, had told her of Vincent's deliberate disappearance- "Vincent's not here, Aeris," she'd admitted, "he's gone away". Where to, the man hadn't revealed. Why he would not disclose. Tifa had reckoned Vincent needed "time to sort things out", but what this really meant no one knew. Cloud and Tifa must have discussed him many times before, though neither ever mentioned him in front of Aeris for fear it might upset her. Nor did she, despite her acute yearnings, inquire about Vincent. She saw no point.

So where did that leave her? Night faded to morning, morning matured to afternoon, afternoon died into night again... eight days had rolled by. Soon the ninth would also pass, still no word from him. Aeris surveyed her room again. Nothing but the same derisive silence.

A familiar sting suddenly welled up within Aeris' eyes- no, no crying, she ordered herself. She didn't want anyone to walk in on her like this. She'd have to explain these tears. She'd have to submit to these emotions tumbling within her bosom. No, she mustn't cry.

Aeris composed herself by force. She wiped her wet eyes. Only then did she realize how tired she'd become spinning in these mental circles. Best to retreat to bed. Tifa will be arriving any minute. Besides, what good did sitting here do except intensify her heartache?

Another day gone without him. Another day waiting in vain. Yes, best to go to bed now. He wasn't here.

Aeris ruefully rose from the sill onto her feet. Before drawing the curtains though, she paused to survey the world outside one last time- not searching for anything in particular, just brooding upon the gloom with melancholic yearning. The backside of "7th Heaven" overlooked, like all other houses along this street, an

old courtyard. Aeris' bedroom window offered her a picturesque view of this venerable courtyard. It extended to the row of houses on the opposite end of the block. A tall brass gate separated the two territories, though the trees, gnarled and defiant, crowded against this barrier and stretched their bare branches through the bars to reach their brethren on the other side. The place usually buzzed with people throughout the day. On occasion, Aeris, out of boredom, spent an hour or so observing them from above.

She disliked the courtyard around this time however. It became eerily deserted. The tangled trees to her resembled a black labyrinth- a festive ground for shadows to enjoy till morning scattered them again. Aeris turned her attention skyward. Nothing remained of daylight now save a dull blue hue. In the distance, the houses huddled together as evening's bitter air began to coil around the city. Even standing here, Aeris could sense the chill seeping through the window into her room. She gave a slight shiver. It will be another cold night, she mused.

And with that final thought, the girl closed the curtains.

Many shadows indeed lurked about the courtyard this frosty night, amongst them one whose red eyes had been studying her all this time.

There amidst the trees, a tall, solitary figure loitered behind the brass gate, with both hand and claw loosely clutching the metal bars. He'd blended himself so well into the surrounding darkness; he appeared no more than a vagrant phantom, belonging to neither this world nor the ghost realm. He knew he could watch the girl from here without risking detection. Even were that to happen, she'd never find him, not while he stood hidden behind the trees, the gate, the very veil of gloom.

To contrast, this location offered him an excellent view of her room. Every night he crept into the courtyard, long after the crowd had dispersed. He preferred it that way- just himself and Aeris. Every night he waited exactly here to catch a glimpse of her figure at the window. If she did not appear, he still stayed; he would contemplate upon that window- of all windows in the city, *that* one- wondering how she was.

Tonight however he had seen her face. She'd lingered behind the glass gazing into the sky, blissfully unaware of his scrutiny. He'd found her so beautiful, with her hair in loose, long curls and the weak afternoon light caressing her gentle features.

The sight of her had frozen him. Only when she'd disappeared behind the curtains did he remember to breathe. He'd wanted to see her. Often the intensity of that desire overwhelmed him. Yet as the same time, he wished from the core of his soul, that he hadn't seen her. The mere thought of her tormented him nonstop. Now her face sharpened the agony a hundred fold. He felt his whole interior twist and coil to near suffocation. His eyes glowed fire under strained brows.

Questions. So many accursed questions spun around him.

But outside, he remained the same: silent, statuesque, still staring through the tree branches up at her room.

She probably believed he'd maintained his distance during these past few weeks. Truth be told however, he'd kept a much closer eye upon her than she ever suspected. He just never revealed himself to her, choosing instead the secrecy of the shadows.

She did not know of the many times he'd visited her at the hospital. He always came in the dead of the night, when the halls had emptied and the weary staff on call would neither notice nor care about him. Aeris did not know how often he'd stood behind the observation window, his morose gaze riveted solely upon her.

Lying there unconscious, she couldn't have known of the times he'd pressed his hand against the glass, wishing he could touch her skin instead.

He never ventured inside however, as if he... mistrusted something deep within himself...this... he had no description for it, which unsettled him all the more. Or maybe he actually did; he just couldn't confront it...

Though concealed, he still managed to follow her recovery course meticulously, thanks of course to Dr. Moira's notes (which he'd read and return before anyone realized the theft). In fact, that's how he obtained Aeris' discharge date. He had assumed quite correctly that Cloud and Tifa would take her. When the hospital at last released her, he'd waited for opposite "7th Heaven", again hidden from view, until she'd arrived at her new home.

Since then, he'd come here every night.

Every night he stood here alone in the dark and cold to watch her window.

And at the end of each vigil, he left again.

He could go up to her tonight. But then what? What would follow? What would he say, after all that has happened? Turmoil wrangled his mind, emotions, hesitation and wretched, wretched uncertainty plagued his heart- how could he articulate this jumble to her? He couldn't even grasp it himself. And where would he start?

His past? Lucrecia? The Reactor? The moment he kissed her? When she declared her love for him? The words he told her when she'd asked him to abandon her? The horror of witnessing those claws rip across her flesh, the blinding wrath afterwards, or the searing anguish of holding her bloody body while life slowly drained out of her?

What, Vincent, the clamor pounded his skull, what would you tell her? What will you do? What do you want?

In response, Vincent tore himself away from the gate, the questions, that window, everything, and marched off.

End of Chp. 96

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields –Chp. 97

The solitary figure tread softly across the wasteland of death and debris towards the Mako Reactor, which loomed there before him amidst a grimy fog. Like a phantom enshrouded in black, the man had wrapped his scarf close around the lower half of his face to protect himself against the vicious chill, though it did nothing to shield him from the gloom tormenting his sanity. Vincent plodded along with scarce interest in his surroundings. He barely raised his dull red eyes; to lift them just required too much effort.

Weary. He felt so weary of this state, of himself, of walking, constantly, *constantly* thinking yet never reaching either a final destination or a conclusion. Only when his feet became too heavy to drag did the man pause a minute, during which he let his eyes wander around.

He did not realize he'd drifted into the Reactor grounds until he caught sight of that ravaged metallic skeleton in the distance. The charred ruins of the Reactor stood silhouetted against the pale grey sky. No wind dared visit this barren kingdom. Birds, even crows, feared to caw lest they stirred up another calamity. Midgar, which once worshipped this magnificent fortress, had come to shun the very sight of its forlorn frame. True, weeks may have passed since that disastrous night. The air however still reeked of something sinister; a vile, unnatural stench which repulsed the rest of the world. And its source, whatever it be, till this day remained buried so deep underground not even God's hand could reach it. In return, the Reactor regarded God, Nature and the city with mute ruefulness, for all three had abandoned it to suffer its cruel fate alone.

Vincent surveyed the extent of Chaos' wrath. Were these sad ruins all that really remained? Had Chaos annihilated so much? As he viewed the Reactor, Vincent marveled at how he'd escaped, more so how he now stood outside when just some weeks ago he'd also been trapped inside. His morose gaze clambered up the building. Battlements of garbage waited on guard; he could imagine the ghosts huddled behind, glaring at him- the one who'd demolished their home- with quiet disdain. Vincent looked higher, up turrets of rubble, deluges of junk, stakes of steel and bars until he reached the peak: a crown of trash and cables placed askew upon its battered head.

Everything was burnt, broken, twisted.

Dismayed, Vincent next scanned the surroundings. Devastation met him on every front. The man found himself the only living soul amidst a desert of rubbish. As far as he could see, the explosion had spared nothing. Its force had cut a horrific swathe of havoc within a wide radius, cracking the very earth. Pipes, girders, glass, dismembered machinery lay strewn about. It seemed the Reactor's whole entrails had been splattered across the land like the victim of a brutal murder.

The man wrapped his long coat around him closer before he resumed his path, already lost in thought again. He'd been plodding about the city nonstop since daybreak. Judging from the sky, he reckoned it was now late afternoon. But time mattered little to Vincent anyway, no more than where his feet carried him. If only he could shake these thoughts and emotions off his trail. Yet here they remained, as they had the day before and the day before and one before, a forever wriggling knot of worms lodged deep in his mind.

Still, Vincent could not fathom why he'd returned to this place. Whether a subconscious desire or pure chance, either way the mystery gnawed at him. Had matters deteriorated to such an extent that he couldn't march forward, only retreat further and further into the past? What was he searching for? What could he possibly find here?

"Pretty grim, huh?" a familiar voice suddenly broke into his reverie.

Vincent stopped short. He swung his attention to the far left, towards a mound of debris and pipes some meters away. There he spied a white-haired man perched upon a sturdy horizontal girder, both legs dangling

free, and an amicable smile across his face.

“Hey,” greeted Davoren with a small wave of the hand.

Vincent, who'd been so engrossed in private meditation that he hadn't even detected the gunman's presence, muttered a quiet “hey” in return.

It was the first time they'd seen each other since that disastrous night at the Reactor. Despite the sickening haze that tarnished his final memories, Vincent nevertheless remembered Professor Hojo lunging at him in an unguarded moment. He remembered being pinned to the floor, with a hot, leathery hand as hard as marble crushing his windpipe.

Then a gun had dropped out of nowhere. The sight of that weapon lying there had seemed so implausible, so ludicrous, that it distracted Hojo just long enough for an unknown sniper to blast him off Vincent.

At this point, Vincent's mind faltered a bit. He'd reached out for the weapon. Gunfire followed. Loud, harsh gunfire. He'd just kept pulling the trigger, his sole intention to force Hojo as far away from him as possible. The outcome eluded him however. He merely remembered crashing back to the floor, after which he found Davoren looking down at him, disheveled and flustered with anxiety.

At the time, Vincent could not comprehend how this man was there; he'd thought he'd long since escaped. But by then, all his senses had degenerated to rot. Awareness soon followed, and Vincent remembered no more.

He knew of course he owed his life to Davoren. That gun Vincent at first imagined had dropped out of nowhere had actually come from him. When Vincent opened full fire on Hojo, so did Davoren; together they beat their maniacal enemy far back into oblivion. When he lost consciousness and reawakened three days later, only to find himself in some hospital bed, he'd realized immediately the gunman had carried him to safety (though *how* he'd managed to escape that deathtrap still intrigued Vincent till this day). Soon afterwards, Vincent discovered that he'd also rescued Aeris. The girl lay in the intensive care, comatose and critically wounded but alive- *alive*- solely because of Davoren.

Vincent flashed forward to the present, to this desolate graveyard. He remained statuesque in place, still studying Davoren pensively from across. Despite the dreary cold, the latter emanated a unique warmth as he loitered so casually atop that girder. Vincent found it odd to see his former leader out of a suit. Instead he wore a pair of dark jeans and grey shirt, with a charcoal-black coat left open to expose his gun harness beneath. But what struck Vincent most was his changed aura. What a contrast to the man he last recalled. Where before glowered malice and despair now lingered a sort of solemn tranquility: with both himself and this wasteland which told a story only they knew.

“You're looking much better,” decided Vincent at length.

“Haha! Thanks,” replied Davoren, “Wish I could say the same to you. Geez, you look awful.”

The gunman told no lie. Sure enough, Vincent had slept very little and eaten even less over the past couple of weeks. He reckoned he must have cut a sorry figure, with his tall, haggard frame wrapped in this old long coat. His face, though obscured by a scarf, probably betrayed the wretched state of his mind. Still, he gathered himself up behind a stoic façade. He'd felt an instinctive resistance to reveal anything of himself to the open air.

Davoren most likely sensed Vincent's reluctance to discuss this matter. “How's your arm?” he steered away, “It was busted pretty bad when I found you.”

"The circuitry was destroyed, but the main body was spared," came the cool reply. Vincent showed his claw to the gunman. It gleamed in the dying afternoon light. He'd replaced the broken knuckles and torn forearm covering. He could move the limb about freely and clench his fist, although the base, where flesh met metal, still tingled painfully from time to time. Vincent admitted, "It was hard, but I've managed to repair most of the damage, as you can see."

"That's good to hear."

Davoren regarded him a moment before chuckling, "Some night, eh?"

"Yeah. Some night."

"Heh! Man, I tell ya, you and the girl each gave me a damn heart attack! I mean, the state of you two!" The gunman searched inside his front pocket for his cigarette pack. He slipped one between his lips, whereupon he reached for his lighter, still speaking on the same affable note, "Felt like I was racing Death itself to get you both out of here."

Vincent waited for him to light his cigarette, then asked, "What about Professor Hojo?"

All jest faded at the mention of that name. Davoren's face darkened as he stole a long drag from his cigarette, but his astute pink eyes always remained fixed on the man. "He ran off after we shot him," recounted Davoren through an exhalation of smoke, "everything was crashing down. I lost sight of him in the middle of all the commotion."

A heavy silence fell between them. For a minute, Vincent broke away from his friend's gaze to view the Reactor again, as if it might tell him what befell Professor Hojo. Yet the derelict fortress stood mute like before, holding Hojo's fate forever a secret within its folds.

Vincent breathed a soft sigh to himself. He returned to Davoren, who merely puffed his cigarette with quiet composure. He just realized that not once had felt any surprise to meet the gunman here. On the contrary, he almost seemed to have expected it. Was this "the thread" that had subconsciously pulled him back to this place?

Vincent, after another moment's brooding, advanced across the jagged terrain towards Davoren. The latter still said nothing, but watched the man climb up the steep mound of debris. Vincent soon reached that horizontal girder. He hopped onto it, then scuttled over to Davoren, where he sat down next to him. The two friends loitered side by side, neither speaking just yet. The ground beneath them seemed far away. From this height, the girder offered an even clearer view of the Reactor in all its burnt, wasted glory.

"The coughing has completely stopped," remarked Vincent at last.

The pensive gunman smoked his cigarette without looking at him. Still, Vincent could tell he was listening intently.

"I could always feel the pain and fever here," he continued, pressing his hand to his chest, "Sometimes it would become so intense, it felt like a knife tearing through me. Other times, the pain was just a small nuisance niggling at my lungs. But it was always there."

"And now?" asked Davoren.

"Now, everything has turned quiet. When I woke in hospital, my chest was calm. The coughing, the fever and pain have all disappeared. Do you sense it too, this... this absence?"

He could find no better word to describe it. But Davoren needn't answer Vincent's question. The latter already knew what his reply would be: yes, he too sensed this absence. Yes, he also recognized what it might signify.

Davoren slouched forward. Still staring into the distance, he asked what played on both their minds, "You think he's dead then?"

"I don't know," mulled Vincent. He wondered what happened to Professor Hojo after they'd forced him to retreat. Did he also manage to escape? Did he really perish? Perhaps his tormented spirit still haunted this place, simply because he had no where else to go.

"I suppose," brooded Vincent, "whether he's dead or still alive no longer matters. Either way, he's gone."

Gone out of their chests, out of their lives, leaving behind a long trail of devastation.

"Yes," echoed Davoren, "He is gone."

Vincent glanced askance. Beneath Davoren's apparent placidity, he could discern a grievous turmoil slowly rising to the surface. Vincent said nothing. Instead, he allowed this trouble to manifest at its own pace, all the while observing Davoren's somber countenance from the side.

"It's been 31 days, Vincent," murmured Davoren some minutes later, when he'd gathered enough incentive to retreat from his private ruminations. His pink eyes rested upon the wasteland before them, "Exactly 31 days since the Professor told me about... about Donal. How he'd struggled and cried out for me, how much he suffered... then after that... after all that torture and fear and humiliation, how he was just..."

For a moment, the gunman floundered in evident difficulty. He could not, despite his best efforts to keep steady, bring himself to finish that sentence. Vincent waited. He never interrupted.

"I'd tried to destroy Donal, forget him, drown both him and myself in as much blood as I could shed. But y'know, that one time I lost consciousness, I think... no, no now I'm sure of it: Donal came to me," a small but genuine smile crossed his lips as he insisted, "It really was him. And Vincent, he was happy. There was no more pain. He wasn't angry for what I'd done. He wasn't frightened or disgusted by what I'd become. Donal was just so... happy I'd finally let him return to me. Heh! No actually, he told me he never left my side. 'I'm right here,' he said, 'I've always been right here'."

He loitered a moment upon those dear words. Yet soon the melancholic shadows overcast his smile again. Indeed, whatever consolation those words gave him, they remained exactly that: words. He would never be able to see them, confide in them, touch them, or press them close against his scarred heart; much like his beloved brother. Davoren, only too aware of that fact, mechanically pulled the last drag from his cigarette then flicked it away.

"31 years," he mused aloud, "For each one of those years, I have spent a whole day here, by this Reactor, because *here* was where I truly... 'lost' myself."

It was here he unleashed all the violence inside him. Here where he gave that blood-crazed demon full reign, and where he managed to shove that pathetic man named "Davoren" into the darkest, deepest recesses of consciousness.

Here was where he lost himself.

"So that's what I do," he admitted to his mute friend, "I sit, hour after hour, day after day. And for the first time in 31 years, I allow myself to remember Donal. I think of him. Simple things, like how he looked and smiled. I

think of what I did to him, how much I love and miss him, and how I wish to God h-he was still-“

Talk had become so painful, so excruciatingly painful, that Davoren squeezed both eyes tight and hunched over to restrain his grief. He could not continue. All this time, Vincent had watched his failing struggles to steer firm through this emotional storm. When Davoren finally capsized, he reached out to wrap a kind arm around his shoulders.

They languished thus for a minute or so. Davoren, despite his leaking tears, kept his sorrow muffled well within his chest. He fought in absolute silence to compose himself again. Vincent did not doubt there must have been times during the past 31 days when Davoren, alone and forlorn, had openly wept for his dead brother. There must have been moments, while sitting here surrounded by this vast destruction, when his grief turned so poisonous it suffocated him breathless. But Vincent also reckoned this was the first time after three decades of repression that Davoren had actually permitted himself to mourn Donal. He could sense beneath his sorrow a core of new strength and dignity. Eventually, it would blossom into the peace he so yearned for. Of that, Vincent was certain. For the present though, he could do nothing except offer this man continuous confirmation of his presence and support.

When the gunman had somewhat recovered, Vincent gave his shoulder a final squeeze of reassurance then released him. The grief needed another moment to completely abate, during which Davoren pressed both eyes and sat upright again.

“I wish I’d had the opportunity to meet your brother,” said Vincent after a while.

The gunman chuckled softly at the idea, “Yeah, you would’ve liked Donal, actually. He could be a bit too headstrong for his own good (as can you), but haha! Donal always had this light-heartedness about him. With him around, things never seemed too bad. It’s like, even if the entire world were to stop making sense to me, that was okay, because I knew I’d always have him to put some meaning back into it.”

The confession brought a wistful smile to his lips. Davoren added, almost inaudibly, “He was my whole life, Vincent.”

And that life ended three decades ago with the murder of his brother. Vincent could think of nothing to say. Instead he wallowed with his friend in the memory of Donal. He knew, even without having ever met him, that Donal had been a man as good and humane as his older brother. He did not doubt the infinite, unselfish love Davoren carried for him, how important he’d been- and still was- to him, or how resolved he was to travel down the long road of repentance to eventual tranquility.

Vincent wished he could tell Davoren’s brother all this. Then again, there was nothing he could say that Donal did not already know: he’d learnt it all when Davoren, in the depths of despair, finally re-opened his heart to him that terrible night 31 days ago.

“Ah! But listen to me!” started the gunman, now trying to instill some cheer back into their conversation, “Here’s me yakking away and I clean forgot to ask you about Aeris! Has she left the hospital yet?”

“Yes,” confirmed Vincent demurely, “She’s staying with some friends.”

“Hm, I must say I was more worried about her than you. I’d found her with this huge gash across her chest. It was like the Professor had tried to literally rip her apart. And she was lying there so pale and still. I almost thought...”

But Davoren stopped; he did not want to remember what awful things he’d thought much less repeat them, “Anyway, that doesn’t matter,” he swerved onto a more positive note, “I’m just glad to hear she’s pulled

through after all. So how is she doing?"

"From what I can gather," he obliged, "she seems to be doing fine."

Yet one word bothered Davoren, "'Seems'?" he regarded the man in amazement, "Vincent, you mean to tell me you haven't actually spoken to her since...?"

"I haven't."

Cool and simple. To hear his own reply, however, darkened Vincent's demeanor into further gloomy preoccupation. In fact, he hadn't approached her once since that catastrophic night. He hadn't even allowed her to see him.

Davoren meanwhile fumbled to light himself another cigarette, at the same time muttering in jest, "So Mr. Valentine would rather waste his evening in a dump with an old fart like me instead of spending it with a young, lovely girl like Aeris? Huh! Well, I'm certainly flattered!"

Vincent however showed no reaction to the joke. Nor did the gunman pursue this matter any further, but rather smoked his cigarette nonchalantly, not the least bit discomforted by this silence that had sprung between them. Vincent brooded upon an open fire of hesitation and mistrust, his glowing red eyes always fixed downwards. He hesitated to speak, for really, he knew not how or where to begin. He mistrusted himself- his own judgment, his own heart, everything- because it had all become so muddled. So tangled and tiring and muddled.

And again, there she stood before him, watching him through this mist of uncertainty. Yes, *her*. Above all else, he mistrusted himself to approach *her*; he hesitated to discover which one she was.

"Do you know why Hojo tried to kill her?" Vincent heard himself ask suddenly.

Davoren looked to the man and waited. Vincent could not fathom any reason to share this story with him. The gunman hadn't asked, much like he'd never asked him why he was shunning Aeris. Vincent just felt this... compulsion to talk, to confide in him.

"The Professor had defeated me," he recounted, "he was about to finish me off. Me, I kept struggling to get up. I *had* to get up. Aeris was with me. I was the only obstacle between them, and damned if I'd stay down while he takes her away. But regardless, all of us knew how it would end: Hojo would kill me, and she would go to him."

In a flash, Vincent was back there, a heaving wreck sprawled across the floor. He saw that demon stomping towards them, his armor broken, one eye swiveling mad, his aura radiating murderous malice every step of the way. He'd failed. He'd failed to get her out. She was with him, holding him as he recalled, trying her best to keep him together. Still, Hojo had kept marching towards them. Closer and closer until...

"It was then that she stood up," marveled Vincent, "Aeris just stood up to confront him on her own."

Davoren's expression gravened, but he remained quiet, puffing his cigarette while the story unfolded.

"The things she said were so simple and honest, yet at the same time ruthless," reflected Vincent. He could hear her voice once again, tearing the helpless Hojo to shreds, "She told the Professor... out of everyone in the Reactor, he was the only true 'monster', because he'd given away his very soul for his experiment. And 'Genesis Retrial' never was about science. It was simply a refuge he'd built to hide from his own pain. Right then, I saw the Professor for what he really was. I understood him."

When he lost his soul, she'd said, he'd lost everything. All he had was... nothing except nothingness itself. Vincent pondered the meaning behind those words. After a pause, in which he drew himself up, he added more softly, "While Aeris spoke, Hojo couldn't touch her. I... I'd been battling him all night, but it was *her* words that defeated him. By the end, she no longer feared him. Instead she just stood there, strong, beautiful, and pitied him."

Davoren allowed another moment of silence to elapse before he ventured, "Is that when he...?"

Vincent nodded.

"Ah," he muttered. He correctly surmised the rest.

Of all he'd witnessed that night, Aeris' near slaying had branded itself deepest into Vincent's memory. The image still burned so hot and vivid. He remembered that vile feeling of utter powerlessness as he'd watched Hojo's five claws rip across her flesh. Then came the overwhelming grief, and the vortex of voices spinning wilder and wilder until rage exploded. That was the last thing Vincent recalled: unbridled, catastrophic rage.

"Do you blame yourself?" broke Davoren into his reverie uninvited.

"What...?"

"Do you blame yourself for what happened to her?"

Vincent contemplated the question. "A part of me does, yes," he admitted at length.

"Why?"

"Because I couldn't protect her when she needed me, when it really mattered."

Just like...

"But there's another reason you're avoiding her," probed the gunman.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

The question hardened Vincent entire front to granite. There it mocked him again, that damn question: what is it?

What is it that pulled him away from her? What is it, this unknown thing he kept searching for in a vast forest of darkness and doubt? The man scowled at his own inability to provide an answer, more so under the heat of interrogation. What, did Davoren think he hadn't already mangled his mind to insanity with that one question?

The gunman no doubt discerned Vincent's resistance to wander into such uncertain territory. Still, he would push him forth, "Vincent," he stated, "Aeris loves you."

Yes, she'd told him that once. To think it true had bewildered him, to hear her actually declare it had silenced him, and to hear it now again merely strained his brows with fresh perturbation. He looked away from Davoren bitterly.

The solemn gunman persisted, "You know as well as I do when Aeris escaped the Professor, she was

nothing more than a shaking, tearful little mouse. No one terrified her more than Hojo. For her to confront him like that... Vincent, she loves you so much she'd face her worst fear, even defeat it, for you."

Vincent could give no reply.

"But then, that's not the issue here," observed Davoren as he stole another drag from his cigarette, all the while shrewdly studying this aloof man, "I suppose the question I really should be asking is: do *you* love her?"

Vincent still shunned his friend's eyes. After a very, very long silence, he breathed, "I don't know."

If the first question 'what it is?' had been the most confounding, then this one was the question Vincent had never dared utter, consider, or even consciously touch. It disconcerted him to admit that truth- that he did not know. Whether he said yes or no, constant, relentless doubt plagued either answer.

"My mind keeps tossing about," revealed Vincent, "There is this... this incessant whirlpool of worries and voices inside me. They're always asking, always doubting. I'm unsure what to think, unsure what to do, unsure what I want, and most unsure if I even want to know."

He had to continuously tear past layers and layers of hesitations and misgivings just to articulate a glimpse of this strife ravaging his head right now, "Every night," he growled in quiet torment, "I hide in the shadows while I watch Aeris' window. I wait and wait for the brief moment she appears behind the glass. But at the same time, I dread that moment. I dread it because that is precisely when... when *she* rushes in."

"Lucrecia," Davoren pronounced the name.

"Every night I go to Aeris, but in the end, I always leave again. I can't come near her. Lucrecia rushes in, with her the past, this confusion and uncertainty and... *fear*," he reflected darkly upon that particular word. He remembered how cruelly it had taunted him as he'd battled Hojo. It had dogged him throughout the night, always in the same foreboding tone: fear, Vincent, are you afraid?

"And if you were to actually go to Aeris, what then?" challenged Davoren, "Are you afraid of what might happen next?"

Vincent's jaws stiffened. He did not respond.

"You afraid of letting Aeris love you?"

No reply.

"Or are you afraid of what you'll find inside yourself if you look beyond Lucrecia, the past, confusion, uncertainty and everything else?"

Vincent remained barricaded behind his wall of silence, though even that could not stop Davoren's words from seeping through. His face, haggard and taut with deliberation, betrayed how solemnly those words had stained his conscience. The gunman's relentless probing vexed him; the deeper he'd dug, the greater tumult he'd stirred, the more Vincent realized how much these questions rattled his interior: was that it? Was it fear that kept him away? Fear of himself?

Yet still, Vincent held his tongue, and let this question too pass without an answer.

Nor did Davoren press for any. Instead he studied his friend thoughtfully, then returned to his cigarette,

content to smoke the remainder in peace before flicking it away.

“Y’know, I’m glad we bumped into each other,” he smiled, “I was hoping to say goodbye to you before I left town.”

The announcement shook Vincent into attention. He looked around towards him, “You’re... leaving?”

“Yeah. Today,” the man confirmed. When he noticed Vincent still staring at him, he chuckled, “Heh! Don’t pretend you won’t be glad to see the back of me! At least now you won’t have to worry about some crazy bastard trying to kill you, eh?”

The gunman gave him a friendly nudge in the ribs then gracefully hopped off the girder, whereupon he made his way down the cragged mound of garbage. Vincent followed just behind.

“Where will you go?” he asked as they strolled together across the wasteland, away from the desolate Reactor.

“I’m not sure,” hummed Davoren, both hands in his pockets, “It just feels like I won’t be able to start piecing my life together until I leave this place... put the ruins behind and try to make some sense of things again. Something like that.”

Vincent pondered this reply. He did not know why he’d been surprised to hear Davoren was departing. Vincent reckoned he’d become such an important figure in his own life, from a brutal nemesis to dear friend, he had almost forgotten this man would eventually have to disappear back into the shadows from whence he came. Indeed, after 31 days of mourning, it was time to go.

“I understand,” Vincent concurred. Davoren glanced aside to him with a smile: he knew he would.

“Will you ever come back?”

“I might. But probably not for a while.”

“So, this is it.”

The gunman said nothing for a minute. He appeared distracted by some stray thought his mind had just caught. The pair walked slowly. Their feet crunched over broken glass and coarse debris. Above them, darkness had begun to invade the cloudy sky, like black ink seeping through a thick blanket of wool. Soon it would be night.

“As a matter of fact, Vincent,” Davoren spoke at last, “I wanted to ask you a favor.”

They both halted. The man delved deeper into his right pocket, only to procure some trinket and present it to the quizzical Vincent. The latter stepped closer to study this object: a small flint of stone held dangling by a thin, short chain.

“I’d like you to deliver this to Rufus,” requested Davoren.

The fate of the ex-Turks and the former ShinRa president had remained unknown to Vincent, a mystery Davoren now dispersed, “I managed to smuggle him and those Turks out of the Reactor before it collapsed. I left the boy with them, actually. You’ll find him there.”

He passed the chain to Vincent, who accepted it with an open palm. The stone looked quite old. Yet

underneath its dull green surface, the core shimmered a particular essence that he recognized at once.

“This is...?”

Davoren nodded. Vincent re-examined the stone with fresh intrigue: how rare nowadays to find unrefined materia, compressed by Nature instead of a Reactor. But what-

“It belonged to my brother,” he heard Davoren confess.

By instinct, he clutched it tighter, if only to bear the significance this little trinket had suddenly gained with that one mere sentence. Vincent regarded his friend gravely.

“When we were kids- Heh! God, this is going way back,” he recounted, “I happened to find that piece of materia one day, so I strung it through a chain and gave it to him. It wasn’t much, but still, Donal loved it. He always carried it around; used to love holding it up to the light, watch it glow between his fingers.”

His thoughtful pink eyes drifted towards the dreary Midgar skyline. In the tranquility of the evening air, he continued on the same soft, somber note, “I remember when Donal received his orders to travel to Wutei. It was his first mission abroad, and he was worried he might lose the chain or someone might steal it. So he gave it me for safekeeping. I promised I’d hold onto it till he returned.”

But of course, Donal never returned.

“It’s strange,” mused Davoren, “I managed to throw everything about Donal away, but I could never bring myself to get rid of this chain. Such a small, old unremarkable thing. I guess secretly I was hoping someday, somehow, I could return it to him,” upon which he looked back to Vincent with a gentle smile, “And in a way, I am.”

Vincent understood. Still, upon considering his request, he had to argue, “I’m sure Rufus would much prefer you delivered it to him rather than me.”

A tinge of regret overshadowed Davoren’s face, yet the smile remained as serene as ever, “I know,” he explained. Indeed, Rufus had been the hand that finally stopped this old man’s 31 year old wound from bleeding, “But our roads have separated, and we’ve already told each other all there is to say. Still, I’ve been carrying that chain with me for so long. Today I’ve decided it... it’s time I gave it away. Please,” begged the gunman, a solemn intensity glowing through his eyes, “I really want the boy to have it.”

Vincent, in face of such earnestness, studied his friend with thoughtful interest until at last he conceded, “Very well”. He slipped the trinket into his pocket, to be delivered to Rufus later this night.

“Hey, I’ve also been thinking,” ventured the gunman after a moment of silent deliberation, “About what you said earlier.”

Vincent listened.

“I can’t tell you what to do, of course. That’s something you have to work out on your own. But maybe if you gather up everything inside you: those worries, confusion, doubts, fears- everything, and lock them out of your head for one minute. Just one,” he emphasized with his index finger, “During that minute, Vincent, ask yourself: what do I want?”

A genuine conviction tensed Davoren’s expression. He assured Vincent in a low but confident voice, “And I

tell ya, the first answer you get, that'll be the right one.”

Vincent beheld the gunman. He wasn't too sure he could follow his suggestion: how could he halt such a vicious war as the one raging inside him for an entire minute, never mind unearth an answer to this daunting, almost impossible question? Besides, what good would it achieve? The turmoil would re-start the instant those 60 seconds expired, and he'd return to the same helpless shipwreck forever spinning in its treacherous vortex, because he was too confused, doubtful and afraid to do otherwise.

Still, Vincent found Davoren's hard gaze, the sheer resolve upholding his words, had carved a deep imprint into his mind, so much so that despite his own uncertainty, he nodded in consent. The gunman smiled.

The two resumed their walk through the desolate land, under arches of mangled pipes and along hills of metal and stone. The road grew wider, the debris less thick as they put the Reactor farther and farther behind them. Soon, they found civilization again.

Vincent and Davoren walked side by side down the deserted street, neither speaking a word. An acrid chill penetrated the night air. The weather forewarned snow, probably the last of this winter season. The two men, no more than shadows, drifted along the pavement until they reached the train tracks. One end lead back to Midgar. The other snaked away from the luminous city, far into the gloom, and farther still into the unknown. The gunman stopped at this point, whereupon he wheeled around to face his companion one final time.

“Well, I'm off then,” he declared simply.

Vincent knew they would part right here even before Davoren had spoken. When or if they'd ever see each other again, impossible to predict. Davoren held out one hand to Vincent, a farewell gesture lest their roads never crossed again. The latter shook it.

Yet each man owed more than just his life to the other. To Davoren, Vincent, together with Rufus, had helped pull him out of complete darkness. To Vincent, the gunman was one of the very few who'd cracked through his defenses to help him explore his own core better. Both had suffered such horrific pain and grief under “Genesis Retrial”. But both had also gained a truer sense of understanding and connection.

To these two, a simple handshake seemed insufficient to convey the strength of this bond between them. It did not even express the great importance their friendship had come to mean to each other.

Indeed, before their ways parted here, Davoren stepped closer to embrace Vincent, who welcomed him with equal warmth.

“Take care of yourself, Davoren,” he said.

“You too.”

Davoren gave his shoulder one final squeeze of affection before they let go, after which the gunman slipped away. He walked the first few steps backwards, all the while regarding his friend, smiled then with a wave of the hand turned around. Vincent silently watched him walk alongside the train tracks towards the black mist.

Davoren ventured farther and farther into the distance until the shadows swallowed him. Vincent could still hear his footsteps fading, fading away. Soon they disappeared altogether.

He was gone.

End of Chp.97

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields –Chp. 98

"I know at first it will be very difficult for you," he'd told him, smiling despite that rueful glow in his pink eyes, "you'll get angry at me, probably end up hating me for a while. But I will always be there by your side, Rufus. And I hope with time, you'll finally come to understand."

Then came the nightstaff into his chest. The gentle hand Davoren had placed upon his shoulder minutes ago suddenly tightened into an iron clamp, thus arresting him, ensuring he received the voltage in full. He finished the deed so quickly, so precisely. He did not hesitate a second. For the gunman, the decision had already been made; it could end no other way.

And what an idiot Rufus had been to think anything he said would make a lick of difference. It didn't matter the secrets he'd just told him. It didn't matter that for once in his phony life he'd finally trusted someone enough to reveal the remorse, anger, grief and intolerable ugliness ravaging his insides. It didn't even matter to tell him he was sorry, or that he occupied the hole his own father never bothered to fill.

Davoren rammed that charged dagger into his chest all the same. And when Rufus reawakened, he discovered the gunman had completely vanished from his life.

Did he perish under the collapsing Reactor? Did he survive? Either way, all links between them had been severed by that despicable nightstaff. This one tiny shred of comfort and warmth incinerated in one blow. And why?

"I get it, okay?" he remembered Reno say, "It's just he... he believed that was how it had to be."

The condescending reply still coiled Rufus' entrails with fury. He "got" it, did he? This venom suffocating his mind, these piercing emotions, these restless thoughts- Reno got all that, did he?

Then why the heck couldn't he give him an explanation instead of "that's how it had to be" bullshit? Why? WHY is this bitter mess how it had to be? Fool! Conspiring with the gunman, thinking mere words can ameliorate everything when in fact he couldn't even answer a simple question like that!

Rufus felt that same old familiar ache tighten around his skull. He bowed his head further while at the same time raking all ten fingers through his hair, if only to clutch what little sanity he had left. Amidst the mental conundrum, Rufus threaded his way back to the Reactor. He'd sworn a thousand times before not to return there, but each time he broke that oath, each time he came back, simply because he knew not where else to go.

Now here he was again, beholding that mountain of steel burning wild in the distance. The flames mocked his helplessness, for there was nothing- utterly nothing- he could do to regain what he'd just lost. They ridiculed him for being so afraid in his heart, so ineffective in his actions, and so damn stupid to confide his all in the gunman when it never mattered anyway.

After all, "this was how it had to be."

"And I hope with time, you'll finally come to understand."

Understand what? That he'd deceived him? That he'd thrust him into a new life without even granting him the chance to fully close his old one? That he'd walked out on him, like things were somehow better this way?

"That's how it had to be."

You bastard, Rufus seethed fresh rage at the missing gunman, you bastard you bastard you bastard you goddamn bast-

But the boy suddenly jolted upright out of his delirious state. He thought he'd heard something just now.

The abrupt return to reality left Rufus breathless. It felt as though he'd been spinning wild in a vortex only to collide against a wall and reawaken here in this room. Amazing how far his mind had wandered while his body remained rooted in the exact same spot. Indeed, Rufus found himself as before, the sole human amidst a crowd of shapes and shadows. He sat huddled in the corner, hands still clutching his temples with loose hair strands dangling across those perturbed blue eyes. Rufus surveyed the bedroom in wary silence. Nothing. The clock continued to tick its monotonous tune. The furniture stood unchanged, the curtains drawn and the door slightly ajar as he'd left it.

Odd. He was almost certain he'd heard a noise. Maybe it was Rude? Or had Reno turned up his stereo too loudly again? Rufus reminded himself however that all three ex-Turks had gone on errands only a short while ago. They couldn't have returned already. Besides him and Elena's cat Simon, no one else was home.

So what then? Did he imagine it? Yet he was almost certain he'd heard a noise.

Moments passed. Still nothing. Rufus slumped back against the wall in defeat, though inside he remained suspicious of this tranquility. Even then however, his wayward mind began to drift again. The bedroom had grown quite dark, he noted passively. Black mist everywhere, defied only by a solitary lamp Rude had flicked on before leaving Rufus alone. Rufus beheld that lamp, so valiant poised there on the nightstand fighting the darkness back, so stupid thinking its efforts made a difference.

"That's how it had to be."

He wondered what time it was, more out of boredom than any real curiosity. Quarter to midnight, according to the clock. Several hours had already elapsed then as he'd loitered in this spot. Strange how fast time passed in reality whereas it dragged so slowly inside his head. He'd been languishing here since late afternoon, after Elena, desperate and on the verge of tears, had begged him to eat. She said he hadn't touched food in four days straight. Rufus had forced down half a sandwich just for her sake. The rest he'd left untouched on the kitchen table, where it probably still sat. Rufus knew she meant well. He even regretted causing her such woe. But really, he'd neither the appetite, energy or slightest interest in eating. All he wanted was to be left alone.

A desire the ex-Turks struggled to accept. It was only some days ago that Rude caught him awake in bed, wrestling a horrible spasm fit in absolute silence. Rufus had to concoct some flimsy excuse; he'd blamed his insomnia on a headache or such, though he could tell Rude did not believe that lie. The man had a keen sense of discernment which could be quite vexatious at times. Rude had begged him to share whatever weighed on his mind. He almost veered the conversation onto Davoren had not Rufus, his nerves already frayed, abruptly cut him short and retreated to bed.

He appreciated what this man was trying to do. Rude had always been so kind to him, sometimes Rufus forgot he used to be a member of the ruthless Turks. But really: the very last thing he'd wanted to talk about was the gunman. Just a hint of that damn bastard ignited a fresh surge of anger within his chest.

Since then, Rude had thankfully steered clear of this topic. Still, he could never conceal that dark, worried expression everytime their eyes met; like he wanted to say something but had to hold his tongue.

Both he and Elena cared about him. He knew that. Rude had even once told him they'd come to consider him part of this group. Yet in truth, Rufus felt no... no solid connection to them.

Perhaps he subconsciously did not trust them, at least not with his heart. Or maybe he just lingered too far away for them to reach him. His friends very much resembled this new life: good but remote, with no bonds anchoring their shores to his own.

"That's how it had to be."

Rufus' dull façade soured. He'd just squeezed both eyes shut, trying to bar those hateful words out, when a sudden noise jerked him awake again. The boy snapped up. This time, he was dead certain he'd heard something!

Rufus stared at the door, which still stood open ajar. There from down the hall and through the tiny crack slipped the noise again: three consecutive taps against a window pane.

Any logical mind would have refuted the idea of someone rapping at the window. This was after all the sixth floor. Yet those three taps resonated again, assuring Rufus that however inconceivable it seemed, a visitor was calling for him.

Rufus scrambled onto his feet. Emerging from the bedroom onto the dim corridor, he ventured forth towards the living room, where the sound seemed to emanate from. The entrance yawned before him like a ghost's den. He gingerly crossed the threshold halfway, just enough to peek inside at the balcony window, whose curtains had been forgotten open. There much to Rufus' bewilderment he discovered a tall ominous figure poised behind the glass, his silhouette black against the weak moonlight but his brilliant red eyes honed straight back at him.

He recognized Vincent immediately.

The surprise visitor, having finally lured Rufus out, lowered his claw, which he'd been tapping against the window. Rufus, still mystified, watched him then slip sideways out of view. All stood silent.

Rufus understood Vincent's mute invitation to go follow him outside, yet hesitated another moment before he complied, if only to better compose himself: to be sure, the very last person he'd expected to see alive, never mind at his balcony window, was this man.

In fact, he had not seen him since that catastrophic night in the Reactor. As Rufus recalled, they'd parted paths at the grand bridge overlying the drainage pits, when Professor Hojo, infuriated by Davoren's defiance, had hurled a fatal energy blast at him. Vincent had shoved him back, well out of harm's way, while he'd lunged forth to save the gunman. He'd managed to pull Davoren away in time, but not even Vincent's incredible speed could withstand the ensuing explosion. It had swept them both clean through the railing. Off the bridge they'd tumbled, only to plummet into the abyss below. That was the final image Rufus remembered of Vincent: him disappearing into a pool of black fog, spinning amidst a deluge of garbage with Davoren still protected in his arms.

How the man survived Rufus could never guess, nor did it matter that much right now. What weighed solely on Rufus' mind as he approached the balcony was the reason behind this visit.

He tentatively slid the door open and poked his head out into the cold night air. He found his visitor had retreated to the very end of the balcony, where he loitered by the parapet cloaked in shadow. Those unnerving eyes however remained fastened on Rufus.

"Um, hi," the latter greeted.

Vincent nodded in acknowledgement.

“Would you, uh... like to come in?”

“No, thank you,” he declined politely. He did not intend to stay for long. Besides, last time he'd entered this place, that woman- Elena, he believed was her name- had thrown a lamp at him in terror. He doubted she'd welcome him were she to return and discover him inside her home again.

Rufus had no choice but to join his guest outside, though not without some trepidation. He knew Vincent bore him news about the gunman. Finally, the opportunity to find out what happened! Yet just as one thread reeled him forward, another kept tugging him back, away from the truth. Strange how after an entire month of agony wondering what befell Davoren, now he dreaded to learn the answer.

But Rufus forced himself, despite his very worst misgivings, to cross the threshold. He had to know. He couldn't leave the gunman behind in the Reactor and continue like this in ignorance. He had to know what happened to him, at the very least if he was still...

The narrow balcony offered a marvelous view of the Midgar skyline, which spread out like a sea of lights, shimmering bright under a cloudy black sky. The sounds of life echoed in the distance; of cars whooshing by, and stray footsteps dashing across the street below. Yet within the confines of this small space, the air between these two remained taut around a cautious silence.

Rufus stayed by the door. He wanted to maintain some distance from his visitor. Indeed, Vincent still filled him with a certain discomfort. Perhaps it was his perfect stoicism. To Rufus, this man very much still remained a mystery. He couldn't even scratch past that cool veneer to see what lurked behind. He did notice however, from the corner of his eye, a large tree rooted in the pavement below. Its gnarled, naked branches reached up to almost the second floor balcony.

So that's how he got here, deduced Rufus: Vincent must have climbed the tree then leapt across onto the second floor balcony. From there he'd flipped his way level by level up to the sixth. He'd found the lights inside switched off, which must have told him none of the ex-Turks were home; all except one bedroom light, which also told him only Rufus was there. An ideal opportunity, since he obviously wanted to speak to him alone.

“How have you been?” Vincent broke the silence at last.

Rufus regarded him, then hummed, “Alright, I guess.”

Vincent mused over this blatant lie, but sensing Rufus' unease in the manner he flicked his eyes aside, he let the subject slide. Instead he asked, “Your friends, how are they?”

“They're okay now.”

For all their differences and Reno's lame vampire jokes, Vincent was glad to hear his two former allies were fine, “And?” he returned to Rufus, “Have they been treating you well?”

“Heh, better than the guards did anyway,” joked Rufus humorlessly. He folded both arms across his chest, now studying this man with intent solemnity, “But then, I highly doubt you climbed up six floors in the middle of the night just to inquire about my well-being.”

Vincent paused at such bluntness before he admitted, very quietly, “That is correct.”

He could see the boy deplored this small talk as much as he did. The sooner he told him, the sooner the wretched apprehension so clearly squeezing his chest would be relieved. Rufus already knew what, or rather who, this was about. Therefore without any more delay, Vincent reached deep into his coat pocket and pulled out a small object. He tossed it across to Rufus, who automatically caught it. Upon opening his palm, he found a dirty green stone shimmering softly back at him.

The boy beheld this gift with a vague sense of familiarity. Where... where had he seen it before?

The answer suddenly struck him like a bolt of lightening: Davoren! He'd shown him the same trinket once. Rufus remembered the man had asked him to raise it up against the light, whereupon its dull color ignited to a luminous sapphire green. Such beauty, Rufus recalled, had mesmerized him to calmness. He even remembered the story Davoren told him about the stone; how as a child he'd discovered this flint of materia in some Mako cave and, fascinated by its shimmer, strung a chain through its head. Yet the trinket, Davoren added, did not belong to him. He said he was actually just holding it for "safekeeping".

Rufus reeled himself back to the present, to the stone still waiting demurely in his palm. He saw its meaning now: the gunman had actually survived, but had made a staunch decision to leave, and this was his parting gift to him, a sort of memento of the last bond between them. Rufus reflected long upon such a realization, visibly torn between genuine relief and fresh anger until at last he squeezed the trinket tight.

"I hope with time you'll finally come to understand," he'd told him.

Rufus felt a poisonous sense of finality seep into his blood. At last he realized... no, he'd always realized, he just couldn't accept it.. at last he accepted that beyond the words "I hope with time you'll finally come to understand", the gunman had nothing more to say to him. Their path ended right there. And yes, that nightstaff jab in the chest... that really **was** it.

"I suppose... Davoren has skipped town by now," muttered Rufus.

"Yes," confirmed Vincent, "I saw him off, as a matter of fact. But before he left, he gave me that chain and asked me to deliver it to you," his crimson eyes narrowed closer upon Rufus as he added in a firm undertone, "It used to belong Donal."

The simple revelation, the name- THAT particular name- startled Rufus into dumb bewilderment. His wide gaze drifted from Vincent down to his hand, which opened again to show him the same stone, but under a new grim perspective. This little trinket, so light in grams, yet so heavy with importance. To think Davoren's brother had once worn this stone...

To imagine he too had held it up against the light, admiring like he had its hypnotic green luster between his fingers...

The very idea rattled Rufus to the core.

"Safekeeping"...

Just then, he grasped the entire truth behind Davoren's story. So for three long, lonely decades he had carried this chain close, clinging to the hope that one day he would find its owner again.

But in vain. That day would never come, and all because of him. It was his company and his ignoble father who stole Donal and ruined Davoren. It was his own avarice which, rather than rectify those crimes, allowed them to pass not only unpunished but with his full support. For Rufus, the idea that a despicable scum like him would behold, never mind touch, something this pure and beautiful twisted his stomach with self-disgust.

So much so that he turned to Vincent, “L-listen,” he pleaded, “I.. there is no way I can accept th-“

But the latter shook his head, “Davoren *wanted* you to have it. It belongs to you now.”

Such adamance cut Rufus short. He realized that any argument would be wasted effort. Thus defeated, he fell back into a long pensive silence, only for that scowl to darken further across his face. For a moment, the stone became the most loathsome object Rufus had ever seen. Past its green shimmer, he could perceive all the love Davoren ever bore for his brother contained inside, staring squarely back at him. He felt an urge to throw the damn trinket away, to shout all sorts of obscenities after it then turn his back on everything.

Yet instead, Rufus noticed his first had clenched more tightly around the stone, refusing to relinquish it despite the searing pain it caused him. Nor did he turn away. He’d done it too often before- turn away from his conscience, his crimes, himself. But this time to do that meant to deny all that happened in the Reactor, all the secrets he’d discovered and all the suffering he’d caused in the name of power. It was something Rufus could not... would not do.

His thoughtful blue eyes drifted towards the city skyline again. Midgar lay sprawled before him end to end, the remains of an empire long fallen.

The ShinRa empire.

“Pathetic, huh?” Rufus smirked weakly at the spectacular view. He returned to Vincent, who demurely watched him as he simpered in quite self-mockery, “Y’know, that city in front of us... the whole planet in fact, I used to own it. I had magnificent Reactors all over the world that pumped Mako into materia, and materia into profit. I had everything in the palm of my hand. Heh! And right now? Look. All I got is this little piece of materia.”

This tiny stone, this token of love Davoren had given Donal decades ago. Tonight it found itself prisoner between the fingers of the one ultimately responsible for tearing the two brothers apart.

“New Age President Rufus ShinRa,” he pronounced the title with contemptuous irony, “Yeah, wasn’t he great. Destroying, taking, killing... even if it meant burning everything inside of him and hiding the ashes behind a mask... none of that mattered to him as long as the bastard got power in the end. Now tell me,” Rufus demanded, staring his visitor straight in the eye, “And give me an honest answer: do you think someone like that, who reeks of so much blood and filth, really deserves such a beautiful gift as this?”

Rufus did not know why he was asking Vincent this, just that of all people, he would have the best answer. In return, Vincent lingered a moment rather struck by the question. That word- “deserve”- clenched his heart. Hadn’t that same word relentlessly pursued him over the past three decades: that he deserved punishment for all his crimes. He deserved to suffer for abandoning Lucrecia. Hideous monster that he was, he deserved to languish forever in self-hate, guilt and agony, always seeking salvation but knowing he’ll never attain it.

Vincent realized why it still rattled him to remember Aeris say she loved him. It’s because her feelings defied the very essence of his convictions. She’d given him all her love while he could not believe someone like him *deserved* such a tender gift. She’d soothed his pain, absolved him of the past while he believed, as he’d sat there helplessly watching her die, that he only *deserved* more punishment and torment.

That decisive moment Aeris stood up... she hadn’t merely confronted the heart of Hojo’s dogma, but his own as well. She’d torn through both of them, undaunted by the darkness she’d encounter, unyielding in her pursuit until she’d reached the core.

As Vincent studied the brooding Rufus, it suddenly occurred to him how similar he and this boy were: they'd both been granted kindness and love even though neither believed he deserved it. For them, the idea of receiving such a treasure flooded their whole interior with wary fear. Yet despite the blood-streaked trail behind him, Aeris said she loved him. And Davoren, for all Rufus was, had given him this chain- the sole physical remembrance of Donal he had- for him to keep.

"I don't know if you 'deserve' it or not," mulled Vincent over the question, "But Davoren certainly believes you do. It's up to you to prove him right or wrong."

"You buy that?" challenged Rufus, "You think 'belief', or faith, or whatever you want to call it, means I actually deserve this chain?"

The remark contained a sting of sarcasm, to which the unruffled Vincent replied, "And you? When everybody else saw Davoren as a demon, you were the only one who had enough conviction to see beyond that. You held onto that conviction, even though everyone, Davoren included, believed someone like him didn't deserve it. And in the end, didn't your belief... your 'faith' prove *you* right?"

The counter-argument caught Rufus off guard. Vincent lingered a moment, uncertain how to articulate the rest of his thoughts when they all hung so entangled. He clutched the thread which to him seemed the strongest, most trustworthy and strummed out his response, "I'm not sure whether any of us 'deserve' gifts like love or compassion with our hands this dirty. I'm inclined to think we don't," he pondered quietly, "But perhaps if someone can look deep into you and find something good worth believing in and protecting... then perhaps that's reason enough to give them your faith in return and strive for some sort of... I don't know, 'reconciliation' with yourself regardless of what you think."

Rufus fell silent. He wasn't certain he'd understood Vincent entirely, but he could see from his solemn red eyes that the man spoke with an open heart. Rufus looked away towards the skyline once more. Indeed, he remembered how fiercely he'd refused to accept that murderous, sneering devil as the real Davoren. Even when he'd pointed the gun straight in his face, Rufus knew that couldn't be him. The man who'd comforted him in times of darkness, and always treated him with warmth and sincere kindness, *that* was the true Davoren, not the demon before him.

Rufus became aware of the chain again, still clutched tight in his hand. All of Davoren's faith locked within this stone; all of it given to him.

What then? What was he supposed to do with such a gift?

"It's just," admitted Rufus at length, "Somethings... when I think about them, they..."

He turned to Vincent but stopped: the guest, Rufus suddenly discovered, had already departed. Not a sound or a farewell. Just gone.

He felt no surprise, only the same old sense of heaviness as he peered over the balcony railing. Vincent, Rufus reckoned, must have already hopped down the tree branches onto the pavement below.

He even thought he caught glimpse of a black phantom slip into the alley across the road. It didn't matter. Vincent was gone, and he left alone to simmer in his own thoughts. Rufus stared into the gloomy sky for several minutes until he realized he was cold. He retreated inside and shut the door behind him.

End of Chp.98

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields –Chp.99

Rufus' right fist weighed heavy as it dangled by his side, still clutching the materia stone Vincent had faithfully delivered to him. It once belonged to Donal, he heard a voice whisper the awful secret into one ear, it used to belong to Davoren's brother. And in the opposite ear hissed the malicious response over and over again:

You do not deserve it, Rufus ShinRa.

Your eyes upon this stone, your very touch defiled it. Everything it represented, all the love, sacrifice and beauty within, recoiled at the sight of your rotten heart. You do not deserve this gift, Rufus ShinRa, and you know it. You don't deserve it, just like you don't deserve any salvation, peace or even the tiniest crumb of compassion.

And yet, Davoren believed he did. Why? How did he obtain such solid conviction? Why did he hold onto it so adamantly when all Rufus could see was a repulsive, selfish monster not worth the air he inhaled, never mind this faith given him?

He'd asked Vincent this question. The man's answer continued to wrangle Rufus, even now while he loitered in place, statuesque, staring emptily around the living room. He closed his eyes a moment. God, he felt so weary. Indeed, Vincent's visit had touched several wounds still raw in Rufus' conscience; but instead of healing, Rufus found the visit, the words, the sheer grip of those crimson eyes, had torn the wounds wider, forcing him to confront all the unresolved pus and unhealed flesh he'd been trying hitherto to contain.

"I hope with time, you'll finally come to understand."

Davoren's final words still prickled his memory despite the grave tranquility of the living room. But unlike before, when they sparked such anger, now they merely evoked a dull, exhausting sense of sorrow.

"I hope with time, you'll finally come to understand."

He heard the clock tower in the distance announce the arrival of midnight. Each indifferent chime reeled the boy an inch back into reality until he stirred out of his reverie, only to find himself, after so much wandering, still standing in place. His gaze, however, seemed transfixed on something at the opposite end of the room.

It was Elena's piano.

He realized he's been staring at the piano all this time. Rufus could not fathom why his eyes – damn traitors! – had chosen and still clung to that loathsome box. In turn, it surprised him to notice how irate he felt at the sight of a mere piano. Again, he could not explain why, but it stirred some unpleasant knot of emotions buried within, out of his memory's reach yet just close enough for his conscience to touch.

Elena practiced the piano a few times a week. He could tell from the way she played it was just to maintain her skills, not to improve them. Nevertheless, Rufus had often listened to her play as he'd sat huddled alone in his room. The melody didn't arrest him as much as the actual sound of the instrument being played. Somewhere amongst those keys there lurked a shadow he could not see, only sense.

Rufus slipped the stone into one pocket then approached the piano. He lingered in front of it a minute before slowly lifting the cover, only to find those ebony and ivory teeth grinning back at him. He stared down at the vulgar keys. Until tonight, he'd always avoided this piano. He never ventured into the living room while it was being played. Even as it sat before him in silence, Rufus detested the sight of it like a disease.

Paradoxically though, he found the more he hated it, the greater he felt this inexplicable... "connection" to it, for lack of a better word. Now to stand face to face with this enigmatic foe, Rufus could sense the connection stronger than ever.

It was pain. Terrible, numbing pain.

The boy propped himself upon the bench. The first time he tried to touch the key, his finger hesitated. The second time, he managed to tap it. He listened to the note rise out of the box's throat, where it loitered in the air a moment before dissipating into the silence. He pressed another key. Again he listened. The sound both repulsed and fascinated him.

"I hope with time, you'll finally come to understand."

Rufus passively watched all ten fingers crawl across the keys to assume position. They seemed to know exactly where to begin. Rufus didn't feel awkward, rather bemused at how familiar and easy this motion came to him. Did he used to play the piano before his... "accident"? That was the only explanation he could think of.

Upon searching his mind for a tune to play, he discovered he could recall none. Yet his fingers, unlike his memory, seemed so sure of themselves, poised there and ready, that he gave them control.

The song started gently, like an eerie whisper. Rufus listened without understanding as it soon accelerated into a melancholy crescendo. All he could do was behold his hands dance across the many keys.

The notes flowed as smoothly as a stream into the darkness around him. Rufus realized he hated this melody. His face, he finally noticed, had tightened to a frown. He loathed this song. He knew he'd always loathed it, all the hypocrisy and selfishness welded into this beautiful tune. He hated it! Still, the boy continued to play, and from the flawless movements of his hands, he realized he must have practiced this particular song many times before; so many times he'd fused it into his very fingertips, where not even fire could obliterate.

~... it burns me up, but I still feel cold...~

~..."Inside, Sir, you and I have the same blood"...~

A dull ache began to creep up his skull. Rufus ignored it, like he ignored the hundred shards of voices carving his sanity. He continued to play. He allowed the music to sweep him upwards. His fingers and his thoughts raced each other towards a terrifying unknown...

~..."it's our blood... our ShinRa blood"...~

God, how he hated this damn tune.

~..."I want you to make peace with yourself"...~

Yet everyday, he'd practiced. Hour after hour he'd wasted, learning this one song till it had become a part of him. He wondered why he'd bothered so much with this song in particular?

~"... "I know at first it will be very difficult for you"...~

Someone else used to play this song. He didn't know who it was. He couldn't remember. This ghost of a person, faceless, ethereal to him, remained in the shadows of his mind. He still couldn't remember who it was. Yet he knew now why he'd practiced this song so much.

~..."But I will always be there by your side, Rufus"...~

It's because that unknown ghost left him long ago... cut him out... and he, in his childish foolishness, had believed that if he played this song well enough... if he played it often enough, it would somehow bring that ghost back to him...

~... "I hope with time, you'll finally come to und-

Rufus suddenly smashed the piano cover shut on both the song and Davoren's reverberant words before either could finish. The last few notes he'd played lingered a moment, suffocating him with dread, until they faded away. Silence filled the living room once more.

Rufus remained frozen at the piano. He found both hands still clamped hard upon the cover, as if terrified of the secrets it might unleash were it to open again. He felt such horrible pain inside he could barely keep his own breath steady. Every second spent listening to that infernal tune, every key he'd pressed, every motion he'd made had torn deeper and deeper into him until-

"Hey, I was enjoying that," drawled a familiar voice.

Rufus snapped to full attention. His icy eyes shot aside straight towards the living room entrance. He discovered Reno there, dressed in bulky winter boots and a woolly muffler around his pale, scarred face. By his side, the ex-Turk held a brown paper bag filled with groceries. Indeed, he'd finally returned home from his errands.

Reno didn't seem the least bit threatened by Rufus' glare. Rather, he viewed the boy in genuine marvel, "Damn!" he whistled, "I didn't know you played the piano, and so well to boot! You're packing some serious talent there!"

The compliment received no answer.

Nor did Reno appear to expect any. Instead he unwrapped the scarf from around his face, at the same time stepping across to flick on one of the lamps. Only then did Rufus realize that all this time, he'd been playing in utter darkness. Once more, he'd forgotten to switch on the lights.

The awakened lamp spread a gentle glow throughout the room, yet the shadow of animosity remained furrowed across Rufus' wan face. He had already arisen from the bench and retreated towards the opposite end of the room, as far away from the piano as possible.

He wondered when Reno had come in. He hadn't even heard the little sneak open the front door. It nettled Rufus to imagine how long Reno had been standing there, silently listening to his anguish unravel amongst the piano keys. What vexed him more however was the fact that of all people, *Reno* had heard it.

Several days had passed since their tempestuous confrontation, yet the bitter aftertaste remained strong in Rufus' mind. Even now as he lingered by the balcony window, brooding upon the Midgar skyline outside, Rufus remembered what Reno had told him. He'd said it was okay to grieve for the loss of his friend. He'd said he "got" what he was going through. But for all his exclamations, Reno couldn't explain to him why Davoren chose to depart with such a painful deception or why he'd aided him.

All he said was "that's how it had to be."

From thereon, the two had avoided each other completely. Whereas before when he might have ventured out to join the others at the table or in the living room, Rufus spent his entire day safe in the bedroom. Reno never approached him again. In fact, Rufus suddenly realized that this was the first time he'd seen Reno since their dispute several days ago.

He peaked over his shoulder, towards the kitchen where Reno was unpacking the groceries, softly humming the tune he'd just played. The man was either unaware or much more likely ignoring this frost between them.

So typical of that asshole to act all cool, grumbled Rufus.

"Elena and Rude not back yet, huh?" called Reno, "Sheesh! How long does it take to pick out a movie?"

The past week had been unkind to the three ex-Turks, what with Elena and Reno working overtime and Rude

trudging through body guard duties for his paranoid boss during five straight days of meetings and dealings. So for tonight, they'd all decided to relax at home in front of a movie. Reno had agreed to purchase the essential snacks. The latter two meanwhile had volunteered to go rent a film from the store five blocks away.

"And that woman better not bring another 'chick-flick'," growled Reno to himself, "Or I'll be wishing I friggin' DIED back there in the Reactor. Oh hey, kid! I got something for ya!"

The perplexed boy turned to face Reno as he pulled out a small, crinkly packet from the grocery sack. He shook it for Rufus to see.

"Rice cakes!" he grinned, then tossed the pack onto the counter with the other snacks, "Think I heard you mention rice cakes before. Can't remember where or why though. Anyway, these cakes looked really good. I know you're probably gonna say you're not hungry, but I thought what the Hell! He may like 'em!"

All this time, Rufus regarded the ex-Turk in tense surprise, not so much taken by his benevolence as by the flash of memory he had provoked. It was one of those trivial things the mind treasured for some reason. For Rufus, it was this one time, eons ago it seemed, after Davoren had just saved him from another fiery spasm fit. Once the madness had abated, the gunman, knowing he hadn't eaten for several days as usual, somehow coaxed him into eating a bag of rice cakes with him. That was all.

Rufus remembered later, when Davoren had pointed his gun straight in his face, and sneering, told him he was simply obeying the Professor like a good Turk. The same reason he'd watched over him, the same reason he kept him alive, and the same reason he was about to kill him; because the Professor had ordered him. Of all the questions Rufus could have asked before he died, he recalled only one rising out to challenge the gunman: and when you brought me those rice-cakes, were you obeying the Professor too?

The stand-off with all its details and players rushed past Rufus' mind. Yes, Reno was there. If memory served him right, the ex-Turk had even rushed a good distance in the vain hope of stopping him from confronting the murderous gunman. So much had happened since then. Yet what gripped Rufus most was the fact that Reno, however vaguely, remembered the question he'd asked.

No, it was more than that, admitted Rufus. When Davoren shared those cakes with him, it was the beneficence of his action, the kindness of his face and soul that had truly struck Rufus. He'd asked him about those rice-cakes because he himself knew all about lies – he'd lived his first life trapped in an opulent falsehood, and the second caged in ignorance and deceit; he knew a great deal about lies, and he'd known that the compassion Davoren had always shown him, right down to sharing some measly cakes, was no lie.

And now Rufus realized what bewildered him the most was that Reno, whom hitherto he'd held in such contempt, thinking he knew nothing, might actually appreciate the meaning behind those cakes too.

Rufus' expression darkened into reluctant thoughtfulness the longer he studied the man. Reno meanwhile worked on in oblivion, mumbling "...beer for me 'n Rude... popcorn... some low-fat, tasteless junk for Elena..." as he emptied the grocery bag.

He and this ex-Turk had been at odds from their very first encounter: the moment Reno struck him across the face for his ingratitude; the countless times he harshly antagonized him for defending Davoren- indeed, out of everyone, he'd been the most cynical to believe him; the time he called him a 'goddamn loony shithead' for confronting Professor Hojo by himself, or an 'arrogant piece of snot', or a 'real pain in the ass'; the list just went on. With Reno, it always felt like they were a tiny boat bobbing and tossing about in turbulent waters.

Then came that nightstaff. One blow, and the boat had completely capsized over. But now, he...

"Vincent dropped by," Rufus muttered at long last.

To Reno, the idea of them speaking had seemed so impossible that, upon hearing Rufus, he doubted his own ears. He looked towards the boy, "Say what?"

“Vincent,” he repeated more clearly, “He was here some minutes ago.”

The words hung stagnant in the air. Reno obviously couldn't decide which bewildered him more: the realization that Rufus was actually speaking, or the fact that he was talking to him.

Either way, he paused to digest the news. Reno had often wondered what befell Vincent. He couldn't say he'd enjoyed joining forces with a former AVALANCHE member (and an eerie one at that!). Then again, Vincent had proven himself a worthy ally who'd saved his butt at least twice. Reno admitted he was glad to learn he was alive.

“Heh!” he smirked, “So, Mr. Tall-dark-and-creepy survived, eh?”

Rufus remained in front of the balcony window with arms folded. He knew fully well that, despite his best effort to keep stoic, to detach himself from his surroundings like he'd always done before, the torment inside him had already crept across his face for Reno to see.

Indeed, the ex-Turk regarded him with intent scrutiny. Part of Rufus berated himself savagely for opening his mouth: the last thing he wanted was to talk to this man. Damn both him and his nightstaff! He should have just shut up and walked away! He wanted to be alone. He wanted nothing other than solitude and silence!

Another part of Rufus however, held Reno's gaze in equal solemnity. It would not let him leave. It forced him to admit that above his desire for solitude and silence, he wanted to talk. The pain in his chest had just become too excruciating for him to bear.

“Vincent then... he gave you news on Davoren?” prompted Reno as he stepped forward to stand at the kitchen threshold.

Rufus nodded, “Davoren's okay. He told me he made it out of the Reactor.”

“Well, that's good, right?”

“Yeah,” breathed Rufus. His eyes strayed sideways, towards the piano, only to sink into pensive gloom again, “But Davoren's left the city now. I doubt I'll ever see him again.”

Reno said nothing. Instead he leaned aside against the entrance and with arms loosely folded. He allowed this silence between them to linger as long as Rufus needed.

They both realized this was the first time Rufus had willingly spoken of the gunman since that catastrophic night. And for Reno to be his sole listener- the irony did not escape either of them. Rufus thought it better to just leave the matter there. He even took a few steps as though to retreat, but stopped again. Reno's gaze never released him.

“You know back there in the storage ward? That was the last time I spoke to him,” Rufus recounted slowly, “I apologized to him for everything ShinRa and I had done to him. But Davoren didn't want my apology. He wouldn't even accept it. Instead, he said he wanted me to ‘compensate’ him by living the rest of my life as best as I can. He wanted me to be happy and proud, and start making peace with myself.”

His brows strained into uncertainty, “I don't know understand,” he confessed, “A month's gone by, I think about what he said, but I still don't understand what he's asking of me. How am I supposed to find a foothold or make any sort of ‘peace’ with such an ugly past or such an awful bastard like ‘Rufus ShinRa’? Vincent said Davoren had faith in me, but I just...”

Rufus paused before his own doubts overwhelmed him. He wanted to say that he didn't share Davoren's faith. He doubted someone like him could achieve this peace. He didn't even know how to start and feared where it would lead. After a moment, in which he managed to enforce calm again, the boy conceded, “The thing is,

Davoren knew I wouldn't understand. You were right: that IS why he knocked me out cold. Because he understood something that is just beyond me. And you helped him for the very same reason: because you also knew I wouldn't understand."

His eyes lifted to meet Reno's dead-on. The latter said nothing.

"It's okay. I accept that we had to go our separate ways, of course. I accept it was for the best. But still, the man was... he was like a father to me. For him to just cut me out like that, it... it gets me so angry, thinking about it. At times, I even find myself hating him. Actually *hating* him," Rufus gave a faint, humorless smile at his own admission, "What's funny is that Davoren also predicted I'd wind up hating him."

He fell silent. There was nothing more to say. Besides, he was tired. His mind, his body, his heart- everything felt so sickeningly tired. Still, it rattled him to realize how much he'd spilt out in front of Reno. He'd said a lot more than he'd intended, some of it truths he hadn't even admitted to himself never mind another person.

Reno meanwhile remained quiet for a rather long time. Behind his solemn demeanor, he no doubt weighed Rufus' words against the memory of their vicious confrontation: the way he'd tried to force Rufus out of his grief when he knew only a fraction of it, his inability to explain, and most damning of all his arrogance and haste at thinking he could simply drag him out when he couldn't even find him through the darkness.

Now however there was a tiny flicker of light, just enough for him to catch a true glimpse of this figure standing before him. It wasn't the New Age President of ShinRa Inc. It wasn't his former boss.

It was just Rufus. And quite frankly, the candid sight had tightened his face into a deep scowl.

"Geez, kid!" the malcontent Reno suddenly snorted, "I swear, you bottle up so much shit inside you, it's a damn wonder it doesn't come pouring outta your ears!"

The outburst surprised Rufus. He'd always known this man to be unafraid of speaking his mind, but somehow, that wasn't quite the response he'd been expecting.

Like Reno cared, "Has it ever occurred to you," he pressed on, now straightening up to face Rufus squarely, "that maybe you're not supposed to understand all this *just* yet? I mean, c'mon! 'Making peace' with yourself? That takes time to achieve! For some, it can take a lifetime."

Rufus said nothing.

"Heck, we've all got our own bad shit that follows us around, Rufus. Some run away from it. Others bury it under something else. But to actually confront it, to be able to 'make peace' with it, that's not easy. It takes a lot of courage and even more strength. Yeah, Davoren tricked you. He let you go, but there is no chance in Hell or Heaven you're gonna make me believe he 'cut you out' like you were some worthless piece of rope. I've half a mind to kick your stupid ass just for thinking that!"

Reno raked his hair back in search of the right knot to tie his thoughts together, "I reckon..." he ambled along, "I dunno. I reckon when Davoren saw you face up to your past and apologize, he just realized you'd become brave enough to set out on your own. He saw the strength of your soul. Or something like that anyway."

Though he'd spoken bluntly, Reno's tone contained neither harshness nor anger. On the contrary, even the mystified Rufus could feel the kindness beneath his voice, as clearly as he could see it warm and steadfast on his face.

"You'll figure everything out in due time," smiled Reno, "You just gotta cut yourself some slack. Besides, not like Davoren said goodbye, right?"

He blinked, "Ah? R-right."

“So what are you so depressed about?” the ex-Turk declared, now turning away from Rufus with a casual wave of the hand, “If the guy didn’t say goodbye, there’s a chance you’ll bump into each other again,” after which he sauntered back to the kitchen, grumbling in feigned annoyance, “Honest to God, kid! I’ve seen people at *funerals* more cheerful than you...”

Rufus remained mute for a very long minute. He watched the man bustle about the kitchen, now pulling out some electronics magazine from the grocery bag and plopping it upon the counter, only to flip through it at a lazy pace. Reno always kept his back to Rufus, though the latter felt certain he could sense his gaze on him.

He could see the ex-Turk pretending it was nothing, playing it cool like always. Still, his nonchalance did not avert the realization from unfolding before Rufus. There was none of the belligerence of their previous quarrel. No treading over the past when Rufus now conceded that however much it hurt, it was in the end the best and only way. The ex-Turk wasn’t even going to pretend he could easily find him amidst all the darkness.

Nevertheless, despite all the cold and black waters between them, it hadn’t deterred Reno from stepping forth to comfort him in his loss (by his own unorthodox methods, though last time Rufus checked, threatening someone with a severe beating did not merit as solace). But more bewildering, it hadn’t stopped Reno from understanding him in his despair, even if he still couldn’t fully reach him.

Rufus reflected upon Reno’s words for a longer minute. Was that what the gunman saw right before ramming the nightstaff into his stomach: “strength”? Past the crimes, the self-disgust and desolation, did he see this... this “something good”, as Vincent had put it, “worth believing in and protecting”?

The same doubt niggled at Rufus’ mind again. He could see no good in here. No solid place to make peace. But then, Davoren had believed there was. The man had poured his entire conviction into this materia stone and given them both to him: to show how firmly he believed in this strength of his, even at the risk of gaining Rufus’ hatred in exchange.

Rufus returned to the present, to the ex-Turk who’d opened a can of beer as he skimmed his magazine. He listened to everything, thought Rufus, when he could have walked off. The same way he and Rude had fought hard to save him when the much easier option was to just let him perish in the Reactor. The same way they’d sheltered him whole within their folds when neither man nor Elena owed him a shred of obligation.

He had always been grateful to them, of course. But he had also felt that no matter how far they stretched, the shores between him and the three ex-Turks were too wide apart to make any connection; that he, or rather, both this new life and they were inaccessible. Now however it occurred to Rufus that maybe he’d been gazing out the wrong direction. Perhaps he never had to search so far off in the distance. All he had to do was turn around, and he would find the three of them right there behind him.

He would find Elena there despite the apathetic manner he’d treated her beneficence. Rude was there too even after the dozens of times he’d shut him out in the cold. And Reno was there as well, in spite of the harsh verbal bruises Rufus had inflicted upon him during their quarrel.

But Davoren must have known that too, mused Rufus. He knew the ex-Turks would help hold him up in this new life, the same way he’d held him up through his old life, because they’d both seen this so-called “soul” in him, and they believed it would ultimately keep him steady.

What was that Vincent told him? “Perhaps that’s reason enough to give them your faith in return, and strive for some sort of... ‘reconciliation’ with yourself regardless of what you think.”

A remorseful look spread across Rufus’ face as this final riddle unfolded before him. His mind turned from Vincent to Reno. The man paid no attention to him. Rufus however still felt the ghost of their bitter quarrel hanging about. He fidgeted between a desire to speak and a heavy uncertainty of what to say until at last, the former prevailed.

“Listen, Reno,” he stumbled, “About what I said the other day-“

"Forget it," he cut him short.

"But—"

"Ah, shut yer trap already," insisted Reno, as though he already knew what Rufus wanted to say. He stole another sip of beer then added gently, kindly, "Besides, it's not important anymore."

Rufus fell silent again. He didn't want to make this any more awkward for Reno. By now, he'd learned enough about the ex-Turk to know this kind of stuff made him uncomfortable. But if he wasn't going to apologize, then Rufus decided he would at least say one thing.

"Thank you, Reno."

After just being told to shut up, Rufus felt certain this defiance vexed the man enormously, even if it was heartfelt gratitude. He thought it funny how they always seemed to end up at loggerheads no matter which route they followed. But whatever his reaction, Reno maintained his poise. He did not turn around. He did not answer. In fact, he just held his can of beer while reading his magazine; though Rufus did note that he'd stopped midway through turning the pages.

A rattle at the front door suddenly interrupted the silence. Elena stumbled into the main hall, her cheeks flushed from the cold outside, followed by Rude.

"We're hooooome!" she chirped in relief.

Reno had already left the kitchen to meet them in the hall.

"About time! What took you so long?" he demanded.

"Couldn't decide on a movie," explained Rude, taking off his heavy coat and skull cap. As he tossed the two upon the hanger nearby, he noticed Rufus standing at the living room entrance, "Oh, hey," he greeted diffidently.

Elena, who'd just been reminding Reno of some chore he had to do tomorrow, also stopped upon seeing the boy, "Ah, Sir! Wasn't expecting to find you there. You... you alright? Everything okay?"

Neither could conceal their amazement at discovering Rufus here. Nor was Rufus too sure what to say. Thankfully, Reno saved him.

"Nah, it's cool," he shrugged, whereupon he yanked Rufus by the arm into the hallway with them, "I've been trying to talk the kid into watching the movie with us. He says he just *might* depending on what movie we rented. And hey! If it's a really good movie, he might even eat a whole bag of rice cakes by himself."

"Eh? Really?" beamed Elena in delight.

"Of course! I actually bought a bag of cakes 'n everything. We're all set to go here!"

Rufus had no recollection of making such a bargain. He glowered at the sly ex-Turk while rubbing his sore arm (that pull actually hurt! The jackass didn't have to be so rough, thought Rufus). He supposed it was Reno's way of exacting revenge for his defiant thanks earlier. Reno however just gave him a mischievous wink. He then returned to the kitchen, leaving Rufus to Elena, who was eager to show and praise the movie they'd rented least he changed his mind.

"Yo, Elena! Rude!" cried Reno, "So you guys gonna help me prepare these snacks sometime today or what?"

"Fine! Fine!" she sighed back. She trotted off, still smiling behind at Rufus.

As he lingered there in place, a bit disoriented by all that was happening, Rufus felt Rude come up to him and drop a friendly hand upon his shoulder. He looked aside to find the man smiling knowingly at him. Rude squeezed his shoulder as silent support, then left him to assist in the kitchen.

Rufus remained alone in the dim hall another moment. The voices of his three friends wafted from the other room. He heard Elena calling him; the film was about to start, she said. Rufus dug deep into his pocket and pulled out the materia stone once more. He beheld its soft, lovely green shimmer in quiet brooding.

"I know at first it will be very difficult for you," he remembered Davoren's words, "You'll get angry at me, probably end up hating me for a while. But I will always be there by your side, Rufus. And I hope with time, you'll finally come to understand."

A small smile passed across Rufus' lips. He was at last beginning to understand.

-End of Chp.99

I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields –Chp. 100

“The fields are so cold, and so empty,” he could still hear Aeris’ words echo across his memory, “Everything is frozen dead, you’d think nothing can ever grow there. But you said in the springtime, the flowers bloom here. So, something was able to grow in these fields after all. There was life hidden underneath, only you didn’t see it.”

Yes, that had always been a fault of his: looking at matters as they appeared on the surface- black is black, sin is sin, guilt is guilt. Dig deeper and you’ll only find more of the same.

And now, here you are again, he commanded himself wearily: look. What do you see?

Vincent reopened his eyes. Fields of snow greeted his vision. They spread out before him into the distance far away, an endless blanket of unadulterated whiteness. It felt strange to stand in the middle of these fields again. So much had happened since his last visit here, it seemed another lifetime ago. So many wounds torn open and coiled secrets unraveled into the ugly light. But these fields remained as before, untouched, unchanged, and unfathomable.

The whole time Vincent loitered in this place, a cruel war of emotion raged within his heart: desperation nagged him. Doubt – constant, infernal doubt- clawed him until his entire insides were bleeding. An eerie foreboding hissed into his ears, telling him not to venture any further, to turn away from here.

Paradoxically though, it was this same presentiment which held him in place, like underneath these fields lay this... this ultimate thing that would give him some kind of rest, hope, or at least a direction to follow. He didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know where to take himself or these emotions. He feared what he wanted yet what he wanted he did not know.

Vincent reckoned he’d been standing in this spot for over an hour, just staring at the fields. The man however could not see what he was searching for. In truth, Vincent still didn’t know what exactly he was searching for amidst such wilderness or even why he’d returned here to begin with.

Or did he know all along, but was just too hesitant, too cowardly to tread further and find it?

Vincent sighed in bitter defeat. He remained immobile.

After leaving the mystified Rufus with Davoren’s gift, Vincent had retreated to the shadows of Midgar once more. He’d roamed the streets like a wayward ghost, wrapped in his long black coat and a muffler loosely wound around his wan face. People whisked past him unnoticed. Alleys flowed into rivers of darkness; he swam down them without caring.

He dimly recalled the city clock tower chime out the arrival of midnight, but that was God-knows how long ago.

His feet had followed no fixed path. He’d no destination to reach, no purpose to achieve, no end in sight. Vincent had just kept walking, trying to escape *her* but unable to relinquish his mind’s grip on her. He’d pressed on, goaded forward by uncertainty about himself, and hindered back by a painful longing for *her*.

If only he had the courage to turn around and see who she was.

Indeed, all the time Vincent had walked, down the lamp-lit streets, through throngs of shapeless shadows, he could sense *her* right on his trail. She was this presence only he detected, trotting after him wherever he turned. She wouldn’t leave him alone for one second. Worse still, on the few occasions Vincent had paused, weary of his own vagrancy, he’d feel her invisible arms envelope him from behind. Tenderly she’d whisper in

his ears; he'd hear her begging him to look at her.

Right then, a wave of desires would flood him: to turn to her, to press her against his heart where she belonged. But every time, Vincent managed to break free. He'd kept walking forward. He'd never once looked behind. No matter how strong her embrace or overwhelming his desire, his fear of facing her always prevailed.

He didn't want to know whose eyes he'd find staring back at him were he to turn around: Sorrowful eyes from a past 31 years old, still full of the love he'd failed, still condemning him to guilt and misery? Or green eyes beaming love and compassion, the first which rattled him, the latter which pierced him deep, and both of which he knew he did not deserve?

Which pair of eyes would meet his? What if he admitted those weren't the eyes he yearned to find? Then again, how could he admit anything when he felt so torn by doubt?

For him, Lucrecia remained ingrained deep in his mind like a carving in stone unaltered by time. He knew every detail of her: her dear face and soft caress. Her hair. Her white skin. The way she laughed. The way he could spend hours just sitting with her. The ease he felt around her. How his entire loneliness dispersed at her mere presence. How badly he'd longed for her. The joy that overtook him during the brief moment they had each other- she kissing him, he touching her, just the two of them and quiet ecstasy. It was the last time Vincent remembered being truly happy.

He clung to everything that was Lucrecia; her life that had been his light, and her death that became his damnation.

But still...

No matter how many times he swayed to Lucrecia, his heart kept steering him towards Aeris again: to her beauty and kindness. To her incredible strength. To his desire to protect her from harm and pain, starting as a spark and growing until it became a fire, so intense he'd dived into the Reactor just to retrieve her.

The time he held her tearful face up between his hands and kissed her.

The unrestrained rage that exploded out of him upon watching Hojo slay her.

The bottomless pit of grief that swallowed him upon losing her.

This listless agony he constantly felt without her.

Could he really just go on like she was a bridge to Lucrecia, a mere prisoner behind a mirror, there to assume whomever image he wished to see? What if he said he wanted to go on seeing Lucrecia in that mirror, go on loving her, yearning for her, while the girl suffered behind the glass?

And what if he said that was not what he wanted?

What if instead he smashed through the mirror, through the image of Lucrecia, because he actually wanted to reach the girl on the other side? What if he admitted he was only denying himself a truth he'd known all along?

What was this truth? What was the answer? What did he want?

Thus taunted by the same demons, over and over and over, Vincent had marched on. He'd walked and walked, putting more of the city behind him. He hadn't realized how far he'd wandered until he'd passed the

gates of Midgar Public Park, whereupon he'd stopped dead.

To find himself here again, whether beckoned by some subconscious force or sheer accident, nevertheless had bewildered him. He must have spent a whole minute standing at the arched entrance, watching the gravel path snake out before him into the forest ahead.

He knew where this road lead: to the beginning of an enigma, to the death of a monster and the discovery of a soul. To the words "I know what's beneath the snow fields".

Vincent entered. He'd followed the same path he'd taken so long ago. Externally nothing had changed: the grim trees shivered in the cold; the naked bushes and shrubberies huddled together for warmth; the silence weighed heavy upon the air; shadows loomed everywhere. He could scarcely believe he'd once fought a savage battle against Davoren upon these grounds.

But the deeper Vincent had drifted, over arborous hillocks and under gnarled tree branches, the more keenly he'd felt that something had actually changed. It was like some sort of new meaning lurked behind this façade. Indeed, Vincent felt it strongest at the end of his journey, when he finally found the snow fields, a white desert of ice and cold rolling down the hillside into the nothingness beyond. He'd cut his way across this wasteland towards one particular spot.

There he'd stood, and still stood statuesque against the black sky.

He remembered the night he brought Aeris to this place. It seemed ages ago. He remembered how its magnificence had enthralled her. They'd sat down together upon the snow – right here in fact, where he languished alone right now. She'd told him these white fields were very much like him. Vincent didn't understand at the time, but he did recall, in answering her, how badly he'd wanted her to see him as a monster.

A monster within this shell of some pathetic man, chased by the ghost of a love he'd abandoned, hollowed by years of self-hate and vicious remorse. He still didn't know why he'd always wanted specifically Aeris to call him a monster. Nor could Vincent explain why it infuriated him inside to have her deny him that name- so much so that he'd attacked her on one occasion.

Maybe he'd already sensed her love for him, at least on some subconscious level. And that had flustered him, frightened him even, because in feeling that, she was directly defying all the guilt and darkness he'd borne inside for 31 years. Even later when she'd tearfully confessed outloud that she loved him, Vincent recalled his whole being had reeled in shock: he'd wanted her to admit her folly, to see he deserved neither her faith nor her heart, only more scorn and punishment.

But somehow, this girl's resolve always prevailed over his own. He remembered as he'd held her pinned down to the floor, delirious, seething rage upon her, Aeris would not concede to him. When they'd sat here together, before them this wintry wilderness, Aeris had only clung to her conviction more.

She told him, "I know what's beneath the snow fields".

Her words resonated vividly within him. Still, the man remained unsure of himself and even less sure of the path to follow.

Vincent's gaze drifted upwards. He finally noticed it was snowing. The man watched the vast canopy of clouds shed white confetti upon the earth below. How clear the sky had been the last time he'd been here, with a million stars scattered like diamonds across black velvet. Now gloom and despair overcast everything: the heavens, the city, the fields and his heart.

“You never came,” he heard Lucrecia’s miserable whisper stab him across a distance 31 years away, “even though I loved you and wanted you to come so badly, you never came.”

It was the very last thing she’d said before the darkness engulfed her, leaving him to wander the land a lonely wretch, forever condemned by those words.

To love her and hate himself.

To seek forgiveness knowing he’ll never achieve it.

To live a monster. Always a monster.

Hadn’t that been his punishment? Isn’t that all someone like him ever deserved?

But Aeris...

“You’re not the same ‘Vincent’ you were before,” her soft, gasping voice now floated into his ears, clutching him by the roots, “.. that man...his fields were empty. J-just snow and ice. But Lucrecia, she planted a tiny seed in those fields. Your love for her... and... and your suffering after losing her...they helped that seed grow into a flower.”

Vincent narrowed his eyes. In a flash, he was back in that damn hall, watching Aeris bleeding, dying in his arms as she whispered her final revelation. God, how he wished he could tear that one memory out of his skull and trample it to oblivion!

Still, he could hear her gently speak, “If only possible, I’d give up my own life for you to have Lucrecia here instead of me.”

Isn’t that what you’ve yearned for, Vincent?

“I know she’d tell you the same things I’ve said now. She’d say that she’s forgiven you.... she forgave you a long time ago...”

Isn’t that what you’ve wanted?

“.. and n-now that you’ve found your soul at last.... it’s time you... finally...for..g..ave ...yourse..lf...”

Look at those fields and for once answer: isn’t that what you want?

Vincent’s vision dropped back to the snow fields. He didn’t know how to answer. But right now, all he wanted was....

Tifa couldn’t believe what a hectic day it had been. Running between the kitchen and bar while her two poor assistants slaved like mules to serve customers. What had made matters worse was that Cloud had decided to take a “training trip” out in the wilderness for the next few days; said he’s been developing some new sword techniques and needed the open space to practice them.

It had meant more work for the rest of them, of course. Indeed, the staff didn’t close shop until quarter past midnight. Tifa felt sorry for her two exhausted employees; after finishing, they had to trek all the way home by

train. She, on the other hand, thanked God she lived right above her own restaurant.

She'd already checked on Aeris upstairs. She was glad to discover her sound asleep. The other night she'd caught her sitting up in bed, forlorn, staring through the window at the Midgar skyline. Lately, Tifa had noticed the girl sinking deeper and deeper into a swamp of sadness. She smiled and talked all the same, ate her food, took her medications and followed the doctor's instructions. To be sure, Dr. Moira had been quite pleased with her progress on their last check-up. But this aura of grief remained wound tight around Aeris. She still had not told them what exactly happened that night in the Reactor. But then, female intuition assured Tifa that wasn't what preoccupied Aeris. Nevertheless, she had to respect the girl's privacy and give her space.

Meanwhile, back in the kitchen, Tifa still had the laundry to do before retiring to bed. She'd just finished loading the clothes into the washing machine when, much to her bewilderment, there came a soft knock at the front door.

The woman checked her watch: twenty past one. She couldn't even begin to imagine who'd come calling at this ungodly hour as she trotted down the hall. Tifa first opened the door to a crack. She found a grim shadow waiting outside, his shoulders speckled in snow and ruby-red eyes peering over his scarf down at her.

Tifa gave an involuntary start at the sight of Vincent. It was the first time she'd seen him since his disappearance one month ago, when he'd entrusted the badly wounded Aeris to their care. She swung the door wide open, yet remained fixed at the threshold a moment longer, horrified to behold this wretch standing in front of her. In fact, Tifa thought he looked worse than before, like this exile had eroded him to his very limits. She couldn't even muster a simple greeting.

Vincent, well aware of his haggard countenance and more of his friend's concerned expression, nevertheless waited at the doorstep with eyes glowing gentle meaning. He did not speak. No need; at that moment, Tifa understood what he'd come for.

The woman stepped aside to let him enter. "She... she's upstairs," Tifa murmured.

He knew. He'd braved the cold and darkness every night for the past weeks just to catch a glimpse of her at her window. He knew exactly where to find her. Vincent walked past Tifa without a word. He trudged straight through the hall, then climbed up the narrow staircase. Tifa followed him to the foot of the stairs but no further. She anxiously watched the visitor ascend higher until he'd disappeared into the gloom of the loft above.

Tifa lingered at the bottom of the staircase a minute longer. Still she knew despite her own perturbations and worries, this was something only Aeris and Vincent could solve. The best she could do, Tifa decided, was leave them alone.

Vincent's feet tread heavily as though they carried the entire weight of his troubles up the stairs. He reached the square landing at the top, where the sole door stood on his left. Vincent stopped squarely before it. He was here. Finally after 31 days of wandering, he'd brought himself here.

"You afraid of letting Aeris love you?" the question cut through him, "Or are you afraid of what you'll find inside yourself if you look beyond Lucrecia, the past, confusion, uncertainty and everything else?"

Vincent remembered Davoren asking him that, but shook it off, still rattled by its accuracy. He reached for the knob, and opened the door to a crack. He listened a minute for any movement or noise. Nothing. Only silence seeped out. Vincent pushed the door just enough to let him slip inside, then carefully closed the door behind

him.

It took his vision a mere blink to adjust to the darkness of the room. By then, Vincent had already found his target. Aeris rested in a large bed, warm and secure under the heavy blankets. He could tell though from her breathing how deeply she slept, completely oblivious of his visit. For now, Vincent wanted to keep it that way. He unwrapped his scarf and discarded it over the hanger by the door, after which he approached the edge of the bed without a sound. There he gingerly sat down and, eyes gleaming fervent crimson, beheld the slumbering girl.

For him to see her again, to be this close to her after a month of separation, it clutched his very breath. Vincent's gaze devoured Aeris in silence: the curvature of her body beneath the blankets, the waves of brown hair tumbling over her shoulders, her smooth pale skin, right down to her eyelashes. No detail escaped him. Vincent found her beauty devastating, more so when he compared it to the wounded girl he'd held between his arms back there in the Reactor; a wreck heaving raw pain, dripping blood, fading... fading away- the sheer memory of it suffocated him!

She is safe, he tried to allay his frayed mind, she is safe and alive. She is safe and alive.

He must have repeated this sentence a thousand times in his head. Still, Vincent couldn't dispel the terrible image of her dying. Even now, the tormented man couldn't bring himself to fully trust that Death would not try to steal her away from him again. Vincent found himself struggling against a strong urge to touch her. He wanted to assure himself of her safety, of her presence and the life which had been restored to her. He managed to restrain that desire however. He didn't want to disturb her. Besides, he wasn't too sure what he'd tell her were she to awaken.

Where would he start? How would it end? How could he even-

But Vincent suddenly wrenched his eyes off Aeris, if only to escape those same questions before they surrounded him again. His gaze wandered towards the window instead. The curtains had been left slightly open, just enough to admit a thin sliver of light into the bedroom. Through the gap, Vincent watched the snow pouring heavy and fast outside. It amazed him to realize how far he'd traveled- from the park to this house- in such weather. In fact, he'd hardly noticed. All he could think of during his journey was reaching here, and upon reaching here to see Aeris, and upon seeing Aeris to...

He faltered: to what?

The minutes dragged by. His mind, like the snow outside, just kept falling, spinning into the gloom. A relentless flow of black thoughts and white flakes. Vincent hung utterly lost between the two until he felt the girl give a gentle shudder, as though his morbid aura had chilled her sleeping conscience awake. Reacting with a calmness that surprised even himself, Vincent looked around towards Aeris again. The latter opened her eyes halfway. She whirled her sight around the dark bedroom, only to find this phantom seated at the end of the bed, his keen gaze riveted on her alone.

For a moment, the two remained locked in absolute silence. Aeris, who'd now propped herself up on one elbow, stared wide-eyed at Vincent through stray hair strands. She lay there frozen, like she feared he was merely a mirage that would evaporate were she to flinch.

"Aeris..." Vincent began softly, unsure what to tell her.

It didn't matter. The instant he'd uttered her name, a desperate impulse jolted Aeris upright. She embraced Vincent, who before realizing it, had also acted on instinct and yanked her in to clasp her against his anxious heart. He held her safe inside his coat, pressed dear to him, whereby he buried his face into her neck and just

stayed there.

“Ah, God,” he heard Aeris whisper tremulously, “You... you’re really here...”

His grasp tightened around her to prove that yes, he was.

Aeris ran her trembling hands over his shoulders and chest, yet still she struggled to believe it. He was here. Right here, where she could feel him.

“When I woke up, I was in the hospital,” she stumbled in her haste to recount everything, “Tifa and Cloud were there. T-they told me you’d disappeared but didn’t know where. I got so worried. I... e-everyday I...”

All in one breath, she wanted to tell him how everyday he’d occupied her entire mind; how the aching to see him had worsened; how she’d loitered by the window searching for him; how she sometimes left the curtains slightly open at night to watch the sky, always wondering to herself where he was; how much she’d-

“Sshh. It’s okay, Aeris,” Vincent soothed her, “I’m fine.”

He heard a muffled sob escape her bosom. Ashamed, Vincent bent further to murmur a humble, “I’m sorry.”

Despite her comfort at his words and Vincent’s quiet joy of holding her after an eternity of exile, the turmoil within their minds persisted. Indeed, the memory of the last time they’d seen each other hung around them like some disease, vivid and cruel. For a minute, they were transported to the Reactor, back to that tumultuous hall where she’d lay dying. Vincent drew Aeris closer upon recalling that awful moment, when he’d realized there was nothing he could do or give to save her. Only watch, soaked in her blood, as she drifted further and further away from him. Watch and cry.

The memory passed however, and the two found themselves back in the tranquility of the bedroom. Vincent continued to run his fingers down Aeris’ long hair until she’d composed herself again.

“Tell me,” he asked at length, “how have you been?”

Aeris pulled out of his embrace to sit up in front of him. Wiping the last of her tears, she peeked up at him to meet his warm, crimson eyes. In return, she smiled.

The girl had plenty to tell him. Aeris began to recount events of the past month, becoming more animated as she went on. Vincent felt content to simply loiter at the edge of her bed and listen. Aeris told him how well her treatment with Dr. Moira was going. All thanks to Tifa’s diligence. She was wonderful to her, assured Aeris, though such a tyrant when it came to her medications and rest. Cloud took good care of her too, entertaining her with his endless anecdotes. He’d already showed her his entire weapon collection and artifacts from his many travels. Some days ago he’d even wanted to take her for a quick spin on his motorbike but of course, Tifa wouldn’t allow it.

Instead, she’d insisted Aeris stay indoors. Tifa fussed over her too much, Aeris confessed. She didn’t mind staying house-bound, though. There was plenty to do. She especially liked her bedroom. It offered a pleasant view of the courtyard behind the house. But what Aeris still wished to was visit the restaurant downstairs. Tifa was such a fantastic cook and business was finally booming.

“Oh, and guess what?” Aeris lightly clapped her hands together in delight, “Tifa even said that maybe she’ll hire me as a waitress in her restaurant. I mean, after I get better, of course. She says she could use the extra help.”

Vincent nodded.

"It'll be great. I can finally start making a little bit of money for myself. Plus she 'n Cloud will be there with me. And anyway, I'd like to work. Y'know, to just..."

Aeris trailed off into a long silence, becoming pensive at her own words: yes, to not have to always fear the shadows, wondering which one would grab her and drag her back to that nightmare named "Genesis Retrial". She could finally look forward and just have a normal life for a change. Before, Aeris wouldn't have even dared dream it. Now the reality dangled right before her- she was alive, unafraid, and best of all, she was free.

Yet despite her excitement, a shade of quiet wistfulness still overcast Aeris' face. "It's funny, isn't it?" she said at last.

Vincent regarded her quizzically.

"I try to make some kind of plan for the future, but I... my heart and mind... they keep looking in the past. I keep going back to that night in the Reactor."

Vincent didn't answer. From his solemn expression though, Aeris could tell he understood only too well what she meant.

"Davoren... he's left hasn't he?" she inquired softly.

"Yes."

"He... back in the Reactor, when everything was crashing down, it was him who saved us and-"

"I know."

"And... and the Professor...?"

"He's gone too."

Aeris mused upon this news. The memory of his brutal battle against Holocaust Hojo flashed across her mind, causing the very walls of her psyche to shudder in its wake.

"So," she breathed it off, "In the end, you defeated the Professor."

To which Vincent stated, "No, I didn't defeat him. You did."

Aeris looked up at him, rather surprised, only to find his gaze aglimmer with reverent meaning. The girl gave a small smile to accept the credit. She had never battled Professor Hojo like the others. On the contrary, she'd spent the whole night, much like her life, cowering from him. It was only one moment, as she'd watched Vincent persisting despite illness and injury, her supplications and Hojo's power, to hold his faith in her- only that moment whereupon she'd stood up to confront the demented Professor by herself. She'd never thought of her action as a defeat for Hojo; more like her emancipation from him. Though she reckoned in a way, the first meant the second and vice versa.

Silence soon descended upon the air. It hung thickest around them, Aeris with her eyes cast down in her lap, and Vincent, who'd returned to staring out the window, lost in thought again. Minutes passed. Neither spoke. Both sensed themselves standing together at the very brink of a black river. Where it lead neither could fathom, but they both had to accept that despite their dithering and consternation, this was the only route. All it

took was one question to push them in.

Aeris knew that question. She'd been yearning to ask him since the day she woke up in hospital. She could see Vincent patiently waiting for her to say it. Still, she wavered, torn between her desires and insecurities until the conflict strained her brows.

"Vincent?" she forced out very, very softly.

Aeris' voice tugged at him, but the man did not yield.

"Why have you stayed away from me for so long?"

Vincent remained mute for quite some time. He languished amidst the shadows, almost indistinguishable save the weak moonlight which betrayed his form just enough for Aeris to behold. Even then however, he couldn't evade her anymore. He didn't look at her. Yet still, Vincent could see Aeris as she sat there in her loose satin nightgown, with the dim outside light cast across one half of her face. He felt her gaze riveted upon him. Its green shimmer implored him to answer this one question.

All the while, Vincent struggled with an intense vortex rising up his chest. He wanted to answer. He wanted to tell her, but what exactly did he want to say so badly? If he spoke, would it be another deception or the final truth? Which of these emotions came from the core of his heart, and which came from the thick layers of doubt, despondency and damnation encased around it?

"I... I can't bear to stay home anymore," Vincent confessed through this mental clamor, his voice not above a weary hush, "The silence there... just chokes me. It's empty and dark. And every corner I turn, I find you: the living room, where we once sat and drank some herbal tea you made. That book you borrowed from my library, and actually thought I'd be angry because you'd taken it without my permission. It's still there. I can't bring myself to touch it. So I go to the hall, but I see the spot where I attacked you when I was delirious. I even find you in..." Vincent wavered, then added almost inaudibly, "...in my bed, where you used to sleep."

A mild heat flushed Aeris' cheeks, but she remained quiet.

Indeed, Vincent remembered trying to sleep in his bed only once. He supposed, being so awash with agony, he'd wanted to delude himself into thinking he could return to his former life. Go on with things like they were before she came. Maybe then he wouldn't have to confront these changes and feelings tearing him apart. However, Vincent had soon discovered his bed to be the most unbearable place for him. It was there, as he'd lain flat upon his back wide awake, where he'd realized he could still smell her scent. The sheets, the blanket, the pillows- Aeris' scent was everywhere. It had inflamed his mind so acutely that he'd torn himself away within minutes. He never slept there again.

"Since I couldn't bear to stay inside, I would walk around the city instead," Vincent continued, "I'd wander from morning well into the night. But I still couldn't escape you, Aeris. No matter how much I walked or how far I reached, I was always thinking about you."

He could feel his own words carving him open inch by inch for the turmoil within to leak out, "It was..." he confessed, "It was as though I was running to and away from you at the same time. My mind, Aeris, was constantly being hammered with uncertainty, and worse.... Fear. Fear of coming to you. Fear of looking at you, or speaking to you, touching you or even thinking about you because ultimately I... I was afraid of where it might lead me. I'd spent so many years on one path. I believed this was the only path for me, the only path before me and the only one I deserved. But then, with you, it..."

He wondered if she understood any of this. Vincent wasn't too sure he understood it himself. What was he

trying to tell her? For a moment, he loitered in miserable silence.

“Today however, I was passing by the Reactor, and I happened to find Davoren there,” he resumed, “we talked for a while. He said I should block all those thoughts and fears out for one minute, and ask myself: what do I want? He said the very first answer I got would be the right one.”

Aeris regarded him closely.

“Tonight, I went back to “Snow Fields” Park. Maybe it is like you said: one tries to make plans for the future, but the heart and mind keeps looking in the past. I don’t know why,” fumbled Vincent, “but I was certain I would somehow find the answer in those fields. So I went there, and stood in the exact same spot where we once sat. I stayed like that until at last... I managed to asked myself that question.”

Her throat constrained with uncertainty, “And,” she finally whispered, “what was the answer?”

Vincent did not reply. Instead he raised his eyes to imprison her dead-on. He thought it surreal how the snow kept falling outside, the world kept turning unawares, yet inside this room everything remained tranquil and isolated. It was just the two of them and silence in between, the space getting smaller as he deliberately leaned towards her. He raised one hand to caress her cheek- God, she felt so soft and warm. For a moment, Vincent held her thus in limbo, just studying her face up-close, absorbing every detail while she waited, rigid with anticipation but always watching him.

His lips found hers easily in the darkness. A shudder of pleasure rippled through Aeris at the contact, first a gentle press, then pushing deeper as he felt her tension melt and hunger rise. Aeris only let him withdraw his mouth away from hers a moment, just enough for her to breathe, before both arms encircled his neck and pulled him to her again. Vincent glued himself against her; his real hand roamed her body. His claw clamped around her to keep her close.

They retreated further and further into bed, all the while feeding off each others passions. Vincent could taste fresh tears on her cheeks. She was weeping. But even then, Aeris would not extract herself from him. On the contrary, she’d already unbuttoned his shirt halfway to seek the muscles underneath. Vincent had long since slipped off his coat. He began to unlace her nightgown, his lips moving from her mouth to her throat to her collar bone as he exposed more flesh.

In return, Aeris buried her face against his neck, if only to restrain herself from sobbing aloud. Still, the outflow of tears wouldn’t stop. Yet at the same time, she didn’t want to release him. Thus torn, Aeris remained shivering against Vincent’s body. The latter, who by now had realized that something was wrong, trailed to an uneasy halt. He let her linger there a minute.

“Aeris...?” Vincent began, but stopped as she wrenched herself away from him.

Aeris sat squarely in front of him. She wiped her tears, trying her best to compose herself while avoiding his eyes. Nevertheless, she couldn’t conceal from him the anguish strained across her face.

At first, Vincent thought he’d hurt her- perhaps in the heat of things, he’d embraced her too hard or touched an injury that had not yet healed. The longer her silence stretched however, the more Vincent feared he’d misinterpreted something and botched up the whole matter. Maybe it would have been better if he’d stayed away. It certainly wrangled him to see he’d upset her.

“Do you... want me to leave?” he asked Aeris earnestly. Whatever her answer, he would comply.

“No,” she whispered, clutching his sleeve. She’d languished for what felt like forever yearning to see him again, and tonight he’d finally come here. She could not endure another eternity knowing he’d disappeared

again and she'd let him.

Aeris beheld Vincent, who remained in place, waiting for her to speak, "Y-you say...", she quivered, "...you say you're 'uncertain' whenever you think about me. Is it because you're also thinking about... Lucrecia?"

This time, it was Vincent who broke away from her gaze, visibly stung by that name.

"Look at me. No please, look," Aeris begged in desperation.

Vincent obeyed. He forced his turbulent red eyes to return to Aeris. The solemn man found her struggling to keep her distress in check. She regarded him all the same however, him and the ghost of Lucrecia who still loitered behind him.

"You say you're afraid of being with me," Aeris asserted, "You're afraid of the uncertainty and start doubting and questioning everything inside of you. But I'm telling you," she pleaded, placing one hand upon her heart, "There is no uncertainty about how much I love you or the amount of faith I have in you. I don't know, me being a... a clone and all, and after the experiments Professor Hojo did on me... I don't know if I'll still live out a normal life or what's going to happen to me later. But I do know that I want to go back to you, and spend whatever time I have left with you."

The man absorbed her confession word by word, but said nothing.

"It's just, Vincent... I don't want you to return my love with the feelings you have for Lucrecia. And I don't want to be a replacement for her either," Aeris wrestled her agony a moment before declaring gently but passionately, "I want those feelings, your eyes and your heart for myself. I want it to be *me*. So if it's.... if it's Lucrecia you saw as the answer, if it's really her you came for, her you're seeing, her you're wanting and not me, t-then..."

She wanted to say 'then please stop because to go on would just be too painful for me'. Instead though, the girl fell quiet, flushed with bitter melancholia. She found she no longer resented Lucrecia. Why hate some poor, dead woman? No, the weary Aeris now simply wished this rivalry between them would end. She had opened herself wide and laid it all bare before this man. Looking at Vincent, she realized how sorely she loved him, with rabid want constantly rolling inside her. Yet Aeris fought to subdue the former and hide the latter from him. She'd decided she'd rather let him go than have him without truly having him.

Vincent remained mute for a very, very long time, gripped both by the candor of Aeris' words and the intensity of her emotions. He knew what she was asking of him: the whole truth, no matter what. She was right. All she had said was right. Paradoxically though, the more he brooded upon her words, the more keenly swelled his feeling that Aeris was also wrong. Or not wrong per se, more like...

Vincent couldn't explain it that well. It just felt like what she'd said encompassed only a small fraction of a much larger truth; a truth that he'd come bit by bit to discover over the course of this day: from the Reactor grounds where he'd spoken to Davoren, to his conversation with the tormented Rufus, to the snow fields, and finally to Aeris, who now sat in front of him, her watery green eyes fixed upon him.

There was more, Vincent realized. A lot more to be said. A lot more he was holding back from her, and worse, from himself. They couldn't dawdle in darkness any longer. He felt Aeris deserved to hear this final truth as much as he felt determined to at last seize it. This shapeless shadow lurking about his heart- this was what he'd been fearing. For all the time he'd avoided it, Vincent now delved in to capture it. He wanted to pull the whole truth out into the space between them for both her and himself to see.

He didn't know where to start however or even what exactly he would say. His thoughts and feelings, secrets and struggles, spun like shreds of fabric. One brushed by his conscience. Vincent instantly grabbed it, only to

find he held an old piece of cloth, 31 years old in fact, still perfectly preserved, for he'd guarded this memory very well right down to its minutest detail.

As his mind caressed it, filled with longing and joy, tortured by sorrow and agony, Vincent heard himself gently weave the words together "For 31 years, I have blamed myself for Lucrecia's suffering. I loved her, Aeris. Nothing happened between us, not in that sense, But all the same, I loved that woman deeply, desperately.

His gaze wandered to the window, "but Lucrecia had already decided on her path... a path she could not turn away from even later when she came to regret it. She was in front of me the entire time. She was crying, frightened, hurting, alone. And me, I was too cowardly and pathetic to go save her or even comfort her."

Vincent's tone dropped to a bitter hiss, "Instead, I pretended I could not see her misery; that it was somehow best to just let matters slide in this direction. I simply watched Lucrecia drift farther and farther down the path towards the darkness until at last it poisoned her body and killed her. Only then did I realize what an awful crime I'd committed against her: I loved her but I'd failed that same love and abandoned her. Not protecting her, standing by while she slipped away from me... that has always been the biggest regret of my life."

Aeris listened despite the pain in her bosom. It was the first time she'd heard him speak this openly about Lucrecia.

"Without her, all I had left were guilt and self-hate. That, and constant yearning: yearning for her, for her forgiveness and for release from this Hell, even though I knew I could never have any of those three. Years passed. Then one night," Vincent announced, "you crashed into me."

With this, the man's eyes flick back to Aeris, "I could understand you better than anyone else. I knew what it's like being chained to a nightmare. That was the very first reason I felt such a strong urge to take you in: to protect you from that life. But diving deeper," confided Vincent, "I found the more selfish reason was that I also saw you as a way of amending my past. I pretended what I did today could somehow rectify yesterday, and in the process, I made you Lucrecia's replacement."

Aeris tensed. It stung her to hear such a candid statement. But Vincent offered no apologies for his honesty, just like he offered no excuses for his selfishness. The girl glanced away from him a moment. In truth, a terrible sense of dread tumbled within her. Still, Aeris could feel his gaze drilling into her. She realized he was waiting for her to ask out loud what she was already asking inside.

"And..." she ventured at last, "And what about... now?"

The man pondered what his answer would be. He regarded her, all the while recalling the many times he'd pushed her into Lucrecia's shadow, and the many more times he'd reached through her out to his past- to his crimes, his beloved, everything. But now with Aeris sitting before him, with so much behind him, with Lucrecia's aura still about him, now it...

"Now it's time I admitted to myself that I can neither escape or change the past. It will always be there. As for Lucrecia, I... I can never love anyone the way I loved that woman. Lucrecia will always own a part of my heart that no one else can ever touch, not even you, Aeris," Vincent pressed on solemnly, "It is wrong of me to pretend you can replace her. She is simply irreplaceable to me."

A heavy silence flooded the vacuum his confession had created. For her part, Aeris struggled to keep herself afloat. She'd listened to Vincent's every word. She saw how ashamed the man felt to think he could ever find a substitute for Lucrecia. A jewel was a jewel, she mused, and cannot be replaced by even the most delicately crafted glass. Yet neither the softness of Vincent's tone nor the finality of her realization blunted the anguish inside her.

An intense pressure built up behind her eyes. AERIS squeezed her tears back and dropped her vision to her lap, trembling with pain.

Likewise, the demure man had cast his eyes to the ground, boiling in his own pensive stew. AERIS was actually glad he'd looked away; she didn't want him to see her acting so pathetically. In retrospect, AERIS admitted she'd always known what Vincent would say. She'd hoped she would be wrong, though. That maybe Lucrecia would yield just an inch of her property for her to build herself a small home inside him. Now however, AERIS had to concede to her. She could never build anything upon a land that once, still and always would belong to someone else.

"I... I understand..." AERIS whimpered at length. She really did. Still, this anguish inside her just kept-

"However, that wasn't the answer I got when I stood at the snow fields," interrupted Vincent suddenly, his voice still low and calm, yet gaining an ardent edge which rather startled AERIS.

"The truth is, I stood at those fields for a long time until I finally asked myself 'what do I want?'. But there was no answer," he breathed, "There was only you."

The girl, eyes wide open, remained absolutely silent.

"These past 31 years, I have felt nothing but pain," Vincent recounted, that last word visibly turning within him, alive and vivid, "the pain of loving Lucrecia and losing her, of blaming myself and thinking myself a monster. So much despair and hatred and violence. That was my past. It was like a war."

"With you, however," Vincent contrasted, "There was finally peace. Peace after 31 years of total war. You gave me your kindness and faith when I felt I deserved neither. You refused to call me a monster. You protected me when I could find nothing inside worth such effort. You absolved me of my sins when they had completely consumed me. But most importantly, AERIS, you dug out my soul from beneath the snow."

AERIS, in response, edged closer to him. He didn't want any comfort, though. He wanted her to listen. Just listen and watch him tear down the wall between them stone by stone until they could behold each other in full view.

"You once told me that the old Vincent was dead; I'd killed him. Loving Lucrecia planted a seed inside of me. The pain of losing her, of seeking redemption, that made the seed grow into a soul. If that's true, then you're the one who pulled it out and embraced it till it was warm."

No, that wasn't all. There was more. Vincent hesitated for a painful moment, then asked the mute girl, "After Hojo injured you... do you remember the last thing you said to me before losing consciousness?"

He needn't look at her to know she did. Nevertheless, Vincent revealed in a bitter whisper, "You said you'd give up your own life for me to have Lucrecia in my arms instead of you."

He knit his brows at the repetition of her wish. Inside, Vincent felt the same stab of emotion he'd felt the first time she'd uttered it. Back then, he couldn't comprehend what it meant or even what this emotion was. Now he did. Indeed, Vincent gathered himself up, now turning to face AERIS, eyes glowing crimson intensity, "I got no answer at the snow fields," he confessed plainly, "All I realized was that while I'll never love anyone quite the way I loved Lucrecia and she'll always be part of my past, she... it's not her I want for my present or future. It's *you*."

The word 'you' clutched AERIS by the core. Its grip tightened as Vincent leaned closer to her, so close she could see herself- *her* and no one else- reflected in those eyes, "I don't want Lucrecia in exchange for you, not when you're this important to me," he muttered with hard resolve, "And you have to know that, just like

Lucrecia, you own a part of my heart that no one, not even her, can take. But if anything else, Aeris, you have to know that I never loved her the same way I love you *you* right now.”

The girl remained transfixed by the paradox of his gaze: fierce, piercing but also earnest and burning tenderness. All of it directly upon her. Small tears began trickling down her face. She didn't even notice until she felt Vincent's hand wipe one cheek, whereupon he began to falter, "I may... I may not be able to change my past. But with you, there's not just peace. There's also reconciliation with that past. And when Hojo tore through you, I... the fear of losing you, the anger and pain of having failed you, that..."

Through his touch, Aeris sensed that vile memory coil around Vincent like a vicious serpent: those claws unsheathed, her blood splattered, his anguish intolerable. Instantly, Aeris clasped his hand as he held it against her cheek. The beleaguered man watched fold his hand between both of hers and press it dear to her heart. He saw the girl tearfully smile at him. In the silence, she soothed him, proving to him that that awful memory didn't matter: here was her heart. It was still beating, and every beat belonged to him.

In return, she beheld through his eyes an endless land of love and yearning. It wasn't Lucrecia's kingdom through which Aeris had often wandered, admiring its splendor yet knowing not one inch of it would ever be hers. This land was new, born on the moment she'd crashed into him, expanding, rising, growing until tonight, where he now let her view it at its most magnificent.

No one had ever tread here before her. No one was permitted to enter except her: Aeris. But best of all, it belonged to her. Beautiful, warm, safe, vast, complete- this land, this home, and everything inside of him were hers.

With only a small distance between them, both moved in to close the gap. Vincent reached her first. His mouth ravenously fell upon hers. By instinct, Aeris clung to him. As their hunger intensified, the two withdrew farther across the bed. Vincent somehow managed to kick off his boots and discard his coat. He felt Aeris unbutton the remainder of his shirt, only to slide her hands over his exposed chest, all the while kissing him, from his lips to alongside his jaw line to his neck and back to his lips again.

The thrill of it pushed him even closer against her. They tipped over and landed together on the bed, with Aeris pinned flat upon her back, and Vincent crawling under the heavy covers to join her. He settled on top of Aeris, who welcomed him whole into her folds. There the scent of her body, just as he remembered it, rose up to fill his nostrils like some wonderful drug. The intoxicated Vincent jealously nestled his metallic claw against her flank to keep her. All for himself. He refused to share her, even with the darkness around them.

For a minute, Vincent hovered over Aeris while she lay sprawled beneath him. He simply wanted to look at her – this girl, his salvation from Hell, his reconciliation with his past, his respite after years of strife, his strength and his purpose- all of that contained between his arms.

Aeris raised her hands up to untie his bandanna. He watched her remove the red strip, whereupon his long, black hair draped around her like a curtain. She cupped his face, then guided him down to her mouth once more. She kissed him deeply: her courage, her warmth and hope, her security and shelter, right here. He was right here.

By now, Vincent had already unlaced her nightgown in full. He peeled it off her right shoulder, where the white skin awaited beneath. He remembered the horror of witnessing Hojo's talons tear across her flesh. He could find no hint of the wound now, not even the faintest scar. Yet the man leaned down to kiss it as though he could still see it. He heard Aeris weakly moan something into his ear. It sounded like his name.

Very, very gently, Vincent began to trace this invisible injury with his lips, pulling away more and more of her gown as it coursed across her torso.

The entanglement of their limbs underneath the bed sheets.

The pressing of his soul against hers.

Their breathing intertwined.

Their heat moving within each other.

It all flooded Aeri's mind like sweet water as she stirred awake. In the darkness, she found herself flat on her stomach. Vincent lay almost completely over her, molded against her backside with his face buried along her neck, softly breathing in and out. Aeri did not move. Instead, the girl savored this blissful state of paralysis. Her exhausted body still tingled with pleasure, from her face, her arms and trunk down to her legs, every inch over which he'd wandered, claiming it for himself.

She wondered what time it was. Still pitch black, from what she could see through the window. Aeri instinctively drew deeper under the covers, if only to wallow in this cocoon of warmth and safety, protected from the darkness outside. She reckoned after such a long, voracious feast, her and Vincent, both spent to breathlessness and delirious, had sunk into wonderful unconsciousness. Aeri wasn't sure how long she'd been out, though; probably several minutes.

She remained motionless for many more minutes. Her senses relished the silence around them, and the feel of his naked body against hers even more. Loitering thus, Aeri became aware of Vincent's arm as it lay across her, holding her secure in place with his claw mere inches away from her face. Aeri gazed long at that metallic sentry. She noticed she didn't fear it anymore. In fact, the girl daintily ran her fingertips along its surface, over the forearm, the knuckle ridges and down the finger-blades.

He'd been quite careful, she recalled. At first, Vincent had refrained from letting his claw directly touch her. She saw he was genuinely anxious not to frighten her, knowing how much it unnerved her. To be sure, Aeri could remember the first time that claw touched her, or rather clamped over her mouth. The terror had petrified her to stone. Even afterwards, she could never become quite comfortable around it.

To reminisce about that now however merely amused Aeri. All of him was dear to her, claw included. Indeed, she remembered the heedful Vincent drawing up a bed sheet between her supple waist and his claw before holding her down. But she had immediately pulled away this cloth barrier and instead pressed his claw against her side; right here, where metal caressed bare flesh.

The move had surprised him a little. Yet upon beholding the resolve in her face, a warm tenderness had risen within Vincent as he understood what she was silently telling him: she knew he couldn't feel her skin. That didn't matter. She'd just wanted to prove she wasn't afraid.

In response, he'd wrapped both arm and claw around her and greedily pulled her whole to himself. That moment, a boundless sense of safety had overwhelmed Aeri. It was like that night so long ago, when he'd drawn her into his bed and embraced her away from the demons tormenting her. She remembered back then how she'd wished from the depths of her soul that this feeling would last. She remembered weeping because she'd known it would not. To suddenly find this lost sense of security again, to become sheltered once more... it still roused a small smile to her lips.

Aeri wafted amidst this reverie like a tiny sailboat down a stream until her eyelids grew heavy with sleep. Just then, Vincent snuggled closer against her, whereupon she felt his tongue teasingly slide alongside her neck.

"Ah! That tickles!!" Aeri giggled in surprise. She heard him chuckle softly behind her. All this time she believed

he'd been sound asleep, the man had actually been awake, enjoying the tranquility as much as her.

Aeris shifted beneath him. Vincent let her roll onto her back once more, after which he rested his head just above her bosom and closed his eyes. The two loitered in total silence for quite a long time. Aeris, solemn again, gazed meditatively upon Vincent as her slender fingers ran fondly through his hair.

"Vincent?" she called at length.

"Hm," he mumbled.

"When I've completely healed, will you take me to visit the snow fields again?"

The question rather took Vincent aback. Intrigued by its meaning, he raised his head, only to find the girl serenely awaiting an answer. He nodded in consent.

Joy swelled within Aeris at his response, "By then, it should be springtime," she cooed, "the snow would have melted and the fields will be completely covered with flowers... all of them in full bloom."

Vincent stopped. He felt her words caress his core as kindly as her hand now touched his face. He remembered he'd once told her how the barren fields of snow changed to a vast heaven of flowers come spring. Aeris wanted to return there. She wanted to behold the true beauty of those fields after warmth has defeated cold and life, hitherto buried, stirred under the frozen soil.

The same way she now beheld the fields of his heart, reflected in her green eyes for him to see as well. Vincent gazed long upon this girl, mystified by her prophetic aura just like before, when she'd whispered to him the secret 'I know what's beneath the snow fields'.

He leaned down at last to kiss her. He pressed deep, not leaving her lips until several moments later.

"I love you," he breathed into her.

Aeris smiled, "I love you," she echoed.

"It's almost dawn," he whispered, "Go to sleep now."

Vincent slid off to settle next to her. Aeris, who could already feel the allure of slumber beckoning her, shifted towards him as he enveloped her in both arms. She buried her weary head against his chest, this wonderful, warm wall of muscle. There, she listened to his heart beating on the other side.

Minutes passed. Just the two of them lay like this, absolutely silent and still. Soon, Aeris drifted off to sleep.

Vincent remained awake for some time afterwards. He stared across the room at the window. The snow was still falling outside. But it was inside this room, as he held Aeris, that Vincent finally acknowledged what it was he'd been fearing the most: happiness.

All this time, he'd been afraid to release his self-hatred and guilt, because he'd known it would mean facing Lucrecia again and he'd feared to find no forgiveness in her eyes, even after three decades of atonement. He'd been afraid of clearing the old ruins of his life and building anew. He'd been afraid to take Aeris faith. To believe her when she said he was forgiven. To receive her heart or let himself return her love.

All because to do that meant to achieve happiness and absolution, and neither was something he believed he

deserved.

That is until tonight, when he'd decided he would finally accept Aeris' faith in him whole, and let that guide him away from a past now at rest.... down a different path, towards some sort of reconciliation.

Vincent nestled against Aeris and closed his tired eyes. After 31 years of war, here at last – at last – he'd found his peace.

The End