

Who Am I

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A young traveler stumbles into the Shinra Mansion to escape the rain. What he finds within is a little more than surprising, and will lead him on a huge journey.

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1 - Oops, Sorry About That

The rain poured down over the dark streets of Nibelheim. Between the flashes of lightning, a single figure stumbled through the streets. Its steps were shakey, and once or twice they slid on the wet stone streets. It clambered past the houses, glancing every so often into the warm windows, seeing the smiling faces of comfortable, content families. The figure let out a sad sigh before jumping at the sound of the rolling thunder. As lightning flashed again, the figure saw a sanctuary. There, half buried behind tall weeds and vines stood a mansion, its windows dark. As the figure drew closer, the house seemed to grow and become imposing, its windows like eyes that were looking down at the weary wanderer with disgust. Ignoring the glaring windows, the figure rushed up to the doors and pushed them open. They creaked open loudly and the figure fell onto the hard floor. Quickly rising and shutting the door behind him, it called out.

“Hello?! Is anybody in here? Hello!?”

No answer came but the echo of his voice as it bounced off the solid walls. The place looked abandoned, though everything seemed to be in order, with only a small amount of dust on the banisters of the stairways before him, revealed only by the lightning that shown through the windows. He shivered as he peered into the darkness, trying to see his way. Hand outstretched, he stumbled until he found the banister for the staircase and followed it up, hoping to find a place to rest, and perhaps make a fire. His hand brushed against the wall at th top of the stair, and he followed it until he reached a doorway. Another flash of lightning gave a brief glimpse at the contents of the room: two beds, a bookshelf, a desk and a small wood stove. Trembling from fear and cold, he felt his way over to the stove. Opening the hatch, he felt some old, half burned logs judging by the smell. Not thinking of how they got there, the figure spoke a command word, “Fire.” Instantly, the logs started to burn, and they released a small bit of warmth into the lonely room.

Looking around, the traveler tumbled onto one of the beds, his body too exhausted to resist the call of sleep, despite the haunting felling that he was being watched.

Eric Constantine yawned as he sat up in bed. It had been a rough night, the storm making things difficult for him, but at least he was able to find shelter. His clothes were still damp, so he dug through his rucksack that had fallen on the floor for a change of clothes. Grabbing out a black t-shirt and black pants, he stepped over to a mirror that hung on the wall and looked at his reflection. It's not too bad, he thought to himself, though his long, brown hair had frizzed slightly, and his green eyes had small circles under them. Sleeping in a strange house was unnerving, though he woke up safe and sound, and it was slightly warmer then when he had fallen asleep last night.

A small flicker of movement in the mirror grabbed his attention, and he looked at the right edge of thhe glass to see a man staring back at him. Eric gasped and jerked around. How long has he been there? He thought to himself.

"Who are you?" Eric demanded, backing up against the vanity, so much so that he was almost sitting on it.

"I should ask you the same thing," the man asked. His deep, red eyes seemed to pierce Eric's, and it was all Eric could do to keep from looking away. "You are the stranger in this place, not I."

"I..I'm sorry," Eric apologized, "I needed a place to stay last night-"

"And wouldn't it have been better to just barge into the private home of another person?" the man interrupted.

"No, well, maybe," Eric stammered as the man's eyes narrowed slightly. The man stood at least a few inches taller than himself. Fine, raven black hair framed his pale face, and his mouth covered by the tall collar of his blood red cape, the ends of which were tattered and torn. On his left hand was a golden claw, whose wicked looking finger tips reflected the light of the sun. The sleeves of his black shirt went all the way to his hands, and on his right hand was a black glove. On his feet was a pair of metal shoes, whose color matched his claw. Belted on the right leg of his black pants, just above his knee, was a gun holster, partially hidden by his cape.

"Then maybe," the man said quietly, "You should leave."

"But, I don't have anywhere to go," Eric protested, "I'm alone in the world."

"That is not my problem," the man answered as he walked towards the door. His monotoned voice and empty face made it impossible for Eric to determine whether he was annoyed or not; still, he did not seem to enjoy having a guest.

"Could I at least get changed before you throw me out?"

"You may, but I want you to leave the moment you finish."

"Alright," Eric sighed, then watched as the man passed through the door and shut it behind him.

"Just who does he think he is?" Eric asked himself quietly as he changed, "I mean, does he think he's cool or something? Why, if he didn't have a gun I'd give him a good smack upside the head. You don't act so rudely to people in need."

Eric pulled on his shirt and shoes, then grabbed up his rucksack. As he opened the door and stepped into the now well-lit hallway, he glanced around for the stairway. Spotting it, he headed down the hallway, when a sudden voice made him jump.

"Before you judge me for being rude, perhaps you should look at your own manners."

Eric turned around, and there was the man, leaning easily against the wall of the hallway. "I'm sorry," Eric blushed as he realized the man had heard him.

“Try to not talk to yourself when others are around,” the man said, pushing off the wall and walking towards his unexpected guest, “They may think you are strange.”

“Look who's talking,” Eric mumbled.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Nothing.”

“Now that you're finished, I once again ask that you leave,” the man reiterated, still maintaining an unemotional tone.

“Aw, come on,” Eric pleaded, “I have no where to go, and I like it here.” Honestly, he didn't really like it here, because he found it rather creepy. But it was a warm place, and besides its quiet inhabitant, there didn't seem to be anyone else around.

“I repeat, that's not my problem,” the man replied.

“Please,” Eric asked, giving his most pathetic face and most pleading voice, “I'll do anything. I clean and cook, or not even leave my room. Please let me stay.”

“First, I must say that I find it amazing that you have claimed a room in my home as your own. Second, I do not require a housekeeper, and finally, I do not have the time nor the inclination to keep an eye on you.”

“You don't have to babysit me,” Eric replied, sounding injured, “I am sixteen years old.”

The man didn't say anything for a moment, and Eric smiled slightly, knowing his triumphant claiming of a room in the house was near.

“Very well,” the man nodded, “But, if you are going to stay here, there is something that you need to see; hopefully, it will change your mind and help remove you from this house.”

“Go ahead,” Eric answered, “Cause I'm not leaving, no matter what you show me.”

“Very well,” the man said, and started down the stairs to the front room. He turned to Eric with his plain face and looked at him. “I would ask now that you close your eyes.” Eric looked strangely at the man, but he seemed adamant, so Eric slowly closed his eyes. “I only ask this because I don't want you to know where what I am going to show you is.” Eric felt the man rest his hand on his shoulder, and lead him forward, then to the left, then right, then turned around, then forward. He heard a door click open, then felt himself being pushed forward through the door. Beyond the door, the air became less stuffy than the rest of the house, and it felt warmer. It also seemed to grow brighter, and his eyes flew open when he felt the man's hand let go, and heard the door close behind him.

He was standing outside of the mansion on the front step. The sound of a lock clicking on the door behind him made him jerk around.

"You creep!" Eric shouted as he pounded on the door, "What kinda dirty trick was that?!"

"The kind that gets rid of unwanted intruders," he heard from the other side of the door. Eric slammed his fist against the door once more for good measure, then sat down on the stair in a huff. "What a jerk," he mumbled. He adjusted his pack, then started towards the crooked gates of the mansion.

A noise over to the left caught his attention. Looking over his shoulder he saw nothing, but heard the sound again; a sort of raucous laughter. The sound didn't sound like something the man would make, so Eric followed the noise. It came from a window on the side of the manor that led into the basement, and when Eric peeked in the clouded glass, he saw a whisp of something sweep past the window. The laughter came again, and Eric couldn't let this pass. Someone else was in the house, one that didn't sound like it belonged. Eric had stop him; though the true reason for the action was that he was searching for a way into the house again.

As he slipped in through the window, he dropped into a large room, with books on the shelves all around. The corners of the room were empty, looking like something had been there, with circles of dust on the wooden boards.

The laughter came again, this time in the hall, and Eric ducked behind the doorway. Ahead of him was a long hall with a spiral stair at the end. A door was in the middle of the wall off to the left, but it was closed. Again, the sounder of laughter came from the hall, and Eric walked slowly towards the stairs. The materia that were on his belt, the materia he had carried with him through all of his trveling, glowed brightly in preparation, as if it knew that a fight was coming. Eric stepped closer to the stairs, but was unaware of the shadow that had dropped down from the ceiling behind him.

A swish behind him was his only warning, and he turned around to see the end of a large pendulum about to impale him. He dove against the rock wall, the blade missing him by mere inches. As the pendulum swung back, Eric saw that sitting on top of it was a man, or what appeared to be a man. It had dark skin and blonde hair. It wore no shirt, and a pair of tight, blue pants. On its deformed, ghostly face was a look of both disappointment and glee. It smiled wickedly as it swung the huge blade around towards Eric again, this time slicing his leg slightly.

Eric looked up and saw that the chain was not that long, and that thihs would be an easy victory as long as he cast magic from a safe distance.

Feeling the rushing energy of the materia, Eric spoke the words for the spell, then released it all with the command, "Thunder!"

A current of electricity shot from his extended hand towards the spirit, striking it solidly. The ghostly form seemed stunned for a moment, then slid off the pendulum and onto the ground.

Now's my chance, Eric grinned to himself, and ran forward, preparing to cast at close range. When he was but a foot away, the spirit jumped back onto the pendulum and swung forward, taking Eric completely by surprise. Without time to react, there was no chance of dodging it, and he watched in horror as the blade descended. It swept down, but before it reached him, a gunshot rang out. The chain holding the pendulum to the ceiling snapped apart cleanly, and the whole thing flew forward, still on a one-way course with the terrified Eric. Suddenly, a hand pushed the young man on his back just as the

metal blade spun over his head. It swirled towards the stairs, but was stopped by the narrow threshold of the doorway in front of the staircase, and it stuck in the wall, firmly inbedded by the force of it's trip.

The ghostly man had once again fallen off the blade, and this time laid helplessly on the floor. Eric, without giving a second thought, cast another spell.

"Fire!" The flames exploded underneath the spirit, and when they dissapated, the spirit had vanished, leaving only a small whisp of smoke where it had been lying.

Eric was breathing heavily as he turned around to see his rescuer standing behind him, although he wasn't too sure if he would have rather faced the pedulum again. Standing before him was the man from earlier, and he did not look pleased.

"I thought I had told you to leave," the man said, a small touch of annoyance in his voice.

"I thought you were in trouble," Eric lied, "I thought that ghost was going to kill you."

"I have lived in this mansion for many years, young man, and have faced its many perils time and again. Do you believe that I would have sucumbbed so easily to such a simple spirit?"

"Well if you had let me stay, I could have found out more about you, and I wouldn't have made that assumption," Eric replied, becoming just as annoyed.

The man didn't answer, but stood there, silently regarding Eric. "What is your name?" he asked quietly, his voice returning to the point of absolute monotone.

"Eric Constantine," Eric replied slowly.

"Very well then, Mr. Constantine," the man said, "If you wish to remain in this house, you are to never come down here again, understand?"

Eric smiled widely as he pieced together what the man had said. "Thank you so much," Eric said gratefully, "I promise, I won't be any trouble."

"Don't thank me too quickly," the man said, lifting his right hand, "This is only for tonight, and I expect you to begon by tomorrow morning." With that, the man turned on his heel, his cape swirling dramatically, and walked towards the stairs. Eric followed closely behind, a huge grin on his face.

"So, what's your name?" Eric asked quietly, still smiling widely.

"Vincent," the man said over his shoulder.

"What? No last name?"

The man stopped at the bottom of the stairs, but did not turn around. "It would be in your best interest, Mr. Constantine, to not expect answer for every question. I would also remind you that some questions are better left unasked, especially from one who is in such a precarious place as to lose your room for

the night.” Without another word, Vincent started up the stairs, with Eric once again trailing quietly. As the two climbed upward in silence, Eric became aware that he couldn't hear Vincent's footsteps, despite the metal boots he was wearing. He, however, heard every step of his own shoes echoing all the way up the brick cylinder that encased the stairway. He winced slightly with every step, and imagined that Vincent was probably thinking how ridiculous he was. Brushing away that thought, he decided to try to start a conversation.

“So, you're a pretty good shot with a gun,” he commented quietly. Vincent didn't turn around or respond, so he pushed a little further. “I mean, to be able to shoot a chain while its swinging like that is really good. I know how to pull a trigger and all that jazz, but I could never aim like that.”

“Years of practice have allowed for such aim,” Vincent answered, stopping once again, “Now, I will leave you to your own devices. All I ask is that you do not wander around the manor. Try to remain in the rooms. The hallways belong to the other denizens of this manor, as you have become acquainted with, and they do not like the living wandering within their domain.”

“So, what do you recommend?” Eric asked, looking around the room the had come into, expecting another spirit to appear out of thin air.

“There is a small conservatory and library next to the room you claimed last night,” Vincent replied, starting for the door. “You may remain in there, but I warn you again, do not leave that room, regardless of what you hear. I will fetch you when the time is right.” He stepped through the door, and Eric watched him disappear into the dark shadows of the manor's corridors. Eric tiptoed down the hall, towards his room, trying to mimic Vincent's steps and move as silent as he did. After several seconds and several sore toes, he gave up on the notion and rushed down to the conservatory, shutting the door behind him.

Looking around at the room, the first thing he noticed was the large window over-looking a dead patch of plants at the back of the mansion.

“Must have been a garden,” he said to himself as he looked at the dead patch of plants, “What a shame. Guess Vincent's not much of a gardener.” He sighed as he turned his attention to a small bookshelf standing in the corner. If there was one thing Eric loved, it was reading. He had spent a lot of time in books, usually fantasy novels simply because he found nothing interesting in factual books.

Settling down in front of the shelf, he scanned the bindings, picking out interesting sounding books. A stack sitting firmly beside him, Eric plopped down on a dusty arm chair and read through them. They weren't too terribly long, so he found it easy to read through them. As it grew later in the day, Eric became aware of a sound emanating from just outside the door. He rose to his feet slowly, picking up a heavy dictionary as a weapon. He stepped slowly up to the door, and leaned his head against it, pressing his ear against the old wood. The noise came closer, a clanking sound, like a piece of heavy metal being dropped sharply on the floor with a `clunk'. A dragging sound followed, and then another clunk, growing ever closer to the door. Eric tensed, holding the dictionary tightly in his left hand, reching slowly down towards the handle. Placing his hand on the handle, he began to turn it.

Suddenly, a gunshot erupted from behind the door, and Eric fell backwards in surprise. Three shots were fired, each one sounding like it was hitting a steel wall. After the echo of the bullets had quieted, the clunking didn't come again. Eric rose to his feet, trembling as the door nob turned. He scooped up

the dictionary and dove at the door, the heavy book raised for a downward swing. The door opened quickly, Eric closed his eyes and brought the dictionary down hard. It thudded against something, but Eric couldn't tell through his eyelids. A grunt followed the thud, and Eric brought the book around for another swing. Something stopped the strike, however, and Eric tried to jerk it free, opening his eyes in frustration.

When he saw Vincent glaring at him, a red mark on the side of his normally pale face. His red eyes were staring at Eric's, annoyance and irritation practically shooting from them like sparks, and Eric looked at the floor as he blushed.

"Hehe," he chuckled, completely embarrassed, "Sorry about that."

Vincent didn't respond, but firmly removed the dictionary from Eric's hand.

"In the future, Mr. Constantine," Vincent said, his voice trembling slightly. Eric could tell, he was doing his best to maintain his quiet, unemotional tone despite his annoyance, "I would suggest that your weapon of choice would do more damage to your opponent than irritation. Otherwise, you will find yourself in a very difficult situation, such as you are now."

"That bad, huh?" Eric asked sheepishly. "Look, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hit you with a dictionary. Still, you gotta admit that it was rather funny having the book thrown at you," Eric commented, trying to make the best out of the obviously bad situation. Vincent wasn't laughing.

"I also suggest that you do not try to cover your mistakes with comic relief. It usually causes nothing more than trouble for you. I knew of a person who made it a habit to do such a thing, and she constantly found herself in danger of being injured by her own friends for it. Therefore, I ask that you please avoid her fate and not try to be funny around me."

Vincent's eyes returned to their normal state, completely unemotional, completely unreadable. Eric sighed, relieved that Vincent hadn't thrown him out for the incident.

"At least I didn't leave the room," Eric offered.

"Perhaps you are capable of listening," Vincent said to himself, "Your second entrance into this place had given me little hope for such a thing."

"I listen very well," Eric defended, "At least when I'm willing to."

"A seemingly rampant symptom for those your age," Vincent commented quietly. "If you choose to, the kitchen is located below here. I have prepared a meal for you. You may take it back to your room if you wish."

"Well, can't I eat with you?"

"I have already eaten," Vincent answered, turning back to the hall.

"Aw, come on," Eric pleaded, "I have to eat by myself a lot. Can't I enjoy company just this once? I

promise to not hit you with anything.”

Vincent said nothing, but just looked at his uninvited guest. Eric placed his hand behind his back and tightened his hands into fists, bracing himself for the answer. Instead, Vincent answered simply, “Your meal is downstairs. I suggest you hurry down and eat before it grows cold.” Eric sighed heavily, dropping his head low and walking slowly out the door, hoping that the sad performance may have an effect on the man. But Vincent didn't react, and didn't follow, so Eric picked up the pace and walked down the stairs. Glancing around the darkening foyer, he saw a light on behind a closed door to his left. Walking quickly over to it, he peeked inside.

Within was a simple kitchen, large but plain, with what seemed to be only the bare necessities for making food. Eric stepped inside and saw sitting on one of the counters a bowl with steam rising from it. A slice of white bread lay beside it, and upon further examination of the bowl, Eric found that it was a stew. A few chunks of meat, some carrots and a potatoe floated around in a brown broth, with a strong smell radiating from it. Grabbing up the spoon in the bowl, Eric tasted it. It was slightly bitter, probably from the large amount of different spices he smelled, but it was better than his own cooking, so he didn't really mind. Grabbing up the piece of bread and sitting at an island counter on the other side of the kitchen, he dabbed the bread in the broth and ate his dinner glumly. The entire situation seemed depressing all of sudden. Perhaps it was Vincent's attitude, or the house or both, but for some reason, Eric felt oppressed at the moment.

“How does it taste?” Vincent asked from the doorway. Eric jumped, almost spilling the hot meal on his lap.

“Don't do that!” Eric replied, trying to catch his breath, “What are you tryin' to do? Kill me?”

“If it get's you out of here any faster...” Vincent answered. Eric looked at him horrified.

“Please tell me that was a joke.”

“If you wish for it to be,” was the answer, as the man came and leaned on the edge of the counter.

“You should stop speaking so cryptically,” Eric added, taking a bite of bread, “It's rude.”

“So is talking while eating,” Vincent answered.

Eric swallowed. “Sorry.”

“Before making statements about my behavior, try to make sure you are not partaking in rude behavior yourself. One might question your upbringing for doing such a thing.”

“Yeah, I guess your right,” Eric replied. At least he's down here, Eric thought to himself, even if he is insulting me. “Thanks for the stew by the way,” he added, “But you may want to avoid using a lot of spices next time.”

“Pardon my inexperience,” Vincent replied, “But then, I suppose you would wish for me to dine upon what you make and then point out your culinary mistakes?”

Eric smiled slightly, once again embarrassed, "No, I guess not. I mean, there would be a ton of things you could point out about my cooking."

"I can imagine," Vincent nodded.

Eric opened his mouth to respond, but decided that it would be best to not say anything, at the risk of being subtly insulted again.

"So, if I may ask," Eric asked after swallowing some stew, "Why do you live here all by yourself?"

"You may not ask," Vincent said quickly, but then stopped and added quietly, "I see no reason to not live alone."

"Well, it may help your temperament. I mean, if I lived in this creepy place all by myself, I know I'd end up getting depressed."

Vincent sighed, closing his eyes in annoyance. "You know that old saying, 'home is where the heart is'?" Eric nodded.

"That is not necessarily true. In fact, it is very wrong. The place where one has a home, be it a dark manor or a cave, is not what determines an attitude; those that believe such a thing are sorely mistaken. Life is what makes a heart, what gives and determines one's outlook and attitude. My life has made me the way I am, not this house. If the 'home' has any effect on those within it, it magnifies the actions and events of those who inhabit it."

"I never thought of it like that," Eric said, wiping a bit of broth off the corner of his mouth.

"Very few do," Vincent answered.

Eric looked down at the empty bowl in front of him. If what Vincent said was true, what did that mean for him?

"Well, what about me?" Eric asked, looking up again, "I don't have a home. I just kinda drift."

"Perhaps your home is the road then, a symbol of what has occurred in your life to bring you to this point."

"I guess that's true," Eric said, leaning his head on his hands. Without thinking about it, he started to chew on his nails. It was something he had done since he was little, and it had become a habit for whenever he was thinking hard.

"I couldn't help but notice," Vincent commented, breaking the silence, "That you carried yourself with experience in battle."

"Did you just compliment me?" Eric asked, his voice carrying a sarcastically amazed tone.

"No," Vincent replied simply. Eric decided to ignore that.

"Well, yeah, I mean, you can't travel as much as I do without fighting a couple times."

"Really?" Vincent asked, his voice sounding unconvinced.

"Yep," Eric answered confidently, "In fact, I'm a pretty good fighter, and an even better spellcaster. You should see me fight when it's not all cramped. I'm untouchable!"

Vincent snickered, though it carried no cheer. "How much would you wager on that claim?"

"I'd stake my whole collection of materia," Eric answered with a huge grin.

"Should you be so willing to lose something so precious?" Vincent asked, his eyebrows rising slightly.

"Why, I wouldn't lose, so it's not a problem."

"Very well then," Vincent nodded, "I shall take you up on that offer."

"What?" Eric asked, his confidence suddenly deflating.

"I do not usually repeat myself," Vincent answered, "But I shall in this case. I would like to take you up on that wager."

"You can't be serious?"

"I am," Vincent answered, still maintaining an unattached voice, "If I win, you will hand over all of your materia."

"What if I win?" Eric asked, suddenly caught in the moment, feeling the excitement of laying things on the line.

"I shall permit you to remain within this house as long as you wish."

"Your on then!" Eric cheered, "But don't mope when you lose!"

"Do not worry," Vincent said, "In fact, I shall be celebrating your immediate removal from this house. Now, I suggest that you get some rest. I would hate for the contest to be unfair because you did not find enough sleep."

"But it's only five," Eric answered, looking at a small clock on the wall.

"That clock has stopped," Vincent answered, "And if you wish to avoid a forceable removal from this house, I suggest you find your way into your room immediately."

Eric understood the threat, so he quickly rose, rinsed out the bowl he had eaten from and rushed up the stairs. As he closed his door behind him, and was certain Vincent wasn't listening, he fell face forward on

the bed.

“What have I just gotten myself into?” he grumbled into the pillow.

2 - So, Who Are You Again

Vincent walked quickly through the narrow mountain paths, with Eric trailing behind. Vincent was leading Eric to a wide area, hidden deep in the mountains, so that he could see just what Eric was capable of in battle. The large collection of material suggested that he was strong in magic, but Vincent wanted to see it for himself.

The two of them had entered the mountain region behind Nibelheim early this morning, and had only stopped for a brief breakfast. The terrain had required a bit of climbing and jumping, and by the time they were three-quarters of the way there, Eric was beginning to noticeably slow down. He didn't complain at all though, and managed to match Vincent's brisk walking pace, even if he was a foot or two behind. At least he's persistent, Vincent thought. Eric broke the silence, which had been hanging over the two of them since they had left the mansion that morning. "Vincent, do you....do you have any family?"

"No," Vincent answered abruptly, not even turning around or slowing, "why?"

"Well, I know it's not really any of my business, but...it's just...well, you live in that mansion all by yourself, surely you must get lonely?"

"No," Vincent lied. He did get lonely, but not often enough to make it a problem.

Eric remained silent for a few more minutes, and then asked hesitantly, "Do you have any friends?"

"Yes, I have several," Vincent answered.

"Where are they?"

"Three of them live in Midgar, one in Cosmo Canyon, two that travel around the world together, and then one who works and lives in Gold Saucer."

"You know someone who lives in Gold Saucer!" Eric asked excitedly. His excited tone surprised Vincent so much that he stopped and turned around.

"Yes, why?" Vincent asked, still a bit shocked at Eric's reaction.

"I've always wanted to go to Gold Saucer! Have you actually been there before? What does your friend do there? What's it like?" Eric continued on, his eyes growing wide with excitement. Vincent just stood there, looking at him silently. Something about this kid reminded Vincent of himself, back before the Turks, back before- No! Vincent didn't even like to think about it. He couldn't hide from it, but at least he could put it out of his mind. Right now, he had more important things at hand; the most important being the reason they were in these mountains in the first place. Vincent wanted to test Eric. The kid had lots of material, a lot of which was mastered, meaning that it was at the peak of its power. Vincent wanted to see why this kid's material was so strong. Only big time fighters could have material that strong.

"We need to move on," was all that Vincent said in response, and then continued on. Eric followed, and didn't say another word.

The sun was reaching the middle of the sky by the time they reached the cave Vincent was looking for.

"We'll head into this cave a little, then have lunch," Vincent explained. He had already told Eric what they would be doing; he just hadn't said where they would be going for the test. Before they had gone to bed last night, Vincent asked Eric if he knew how to fight. Eric said only a little bit, that he mostly relied on magic. So Vincent told him that he would teach him how to fight. Granted, Vincent didn't usually use hand-to-hand combat, but he saw this as an opportunity to test, not train. They entered the cave, and walked down the tunnel, deep into the mountain, their footsteps echoing off the walls. The tunnel wasn't dark, the light from the outside still shown into the cave, and ahead of them, they saw sunlight. When they were about halfway through, Vincent motioned for them to stop. They sat, and Eric took out two sandwiches. They ate quietly, when Eric noticed something he hadn't before. Vincent only ate with his right hand. Come to think of it, Eric had never seen Vincent's left hand. Last night, Eric hadn't thought about it, but now he saw that Vincent's entire left arm was covered by his cape. Just when Eric started looking for some part of the hand that wasn't covered, he was surprised by something, Vincent initiated a conversation!

"So what are you doing out in the world at your age?" Vincent asked quietly.

"Well, I am sixteen. People from Wutai send their kids out at that age."

"But are you from Wutai?"

"No, but I've been on my own for a while. My parents died when I was young, about seven. So, I've been on my own ever since."

"How have you survived for so long," Vincent asked, not sure if he was telling the truth. He sounded sincere, but then he could just be a good actor.

"Well, I scrounged for a couple months. I used to live out near the Chocobo ranch. It was the only other place I looked forward to visiting, next to Gold Saucer that is. So, while living out there, I was suddenly taken to live in the Shinra building by a group called the Turks."

"The...Turks?" Vincent asked slowly. Yet again, Eric had surprised him.

"Yeah, do you know them?" Eric asked, curiously.

"I've heard of them," Vincent replied casually.

"Well, they came and got me. They said that I was part of a new program for children who's parents had died while working for Shinra. They said that I showed a large amount of potential, and that Shinra could help make my dreams come true. Not like I really had a choice in the matter. So, I went and was raised in the Turk program, as well as receiving the "best" education Shinra could buy. I should have seen that being in the lap of luxury would cost me, but it was just too nice, and I was young. On my fourteenth

birthday, I was approached by a man named Hojo.”

Hojo. Just the name made Vincent's skin crawl. He was the man responsible for so much pain in the world. He was also responsible for what Vincent had become. Vincent had promised revenge on Hojo, and was able to fulfill his vow, killing the wretched man himself. But that didn't make the things that Hojo had caused go away. It didn't relieve Vincent of his curse.

“Hojo asked me if I would allow some tests run on me,” Eric continued, not realizing the inner turmoil within his listener, “I asked what for. He explained that he believed I was of a special blood. Now I had heard of the Cetra, but I didn't think that I was one of them. Hojo said that I wasn't a Cetra, that I was part of an old race of material-bound people, capable of bringing out the maximum power of a material, without any real work. I didn't believe him. All material I had was mastered through my own hard work, and had actually taken longer than some of the others that were working in the SOLDIER program. Hojo said that he would have to draw out my abilities, and thus the tests. If he could figure out how to draw out that ability, then he could maybe make an artificial version of it, so that Mako energy would last longer. I refused, not liking the idea of being probed and examined like a dissected frog. Hojo said that I would not be harmed, that I would be asleep for the whole thing. I still refused. Later that night, there was a knock on my door. There stood Hojo, with two SOLDIERS. He demanded that I come with him peacefully, or he would force me to. I went with him quietly, and then took the first chance I could to run. I had this belt with escape, and me, cause I never take it off, so I was able to fend off the Shinra guards as best I could. I've been on the run ever since.”

As Eric finished his story, Vincent stared at the young man. The story was strange, but not entirely unbelievable. The mere fact that Eric had mentioned Hojo made him seem honest, since only the higher ups in Shinra really knew him. Perhaps there was more to this kid than met the eye.

“So, why are you telling me all this,” Vincent asked, a thought suddenly coming to mind.

“What do you mean,” Eric asked, sounding a little hurt. “You asked me to tell you why I was on my own.”

“I meant no offense,” Vincent replied calmly, realizing that he had made it seem that he didn't care. He did, especially where Hojo was involved, but there was one thing that he felt he should point out.

“I simply wanted to point out that you just told me you are wanted by Shinra.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Eric said, not quite understanding.

“Well, do you think it wise to tell this to one who lives in the Shinra mansion?”

Eric suddenly saw his mistake. Vincent was right, and if Vincent worked for Shinra, he had just guaranteed himself a one-way ticket back to Hojo.

“Don't worry,” Vincent said, trying to calm his young companion, “the Shinra are probably too busy with their current problems to go after you. Besides, Hojo died.”

Eric's face became very calm, his eyes brightened, and it seemed to Vincent that an invisible load had

been lifted off the young man's shoulders.

“That's so sad,” he said anyway, trying to hide his dislike for the disgusting man, “I heard he had a wife and child.”

Once again, Eric had unknowingly opened another wound in Vincent's heart. The only woman to ever steal his heart, was the wife of Hojo. And now, she was dead, lost to him forever. And his son, the one being who's value of life matched Hojo's, Sephiroth himself, was long gone, never to darken the world again with his presence. Suddenly, Vincent realized that the day was waning on, and that they needed to get moving. Otherwise, they would end up having spend the night in the mountains, which really wasn't the wisest thing.

“Come on,” Vincent said, standing up. Eric followed suite, and as they started down the tunnel once again, Vincent wondered about the young man. He had lasted so long, hiding from Shinra's arm for two years. Now that the looming shadow of Hojo was gone, would he settle down somewhere? Vincent felt a twinge of pain for the kid. No family, no friends. Once again, Vincent saw himself in Eric, his innocence, and his blind trust. But unlike Eric, Vincent had been unable to avoid the Turks influence, and unlike Eric, Vincent had been unable to avoid Hojo's grasp. Regret filled his heart, but, like whenever he felt this regret, he pushed it aside. He would be a slave to regret no more.

3 - Eric vs. Vincent

The tunnel opened up into a huge cavern, with smooth walls and a high, domed ceiling. In the center of the ceiling was a wide circle, cut out, which allowed the sunlight to stream in. This was the sunlight that they had seen from the other end of the tunnel. In the center of the floor was another hole, positioned directly beneath the one in the ceiling. This one had a barred grating on it, and even with the sunlight shining in on it, the bottom could not be seen. Eric peered into the hole, trying to see in as best he could, without having his feet anywhere near the grate. Vincent startled him, his voice echoing off the smooth walls of the cave.

“This place used to be a Mako reactor,” Vincent explained, “but due to constant problems, they had to move the reactor to another area in these mountains. So this cave is empty now, with only these two holes as a hint to what used to stand here.”

“What kind of problems,” Eric asked turning away from the hole, “They had to be pretty rough if Shinra shut down one of their precious Mako reactors.”

“Are you ready to start,” Vincent asked, still concerned about time. He could tell by the whole in the ceiling that sun was beyond high noon, “If we don't hurry, the sun will go down before we get out of the mountains. If it's dark, the mountain trails are extremely treacherous.”

“Alright, but...how do we start? I mean, I've done training for practice before, but never just because.”

“Well,” Vincent said, “You just begin, with one of us making the first strike. And remember, don't hold back.”

Eric and Vincent went to opposite sides of the cavern. Vincent knew that he would be at a disadvantage initially; since Eric had a large repertoire of magic, but knew that if he could get close enough, he would be able to throw Eric off his guard. He didn't know the fighting styles Eric knew, but he guessed that the Turks had probably trained him, the same way they had trained him. Vincent wasn't a particular fan of hand-to-hand combat, but he wasn't about to use his gun, Death Sentence, and he wasn't trained in using any other weapon, so hand-to-hand was the next best thing.

As the two of them stood there, Vincent saw Eric raise his hands, and cross them over his chest. His hair was flowing around his shoulders, as if he was underwater, and Vincent felt a tingling in his own body. This could only mean one thing. As quickly as he could, Vincent ran to the left, just as Eric brought both his hands forward. An explosion of fire erupted right where Vincent had been standing, and even though Vincent had just escaped the radius of the flame, the heat still radiated out, catching Vincent in its overwhelming grasp. The air was sucked from his lungs, and the heat caused sweat to break out on his forehead almost immediately. He couldn't believe that the kid could unleash a level three Fire, but now Vincent knew he was dealing with a powerful mage. He had to close the gap between him and Eric, and quickly.

Eric loved the feeling of spell casting. The energy building up from the material, then feeling the magic flow through his veins was like nothing in the world. Unfortunately, Eric usually only cast magic in battle, so he never got to enjoy it long. After the initial cast of fire, Eric saw that Vincent was able to move quickly, and even worse, he was able to sense when he was a target for magic. Eric knew he would have to pick up the pace. He charged for the next spell, this one targeted at him. The familiar energy flowed once again, and he moved his hands in the same way he always did when he cast. This time though, instead of the energy rush stopping when he finished casting, it continued. This was one of his favorite spells, Haste. Everything sped up. His mind could focus more on the spells, allowing him to cast faster, and he could hit his targets easier. He charged again, this time with a blizzard spell in mind. A cool feeling flowed through his veins, and he saw his target, Vincent, coming straight for him. Instead of targeting Vincent, he targeted instead the floor in front of Vincent. He waved his hands, and a spire of pure Ice jumped up from the ground just as Vincent stepped over it. Vincent was caught in its icy grip for a moment, before it shattered, releasing him. Vincent dropped to his knees, then stood up, slightly shivering from the frosty bite. Fortunately, magic never left any cuts, bruises or burns. Not to say that it didn't hurt, it just never left any visible marks. Eric remembered what Vincent said, to not hold back. Eric was sure Vincent could handle himself, but he still wasn't too sure if it was safe to such powerful spells for only practice. Still, Vincent said not to hold back, and Eric had healing spells if the need arose, so he wasn't going to worry. He started to charge for another spell.

Vincent shook off the chill that still ran through his body after that Blizzard spell. Evidently, Eric was a bit more cunning than he had expected as well. Vincent had also noticed that he had cast a spell on himself, which meant that Vincent would have to do a little magic soon, to either balance his with Eric's or break whatever magic Eric had placed on himself. He saw how all of Eric's movements were quicker, and knew that Haste was in place. Unless Vincent did something soon, he would be crushed. Eric started to charge again, this time with Vincent as the target. He saw Eric's hair flow, and felt the warning tingle. Now would be his chance, he just had to hope that whatever spell Eric was casting now wouldn't cause any damage. He threw back his cloak to reveal his own set of material, located on a bracer on his left arm. It was smaller than Eric's collection, but still carried the essentials. Simply put, Eric wasn't the only one who could cast Haste! Vincent began casting his spell, just as Eric completed his own. Vincent felt a wave of energy course through his body, but not the usual kind associated with spells, but another kind. Vincent suddenly felt his heart slowing, his lungs taking in air at a much slower rate. He was under the influence of Slow, and it was fortunate that he was casting Haste, otherwise, the battle would have been lost. He brought his own arms down, though he felt as if he was pulling a load with his arms. As the spell completed, he felt everything grow faster, matching Eric's pace. Eric must have seen the change, because he smiled at Vincent and said quietly, "Looks like we'll be spending the night in these mountains."

Below, unbeknownst to them, an old tunnel that connected to the Mako hole was carrying the vibrations of their movement and energy. The vibrations traveled to the end of the relatively short tunnel. But the walls weren't the only things feeling the vibrations of the ensuing fight. The old beast opened its eyes slowly, not waking from its sleep for quite some time. Not since the noisy men from above started moving into his cave had he awakened. Now, he felt the familiar footfalls of humans once again. Had these humans forgotten him so quickly? Well, he would remind them. The great beast spread its wings, stretching, and preparing for its task. The dragon had found a meal.

Vincent had closed the gap, using Eric's moments of spell casting as time for him to get closer. Vincent brought his fist up in an uppercut, but it only glanced off Eric's chin as he dodged it. Then Eric sent out a

sidekick to Vincent's stomach, but Vincent dodged by rolling to the side, then followed by countering with a sweeping kick that knocked Eric off his feet. Eric fell to the ground, and rolled over to avoid a punch to the chest. He stood up quickly, and saw Vincent coming in for another uppercut. Eric had never really been forced to fight hand-to-hand, so this was all new to him. He desperately needed to get some distance, because being this close didn't allow for any spell casting at all. But with Vincent able to move as quickly as he could, maybe even faster, Eric just couldn't see a way out. Vincent continued to press him with punches and kicks, and it was all Eric could do to stay out of their way, let alone run away. Then Eric saw his means of salvation. Vincent swung a haymaker, and Eric ducked then plowed right into Vincent's chest, barreling right over him, and far enough away to pull a trump card from his sleeve, or more precisely, his belt. Eric began casting another spell, one that would require a lot more concentration, a summon. He would use his very first summon ever, and because it was his first, it was mastered. As the spell completed, Eric's material form disappeared, allowing for the material form of Chocobo/Mog to appear. The little mog nodded to Eric as the two switched positions for physical and astral bodies. Eric loved this part of magic too.

Vincent watched as Eric vanished before his eyes, and knew what was coming next. He had seen and been a part of enough summons to know what had happened. The only question now was, what did Eric summon. As the summon began to take form, Vincent released a slight sigh of relief. It was Chocobo/Mog, one of the weakest summons out there. However, Vincent had never faced a mastered Chocobo/Mog before.

The little mog sitting upon its chocobo took one look at Vincent before bringing its tiny heels against the chocobo's sides. The chocobo started off, running faster than Vincent had counted on, and nearly trampled him. He tumbled to ground, narrowly missing the pounding feet and sharp talons of the speedy bird. At least it only makes one pass, Vincent thought as he stood up. He failed to see the chocobo coming back behind him for another run. He turned around just in time to get caught in an explosion of feathers, fur, and claws. He flew backwards, slammed into the cave's smooth wall, and lay there for a moment trying to reorient himself. As his vision became less blurry, he saw the mog and chocobo fade from sight, replaced by Eric, who was trying his best to smother his laughter. With tears in his eyes from his glee, he said, still trying to subdue his giggles, "You said don't hold back."

"True," Vincent replied, standing up, "so now I won't hold back either."

"What! You mean you were holding back?" Eric asked, his face forming a slight pout. He thought he had matched Vincent, maybe was even better than him.

"Well, we'll call it a day," Vincent said suddenly, walking over towards an wide-eyed Eric, "what did you learn from this fight?"

"You mean I had to learn something?" Eric asked, still shocked that Vincent had suddenly stopped a fight that he was actually enjoying, "I thought you were testing me?"

"I was, and still am," Vincent explained, "Now, I'm testing to see if you are capable of learning from a fight, especially a difficult one."

"Well," Eric began, thinking it over, "I learned that...um...well, I need to find a way to keep my distance at all times, because I can't fight worth beans."

“Right, but perhaps you need to learn some fighting skills, in case you can't keep your distance.”

Eric's green eyes brightened, “Will you teach me? You seem really good.”

“You weren't doing too bad,” Vincent said, “You blocked a good portion of what I threw, and you managed to get some hits in,” Vincent mentioned, ignoring Eric's question.

“But will you train me?” Eric asked again, pretending to not have noticed that Vincent had ignored him.

“We'll see,” he answered quietly, then proceeded to cast a Cure spell on them both. As they walked back towards the entrance of the cavern, Eric walking in front of Vincent this time, Vincent regarded the young man once again. Why did he feel the need to see Eric in battle? What was it about this kid, whom Vincent had never known until yesterday, which intrigued him so? Vincent just couldn't put his finger on it. Maybe he felt pity for him, a kid who had been forced to grow up too quickly by Shinra, just as he had. Whatever the reason, Vincent felt a want to help this kid, this naïve boy, who had suddenly appeared. And if that included teaching him how to fight, then Vincent was more than willing. I wonder if this is how a father feels, Vincent thought. I'll protect him, and if Shinra wants him, then they'll have to deal with me. Vincent suddenly stopped, realizing what he had just said. He never thought he would say something like that, but he had developed a liking for Eric, even if they had only been together for a short time, and he wasn't about to let another person he liked slip away from him. Another person who saw through his cold attitude, and dark appearance. He wouldn't lose another friend. There wouldn't be another Lucrecia.

“Hey, Vincent! Hurry up! The sun's going down,” Eric called back to him. Without realizing it, Vincent had stopped walking during his contemplations. He looked up to his young ward, then smiled slightly, and walked quickly to his side. Then the two of them walked out of the cave, and into the light of the near-setting sun. Unknown to them, a visitor was coming right behind them. A visitor that was hungry.

Vincent suddenly stopped, and motioned for Eric to do the same. They both stood silently, hearing and seeing nothing.

“What is it,” Eric asked after a few moments, still straining his ears to hear something.

“Nothing,” Vincent replied, starting to walk again, but keeping an ear open for any more sounds.

“Vincent,” Eric said, “You don't have to answer this if you don't want to, but I was wondering about this. Your left hand,” Eric said, motioning to the now revealed hand, “What happened to it?”

Vincent looked at the hand. Anyone who looked at it would think that it was a gauntlet, with golden claws at the fingertips. Not so, it was part of the experiments that Hojo had performed, placed there after his hand was damaged. To Vincent, it was just another scar he had to bear.

“What makes you think something's wrong with my hand,” Vincent asked, thinking of a way to divert Eric's attention away from the hand, allowing Vincent to once again forget it himself.

“Nothing really, I just noticed that it was only your left hand. I figured if it were a glove, you'd have one on both hands, unless it's just a fashion statement.”

“Yes, it's just a fashion statement,” Vincent lied. Just because he was looking out for Eric didn't mean he had to know all of his secrets.

When they were about half a mile away from the cave, Eric stopped. Vincent also stopped, hearing the same sound from before, a deep rumbling sound, except this time, they didn't just hear it, they felt it. The ground trembled, throbbed like a heart, vibrating, then stopping, vibrating, and then stopping. Suddenly, a rock-shattering roar pierced the mountain air, emanating from the cave the two had just left. Still looking back to the cave, Vincent uttered one word to Eric.

“Run.”

4 - Dance of the Deadly Dragon

“Run!” Vincent said again, this time with more force. Judging by his tone, Eric knew something was wrong, so he took off immediately, with Vincent right behind. The sun was setting, and the paths were becoming dimmer. A sudden explosion erupted behind them, and both turned to see dust, stones and smoke come flying up out of the cave they had been in. Rising up out of the flying debris was what Vincent had feared all along, a dragon. It beat its great wings, and soared in the companion's direction. Its piercing eyes searching for its prey, it swooped overhead, just as Vincent pushed Eric into a small alcove in the stonewall. The dragon saw the movement, and swooped down onto the mountain path. It knew the path they were on was too narrow for him to maneuver on properly, so he went ahead, further on the path he knew his prey would have to take. The path would reach an area that was wider in length, plenty of room for the dragon to strike. He climbed onto a ledge above the area and waited. Waited for the humans to come.

Vincent stuck his head out of the alcove, and looked around. The dragon was nowhere to be seen.

“I think we lost him,” Eric sighed, stepping out of hiding.

“It's quiet,” Vincent said, “too quiet.”

“Why do you say that? Do you think he's hiding? I mean, I don't know dragons too well, but they never struck me as intelligent enough to wait in ambush.”

“It depends on how old they are,” Vincent replied, still looking for any signs that the monster was still around, “Old dragons are extremely cunning, and if they know the area in which they live well, then ambushes are to be expected. Dragons don't easily give up on prey.”

Eric swallowed hard. He had never faced a dragon before, and had only seen them in books. “Did you happen to catch its color?” he asked. A dragon's scale color was a way to tell what his elemental strengths and weaknesses were.

“It looked red,” Vincent answered, “they're native to this area.”

“So, it's weak against ice, huh?”

“Yes, but don't think a couple of ice spells will kill it. Dragon hides are strong, even if they have a weakness.”

Eric nodded in agreement. He couldn't believe that he and Vincent were in these mountains, being chased by a dragon. He would never have guessed that this is where his life would take him. He just hoped that it didn't end here.

“We can't wait here,” Vincent said, walking further down the path, “Otherwise, it'll grow dark, then we'll

really be in over our heads. These paths are dangerous enough at night without a dragon hanging over us.”

The two continued on, eyes ever alert, and ears open for the slightest sound. The fading light cast long shadows, and the mountain air grew colder around them. The sky took on a purple tone, and tiny stars began to dot the skies. The two of them reached a wide area in the path, a ledge that jutted out of the mountain and overhung a valley below. The path continued on the other side of the ledge, with rocks precariously perched along the wall rimming the ledge on the mountainside.

They walked forward, and onto the path across the way, when several pebbles fell down the side of the hill, giving Vincent just enough warning. He grabbed Eric by the back of his collar and jerked him backwards, just before a pile of boulders landed right where the oblivious young man was standing. Eric turned to Vincent, his face filled with surprise and gratitude.

Thank you so much!”

“No problem,” Vincent answered, standing up, and as he did, the dragon, frustrated that its trap was unsuccessful, leapt into the pathway leading back the way the two had come. Now he had them. He let out a triumphant roar, knowing now that his prey was his.

Faster than Eric could see, Vincent pulled a pistol from a holster on his belt. The barrel was a deep black, with a gold sight. The trigger and hammer were also gold, and the handle, which looked to be made out of onyx, was trimmed with gold. On the handle was a white skull, with rubies set in its eyes. Just looking at the weapon sent a chill down Eric's spine. It seemed to match Vincent's personality well, as if the gun was an embodiment of Vincent, a reflection of his soul, except for one thing. The weapon's one purpose was to kill. Eric couldn't believe that the same went for Vincent.

The dragon roared again, bringing Eric out of contemplations. The monster, its red scales shimmering in the sunset like thousands of rubies, reared its head back. Flames licked its lips, and sparks leapt from its nose, as it prepared to roast its victims. Vincent and Eric, with their backs against the pile of rocks that blocked their path, saw what was happening and ran in separate directions just as a plume of fire shot from the dragon's mouth and scorched the blocking stones. Vincent slid to a stop, a foot from the edge of the ledge, pulled back the hammer on the gun and fired. The bullet struck the dragon on the side, piercing its scales and burying into its skin. The dragon roared in pain, and turned its burning eyes on Vincent. Vincent returned the glare, and locked the hammer again. The dragon, swiped its claws toward Vincent, but Vincent jumped over it and fired again. It missed this time, but distracted the dragon long enough for Eric to finish his level three Blizzard spell. A huge block of ice fell from the sky, seemingly from nowhere, and crashed onto the dragon's back. The ice shattered, and small bits of ice scraped against the dragon's burning scales, causing more pain.

The creature turned its gaze to Eric, who stood there, looking dumbfounded, and before he or Vincent could react, the dragon whipped the tip of its tail around Eric's ankle, and tossed him against the rock wall. He slid to the ground in a crumpled heap.

The dragon's maw inched closer and closer to Eric's unconscious form. Vincent knew he didn't have much time to act. Quickly, he fired another shot into the dragon's belly, hoping to draw its attention. But the dragon would not waver, and Eric awoke to find the dragon's mouth open, his sharp teeth

glimmering, and a hot breath coming from its deep, dark throat. This is the end, Eric thought, eaten by a dragon. Suddenly, Vincent was on the dragon's head with his gun aimed right between the dragon's eyes. He fired, and the sound of shattering bone filled the air. Blood dripped from the dragon's wound, but the dragon seemed to not notice. Instead, it jerked its head around, and Vincent fell off, rolled into a somersault, and got to his feet in one smooth motion. The dragon, forgetting about Eric for the moment, turned on Vincent. It reared its head back, but instead of releasing another shot of flame, a huge billow of smoke erupted from its mouth, filling the air. The smoke blinded them, and choked their lungs. Eric laid flat out on the ground, trying to breathe and trying to find any sign of Vincent. All he saw were dragon feet.

Vincent took the full brunt of the smoke, and when it first hit, the smoke burned his eyes until tears formed in them. He fell to ground, coughing from the hot smoke that filled his lungs. He remained low, not wanting to breathe in any more of the choking air. A sudden movement by his feet caught his attention, but before he could move, he felt a something wrap tightly around his arms, trapping them flat against the sides of his torso, and then continued down to ensnare his legs as well. The sound of beating wings filled his ears, and suddenly the smoke dissipated. Vincent found himself face to face with the dragon. He looked down, and saw that the dragon had wrapped its tail around his body. He turned his gaze back to the beast, who's eyes seemed to be filled with a malicious glee. A sudden squeeze from the tail explained the reason for the dragon's mirth. Vincent felt his arms and chest being crushed, his breath forced out of him, and a grunt of pain escaped his lips. The scales were hot, and burned his forearms. He struggled to get free, but the rough scales scraped against his skin, cutting him slightly every time he moved. While he winced in pain, Vincent tried to see Eric, but only saw a cloud of smoke beyond the dragon. Snapping sounds came from his arms, suddenly, and then from his chest, shooting pain through his body, as the dragon tightened its hold some more. Another cry of pain erupted from Vincent's mouth. He began to feel dizzy, and slumped down, his gaze becoming darker. He saw the dragon open its maw, preparing to devour him, and felt the continued crushing of his body from the dragon's tail. He closed his eyes, and prepared for the end. He could only hope that Eric could escape.

Eric saw it all, having crawled his way out of the smoke and behind the dragon, unable to stand. He felt anger, extreme, burning anger at the wretched monster for what it was doing, for trying to take away his only friend. He felt angry at himself, for being so helpless. He had no energy left for another spell, having put as much energy as possible into that last Blizzard. His anger towards himself increased when he saw that Vincent was being killed all because of himself. If he hadn't stayed with Vincent, if he had just left in the morning, then Vincent would be safe at home. It was all his fault. He couldn't stand it. He screamed at the top of lungs, "NO!" then everything went black.

Eric's scream was so loud and mournful that it not only brought Vincent back from the edge of unconsciousness, but drew the dragon's gaze too. Vincent's eyes saw something unbelievable. Eric was hunched over on his knees, his hands clutching the sides of his head. His eyes were wide, filled with pain. He let out a cry, and suddenly, from his back erupted a pair of black-feathered wings. He stood, staring at the dragon with a look of utmost hatred. The dragon tried to return the gaze, but Vincent thought it seemed a bit unsure.

Eric flapped his wings once, just once, and an icy wave shot through the air, chilling the dragon's flesh. It writhed in pain, and released Vincent, who fell to ground, coughing as his lungs sucked in fresh air. He attempted to stand, but found he was much too weak, so he contented himself to watch the spectacle before him while lying down.

Eric stood still, but his wings stretched outward, and a blue circle appeared above his head, and from it shot large chunks of ice. One after another they came out, each striking the dragon, knocking it backwards, towards the edge of the cliff. The ice kept coming, as if Eric's rage towards the beast was being formed into a cold, deadly energy, and striking at the target of that rage. The dragon was against the edge, and was shivering, with patches of ice forming on its once burning scales. The circle that the ice had come from, as Eric brought his wings toward the monster, suddenly flew towards the dragon, and upon striking it, completely encased it in ice, and sent it careening over the edge and into the dark valley below.

Vincent watched the dragon's decent over the cliff, and looked back to Eric, his eyes growing darker from weariness. He saw Eric looked to him, with a look of remorse, as if he had done a great injustice to Vincent, and knew there would be no way to ever find his forgiveness. Then everything went black.

Vincent awoke later, his arms and chest still aching, outside the back of the Shinra mansion. He was lying face up, with the dark, star filled sky above him. He tried to sit up, and found himself able, with only a slight pain from his ribs. He looked around for Eric, and saw him lying face down on the ground, his wings now gone. Vincent stood up, as best he could, and walked over to see if he was all right. The young man was lying still, but he was breathing regularly. The whole set-up reminded Vincent of when he had found the young man two days ago, lying in the alley. Vincent suddenly had a good guess as to how Eric had gotten into the state he had been in that night.

Vincent couldn't use his arms, they hurt to much and were covered with nicks and cuts from the scales, so he gently placed his foot on Eric's back and shook him. Eric awoke, and looked around. Startled by where he was, he turned to Vincent for an explanation, who just shrugged and said, "Let's go inside, I think we need to talk."

The two sat in the library in front of the fireplace, Vincent in one chair, while Eric cast Cure and bandaged his wounds.

"The Cure relieves the pain, seals the cuts, and brings the bones back together, but they'll still be a little tender, so the bandages are really just for protection," Eric explained. Vincent sat quietly, thinking about what had happened.

"What happened up there?" he asked.

"What?" Eric replied as he finished, and walked over to the other chair.

"You know what," Vincent said calmly, not wanting to intimidate him.

"Oh, that. Well, I don't really know. It never really happened before," Eric said, "but, I hope it doesn't happen again."

"Why not," Vincent asked, beginning to think of yet another thing that he and Eric had in common.

"It hurt," Eric said, and Vincent noticed a tear forming in his eye, "It hurt so much."

“How?”

“The feeling I had, the anger that burned within me, it was like a darkness that engulfed me. I was just so angry. I hated everything, the dragon, myself, I wanted it to stop. I remember feeling a rage, then I lost control, like someone else was controlling me, and I was just along for the ride. The dragon that almost killed you, I just wanted it stop, to make it suffer and die. Then, I saw your pain, and I hated myself. I put you in that position, I almost got you killed, I..I,” then he began to sob quietly. Vincent saw the pain in his eyes, the same pain he dealt with everyday. But he was older, and had not been an innocent when this same darkness took him. This young boy was struggling with something no one should have to deal with, especially one his age. Vincent got up, and walked over to Eric, who had slipped down to the floor, and sat there, looking into space, his eyes red from the tears. Vincent knelt down, and placed his hand on Eric's shoulder. Eric turned, and saw a smile on Vincent's face.

“Vincent, I'm so sorry,” he said quietly.

“For what,” Vincent replied.

“I almost got you killed.”

“Don't worry about it,” Vincent said, “It's not the first time I almost lost my life, and it probably won't be the last.”

“But I don't want be the cause of the next time. The next time could be the last time. I think, that I should leave tomorrow.”

“Listen, Eric” Vincent said, as he stood up, his voice becoming serious, “You may leave anytime you want, I won't stop you, but you must promise me one thing. When you are out there in the world, if something happens to something happens to a friend or anyone, you are to never to blame yourself for what happens to them. If it is impossible for you to help them in any way, like this evening, then you are not to blame yourself for what happens. I was careless, and I almost paid with my life. It was not your fault.”

Eric, who was surprised at the mere fact that Vincent had used his first name stood amazed.

“When do you leave?” Vincent asked.

“Tonight,” Eric answered.

“Very well,” Vincent replied, “here,” he said, then, with a wince of pain from his arm, took a pouch off of his belt. He tossed it to Eric. “It's about ten thousand gil,” he explained, “Enough to keep you going for some time. You may also want to purchase some new clothing.”

Eric looked at Vincent curiously, and then understood when he felt his back. Two large rips had formed from the wings, and there were also smaller tears from the fight itself. Eric smiled sheepishly, and then got up to leave. He turned to look at Vincent once when he walked out of the library, then continued on out. He went to the kitchen to get some food for the trip, and then walked out the front door. As he walked into the dark night, Eric looked back to the mansion. He would never forget Vincent, he told

himself, and he would come back to visit his friend. In his hurry to leave, he had forgotten to thank his benefactor, but when he turned to go back to the house, the lights went out. Eric decided that Vincent probably didn't like long good byes. Neither did Eric.

5 - When Eric Met Yuffie

The sky was a deep blue, filled with wispy clouds that floated about. The grass was a cool green, and Eric had taken off his shoes to feel the blades between his toes. A warm breeze gently blew, and pushed Eric's long hair, which was now out of its ponytail, around his shoulders. Everything this morning seemed beautiful to Eric, who had slept beneath the stars last night, and had awoken early to get started once again with his travels. As he took in the entire world around him, he stopped for a moment. He hadn't quite understood until today just how much in life he took for granted. I guess nearly being eaten by a dragon will do that to you, he thought out loud with a chuckle.

He left the ring of mountains that surrounded Nibelheim and headed for the forest beyond its boarder. He loved the woods, the trees, and the shade, the overall feeling of a forest. It gave him a happiness and peace. Little did he know he was being watched.

The form of a person suddenly dropped from one of the branches, causing Eric to jump back. The figure was a young girl, about Eric's age. She had short brown hair that went to her shoulders, with a headband around her forehead, right above her bright, brown eyes. She wore a blue shirt, and a pair of white shorts. Her shoes were a dark orange, and she had a large, arm guard on her left arm.

She looked at Eric sweetly, then walked up to him. When she was two feet away, she took a cross off her belt, and pressed a small button in the center. Instantly, sharp tips came out of the ends of the cross, forming it into a large shurikan, about as high as the girl's knee.

"Hello there," she said in a sweet yet threatening tone, "I'll be happy to relieve you of your materia."

"What?" Eric asked, looking at her like she had two heads.

"I said," the girl stated flatly, her voice losing its sweetness, "Give me your materia, or I'll cut you in half."

"I think not," Eric replied, his tone matching his attacker's. "Besides," he said, indicating the belt he wore, "this materia's so weak, it would probably not be of any use to you anyway."

"Don't give me that," the girl said disgustedly, "An infant could tell that that almost all of those materia are mastered. So be a good little boy and hand them all over."

Eric saw that this situation was dangerous. This girl seemed serious, and Eric was in no mood for another fight.

"This is the last time I'll say it," the girl said, her voice starting to sound irritated, "give me the materia."

But Eric didn't answer. He was casting a spell. The girl saw it, and threw the shurikan as hard as she could. Eric expected this, and dove out of the way, letting the shurikan fly past him harmlessly and

imbed itself in a tree. The girl looked at him sheepishly, then ran to the tree. Eric was surprised how quickly she moved, and wondered if a Slow spell would even do any good. Still, as the girl struggled with the shurikan, Eric cast Slow on her. Just then, the shurikan came loose, sending the girl flying head-over-heels backwards. She stood up quickly, as quickly as the spell allowed, and looked at Eric with a childish pout on her face. Eric just stood there, laughing and laughing until his stomach hurt. The girl's face turned red, and she looked like she would explode, which caused Eric to laugh even harder.

"What is so funny!" she demanded angrily.

"It's just..just," Eric stuttered, trying to get a hold of himself, trying to subdue the laughter. "It's just that I've never, never seen a person's feet go over their head like that," he explained, before bursting into a fresh bout of laughter.

The girl didn't say anything, but instead threw that shurikan, this throw cutting into Eric's shoulder as it flew by, then returned to her. Eric's laughter turned to grunts of pain, and as he saw the blood coming from his shoulder, he knew that the situation was no laughing matter.

Eric ran back against the edge of the clearing, ducked behind a tree for cover, and prepared another spell, hoping that the girl wouldn't be fast enough to stop him. After she had thrown her shurikan, it had returned to her instead of getting stuck in a tree, and she looked to throw it again. She was just about to throw when Eric had ducked behind the tree. Eric cast Haste on himself, just to be on the safe side, then ran out from behind the tree. A flying shurikan greeted him, but he was able to dodge it easily. He cast Fire on the girl, and it exploded, sending her flying straight up in the air. She landed on the ground, with the shurikan coming back to land at her feet.

"Not fair," she said, standing up and brushing herself off.

"Well, neither is you trying to steal the materia I worked so hard to build up," Eric replied.

"I never steal," the girl explained, "I forcibly relieve."

"Well that makes it all better," Eric answered sarcastically.

"Glad you see it my way," she said back.

Eric had had enough. He was going to end this now. He activated another materia, this one red.

"Shiva," he said quietly, "I could use a little help here."

The girl saw Eric cast, but because of the Haste spell he had, she couldn't stop him in time. He vanished, and in his place stepped a woman. She was icy blue, with blue hair and eyes as well as her skin. She waved her hand in front of her, and a streak of ice froze the girl's feet to the ground. Then Shiva lifted her arms above her head, and charged a large ball of blue light. She brought the light down in front of her, and a huge wave of ice came forth from the ball, freezing over not only the girl, but most of the clearing as well. Shiva then snapped her fingers, and all the ice shattered into a fine dust. The girl fell to her knees, her arms around herself, shivering hard. Eric reappeared right in front of her, his arms crossed over his chest, looking at her with a look of conquest.

“Do you still want to kill me?”

“Yes, you little brat,” she replied, still rubbing her hands on her, trying to get warm. “You humiliate me, and then almost kill me, and you ask if I still want to kill you. You're unbelievable!”

“Look,” Eric said, starting to get exasperated, “If you're done playing pretend thief, I really need to get moving. I have a long way to go, so if you don't mind, I'll just be leaving now.”

“Where ya going,” the girl asked as she stood up, acting as if they had been friends their entire lives.

“Not really sure,” Eric said, not thinking it smart to tell a girl who tried to kill him where he was going.

“Well, I'm going to find rare materia,” the girl countered, acting like she became the new president of Shinra, “And then I'm going to sell them all and become fabulously rich.”

“Okay then, you won't mind if I just leave then?” Eric asked as he walked off into the woods, not really paying attention to her. Now he understood why Vincent acted the way he did. Acting like that made Eric feel cool. Maybe he should always act like this. Nah, it was kinda rude, and not everyone would be like that girl anyway.

“Fine, fine, I don't need you anyway, or your large...collection of..powerful..materia,” the girl stuttered. Wait a minute, what am I thinking, she thought to herself. This kid's loaded with materia, and I just let him walk away. Maybe if I stick with him I'll get a chance to steal his materia again. Boy, this is better than when I met Cloud. She smiled to herself mischievously, then ran to catch up.

“Hey! Wait up!” she called.

“What now?” Eric called back, becoming very annoyed.

“I want to come with you.”

“Why?”

“Well, if you're just wandering around, then maybe you'll go someplace with rare materia,” the girl explained.

“I guess,” Eric said, thinking that it would be nice to have someone to talk to, even if it was this girl.

“My name's Eric, by the way,” he said, as the two stepped out of the relatively small forest.

“I'm The Great Ninja Yuffie!” Yuffie proclaimed, while striking a pose, as if Eric should recognize the name.

“Okay,” Eric said, walking on. Then again, if she was going to act like this constantly, it might not be a bad idea to leave her behind.

The day passed without incident. They stopped in a small town to buy supplies, sleeping bags, and some spare changes of clothes. Yuffie already had all this, but Eric required it all. They set out shortly after and continued on for the rest of the day, and as night began to creep into the sky, they made ready to camp. Eric made a fire, while Yuffie busied herself with getting out food. After they had eaten, they sat across from each other around the fire and talked.

“So,” Yuffie began, as she finished off a piece of bread, “Where are you going. I mean, do you have some destination?”

“Not really, I just go where the wind takes me, you know,” Eric answered.

“Yeah, I know what you mean. How old are you?” she asked.

“Sixteen.”

“I'm seventeen. My birthday was last month. When's yours?”

“In two months.”

“That's nice,” Yuffie said absently.

Eric sat quietly for a few minutes, and then asked, “Are you from Wutai?”

“Yes,” Yuffie asked, “What makes you ask?”

“Well, your fighting style, for one. And the fact you called yourself the Great Ninja Yuffie.”

“Well I am,” she said a little indignantly.

“I believe you,” Eric lied, “I was just wondering.”

“Why.”

“Well, I was talking with a friend of mine, Vincent, and-“

“Vincent?” Yuffie interrupted, “What's his last name?”

“Valentine,” Eric answered, “Why?”

“I know him,” Yuffie said, “We saved the world together.”

Eric looked at her in disbelief. His first thought was that they had been friends together as little kids, and pretended to save the world. But Yuffie seemed sincere, so he decided to take the bait.

“Really? How?” he asked, pretending to believe her.

“We beat Sephiroth and stopped Meteor,” she answered, as if it were all in a day's work for her. Come

to think of it, Eric thought to himself, he did hear about someone from Wutai in the group that had stopped the Meteor. The name Sephiroth also sounded very familiar, like he had heard it recently, but where?

“Did you hear me?” Yuffie asked, “I said that we stopped Meteor.”

“I heard you, but, let's be honest here, I find it hard to believe you.”

“Why?”

“Well, why would a heroine be out trying to steal materia from innocent travelers?”

“It's what I do. I'm a materia hunter,” she said, like that was enough to excuse her behavior.

“Well, that's still wrong, isn't it?”

“No, `cause if it was, then I would hear complaints, and so far I've heard none.”

“Well, is that because they liked being robbed, or perhaps you leaving them dead in the woods was good enough.”

“I have never killed anyone that didn't deserve it,” Yuffie said angrily, standing up.

“Like who,” Eric said sarcastically, really starting to wish that he hadn't asked her join him.

“A disgusting scientist for one, Hojo. And then there wa-“

“You killed Hojo?” Eric interrupted, his jaw dropping.

“Well, Vincent and Cloud helped, but I did the most work.”

Eric couldn't believe it. Vincent had killed Hojo. This more than made up for Eric saving Vincent's life, which Vincent said he owed Eric for. Whether Vincent realized it or not, he had saved Eric's life. Then he remembered that Vincent had said that Hojo was dead. Vincent knew that Eric had been running from the man, had known the trouble he had caused Eric, but he never said that he had been the one who killed that monster of a man.

“Eric, you alright?” Yuffie asked, hitting him on the back of the head.

“What was that for?” Eric asked angrily as he was jerked from his thoughts.

“You zoned out. I was just making sure you were okay.”

“I'm fine,” Eric said, his tone deadly.

“Good, cause I'm going to sleep, so be sure to put out the fire,” Yuffie ordered.

“Whatever,” Eric mumbled, as he rubbed the back of his head where Yuffie had hit him.

As Eric cast a Blizzard spell to put out the fire, and crawled into his sleeping bag, he thought about the news he had just received. Vincent was a hero, and had saved Eric's life on two occasions already. Perhaps it wasn't wise to leave the mansion. No, it was for the best that he left. Besides, he could always go back for a visit later. Eric closed his eyes, with the future in mind, and fell asleep with visions of the wide world filling his head.

6 - A Night In Cosmo Canyon

As usual, I don't own any of the characters in this story except Eric. I also do not own the song that is sung, "Mystic's Dream." If anyone has ever seen the the Mysts of Avalon, then you should recognize it.

Darkness. Swirling, endless darkness. He stood at the brink of this abyss, its cold hands clutching at him, pulling at his very being. And as always it begged him for release. He resisted as best he could, but then a hand would come from the darkness, and grab him. The rest would form into a monster, terrible and strong. It would laugh at his struggling, his torment and efforts to escape. The laughter would echo in his ears, a terrible reminder of what lurked in his soul. Then he would begin his own transformation to match the dark creature's shape, his body molding into the foul thing itself. Then he'd wake up.

Vincent sat up in bed, a cold sweat on his forehead. He put his hand to his head and reassured himself, "It was only a dream, only a dream." But deep down, Vincent knew it was more than that. It was the truth, and that made it all the more frightening.

He didn't sleep the rest of the night, and as the sun came up, he went upstairs. The sound of shattering glass brought him running up the stairs of the hidden cellar up to the main house. He came out of the flight of stairs to see an inferno consuming the Shinra Mansion. The heat was intense, and as he went to the front of the house to get out, and trying to figure out how this happened, he heard shouting voices outside the building. He looked out one of the windows to see a large crowd outside, shouting and yelling at the burning mansion. Some had torches in their hands, while others had rifles and daggers. Then a man came to the front of the crowd, robed in black, with a white collar around his neck. In his hands was a mallet and spike, and he looked at the mansion with eyes full of self-righteous fury. He turned to the crowd and shouted so that everyone could hear him, "For years, we knew that a monster inhabited this mansion. Now is the day that we cleanse our town!" and the crowd cheered again. Vincent maneuvered his way around the burning mansion's collapsing beams and walls towards the back of the house. He couldn't go out the front. Unknown to Vincent, the crowd had already put some men back there to. He was trapped.

"Eric! Eric! Wake up!"

Yuffie shook Eric out of sleep, and pulled him to a standing position.

"What, Yuffie? What?" Eric answered, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

"Look over towards Nibelheim!"

Eric looked over in the direction of the small town, and saw a vast, black cloud rising up from it. "What is it?"

"Something's burning," she answered in stunned awe.

"Obviously," Eric said sarcastically. "I mean, what is burning?"

"Something big, judging by the size of the cloud of smoke."

"You don't think," Eric said, and let it hang there. Both had a place in mind, the biggest place in Nibelheim; the Shinra mansion. Eric started casting a spell.

"What are you doing?" Yuffie asked, looking at him cast.

"I'm going over there," Eric explained, "And I'll be able to move much faster if Haste is cast on me."

"Well, cast it on me too," Yuffie said, "I'm coming with you."

"Why?" Eric asked, as he completed casting Haste on both of them.

"Because Vincent's my friend too," she said simply, and ran off. Eric followed, and hoped Vincent was alright.

Trees and bushes sped by as the two raced towards Nibelheim. As they got closer, they saw their worst fear was true. The Shinra mansion was ablaze! A large mob in front was screaming of vampires, and kept throwing new torches into the fire.

"There!" Yuffie said to Eric, pointing to a window. They could see Vincent inside. No smoke came from the window, so it looked like the fire had not spread there yet.

"We need to get this crowd away, or Vincent can't escape," Eric said quickly to Yuffie.

"Right," Yuffie nodded, but then asked with slight panic, "But how?"

Eric's mind, still enhanced by Haste, thought quickly. "I've got it!" he proclaimed excitedly. "Yuffie, are you good at hiding yourself?"

"Hello," she answered exasperatedly, "What part of Great Ninja Yuffie don't you get?"

"Good, then hide yourself around the mansion, and wait until I give you the signal. Then start screaming the word `souls' as loudly and as eerily as you can," Eric said as he ran to the front of the crowd.

"Wait! What are you going to do?" she called after him.

"You'll see, just start screaming the word when I say `vampire'."

"Alright," Yuffie agreed unsurely, but climbed to the top of a tree and hid herself amongst the foliage.

Eric continued to the front of the crowd, and saw that he didn't have much time left. He just hoped his plan worked. He pushed to the front, and started to yell at the man dressed in black, "What are you doing?"

"We are purifying the village of the menace of the vampire," he called back, as if it were an everyday event.

"You, idiot," Eric shouted, his face contorting with anger and fear, "Don't you know what happens when you burn a vampire?"

Right on cue, Yuffie began screaming the word `souls'. It sounded better than Eric had hoped, and if he hadn't been in on this plan, he would have believed it. However, the villagers weren't in on the plan, so the sound caused some to fall to ground in fear, while others bolted and ran. The bravest stepped forward, looking at Eric with bewilderment. "What's happening?" they cried.

"When a vampire is burned, its spirit rises with the smoke and it forms into a foul demon. The demon will then try to poison those around the smoke with its spirit, causing them to become vampires as well!" Eric explained, hoping the villagers would believe him. Some more of the mob ran off, and Eric shouted to the rest, "Go! Go protect your families! I'll try to stop this foul thing!"

He turned back to see that fire had spread to the room Vincent was in. He didn't have much time. As quickly as he could, he cast Barrier, hoping the villagers would see it and believe him. The smoke began to contort as the barrier trapped some of the smoke. Yuffie caught on, and began howling madly. The villagers all ran off, each spreading out, and Eric noticed some coming from the back of the mansion as well. Eric began to speak an `incantation', which was actually a message to Vincent.

"The villagers are gone come out the window now!" He said loudly, and blended the words together, so that it would sound like gibberish to anyone who wasn't really paying attention. Vincent must have got it though, because he quickly opened the window and jumped to the ground below, just as the roof above the room he was in collapsed. He stood up, and Yuffie stopped screaming as she climbed out of the tree and walked over to their friend.

"Eric? What are you doing here?" Vincent asked, relieved he survived, but surprised. He thought Eric had left. He got an even bigger surprise when he saw who was with him.

"Yuffie! What are you doing here?"

"Nice to see you too, Vincent," Yuffie responded.

"I don't want to interrupt," Eric said, "But in case you haven't noticed, Vincent's not exactly welcome in this town any more. Might I suggest we get to a safer place?"

"You're right," Vincent agreed, and then started towards the back of the still burning mansion. They made their way behind the houses, and passed quietly from Nibelheim. They broke into a run when they left, and didn't stop running until Nibelheim was just a dark silhouette in the distance. They traveled on without a word between them, until Eric couldn't stand it anymore.

"What was that all about?" Eric demanded suddenly, causing both Yuffie and Vincent to halt. "Vincent, why were they trying to kill you?"

Vincent exchanged glances with Yuffie quickly then sighed heavily. It was time for the truth.

“Well, I guess you do deserve to know,” Vincent said quietly. He sat down on a stone that was in the middle of the tall grass. Eric and Yuffie did likewise. Vincent looked to the two of them and began.

“I used to be in the Turks when I was younger,” he began. Eric's eyes grew wider, but he remained silent. “While there, I met a woman, Lucrecia. She was an assistant to Hojo, and had worked in Shinra for a while. When I met her, she was the most beautiful woman I had ever met, and I fell in love with her. Her feelings for me were the same, and we spent time together. She told me though that she was married to Hojo.”

“Hojo!” Eric interrupted.

“Yes,” Vincent continued, “So our love would never be complete. After that, we saw less of each other, and though we still spoke, I just couldn't feel comfortable around her anymore. One day she came to me and told me that she was offering herself up for one of Hojo's experiments. I tried to talk her out of it, but she said that she had to. I told her that I loved her, and she told me likewise. Then she left, and that was the last time I saw her alive. I was approached by Hojo, and was used in the same experiment, which I obviously survived. The experiment caused something to awaken within me, my dark half.”

Your dark half?” Eric asked, not sure what he meant.

“The evil side that is in everyone. The experiment gave that half a life of its own, and I can transform, when the need arises, to match that darkness, something similar to your own transformation, Eric.”

“But that makes no sense,” Eric pointed out. “Hojo came to me and asked. I was never a part of any of his experiments. I escaped before I reached the lab.”

“You mean he can change too,” Yuffie said, hooking a thumb towards Eric.

“Indeed,” Vincent answered, “I saw him do it myself.”

“Well, if Hojo never experimented on you, maybe you were just born that way.”

“Perhaps,” Vincent agreed, nodding in thought.

“What's wrong, Vincent,” Eric asked.

“It's nothing,” he said, “Besides, we have more important things to discuss. Why were you in Nibelheim?”

“We saw the smoke from all the way out here, so we came to see what was wrong,” Yuffie explained.

“Well, you saved my life,” Vincent said, looking at them in appreciation.

“Well, I owed you,” Eric said, “Though it's not like I wouldn't have helped anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

"You saved me from Hojo when you killed him," Eric explained.

"I killed Hojo!" Yuffie jumped in. Eric just looked at her, his face filled with sarcastic disbelief. "Well I did," Yuffie said sheepishly.

"Which reminds me," Vincent said, bringing the two out of their dispute, "Yuffie, what are you doing here? I thought you were on the Highwind with Cid and the crew, looking for materia. Yuffie chuckled nervously and rubbed the back of her head.

"Well, I kinda got thrown off the Highwind."

"What," Vincent said in surprise.

"Well, I was in the engine room, counting my materia, when the ship hit a huge gale. It started rocking the ship, and my materia went all over the floor. I went to get them and slipped on one. When I slipped, I fell against a crewman, who knocked into the engine heat monitor. The monitor increased the temperature of the engine, causing it to overheat. It burned out, and Cid had to make an emergency landing. Long story short, he got mad, cussed me out and told me to never come near his ship again. So, I've been wandering around, trying to find materia."

"More like steal materia," Eric said.

"Yuffie, you went back to stealing materia?" Vincent asked.

"Can you think of any other way to get powerful materia?"

"Find it and strengthen it yourself," Eric said, his face showing his annoyance.

"Whatever," Yuffie said haughtily, brushing him off.

"Listen, you two," Vincent interrupted again, "I am not going to play babysitter for you two. I have no where to go right now, and as far as I see it, neither do you two, so I suggest that while we are together, we keep this bickering to a minimum."

"Alright," Yuffie and Eric agreed at the same time. They looked at each other, their faces both showing a childish glare. Eric was glad Vincent was back, but couldn't quite figure out what could have possessed him to allow this girl to join him. Yuffie was happy to see Vincent again, but wasn't sure if this kid's materia was worth all of this. Regardless, she thought, I will get his materia. Materia was always worth it.

They spent the night on that hill, and as the sun rose, Vincent looked out over the horizon. The land stretched out before him and his friends, a wide length of green. Where they were heading, only Eric knew. It was his journey that Yuffie and Vincent had joined, so they had no real say in the matter. As they ate breakfast, they discussed that very situation.

"Cosmo Canyon," Eric said in between bites of sausage. He had wanted to go there recently. He had

heard of a wise man named Bugenhagen, and wanted to ask him about his strange transformation.

“Very well,” Vincent answered, and Yuffie just nodded in agreement. They had their own questions for the old sage as well. Besides, it had been a while since they had seen their friend Red XIII. They hoped he was well.

“Cosmo Canyon is about a day's journey from here,” Yuffie said as she finished her meal, “We should get there at sundown if we hurry.”

“Alright,” Eric said. At least she knows her way around, Eric thought.

The weather in the morning was clear as they traveled, but it started to rain in the afternoon. It was a cold rain, and made for miserable going. They didn't stop for lunch, so by the time they reached Cosmo Canyon, they were all in foul moods.

“I'm sorry, we just can't let you in,” the man at the gate apologized.

“Why not?” Yuffie asked in a whiney voice. She was cold, wet and hungry, and she was no mood for bad news.

“But we know Red XIII, I mean, Nanaki. Can't you let us in, please.”

“I'm sorry, but Cosmo Canyon is closed to all visitors. There is nothing I can-“

“Fredrick, what's going on here?” A familiar voice asked. They all turned to see a large cat approaching. It was as large as a panther, but its fur was a dark red color. It had a small roman numeral thirteen tattooed onto its back leg. Its body was sleek and muscular, its fur was shiny and healthy. Eric had never seen a creature like it. The rain had caused its mane to wilt down flat, but it still didn't take away from the majestic look of the cat. Eric stood in awe, staring at the beast, until it spoke to the guard. Then Eric found himself on his rear.

“Frederick, these people are allowed in at any time, regardless-“ then stopped when he saw Eric fall.

“Oh, right,” Yuffie said apologetically, “We forgot to mention that Red XIII was a talking cat.”

Red XIII ignored the comment about being a cat, then asked the three to follow him to his home.

They entered a door that was carved into part of the canyon wall. Inside was a staircase that led up to a plateau. On the plateau was a small house and observatory. Red XIII led the three in through the door to the house, and into a small living room. There were only two chairs, and a fireplace, where a small fire glowed brightly.

“Would you care for something to eat?” he offered.

He heard the rumblings of their stomachs and smiled, at least, Eric thought he smiled, and then said, “I'll be right back.”

"I'll help," Vincent offered, then followed him into the kitchen. Yuffie and Eric sat on the floor in front of the fireplace, gazing into the flames. Their clothes were still wet from the rain, but they had already started to dry.

"You didn't tell me you were friends with—"

"With Red XIII," Yuffie interrupted, her tone making an implication. Eric caught the implication quickly. Yuffie and Vincent saw Red XIII as a person, not an animal. Eric felt kinda bad for even letting it cross his mind.

"Don't worry," Yuffie said, casually, "I understand your surprise."

"Thanks," Eric replied.

At that moment, Vincent came back into the room with a tray of tea and fruit. As they ate, Red XIII asked, "So, to what do I owe this visit?"

"Well, we had hoped to speak with Bugenhagen," Vincent explained, then stopped when he saw Red XIII's face fall. "I'm sorry, Red XIII, I didn't realize—"

"It's alright, you couldn't have known. Grandfather died about three months ago. Things just haven't been the same since. I've been taking care of his house, you know, to help preserve his memory."

"I understand," Vincent replied. Eric noticed Vincent's hand got to just below his neck.

"Anyway," Red XIII said suddenly, "Perhaps I could help you?"

"Well," Yuffie began, "It turns out that our friend Eric here has, well he and Vincent are alike." She whispered to their wise friend, "They both have issues."

"I don't have issues!" Eric declared indignantly.

"Yes you do!"

"No I don't!"

"Enough," Vincent said. He didn't say it loudly, but it had enough authority behind it to stop both the bickering teens.

"I'm sorry," Red XIII chuckled, "But I have no knowledge on such things." His face suddenly grew serious, "It is a shame, though. Yet again, Shinra has ruined the life of another innocent."

"That's just it," Vincent explained, "Eric was never experimented on. He only lived with them for several years."

"That is strange," Red XIII said thoughtfully. He looked into the fire, and thought. They all sat silently, listening as the rain slowly tapered off. Yuffie turned and looked out the window to see the clouds

parting, revealing the sunset. The beautiful sunlight shone off the red stone of the canyon, then mingled with the purple color of the sky. The sight was beautiful, and Yuffie stepped outside to enjoy it. She sat down on the edge of the plateau, her legs dangling over the edge, and watched the stunning display. She didn't see sunsets like this in Wutai. She was glad she had joined with Eric. She had forgotten how wonderful the world was, with or without its materia. Well, with its materia. She watched the sun go down, and went inside. What she found was more than a little strange. Eric was in the corner, hunched over something, trembling slightly. Yuffie asked Vincent what she had missed. He explained that had decided to go see Reeve, otherwise known as Cait Sith, in Gold Saucer. He was the only one they could think of that could access Shinra files.

"That doesn't explain what Eric's doing in the corner."

"I gave him the Gold Pass," Red XIII explained, looking at the young man, still huddled in the corner.

"He's never been before, and has been wanting to go for a long time," Vincent added.

"Oh," Yuffie sighed. Sometimes boys were so weird, and yet, kinda cute. Ew, Yuffie thought, I can't believe I even thought that. Eric, cute? No way! But Yuffie couldn't help looking back at the kid before getting ready for bed.

Eric tossed and turned in his sleeping bag. He and the others lay on the floor in the small living room, and every else was asleep, each in their sleeping bags and Red XIII curled up in front of the fireplace. Eric's mind kept wandering, thinking about how he had gotten to this point, and the three friends he had already made, more than he had ever had before. He just hoped that his appearance in their lives wouldn't affect them negatively. He would hate to see any of them get hurt, or worse.

Eric suddenly felt the room get stuffy, so he decided to step outside for some fresh air. The night was cool, with a small breeze in the air. He looked up into the sky, and lost his breath. In the sky were thousands of stars. They were spread everywhere, like someone had taken a handful of crystals and spread them over a black sheet. He gazed at them in awe, and sat down on the edge of the plateau, in the same place Yuffie had earlier, in fact, staring at the sight in wonder. He was so engrossed in the view, that he didn't hear someone's feet approach him from behind, four to be precise.

"It certainly is something," Red XIII commented quietly, causing Eric to jump slightly. He turned to see the cat approach and lay down next to him, his head resting on his front paws. "You know," he continued, "I was born and raised here, and I never grow weary of this sight."

"It's wonderful," Eric answered quietly, "I've never seen the sky so full of stars."

They remained silent for a while, looking up. Suddenly, and without quite realizing it, Eric began humming.

"What is that you're humming?" Red XIII asked. It sounded old, like some song of an ancient tribe.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Eric responded, "It's just a song my mother would sing to me before I went to sleep. She said that I should never forget it, that I should teach it to my children someday. For some reason, looking at the stars always reminds me of the song."

"It sounds nice," Red XIII commented, "Perhaps you could sing the words?"

"What?" Eric asked, his face filled with surprise.

"I'm sorry," the cat apologized, picking his head up off his paws, "I didn't mean to embarrass you. The song sounded familiar, so I wondered about the words."

"Oh, well alright," Eric consented, "But I can't sing all that well, so please don't laugh."

"I promise," Red XIII nodded, and placed his head back on his paws.

Eric began to sing, his voice quiet but still strong. It didn't sound terrible, and Red XIII felt himself drifting off when his ears heard the melodic yet haunting tune.

"Clouded dream on and earthly night,

hangs upon the crescent moon.

A voiceless song in an ageless light,

Sings at the coming dawn.

Birds in flight are calling there

Where the heart moves the stones;

It's there that my heart is calling

All for the love of you.

A Painting hangs on an ivy wall

Nestled in an emerald moss.

The eyes declare a truce of trust

And then it draws me far away.

Deep in the desert twilight

Sand melts in the pools of the sky,

When darkness lays her crimson cloak

Your lamps will call me home.

And so it's there my homage due,

Clutched by the still of the night,

And now I feel you move;

Every breath is full.

So it's there my homage's due,

Clutched by the still of the night.

Even the distance feels so near,

All for the love of you.”

As Eric finished the last note, he looked down at his listener and realized, to his embarrassment, that he started petting Red XIII behind his ears. He pulled his hand away quickly, blood rushing to his face. Red XIII didn't stir, and for that, Eric was glad. He looked at the creature for a moment, then realized why Vincent and Yuffie saw him the way they did. He had a mind, a great, intellectual mind, and was probably far wiser than most humans. He carried himself with dignity and pride, and Eric felt terrible for disgracing the strong and majestic creature by making assumptions based on his appearance. Just a moment ago, Eric had been treating him like an animal, instead of a thinking being, by petting him.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered, and then stood up to leave. Red XIII opened his eyes and sat up. He stretched and yawned, then followed Eric back to the house. When they reached the door, Eric looked at his new friend and smiled.

“Thanks for keeping me company,” he said as he opened the door.

“You're welcome,” Red XIII responded. But before he went in the door, he looked at Eric and said, “By the way, apology accepted and thank you.”

“Thanks,” Eric said, but had a curious look on his face, “But why do you thank me?”

“You managed to scratch that annoying itch behind my ear. I've been trying to get it all day.”

He walked into the house before Eric could respond, and lay back down in his spot in front of the fireplace.

7 - The Great Chocobo Chase!

The next morning, Vincent and company awoke to find a breakfast of ham and biscuits provided by the Cosmo Canyon. When they had finished and were getting ready to leave, Red XIII padded through the door.

"Well, I suppose you'll be leaving now," he sighed sadly, "I'll miss you all."

"Same here, Fuzzy," Yuffie sighed, and patted his head lightly as she walked out the door. Red XIII growled slightly, but didn't respond anymore than that.

"I thank you for my time here, however brief it was," Eric added graciously.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it, and I hope you'll come back soon," Red XIII invited, "But until you do, I want you to have a small gift. Down at the gate of the canyon are three Chocobos. Use them to travel safely to Gold Saucer. Don't worry about returning them. They're able to find their own way back, so just release them when you get them."

Vincent sighed slightly at this good news. Chocobos were capable of traveling much faster than humans; they could cover a yard in a single stride when walking at a brisk pace, and even faster when running. However, monsters feared them, and this trip was not extremely urgent, so they probably would not need to push the yellow birds too much. "Thank you," Vincent said quietly, and the three proceeded outside to find that Yuffie was already waiting for them.

"Come on," she called, "let's get a move on, you slow pokes!"

"Shut up, Yuffie," Eric called back as he approached one of the impatiently stamping birds. He slowly reached out his hand to its head, and it instantly nuzzled against it. As Eric rubbed its head, it gave out a small 'wark', and Eric chuckled slightly.

As Vincent walked to his own chocobo, he cracked a small smile. "You seem to have a new friend," he remarked, mounted their own chocobos. Eric gave the bird another pat on the head before climbing on.

"I'll see you all later," Red XIII called after them as they started off.

The three rode in silence out of the canyon towards the rail that led up to Gold Saucer, with only the footsteps and the occasional 'wark' of their chocobo steeds making any sound. Suddenly, Eric stopped his chocobo and proclaimed loudly, "I'll call him Lord Cluck!"

"What?" both Vincent and Yuffie asked in unison.

"That's his name," Eric explained, "Lord Cluck." He accentuated his point rubbing the bird on its neck, "Right, Lord Cluck?"

"That's what you've been thinking about this whole time?" Yuffie asked, surprised at the sudden outburst.

"Yep," Eric answered

"That's the best you could come up with?" Vincent asked.

Eric looked hurt. He had thought hard about that name. Why would they tear it apart like that? Suddenly, Yuffie stepped in, surprising Eric this time.

"Well, I think it's a cute name," she said defensively. Eric smiled at her in gratitude, but she wasn't done, "Speaking of cute, you look pretty cute on **your** chocobo, Vincent," she giggled. Vincent only groaned, and then drove his chocobo on.

"We need to get moving," he said, the sound of annoyance touching his voice.

"You know, Vincent," Yuffie continued, ignoring Vincent's statement. , "Yellow really is your color. Maybe you should try wearing some; it might make you feel a little less grouchy." As she spoke, she drove her steed ahead of the other two, partially to avoid seeing Vincent's scowl, and partially to giggle quietly to herself for her cleverness.

"Yuffie," Eric warned, seeing the quite disturbing look that Vincent was giving the cheeky girl. If looks could kill, then Yuffie would have been six feet under already.

Suddenly, a rabbit shot out in front of Yuffie's chocobo from the brush near the side of the road. The chocobo became spooked by the sudden movement and jumped straight up into the air. Yuffie lost her footing in her holster, causing her free foot to become entangled in her reigns. Her other foot, still in the holster, became twisted around, causing her more than a little discomfort. When the chocobo had leapt into the air, she did likewise, and when she landed flat on her back, against the saddle of the steed, the panicked bird took off running, flapping its wings wildly, with Yuffie screaming for help as loud as she could. Eric and Vincent watched the whole spectacle, Vincent smiling wickedly at how justice had been served, and Eric laughing uncontrollably.

"Should I go get her?" Eric asked as he finally caught his breath. He realized that the chocobo probably wouldn't stop any time soon, and then they'd have to look for her, which would take even more time. He spurred his own chocobo on after her, while Vincent decided to follow after slowly. It was her own fault she was in this predicament; let her get out of it herself.

Yuffie had stopped screaming by now, but had not been able to pull herself up. With the way her feet were tangled, she couldn't move them at all, and the only thing keeping her on the back of the terrified bird was that she was still holding onto the reigns. Fortunately, she managed to lift her head up to see where she was headed. Unfortunately, she saw that the chocobo was head straight for a steep cliff at the end of the meadow that ran down to the ocean, as well as some very sharp rocks.

"Yuffie!" she heard Eric call, "Hold on!"

“Eric, I’m stuck!” she called back, her voice filled with panic. What if Eric didn’t reach her in time? No, she wouldn’t let herself think like that. She had to try and save herself. Yuffie looked down at the foot twisted in the holster. She pushed her foot as far in as possible, wincing in pain from the twisted ankle, then set the shoe against the holster, then pulled it out. The shoe got caught against the holster, and Yuffie was able to slip her foot out of the shoe, letting it roll onto the ground. She brought her foot up beside the one caught in the reigns and tried to use it to slip her other shoe off. No good, she thought, when she was unable to push it off. By this time, Eric had caught up. He grabbed at the reigns, but missed, his hand simply running over the reigns. Yuffie’s foot had pulled it tight against the bird’s neck when it had become entangled, and Eric was unable to get his fingers around it.

“Yuffie!” Eric called, his voice increasing in panic as the ledge quickly came closer. “Let go of the reigns! That should loosen it up!”

“I can’t! I’ll fall,” she called back, and Eric saw that she was right. If she let go, she would slip down, her leg still entangled, but her head would end up on the ground. If she didn’t have her face mutilated by the talons of the bird, she would suffer a concussion from having her head banged against the ground every time the chocobo took another stride. It seemed helpless, but neither Eric or Yuffie was willing to give up.

“Yuffie, I need you to let go of the reigns! If you don’t, I can’t reign the chocobo in! I’ll work as quickly as I can, but please try to keep yourself up! Try to keep your head off the ground!”

Yuffie nodded, tears of fear forming in her eyes. She looked at Eric for a second, then she closed her eyes and let go, crossing her arms over her chest. She focused all her strength in keeping herself upright, knowing what would happen if she didn’t. As soon as she let go, Eric grabbed the reigns, which had immediately loosened. He wrapped his fingers around the reigns, while he pulled the reigns of his own chocobo, letting the force of his stop halt the panicked bird. It came to a stop, and Eric immediately jumped off his mount to help Yuffie off of hers. He helped her stand, holding her shoulders steady so she could regain her composure, but before he could even react, she put her arms around him and hugged him close. Eric stood there, his eyes wide with shock. He heard her sob quietly into his chest, and when she looked up, he saw her eyes were red with tears.

“Thank you, so much,” she sobbed, whipping the tears from her eyes. “I honestly thought I was going to die back there.”

“No problem,” Eric replied quietly, “I sure you would have done the same thing for me. At least, I think you would have.”

“Of course,” she said with a stunned look on her face, “I wouldn’t have thought twice about it,” and then gave him another hug. They stood there for a minute, silently contemplating what had happened and how close the two of them had come to losing their lives. Yuffie let go, and turned back to her chocobo to meet up again with Vincent, but not before giving Eric a quick peck on the cheek. As she adjusted her saddle and holsters, she smiled to herself. That was a nice thing Eric had done for her; so nice that she almost felt bad for slipping several materia of his belt when she had hugged him the second time. Almost, but not quite.

When they met up with Vincent, they explained what had happened, and Vincent seemed earnestly

concerned for Yuffie, even though Eric thought he heard Vincent say under his breath, "Serves her right."

Later that evening, the three set up camp near a small stream. Branches and such had washed up from the stream, and after being properly dried, it made excellent firewood. The three now sat around this fire, talking about the day's events. In nearby, the sounds grazing chocobos were heard.

"I'm going to go check on them," Eric said as he stood up and stretched. He walked off, leaving Yuffie and Vincent in silence. Vincent laid back against a stone and closed his eyes. As soon as he did, he heard Yuffie start talking to herself quietly.

"Now let's see what we got here," he heard her say, "Ooh, a Haste and a Full Cure, how nice."

Vincent opened his eyes, sat up and looked directly at her. "Yuffie, what are you doing?"

"N-nothing," she answered, startled.

"Really," Vincent answered, standing up, "Where did you come by those materia?"

"I found them," she replied somewhat defiantly, as she too stood up.

"You found mastered materia here in the middle of no where? That was pretty lucky," Vincent pointed out sarcastically.

"Yeah, it was."

"Try telling the truth," was all that Vincent said. "I know where you got them, thought I'm not going to make you give them back." Vincent was starting to sound like a parent again.

"You're not," Yuffie asked, somewhat surprised.

"No," Vincent said firmly, "I will just say this. Remember who saved your life," and with that, he laid back down and closed his eyes. He knew Yuffie could be greedy, but not that greedy. She would give them back, eventually. He heard her sigh loudly, then heard footsteps approach.

"Wow, Vincent's already asleep," he heard Eric comment.

"Yeah, he is," Yuffie said quietly.

"Well, the chocobos are all tied down for the night. Guess I'll hit the hay as well."

"Wait, Eric," Vincent heard Yuffie say suddenly. He opened one eye, and saw her approach the young man. "You dropped these," she said quietly, holding out the materia and not even looking Eric in the face.

"Thanks, Yuffie! Thank you so much. I can't believe I dropped these. I would have been devastated if you hadn't found these. Thank you so much!" Eric's face was filled with joy, and Yuffie seemed to be pretty

happy as well, though Vincent could see in her eyes she regretted handing the materia over. He closed his eyes and let himself drift off to sleep. And as he slept, he couldn't help but smile slightly.

8 - So....This Is Goldsaucer

Traveling for the next morning was great, with bright skies and warm air. Vincent explained that they were getting closer to Gold Saucer and the desert that surrounded it, and with a wind coming from the southeast; the hot desert air would make the temperatures warmer. Eric looked into the blue sky, his eyes distant, yet happy. Yuffie watched him, how his eyes were so peaceful, so carefree. She brought her chocobo up next to his then tapped him lightly on the shoulder. Eric jumped slightly, and then looked to her with that same content smile.

“Eric,” she started, “what are you doing?”

“Just thinking,” Eric replied, “See, when I was young, I read a lot of adventure stories. You know, about traveling to save the world kind of stuff. Well, I always wanted to travel. Not for any reason, just because, with no real destinations in mind.”

“That's nice,” Yuffie answered. “And I know what you mean, there's nothing like the open road.”

Vincent rode behind the pair, listening intently to their conversation. As he listened and watched the two, he noticed how much they reminded him of himself and Lucrecia. He recalled how he and Lucrecia didn't get along very well at first, and even though Vincent thought she was beautiful when he first met her, he saw her as a bratty daddy's girl. But as they spent more time together, Vincent found they had more in common than he thought. After that, they were inseparable, and many good memories were made.

Thinking of Lucrecia caused Vincent, without even thinking about it, to reach into his collar and pull out the thin chain that he wore around his neck. On this chain was a small locket, just a simple, silver oval with the engraving of a single rose. He clicked it open to reveal a small portrait of his love, Lucrecia. Vincent gazed at it for a moment, remembering when he and Lucrecia had given one another's portraits to each other.

It was the last time Vincent saw her alive. They had sworn to keep them forever, and to never forget one another. “How stupid I was,” Vincent said quietly, thinking of the irony of it all. A single tear formed in his eye as he closed the locket and put it back under his collar.

“Hey, Vincent! Whatcha doin,” he heard Yuffie call. Vincent looked up to see that he had inadvertently stopped his chocobo, and that Eric and Yuffie had gotten some distance on him.

“Vincent! You have to see this!” Yuffie called, her voiced filled with excitement. Vincent brought his chocobo to the top of the hill they were on, and looked down towards where Yuffie was pointing.

Below was the desert, or where the desert used to be. Now the large area was filled with tall buildings, golden in color, with bright lights and large windows. Tiny dots could be seen between the buildings, people moving around from one amazing sight to the next. In the center was the large tower and saucers that used to house Gold Saucer.

"Looks like they've upgraded," Vincent said quietly, his eyes losing their typical cool and growing large at the sight of the huge city. Eric, whose mouth was hanging open, just nodded his head. Yuffie couldn't take it any longer.

"Come on," she cried, "what are we standing around with our mouths open for; waiting for flies to choke us before we get there? Let's go already!" And with that, she drove her chocobo down the hill, with Eric and Vincent following behind.

As the three approached the edge of enormous amusement park, they saw a huge line to use the entrance gate. Yuffie stomped her foot in frustration.

"Well this is stupid," she said, pouting. "How are we supposed to get in?"

"I know," Eric answered sarcastically, "How dare they ask us to be patient and wait our turn."

"Why did you say it like that?" Yuffie asked angrily.

"Well, Captain Obvious, I said it that way because you asked a stupid question."

"No I didn't!"

"Yes, you did!"

"Quiet!" Vincent interjected forcefully. Yes, they were just like Lucrecia and himself. "Now look," he said slowly and quietly, "It appears we have no choice but to wait like everyone else. I don't want to hear another sound out of either of you towards each other until we get in, understand?"

Eric looked away from the group, his face slightly red from embarrassment, and Yuffie crossed her arms and huffed loudly. Vincent just shook his head, and couldn't help but smile slightly at how ridiculous the words coming out of his mouth sounded.

They ended up in line for an hour and a half getting through the entrance gate. When they got to the front and showed their Gold Pass, they walked through the gate, and saw a familiar sight. Waving to the entering guests was a large pink moogles. It had shiny black eyes and large arms and feet, with a small set of bat wings on its back. Yuffie ran up to it, with Vincent looking around for their friend that would most likely be nearby.

The three approached the large moogles, which was actually nothing more than an animated stuffed animal. It seemed to recognize them, because it looked at them for a moment, then it stopped moving completely. Suddenly, the moogles started talking with a familiar voice.

"Vincent! Yuffie! It's great to see you!"

"Reeve? Is that you?" Yuffie asked, somewhat surprised at the voice. As long as the two had known Reeve, or his alias, Cait Sith, they had never seen his moogles doll speak.

"I can see you're surprised," the moogles chuckled, though its eyes never changed their emotionless expression.

"Just a little," Yuffie answered, patting him on the head, "We've just never seen you talk through the moogles before."

"I know, I'm experimenting with a microphone that is directly wired from me to the doll."

"Whatever," Yuffie said, getting bored with the technical details.

"We need to talk with you," Vincent said, stepping forward.

"Ah, Vincent, don't you ever relax? You're all work, no play. Actually, I was hoping I would get to see you soon. I have a question of my own."

"Very well," Vincent nodded, "where shall we meet?"

"Well, I was hoping I could speak with just you," he replied quietly, hoping Yuffie, who had walked off with Eric and was getting something to drink, wouldn't hear.

"Easier said than done," Vincent answered, "You know how she is. Besides, there's another kid, Eric, that's with us too."

"Eric?" Reeve asked.

"I'll explain later, we just have to get them out of here first."

"Leave that to me," Reeve answered, his voice carrying a sly tone. Suddenly, the doll fell flat on its face, and a voice came over the intercom system.

"Would the holders of the winning golden pass, numbered 6082431, please report to the receptionist building to claim your all-expenses paid Golden Park Time passes. The holders of golden pass 6082431 please claim your prize of two Golden Park Time passes. Their values will be explained when you pick them up. Thank you, and have a golden day at Gold Saucer."

Vincent looked in the direction of Yuffie, who wasn't even looking to see if she had won. Eric tapped her on the shoulder, and she looked up, then Vincent saw Eric take the gold pass, look at it, then watched as both him and Yuffie ran off towards the front. He couldn't believe it, but Reeve had done it. He turned back to the moogles doll, which stood up again.

"Just follow the doll," Reeve explained, "It'll take you right to me. I can't talk anymore, I have customers," and with that, the doll was once again fell silent, and started walking down the busy street. Vincent followed quietly.

"These passes give you unlimited rides on any ride here in Gold Saucer, as well as half price on all games. You can go to one free show a day, and stay in the hotel of your choice. All food is free and you are able to skip right to the front of any line for a ride, provided you are of the right height."

As the woman behind the receptionist counter explained the value of their passes, Eric and Yuffie just stared in disbelief at each other. They couldn't believe their luck. As the two left the reception area with their new passes, a thought struck Eric.

"What about Vincent?"

"What about him," Yuffie echoed.

"Well, there's only two passes," Eric pointed out, "What's he going to do?"

"Does it matter? If he was here, he'd probably act like a martyr and depress us all."

"Well, where is he?"

"Probably went to see Reeve, so they can talk about boring tech stuff."

The two walked into the ride area of the park, looking at all the amazing rides, trying to figure out what to go on first.

"Let's ride that one!" Yuffie pointed, indicating a huge roller coaster. Eric, who had a fear of heights, looked around for something else.

"How about that one," he said, pointing to the Moogle Train, a slow moving train ride.

"You have to be kidding," Yuffie said haughtily, as if it was beneath her.

"Well, kinda," Eric answered sheepishly, not wanting to let Yuffie know his fear. Heaven only knew how she would treat him if she found out.

"Good, then quit fooling around and let's go!" And with that, she grabbed his wrist and pulled him to the ride. They got to the front of line with their passes, and as Yuffie and Eric were strapped in, Eric tried his best to comfort himself.

"It's just a ride, it's just a ride, it's just a ride," he chanted to himself over and over, hoping his heart wouldn't tear out of his chest from pounding so hard. He braced himself against the seat as the cart went up, and Yuffie glanced over.

"You're not scared are you," she asked, nudging him. Eric turned to her and started to open his mouth, but the sudden drop of the hill kept the words from coming out. The ground rushed towards them, and the next thing Eric knew, he was lying on the ground and Yuffie was slapping his face. Really, really hard.

"Come on, Eric, snap out of it!"

"Yuffie! Cut it out! I'm up, I'm up!" He sat up, his cheek red and stinging from when Yuffie was hitting him. He glared at her. "Could you hit any harder?"

"Well, yeah," Yuffie said, rolling her eyes, "but I didn't want to hurt you."

"I could tell," Eric answered, rubbing his sore cheek.

"Don't be such a wimp," she responded, helping him to his feet. "You need to toughen up."

"I'm fine."

"You only fight with material," she explained, "That's wimpy."

"No it's not," Eric mumbled, starting to walk away.

"Ah, come on, don't take it so hard. I'm just trying to help."

"How?" Eric asked, turning back to her.

"Life is tough," Yuffie explained, "So you need to get tough too."

"Well, `Doctor Yuffie', what do you suggest?"

Yuffie thought for a moment, then a smile spread across her face and she snapped her fingers in triumph. "I've got it. We'll go to the Arena!"

"What!" Eric said, startled by her idea.

"Yeah, we'll sign up for a team match, with no materia allowed."

"WHAT!" Eric shouted, drawing people's attention. "I can't fight without materia! Are you nuts?"

But Yuffie wasn't listening; she was too busy looking at a map of the park. "It says here that the actual arena doesn't open until after dark, but they have a training center that's perfect for beginning and advanced fighter's alike."

"Yuffie, are you listening?" Eric asked, crossing his arms. She looked at him, and Eric spoke slowly, "I-can't-fight!"

"You can with some training," she replied, grabbing his arm again. They started walking towards the center spire of the park. "We'll also need to see what type of weapon to get you."

Eric just shook his head as he followed along quietly. He knew arguing was pointless, and that Yuffie probably would ignore him anyway.

9 - Memory Lane Is A Cruel Place

Vincent followed his stuffed guide through the streets of the amusement park to an area marked Theatre District, but when he had located his friend, he quickly found out that his meeting was not going to be short and sweet.

“Sorry, but I can't get away right now,” the cat shrugged, “As you can see, this crowd won't be going anywhere anytime soon.”

“So you called me down here for nothing?”

“Not nothing,” the cat said, rather annoyed at Vincent's rudeness, “I want to talk, I just didn't expect this group! Ow, stop pulling my tail!” he yelled to one particularly rude girl. “Just go have fun,” he yelled through the crowd, “I'll give you a call on this PHS when I get the chance,” and he tossed the small communicator to Vincent.

Vincent had half a mind to chuck it back at the cat, but held his anger and stalked off. He walked through the Theatre District for awhile, looking for something to do, but was unsuccessful. He was about to give up and head back to Cait Sith when he heard the sound of singing coming from an open door. The door led into a club called “The Golden Star,” and had a sign below it offering a prize to the best singer in a singing contest. Vincent smiled slightly and thought out loud, “This should be good for a laugh.”

The club was dim, with dark blues and greens decorating the walls. Small lights hung from the ceiling above the tables and sofas and the a small stage stood at the far end of the club. A singer was stepping off the stage as Vincent walked in, so the stage was currently empty.

Vincent approached the bar in the corner and ordered a Bloody Shiva, a personal favorite, then took his drink and sat down at one of the tables. As he lifted the glass to his lips, the curtains at the front of the room opened to reveal a beautiful young woman, who looked like she was in her twenties, probably around Vincent's age. The woman had a smooth, pale face, outlined by blonde hair. Her lavender, almond-shaped eyes were lined with a purple liner that matched her lipstick. Her nails were also painted a deep violet, and she wore a beautiful, black dress, and around her neck was a black ribbon that was tied into a bow. The bottom of her dress reached down to just above her ankles, where it was lined with a black lace.

She stepped slowly to the microphone, her eyes glancing around, slightly nervous. Clearing her throat quietly, she nodded to the small band over to her left. As they struck up the tune, a haunting and melodic song, Vincent slowly realized that he knew the music. The notes drifted on the edge of his memory, as if it was a dream that had long since passed.

“The valley of green was so serene,

In the middle, ran a stream so blue....

A maiden fair, in despair, once had met her true love there and she told him...

She would say...

“Promise me, when you see, a white rose you'll think of me.

I love you so,

Never let go,

I will be your ghost of a rose....”

Yes, Vincent could remember it all now. It had been one of their last times together. They had gone to a club in Midgar, not unlike this one, and had danced to this song. Lucrecia had declared it their song as she leaned her head against his chest.

“Her eyes believed in mysteries

She would lay amongst the leaves of amber

Her spirit wild, heart of a child, yet gentle still, and quiet and mild and he loved her...

When she would say...

“Promise me, when you see, a white rose you'll think of me,

I love you so,

Never let go,

I will be your ghost of a rose....”

Vincent promised her that night that he would do as the song said, and that her face would always fill his thoughts whenever he would see a white rose. That was the same night he had first told her he loved her, the night they shared their first real kiss.

“When all was done, she turned to run

Dancing to the setting sun as he watched her

And ever more he thought he saw

A glimpse of her upon the moors forever

He'd hear her say...

Promise me, when you see, a white rose you'll think of me

I love you so,

Never let go,

I will be your ghost of a rose..."

On the final words of the song, Vincent felt a tear trickle down his cheek. Those last words brought back his final memories of his time with Lucrecia.

"Lucrecia," Vincent said quietly as he approached the young woman. She was writing in her journal in the executive gardens in the Shinra building, but when she saw him coming, she quickly shut it. Vincent noticed the action, but dismissed it, thinking it was because she didn't want him to see it. That was alright, though. He had a surprise for her, something that would make them both very happy.

"Yes, Vincent," she said quietly, looking up at him. Her face showed lines of worry, and Vincent was sad to see them, but continued on with what he had to say.

"I have something for you," he said shyly. From behind his back, he produced a bouquet of white roses. It had taken a great deal of money to buy them, a quarter of his last pay check actually, but he didn't care. For Lucrecia, it was worth it.

"Oh, Vincent," she cried happily, "They're lovely!"

"I hoped you would like them."

"Like them? I love them! Oh, Vincent, you're so sweet!"

"Well, it is our one year anniversary, and I felt that my promise from last night should be honored," Vincent explained, reminding her of their song last night. Lucrecia looked down at the flowers, and Vincent saw some tears trickle down her cheeks. She looked up and smiled, then burst into tears.

Vincent didn't understand, but went to her side and placed his arm around her. She leaned against him, and Vincent felt her tears on his shoulder, and his heart hurt. It always pained him to see her cry, and she had been doing it a lot recently. But he was always there for her to lean on, a secure shoulder to cry on.

When the tears had finally quieted, he placed his finger under her chin and lifted her face. Their eyes met, and Vincent felt now would be the time to ask. Now would be the time to take control of his life, for the first time in a long time.

"Lucrecia," he said slowly, kneeling down in front of her, "I want to ask you something." He reached into the pocket of his blue uniform and pulled out a small, black velvet box. He opened it to reveal a

beautiful silver ring. It was set with a sapphire, Lucrecia's birthstone, and ringed with tiny diamonds.

Lucrecia looked into his eyes, a smile on her lips but tears in her green eyes. "Vincent," she said slowly, "I love you with every ounce of my heart and soul."

Vincent prepared himself for the one word that would lead to a life of loving bliss.

"But.." she said quietly, "But I cannot accept."

Vincent's heart stopped and his breath wouldn't come to him. He felt his stomach heave slightly, and a paralyzing chill ran through him. In one second, his entire world came crashing down.

"I'm sorry," she said, more tears welling up in her eyes, "But Hojo and I are already engaged. He proposed this morning."

Hojo. That filthy man. That monster that had haunted his and Lucrecia's steps for the whole year he had known his love. He had taken something from him that could never be replaced.

"We are to be wed in two days," the sad woman continued. "If I could, my love, I would call it off, but I cannot. The entire situation is too complicated for that."

Vincent just stared at her, his red eyes unblinking in stunned silence. She rose to her feet, taking his hands in her own. They both stood together, their heads bowed in sadness. Then Lucrecia reached into her own pocket and pulled out a small, silver locket on a silver chain. On the front was a single rose, and when she opened it, there was a portrait of herself inside.

"I thought that perhaps you would want this," she explained slowly, "I have the one you gave me." She stopped and wiped away a tear, "If we have these, we can be connected forever."

Vincent accepted the small gift, and placed it around his neck. Suddenly, they heard footsteps coming up the path behind them. They turned around to see Hojo coming towards them, his face burning a bright red underneath his thin glasses.

"Lucrecia, come away from him, we need to get back to the subjects!" he ordered loudly, and walked up to her. He roughly grabbed her arm and started to pull her away. Vincent followed behind them, and would have liked nothing more than to put a bullet into the back of Hojo's head, but kept his hand steady for Lucrecia's sake. When they reached the elevator, Hojo shoved Lucrecia inside and pressed the button to take her to the lab. Before the doors closed, he stepped between them and waited for them to close. Hojo turned his grey eyes on Vincent, glaring as hard as he could. Slowly, a nasty smirk spread across his thin lips and he leaned in close to Vincent.

"I win," was all he said, he stepped into the second elevator and shut the door. Vincent returned to his room that night and, doing something he hadn't done in years, he cried himself to sleep, his spirit completely overwhelmed with the pain he was experiencing.

Two days later, Vincent received word that Lucrecia had died, but that he was not allowed anywhere near the funeral. Despite this order, Vincent, grief completely consuming his judgement, slipped into the

cemetery located in the far corner of Midgar. He watched the procession and where they laid his love to rest, and after the rest had left, he went to her to pay his own last respects. Laying on her grave a single, white rose, he knelt down and cried over it. As he did, he spoke the chorus from the song that they had made their own.

“Promise me..when you see” he whispered, his voice trembling from sorrow, “A white rose, you'll think of me. I love you so...” he forced the words out, his entire body trembling, “Never let go. I will be....your ghost of a rose.” The last words came out as a strained whisper, half sung half cried. He was so caught in his sorrow that he didn't hear footsteps behind him or even realise that someone was standing above him until he felt a sharp pain on the back of his head and rolled over. As darkness covered his eyes, he was able to make out the sneering face of Hojo, the man who had and would take everything away from him.

Vincent rose from the table he was sitting at and walked quickly out the door. The sun was setting over Gold Saucer, and the cool desert air was settling in. He sat down on a bench, frustrated with himself. His emotions were running high, the guilt stinging him. Why couldn't he protect her? Why was he the one who had to bear this shame? Why couldn't he have a normal life like everyone else? “Why do I have to be denied happiness?” he asked quietly, gazing into the setting sun gleaming from in between the golden buildings.

A door clicked open in the alley behind him and he turned to see the woman from the stage step out. She closed the door behind her and started walking forward when she noticed Vincent standing just across from her.

“Oh,” she said, surprised, “Good evening.”

“Good evening,” Vincent nodded in reply. She smiled and came forward.

“Excuse me,” she said politely, “But perhaps you were in there.” She motioned to the club then turned back to him, “Did you hear me sing?”

Vincent nodded, somewhat startled by her forwardness, but said nothing else.

“Did I sound nice?”

To this, Vincent didn't respond right away. He couldn't. How could he say that it sounded nice when it was so much more than that; when it symbolized the greatest thing he had ever experienced, true love.

“It sounded nice,” Vincent answered simply, unemotionally, “I enjoyed it.”

“Thank you,” the woman sighed, “I feared that it didn't.”

“No need to worry about that.”

“Well, it was the first time I had ever performed in front of people, so I wasn't sure if my being nervous had affected my voice.”

“You couldn't tell.”

“Oh,” the woman said softly. She looked at the cold man, realizing that he probably didn't want to talk, and started to walk away.

“You really do sing well,” she heard him say quietly, and she smiled as she turned around again. As she walked back towards him, she looked him up and down. He was a very handsome man, with a smooth, pale face and beautiful hair. His form seemed frail, but his red eyes and the way he carried himself suggested a strength within, stronger than any she had seen. He actually reminded her of her old boyfriend, and that maybe why he seemed so familiar. Regardless, he didn't seem to her to be like the kind that would compliment often, so she appreciated the words of encouragement.

“So, what are you doing here in Gold Saucer?” she asked as she sat down on the bench next to him. When she did, he stood up and leaned against a light pole. No problem, she thought to herself, I'll get him to like me.

“I'm here to see a friend,” Vincent answered.

“Really?” she asked, hoping that didn't mean what she thought, “A female friend?”

“No,” Vincent replied, and she sighed contently. Good, she thought to herself, he's still available. “I'm here for business reasons.” Oh no, she thought again, he's a businessman, how boring.

“Well,” the woman said, rising to her feet, and extended her hand, “I don't believe we've even been properly introduced. I am Kathleen Beshel.”

“Vincent Valentine,” Vincent answered, taking her hand gently in his. It was warm and smooth, like Lucrecia's were, and Vincent felt happy for a moment. His mind felt the happy nostalgia that is associated with good memories, but then lost it when she removed her hand slowly from his.

“Would you like a drink?” she asked politely.

“I've already had one, thank you,” Vincent replied, but when he saw her eyes drop, he decided that it wouldn't hurt to get to know this woman. She seemed nice enough, and he would more or less never see her again.

“Actually,” he said slowly, “A drink sounds very nice right now.” Kathleen smiled and walked beside him back into the club. Perhaps there really is someone out there for me, she thought to herself. So far, things were off to a slow but nice start. This Vincent was nice, though a bit cold, but then again, she herself didn't give a very approachable appearance most of the time. Once I get to know him, she thought to herself as the two sat down at a table, he'll be much better. She could only hope that was true.

“Ooh, this one looks cool!” Yuffie exclaimed as she picked up a huge halberd. The thing was as tall as she was, with a sharp, swirling head and decorative ribbons on the head and below the blade. She could barely hold it up, and Eric rolled his eyes.

“Yuffie,” he started to say, but she cut him off.

“I know, let's look at throwing weapons,” and she ran to the weapons rental counter. As she spoke with the man, Eric just sighed and looked around. The two had discovered this store when they went around the arena. The whole way there, Eric had tried to convince Yuffie to stop with her crazy idea, but, as he had guessed, she just ignored him anyway. They had been in the store for an hour, and so far Yuffie had made him try out over ten different swords, three spears, four staffs and a mace, and absolutely none of them worked well for him, not to mention his arms were so sore and tired from slicing and parrying, he felt like they could fall off. He could only hope that they were out of weapons.

Suddenly, something caught his eye. A large red curtain hung in front of a doorway. The curtain was made of a thick velvet, on the curtain was embroidered all kinds of different symbols and images of battles. Brave knights and fearsome monsters shimmered in the light, and Eric thought that he could almost hear the sounds of battle. Eric knew that he really shouldn't, but his curiosity was too great, so he slipped behind the curtain, and into a dark room inside.

The room was lit only by candles, and they were spread out through the area, casting an eerie light on everything inside. All around the room were weapons, and very old ones at that. Throwing daggers, wands, javelins, slings, there was a large assortment, but still nothing that was particularly pleasing to Eric. He was about to leave when he saw something hanging on the wall.

At first, he wasn't sure it was even a weapon, considering its shape, but when he got a closer look, the blades stood out clearly. On the wall, above a lone candle were two rings. They were large, about the size of Eric's head, but were flat, with blades on the inside and out. He ran his fingers around the edge of one, making sure not to cut himself. The blades were still very sharp, and Eric wondered how a person could possibly use a weapon like that. He gently took them off the hooks on the wall, then saw a thin strand coming off of both the rings. He followed them to a small box in front of the candle, and when he opened it, the answer to his question was revealed. Inside the box was a pair of black gloves with the strands connected to the palm of the gloves. He slipped the gloves on, though they were way too big. There were straps on the end for him to tighten so the gloves would stay on, and after making them fit snugly, he grabbed the weapons in both hands. The blades wouldn't cut through the gloves. No matter how tightly he grasped the rings, the blades wouldn't cut through the cloth of the gloves. Eric even felt brave enough to try and slice the glove while it was on his hand. No matter how hard he tried, the blade would not slice the flimsy fabric.

“Eric! Eric!” Yuffie's voice startled him.

“I'm in here,” he called back, then turned back to the blades. Yuffie pushed aside the curtain and stepped inside.

“What are ya doin' here in the dark? You're not becoming like Vincent, are you?”

"No," Eric answered distantly, his eyes not leaving the rings, although someone saying he was like Vincent would have been a compliment anyway, "I was just looking at these." He showed Yuffie the rings and gloves.

"What's with the gloves?"

"I think they protect your hands from being cut," Eric explained, still not quite sure.

"Nah, the blades are just dull," Yuffie corrected, then took one of them. When she did, she yelped in pain and dropped the ring. It fell to the floor with a loud clatter, and when Eric picked it up, there was blood on the edge of it. On Yuffie's palm was a line of blood from where the blade had cut her.

"Yuffie," Eric cried, "You're bleeding!"

"I know, and now we're probably going to have to buy the stupid rings, 'cause I got blood on 'em."

Suddenly, the curtain was thrown open and the store owner, a small and stocky man, stepped inside. He squinted as his eyes adjusted to the dim lights, then they widened when he saw the rings.

"What did you do to the chakrams?"

"The 'what-ams?" Eric asked, as he examined Yuffie's wound.

"Chakrams, the rings you bloodied up, are very rare and powerful. At least they were. They don't work anymore."

"What do you mean?" Eric asked, starting to become very interested.

"Well, way back when, some race, I think the Cetra or something like that, made them. The gloves are from woven mithril and the blades are mithril as well."

"Well, if it is made of mithril, then how is it any less powerful?"

"Well, there's a story that says that the chakrams would return to the owner if thrown. They said that a mithril strand connected the glove to the chakram, but it would only return to a member of the race that created it. The strand was only visible to one of the race as well."

Eric's eyes widened when he remembered the strand he saw. What did this mean?

"So, how much for 'em?" Yuffie asked.

"Well, normally, I wouldn't sell it because of how old it is, but for you two, I'll take six thousand gil."

"What?" Yuffie shouted.

"Sorry, but that's the price," the clerk said resignedly.

Eric grabbed Yuffie's arm and pulled her to the side.

"Yuffie," he whispered, "There's something I need to tell you."

"I know," Yuffie whispered back, "That guy's a total rip-off artist."

"That's not it," Eric replied, frustrated, "I can see the strand."

"The what?"

"That strand he was talking about," Eric answered, his voice quivering with excitement and fear, "I can see it! It's tied around the rings right here," he pointed out. He then picked up the rings by the strand and held them in the air, but to Yuffie, it appeared as if they were floating by themselves.

"Oh my gosh!" Yuffie said loudly, "How are you doing that?"

"I'm not doing anything," Eric answered, "The strand is holding it."

"That's amazing," Yuffie answered, "But I don't know if I have enough cash."

"I think I have some left from when Vincent gave me gil."

"Well, I only have two thousand, and I'm giving that to you."

"Thanks a lot," Eric said sarcastically, then had an idea. It would mean a serious sacrifice, but it would be worth it to get these rings.

"Well, I don't have much gil," he admitted, "Only two thousand, but could you possibly take materia?"

"I suppose," the man rubbed his chin thoughtfully, "But only if it was worth the amount."

"Well, how about—"

"How about this," Yuffie said suddenly, thrusting a green materia into the man's hand, "An almost mastered Poison materia."

Eric stood shocked, amazed by what Yuffie had just done. What surprised him even more was that when the man took it and the rest of the money, Yuffie didn't jump on top of him trying to change her mind and take it back. As the two left the store and headed towards a practice area, Eric turned to his friend.

"Yuffie, I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything," she mumbled, her voice sounding sad and happy at the same time, "Otherwise, I might change my mind."

"Well, thanks," Eric replied.

“Oh, don't thank me,” she said misceviously, “You owe me a Poison materia, you know.”

Eric just smiled. It was good to have friends.

“No, No! You throw it like this! Not that way!” Yuffie said in frustration. She had been trying to get Eric to throw the chakram properly for half an hour, and had been unsuccessful in doing so.

“I'm sorry, Yuffie, but I did just start learning how to use these things today.”

“I know,” Yuffie said, her voice returning to normal, “Which is why you have to listen to me. Otherwise, you'll end up dying in the tournament, or worse.”

“I thought you said these tournaments were perfectly safe.”

“I may have stretched the truth a bit,” Yuffie said sheepishly, “Okay, I lied. You can get hurt and die, but only sometimes.”

“Thanks,” Eric said sarcastically, “And what could be worse then that?”

“Well, you could end up losing to a lttle girl.”

Eric sighed then looked back down at the weapons in his hands. They shimmered brightly, the blood having been cleaned off of them, and Eric was happy when he looked at them. The strand was still attached, but Eric hadn't made use of it yet. He would surprise everyone when they came back to him, but until then, he had to go pick them up after they were thrown. At leas, that was what Yuffie had told him to do, and since he was tired of her getting angry at him, he didn't say anything. He went and picked up the blade, then turned to face his teacher. When he did, he saw three men approaching him and Yuffie from across the practice area. At the head of the group was a tall man, with straight black hair and brown eyes. Except for the eyes, Eric thought to himself, he looks kinda like Vincent. Behind him was a big man with a bald head and the other man was shorter with a head of short red hair.

“Hey, you,” Yuffie called to the men, “We reserved this room!”

“Sorry,” the man said, and Eric felt as if he had heard the voice before. The man looked at Eric with his cold eyes and said quietly, “Your time's up.”

Faster then either Eric or Yuffie could react, the black-haired man pulled out a gun and pointed it right at Eric. “Don't move,” the man growled, “Or I will pull this trigger.”

“What are you doing?” Eric asked frantically.

“We've come for you,” the man replied simply, “Did you honestly think you could run from Shinra forever?”

Shinra, the name of the one place on earth Eric wished he could forget. The one place that had brought so much trouble to him and his family. He had tried his best to run from that past, but it seemed that his past had finally caught up with him.

“Hey, boneheads!” Eric heard someone shout. All heads turned to Yuffie just as she through her shurikan. It flew straight towards the man with the gun, but he managed to jump back a fired at a shot at her. She dove to the left, but was met by the red-haired man.

“Yuffie, how nice to see you again,” he said calmly, almost flirtatiously.

“Ew, is that you, Reno?”

“The one and only, and what do you mean by ew?”

Eric didn't have time to listen to the rest. Without even thinking about it, he flung the chakrams towards the leader. The blade spun towards him, and managed to cut slightly into his side as he rolled away. The man placed a black gloved-hand on the wound, then pulled out the gun again, though now, hhe pointed it at Yuffie. He smirked once at Eric, then aimed at the girl, who was dodging blows from Reno. He swung a long, metal rod at her, and she was barely able to dodge in time. Eric saw that she couldn't escape the man and the shot, and ran towards her. As he dove infront of her, he heard a shot, then felt his body being struck with something.

Instead of the pain he had expected, he felt a numbing sensation running through him. He fell to the ground and saw the world grow dark around him. He couldn't move any part of his body, and laid there helplessly until his eyes closed and sank him into a blank, paralyzed abyss.

Yuffie watched Eric take the hit, and ran to him, but was stopped by Rude, the huge bald man. He grabbed her by the hair and then tossed her into the wall of the area. Stars danced before her as she rose unsteadily to her feet.

“We had better get back quickly,” she heard Tseng say before the three walked out of the arena. Rude had the unconscious Eric slung over his shoulder, and Reno smiled at her triumphantly before folling Tseng and Rude out of the room. She stumbled towards them, but her steps were slow, for she still felt dizzy from hitting the wall. She finally regained her senses enough to run after them, but they had disappeared.

“Come back here, you jerks!” she screamed. “I'll kill you if you hurt him!” The only answer she received was the sound of helicopter propellers. She ran out of the Battle Arena to see a helipad outside, meant for flying in the rich who had come to see the tournaments and competitors. The helicopter rose into the air, too high for Yuffie to jump, and took off north, back to Midgar.

10 - The Eyes of a Killer

Eric blinked his eyes open when he heard the sound of angry yelling. As he opened his eyes slowly, hoping the incident with the Turks was just a dream, he found that it wasn't. Instead, he found himself lying face down on cold, wet, ground. He felt panic rising within him as he realized that he couldn't move his arms or legs; he couldn't even feel them.

Suddenly, a foul smell wafted into his nostrils, the smell of rotting wood, grass and stagnant water. He brought his head slowly around, and saw behind him tall weeds and cattails. The smell seemed to get stronger as he looked at the weeds, and Eric realized that they were near a bog, and there was only one marsh he could think of; the Midgar marsh. The swampland was located near the Chocobo Ranch, and was a home for foul monsters and such, a place that was most certainly not safe to spend the night. Suddenly, he heard voices growing louder and turned back around and laid his head on the moist ground, hoping his captors would think him still unconscious.

"I'm telling you, Tseng, I checked it before we left," Reno said, almost pleadingly.

"Then how did we run out!" Tseng shouted back, his frustration apparent on his face.

"I don't know!"

"How can you not know? There's a meter that shows the gasoline levels! Any half-wit could tell we were running low! Do you realize what Velk will say! He'll be furious that we've taken as long as we have already!"

Despite how scared he felt, Eric couldn't help but look up at the two and smile slightly. Even now, when it seemed that his luck had finally run out, he still received a faint glimmer of hope. If Yuffie saw him as even the smallest bit of a friend, then perhaps she would tell Vincent, and the two would come looking for him. Unfortunately, they had absolutely no idea where he was, let alone where in the middle of this vast swampland he was. He sighed heavily as the weight of the situation came back down on him, perhaps too heavily.

"Oh, look," Reno snickered, "Sleeping Beauty's awake."

Eric just remained quiet, looking stoically at the man, the way Vincent looked at people. It helped him feel a little more brave.

"Not a talker, huh?" Reno asked, walking over to him, "That's okay, You'll be begging for mercy soon enough."

"Mercy?" Eric spat, trying to sit up, but found that the feeling in his limbs was still gone, "What would a Turk know about mercy?"

"Enough to show you some," Reno shot back, hitting Eric sharply on the back of the head, "You shouldn't speak to your elders so rudely, kid."

"My name is not `kid'!" Eric growled, "It's Eric Constantine!"

"Well, thank you, Eric Constantine," Tseng said quietly, "At least now we know we have the right kid."

Eric stopped, realizing the foolish mistake he had made.

Reno laughed quietly, "Nice one Tseng." His hand went up for a high-five, but a cold look from his leader caused him to drop his hand.

"What do you want with me?" Eric asked quietly.

"WE don't want anything," Tseng answered, walking next to Reno, "It's Velk that wants to see you, and your guess is as good as ours as to what he needs."

Eric shivered at the prospect of going back to Shinra, and even more so from the thought of seeing the Shinra lab again. He had only been in it once, and that was way before Hojo had tried to capture him. He had been on a general tour of the building when he was ten years old, as part of his Turk training. The cruel instruments and cold machines still scared him when he thought about them.

When Tseng and Reno had turned away and started back to the place they had come from, Eric shivered again, this time, not from the fear, but from the cold. His stomach was cold and wet from lying on the muddy ground, and goosebumps were spreading across his arms. This development was very uncomfortable, but showed that he at least had feeling again. Before he had time to appreciate this stroke of good fortune, he felt something coarse around his wrists and ankles. He jerked his head around as best he could to find his wrists tied together tightly with a thick cord of rope. His feet were also bound, and he struggled slightly to slip his hands free from the rough rope. It went on for several moments, and just as his wrists began to chafe from moving against the coarse weave of the rope, a sudden rustling in the weeds behind him grabbed his attention. He jerked around but saw nothing, so decided to return his attention back to the rope, still keeping a watchful eye on the grass.

When he had gotten his thumb under the rope to use as leverage for the rest of his hands, he heard footsteps coming from his left. He relaxed his hands back into their tied position, hoping his captors wouldn't notice how loose they had become.

"Did you see anything out there, Rude?" Tseng asked the tall bald man.

"No," he answered simply.

"Good," Tseng nodded, "That's the last thing we need."

Eric, who, by this time, had grown very wet from lying on the soggy ground, cleared his throat politely. The two men looked at him, both glaring slightly, though Eric couldn't be too sure. Rude's eyes were covered by his sunglasses.

"I'm sorry," Eric said quietly, "But you could you please let me sit up? This ground is awful wet." Normally, Eric would have been too frightened to ask such a question, but he reasoned that they might be slightly willing to help because he had almost been a Turk. He knew he recognized Tseng from when he was there, though the man had been younger the last time Eric had seen him.

Tseng rolled his eyes, and Rude cracked his knuckles. Eric jumped, but Tseng just shook his head and motion for the large man to follow him. Rude grabbed Eric's ankles, and Tseng grabbed his wrists and the two flipped him over, then laid him back down, or more like, dropped him back down. Eric landed on his rear, and as the two walked back, brought himself up too a sitting position as best he could. It was uncomfortable, but at least he wasn't lying on the wet ground.

"Thank you," Eric mumbled to the men, and Tseng just rolled his eyes again.

"Just stay quiet," was all he said. Eric settled himself back in the grass and hoped that he would find a chance to run.

"Here," Tseng ordered, tossing a belt to Rude, "Start a fire."

"Hey!" Eric shouted, trying to stand, "Those are mine!" Rude was holding his belt of materia, the materia he had worked so hard to perfect.

"Not anymore," Tseng answered, and Eric fell into a pout. How dare they? They kidnap him, threaten him and then steal his materia! How much lower could they get?

"I wonder if Vincent was like this?" he mumbled to himself.

"Vincent?" Tseng asked, turning to Eric. His eyebrow was raised and a somewhat surprised look was on his face. "Vincent Valentine?"

Eric just nodded slightly, for he wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not to let them know he was friends with Vincent. After a moment, he grew more confident, and decided to press it.

"You just wait," Eric continued, feeling slightly childish, "Until Vincent finds me. He'll save me, you just watch, and then you'll be sorry you ever messed with me."

"Are you really that naïve?" Tseng asked quietly, "To believe that he cares?"

"Of course he cares!" Eric replied, "He's saved my life before, twice actually!"

"And you don't think that you've become a burden to him?"

Eric stopped. Had he become a burden to Vincent? It was true that Vincent had agreed to help him in his journey, but after saving and helping him, had Vincent grown tired of him? Eric had disrupted the man's way of life, and had brought him out into the world he was obviously trying to avoid. No, Vincent wouldn't have stayed with him for so long if he saw Eric as anything but, at least, a companion.

"No, Vincent doesn't mind me," Eric shook his head, and Tseng just smiled slightly, a cold, knowing

smile, as if to say that he knew something Eric didn't.

"Do you think Vincent is a simple man?"

"No," Eric answered, becoming nervous about where this was going, "He has his secrets, just like everyone else. His are just a bit more scary, that's all."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"Don't you wonder why he keeps them so close?"

"Because he feels sorry for what happened."

"And what happened?"

Once again, Eric was at a loss. He didn't know that much about Vincent. All he really knew was about a woman, Hojo and something about another half of Vincent's personality; in short, almost nothing.

"You don't know a whole lot, do you?"

Eric just sat silently.

"I'm surprised," Tseng said, turning around to the small fire Rude had been starting during the conversation. "I would have figured that someone like you, who had been hiding from an entire organization for so long, would have tried to find out more about those you put your trust in."

"Vincent had saved my life," Eric said, his voice quivering, "That was all I needed to know. Anyone who saves a life must not be all bad."

Before Tseng could answer, a slight rustling in the bushes caught his attention. Suddenly, Reno came tumbling out. His clothes were torn and bloody, but he was still breathing. He looked as if he had been attacked by a wild animal, for there were claw marks all over him.

Rude rushed to the injured man and helped him to his feet. Tseng took his shoulder to help support him, then asked him what had happened, his cool voice sounding slightly panicked.

"Something....something out in the marsh," he panted through deep breathes, "I was attacked. I couldn't take it, and it almost killed me. It's coming this way. It's huge and.." but he slumped down before he could finish.

Rude and Tseng looked at each other, then turned again to the grass when they heard more movement. The area fell silent again, and even Eric held his breath. He was completely defenseless to a monster, and he doubted that his captors would protect him.

The grass of the marsh exploded suddenly, and the air became filled with the sound of beating wings. A

tall figure swooped down from the night sky and landed before the group. Eric gazed up at the most frightening figure he had ever seen.

Before him was a tall creature, its black skin seeming to absorb the warmth and light from the small fire. Long, black bat wings extended from its back, which were spread out wide. Its eyes, two, red portals of anger and hate, glowed menacingly, and just above them protruded a set of fierce looking horns. Its fanged mouth let out a roar, and before Eric could have time to move or even breath, the monster spread its wings and swooped down right at him. It flew down, grabbed him by the shoulder of his shirt and lifted him off the ground. The creature held him in the air for a moment, Eric too petrified with fear to even scream or struggle. It opened its free hand, and using one of its wicked claws, tore apart the rope holding Eric's wrists together.

Eric looked up at the creature, stunned. Why would it do something like that? Before he could contemplate the idea, a gunshot rang out. He turned to see Tseng aiming his gun at the monster. It dropped Eric on the ground, then landed in front of the young man. Eric, seeing his chance, untied the ropes binding his ankles, then lifted his eyes to see the creature dive for Tseng. Another shot went off, and the monster seemed to shake for a moment, as if it had taken a hit, but then continued with even more ferocity. It brought its claws down on Tseng, whom it had pinned on the ground, but Rude caught the thing by its wrist and pulled back. The creature turned its gaze on the man, then lifted him off the ground by his throat. It roared again, then threw him towards Eric. The large man rolled across the ground and stopped in front of Eric, his glasses off and his eyes closed. Around his waist was Eric's belt.

When the monster turned back to Tseng, the man was gone, and it roared in frustration. Eric watched it as he unbuckled the belt from the unconscious man, and just as he had slipped it off, he saw something strange happen to the monster. A dark cloud had appeared around it.

The cloud swirled around its tall form, and Eric thought he saw its figure change. First, the wings melted away, and the mist seemed to change colors. Some of it became a blood red, while some took on a dull gold color. The red laid around the creature's shoulders like a cloak, and the gold wrapped around its left hand and feet. The rest of the black mist fell around his head, torso and legs, and formed into hair, a shirt and a pair of pants. The mist disappeared as Vincent turned around to face Eric. Eric wasn't sure whether to be afraid or happy, but really didn't get a chance to decide. He felt something pull hard on the belt in his hand, hard enough to lift him right off the ground. The belt was tugged out his grasp completely, but not without letting a single materia fall into Eric's hand. Eric looked at Vincent in fear as he felt the end of a gun press against his throat.

"Let him go," Vincent ordered quietly. His voice was calm, but his eyes showed a smoldering anger, the same anger Eric had seen in the eyes of the monster.

"I don't think I will," Tseng answered, his voice just as intense, "He's too important."

"Why?" Eric asked slowly.

"It is none of your concern," Tseng shot back. Vincent walked forward slowly, his steps long and strong.

"Stop right there," Tseng said dangerously, "Or this boy's life is forfeit."

"You won't harm him," Vincent answered, "He's too important, I thought."

"He's only important to Shinra, not to me," Tseng said, "I only have to claim that he was killed by another and I shall be exonerated."

Vincent didn't say or move, and instead stood very still, his eyes practically exploding with anger.

"And don't try to transform either," the man added, "I could kill him before you'd even have a chance." Vincent didn't move.

"Why do you care about the kid so much?" Tseng asked, almost tauntingly, "It doesn't seem very becoming for the legendary Vincent Valentine to show so much concern for a mere child."

"Child!" Eric asked angrily, but only had the barrel pushed harder against his neck as an answer. Vincent still did not respond.

"Hmm, no answer, eh?" Tseng continued, "Though I shouldn't be surprised, considering your history. In fact, I would expect you to recognize the brat." Vincent's face didn't change, but Eric thought he saw a hint of confusion in the man's eyes.

"Of course, you never did see Eric," Tseng added, seeming to grow more confident, "Just his parents."

"My parents?" Eric said quietly, his eyes becoming empty.

"That's correct," Tseng said, "Vincent here could probably tell you the story better than I could, but I feel that he may change some elements, so I get the pleasure of telling you."

"It was about eleven years ago. Vincent and I had just finished our training to be Turks, and we had received our first assignment. I was to find the child of two Shinra employees, and Vincent was to remove the parents. You were that child, and Vincent's target was your parents. As you can see, the kill had affected him so much that he completely forgot about it."

Eric couldn't believe it. So many things rushed through his head at that moment, the Turks coming to get him, his escape, meeting Vincent, his adventure in the mountains. Everything that had happened swirled around. A huge weight of emotion dropped on him, and when he looked at Vincent, the man who he thought was a friend, he saw only the monster.

"Vincent," he whispered, "Tell me that's not true." A tear ran down his cheek, "Tell me it's a lie!"

Vincent didn't answer, but looked away instead. Of course it was the truth. He remembered it all very clearly, unfortunately.

"You mean it's true?" Eric said, stepping forward, not realizing that Tseng had let go. "My parents didn't die in an accident? They were murdered, and you pulled the trigger!"

"Indeed," Tseng pressed, "He did, and he enjoyed every moment of it."

"That's enough, Tseng." Vincent growled. He may have been responsible for their deaths, but never had he enjoyed killing anyone.

"I can't believe you!" Eric shouted, tears streaming down his face, "All this time! I trusted you! I trusted you!"

"I am sorry," Vincent said quietly, but Eric didn't hear him.

"Enough!" Eric shouted, his eyes burning ferociously. Suddenly, the materia in his hand glowed a bright red, and it burned brightly. Eric fell to his knees, a pained scream tearing from his lips. He clutched the sides of his head, and Vincent knew what was happening. The same thing had happened, in the mountains, and the results had been terrifying.

Tseng, not understanding, saw his chance to grab the young man and run, but as he reached out, a fiery shockwave went out from the anguished young man. It blew both Tseng and Vincent backwards, each skidding on the wet ground. Vincent watched in horror as Eric's entire body became consumed in a huge blaze. The ground around him began to dry up and crack from the heat, and sparks shot from him in every direction.

Suddenly, two, long black-feathered wings sprouted from his back, and flames ran up and down them, lining their entire edge. Eric rose to his feet, and the flames became less intense. Just like his wings, the rest of him had transformed as well.

His long, dark hair had become a bright orange and red, and was tangled and wavy, and two short horns protruded from his forehead. His skin was a dark tan, and his eyes were a bright mixture of red and orange. His fingertips were clawed, and all around his torso, waist, legs and feet was an inferno.

The burning creature that had once been Eric looked at Vincent, his orange eyes full of bitterness and hate. His eyes narrowed at him, and Vincent thought he heard Eric's voice whisper in his mind, "I'll deal with you later," before he turned back to Tseng.

He gazed at Tseng with a judgemental look, and raised his hand, palm outward. "Burn in your sin," he said simply, and fired a huge ball of fire at the man. He dove out of the way, and the fire continued on to blast through the tall grasses around the clearing. Anything left in the wake of the flame was scorched to almost ashes, and Tseng looked back at the place he had stood, shuddering at what would have happened if he hadn't moved.

"Go," Eric growled through gritted fangs, and Tseng rushed to his men. By this time, they had started to awaken from all the commotion, and Tseng helped them to their feet; trying his best to keep their focus on escaping and not the burning being before them. "Leave the belt," Eric ordered, and Tseng dropped it on the ground without giving it a second thought. After the men had rushed through the grasses, Eric turned his gaze back on Vincent.

"How long did you intend to hide it from me?" Eric roared, circling around Vincent. Each step he took caused a footprint of flame to remain behind him.

"I assure you," Vincent answered quietly, hoping to calm him, "If I had known, I would have-"

“Would have what? Found a better way to keep it a secret? Finish the job! Is that why you saved my life from the dragon and from the rain? Because you wanted to kill me yourself!”

“Never,” Vincent replied.

“Then why didn't you tell me?” Eric shouted, before unleashing a ball of flame at Vincent. The man dove to the side and rolled across the hard ground, jumping up to his feet again at the end of his roll.

“Eric, listen to me,” he started, but was cut off again by another blast.

“No!” Eric roared, then soared into the air. He peered down at Vincent with a look of absolute disgust, then cupped his hands together in front of him. A small orb of fire formed in his hands, but started to grow larger and larger as he focused more of his fire into it. The sphere grew larger and larger until it was almost as big as he was.

Vincent watched the display from below and quickly realised that he may have to fight fire with fire, rage with rage. Chaos appeared to be his only chance, but he was already tired from the first time he transformed. It would be hard to control the Chaos being, but he had to do it, if for no other reason to stay alive. Eric was too angry to be calmed by words, and his fury was being channeled by his own transformation. However, this transformation was different from the last one. Last time, Eric had physically changed dramatically, but now, he had taken on an almost completely different form, but how?

Vincent didn't receive much time to ponder this however, as Eric had finished forming the huge ball of flame. The fiery being clasped his hands together and raised them above his head. Before he could even react to this, Vincent watched as Eric slammed his hands down on the ball, and sent it careening down on the ground. Vincent saw his only escape, and jumped into the air as his own wings formed out of the black mist that had surrounded him. He flapped his wings and soared to the left, just avoiding the molten ball as it rocketed into the marsh and exploded. Vincent flapped as hard as he could to avoid the spreading wall of flame behind him, and came up to the same height as Eric; all while trying to keep his appearance from becoming too menacing.

“Eric, please, you must calm down,” Vincent instructed.

“And who are you to order me!” Eric asked, before unleashing a stream of fire from his hand.

“A friend,” Vincent shouted over the roar of the flames, “A friend who doesn't want to see you in trouble.”

“Trouble?” Eric asked, “You wish for me to be out of trouble? I will be rid of my troubles when my parents are avenged and you are dead!”

The next few minutes were a blur to Vincent. Dodging Eric's attacks were easy, for his rage distracted him too much for him to really focus, Vincent noticed that Eric wasn't tiring out, but was only growing more angry with each missed attack. Vincent saw that the situation would require drastic measures, otherwise, Eric might go completely berserk and destroy more than just Vincent. Vincent saw that the

only true way to stop Eric would be to reach out to his humanity.

Vincent stopped dodging and flapped his wings to stay in flight. "Eric, I won't fight you," he said stoically, and prepared for the attack. Whether it ended his life or not, Vincent didn't care, it would be a welcome reprieve to what he had been dealing with for so many years. His one hope now was that Eric would come to his senses. He raised his hands in surrender, and Eric blasted.

The wall of flames consumed him, and he felt as if he was shriveling up. Vincent felt not only the pain of flames, but the very pain of Eric's heart, all the anguish that was pervading his spirit, and finally, the overwhelming feeling of loss and hopelessness. As the subsided, and Eric stared at him dumbfoundedly, a single tear formed in his eye, before his wings disappeared and he fell towards the earth.

Eric watched in awe as the target of his hate fell from the sky. He felt torn, for although he still felt anger and bitterness towards Vincent, he also saw the sacrifice the man had made. Completely confused, he swooped down and caught Vincent, then landed on the ground. His flames died away, and the wings vanished, and all that was left was a broken young man, and boy that had lost everything in the span of a few moments.

He knelt over Vincent's still form, still shocked at what he had done. He had never wanted to kill him, he realized.

"I didn't want you to die," Eric cried out, "I didn't want you to die! I just..I just wanted to get payback, to avenge my parents for their suffering."

Vincent slowly opened one eye, wincing at the pain still coursing through him, "Is that really what you wanted?"

"Vincent!" Eric cried, going to embrace his friend, but stopped. His heart was still torn.

"Tell me," Vincent said again, "Is that really what you wanted?"

"Well, yes and no," Eric answered quietly, "I just...I just wanted to repay your actions."

"And did it truly get you anywhere?" Vincent asked, his voice no more than a whisper.

"No," Eric said sadly, his head hanging low, "It didn't. It only brought more pain."

"You see," Vincent said simply, "Vengeance brings nothing but more trouble upon yourself and those around you. I don't ask or expect your forgiveness," Vincent said slowly, "But at least promise me that you will never strike out in vengeance at anyone, no matter what they have done to you."

Eric nodded, and he looked at the materia in his hand. It was the materia of Ifrit, the Burning Summon of Rage. Never had Eric ever thought that he would kill someone, but yet here laid Vincent, dying before him. He had to do something, even if it was for his parent's murderer.

Quickly, he rushed to the belt of materia that was lying on the ground, and pulled out a materia, one he had never had to use before, Life.

He rushed back to Vincent's side, and was about to cast it, when he realized what this would mean. Using the Life spell required that the caster place a small portion of their own spirit into that of the target. If Eric did this, if he put some of his own life into Vincent, he would be rescuing the opne he had wanted to die. He didn't do it, thinking about how appropriate it was, but saw that he couldn't have any life on his hands, even a murderer's.

As he finished the spell, and Vincent sat up, and Eric looked into the eyes of a killer, and saw within them remorse, anguish, and shame, the very things that Eric had felt just now. Did that make him a killer as well? Did his action of almost taking the life of another, his willingness to snatch the breath out of another human, even if to payback for his parent's death, make him a murderer, just like Vincent? Eric wept openly, not for Vincent, not for himself, but for his parents, the two people that had been ripped away from him, for no other reason then because Eric existed.

He would eventually be able to forgive the man. Perhaps not immediately, but forgiveness would come. It would be what his parents would want.

As the young man wept, Vincent let him fall against his shoulder. He knew what that felt like, to have a need to shed tears, but unlike Eric, Vincent never had a shoulder to lean on.

"I hate you, Vincent," Eric sobbed quietly, "I hate you."

"I know," the man replied, patting him lightly, "I know."

11 - Something Wicked This Way Comes

Eric stared deep into the inky blackness of sleep, that world where all dreams take shape. Tonight however, no images stood before him, just the darkness of his thoughts. His confusion swirled around, confusion about Vincent, himself, and so many other things. Finally, though, his thoughts fell onto one thing; his parents. He missed them terribly, and the thought of them being shot, gunned down when they had done nothing wrong, pained him so much that he fell to the black ground and wept softly, his shoulders shaking with each sob.

“Aw, how sad,” a cold voice said from the darkness, its tone bitter, wicked and cruel, and Eric look up and peered into the black fog for the source. At first, he saw nothing, but then from the swirling mists, a figure stepped forward, and Eric gasped when he saw who it was, his entire being feeling cold. The voice belonged to a being whose features were familiar; as Eric looked at the figure, he realized he was looking at a reflection of himself. Long, silver hair swirled around its pale face like the mists around him, and his red eyes glowed intensely. He wore a simple black robe, and on his back was a set of black-feathered wings that shimmered like oil on water. The nails on his hands were long and sharp, like claws, and his teeth were pointed and menacing. Is this what I look like when I transform? Eric asked himself.

“Is the poor little boy sad?” the shadow Eric asked mockingly, “Do you need to cry?”

Eric didn't reply, but looked back down at his hands sadly, the creature's words seeming to come down on him like stones. Regardless of how startling the reflection may have been, Eric simply couldn't look up, crushed beneath a weight of sorrow.

“Answer me when I speak to you!” the being shouted and slapped Eric hard on the side of his face, his nails scraping against his cheek and causing tiny lines of red to form on his skin. Eric tumbled to the ground from the force of the blow, and looked up bitterly at his attacker. “That's better,” the demon mocked, “Look up at your master.”

“What are you?” Eric asked slowly, rising to his feet. “What's going on here?”

“This, dear boy, is your mind, or at least the darker portion of it. And I am you, or perhaps to be more precise, your darker half; the half that will soon be in control. You may call me Cire.”

“What do you mean, `soon to be in control'?”

“I mean,” the Cire replied with a huge sigh, as if it were bored, “I have been watching your actions from within here for quite some time, and it has come to my attention that you have not been using your gifts the way you should.” Eric just gave the demon a confused look, and the hungry look Cire gave him sent a chill up his spine and goosebumps cover his arms.

“And how should I be using them?” Eric asked, giving the being a suspicious look.

“Need I remind you of the dragon? You eliminated the beast with minimal effort. So, what do you think would happen if you used that power constantly? You could rule all on this planet. All would fear you, and your kingdom would be founded on the blood of those who opposed you.”

“I couldn't do that,” Eric replied, almost horrified.

“And why not? Wouldn't it be nice to be in control? Wouldn't it be nice to serve justice to those that have shown you none? Think about it. With this power, you could get rid of Shinra completely. You could make them suffer as you have.” Eric stopped for a moment, listening to the demon's words. It was true, he could destroy Shinra. Those wretches who had taken everything away from him, the people who had ordered his parent's death in the name of greed. Yes, they could feel his pain. It would be good to make them taste sorrow.

The demon saw that his offer was having a significant effect on his listener, so he leaned in closer, practically whispering. “You could give Vincent his just reward.”

Eric's mind flashed back again, this time focusing on Vincent. He could do it. Vincent could be made to suffer longer, feel pain and sorrow, and then despair as he died slowly. Wait! His mind practically screamed, what are you thinking? Kill Vincent? The man who risked his life to bring you to your senses, who saved you from so much disaster, and then felt so much remorse for what he had done to you in the past? How could you even think such a thing? He reprimanded himself. Cire looked at the change in Eric's eyes, the bitterness, but then a sudden change to guilt.

“I could never do that,” Eric stated slowly, “I could not stand having the blood of others on my hands.”

“How disappointing,” Cire sighed again, “I had hoped you would see things my way. Regardless, I will take control, whether you like it or not.”

“I won't let you,” Eric replied, clenching his fists, “I won't let you bring harm to anyone! Not even Vincent!”

“Oh really?” the demon asked, then snapped his fingers. Before Eric could react, two large, black hands shot up from the ground. They wrapped themselves around Eric's arms, and lifted him high into the air. He struggled against the cold, disembodied appendages, but they held on relentlessly, crushing his arms in their terrible grip. Eric struggled on for several moments, but soon felt as if the very strength was being syphoned out of him. He finally stopped, and hung still in the air, hopelessness enveloping him.

Cire just smiled up at his victim, then spread his wings and flew up, stopping in front of his captive.

“Now, while you hang there, listen carefully,” he chuckled wickedly. “I have a very low tolerance for resistance, and an even lower tolerance for fools.” His voice became a growl, a deadly and cruel sound that Eric couldn't drive away, couldn't escape. “I will ask you this one time, and one time only. Will you relinquish your control on this body to me, or will you not?” Eric didn't answer. Cire roared, “Answer me!” then punched his captive in the stomach. Eric coughed as the wind was knocked out of him, but still looked forward, refusing to answer. Another blow came, reaping the same results, then another to his face, and a kick in the gut. “You will answer me!” he shouted, “Or I shall make you wish for death!”

You will scream for it, but will not be able to find it, and I will be here all the while, pulling away that relief each time!" Eric just shook, his eyes turning red from the tears he was trying to hide. "Tell you what," the wicked being said, leaning in close, "I'll kill Vincent for you. That way, you won't have to. And don't worry, I'll make it long and painful. Then....hmm, maybe I'll take care of Yuffie next. Yes, Yuffie, she'll be fun to hear scream."

Eric couldn't contain himself any longer. The thought of Yuffie, the one person that he could maybe admit to having some feelings for, being tortured by anyone, made him forget everything else. He forget where he was, he forgot who he was talking to, and he forgot the overwhelming fear, anguish and hopelessness. Jerking forward, still unable to free his arms, he spit in the face of his tormentor.

"If you ever....ever lay a hand on her," he growled, his voice sounding like that of Cire's, "It shall be you who faces torment."

Cire looked slightly shocked, the corner of his mouth and his right eye twitching slightly as he wiped his face off. His red eyes narrowed and his arm shot forward, gripping Eric tightly by the throat. His nails dug deeply into the back of his neck, and blood trickled down.

"You have a lot of guts doing something like that," he said with deadly calm, "Any other time, I would crush your throat; fortunately for you, I still need you." Eric, fighting for breath, managed to glare at Cire, and the demon seemed to be speechless for a moment. "I cannot truly claim control of our power unless you secede it to me."

"Like...I..would," Eric choked out, jerking his head back and forth, trying to get free of the deadly grasp.

"You will when you don't know any better. You see, even the strongest will can be broken over time, and your's will be simple. But first, we need to make my new accomadations a bit more suitable." Eric looked at him again, still thinking on the threat he had made on Yuffie's life. Suddenly, a searing pain coursed through his body. He let out a pained cry, and Cire laughed horribly, enjoying every moment of it.

Vincent ran swiftly through the marsh, rushing back to where he had left Eric. After the young man had fallen asleep, Vincent had left him and went around the perimeter of the empty clearing they were in, securing the area against any monsters. As he walked, he thought about what he was going to do, and he felt the weight of yet another sin come crashing down on him. Looking up into the moon, he contemplated the day he had taken his first life, the first time he touched that dark, murderous side of himself. It was then that a cry had erupted from the clearing, and Vincent, fearing for Eric's life, had raced back to see what had happened. What he saw made him recoil.

Eric lay on the ground, thrashing about madly, wild, animal-like growls coming from his mouth. Vincent stepped carefully towards him, seeing this as another tranformation. Suddenly, Eric's body rose into the air, and the young man's hands gripped the sides of his head. He continued to moan and lash his arms and legs as another change took place.

Vincent could only watch as Eric's long, brown hair became a platinum color. His skin took on a pale color, and every time his eyes opened, Vincent saw that his once emerald irises had become a maddened, blood-red. His teeth grew long and sharp, and his nails became claws. Finally, and most disturbing of all, two, thin ivory lines protruded slowly from his back. At first, it didn't seem to be anything,

just two, slightly curved white protusions, with red streaks of blood from where it had pierced Eric's skin, but when these two lines had stopped extending, three other ivory lines dropped off of these, Vincent quickly realized that this was a skeletal set of wings. A black miasma swirled around them, and disappeared, leaving shimmering, black-feathered wings. Eric curled into a fetal position, his wings draping themselves around him, then with one final scream, the crescendo of his suffering, a black light shone forth from the center of his body, and a fierce wind whipped around him, carrying in its gusts a flurry of black feathers. The wind and feathers swept around Vincent, and he set his feet to keep from being blown over.

When the gale finally stopped, Eric fell from the sky and onto the ground, laying motionless. Vincent cautiously approached him, and when he saw that he was not reacting to his movements, he knelt down beside him. Running his fingers lightly on the wings, he traced them along their edge, all the way to where they connected with Eric's back. The back of his shirt was in ribbons, and Vincent carefully turned the young man over. When he saw the results of the change, it made him shiver.

There, melding into the skin as if they had been grafted in, were the ends of the black-feathered wings.

Eric finally fell still again, the pain that had been surging through him finally ending. He could barely breathe, and his vision was clouded, but he could hear the malicious laughter of his darker half; the sound of a horrible victory.

“So,” Cire chuckled wickedly, grabbing a handful of Eric's hair and lifting his head. He looked into Eric's eyes, all the wickedness and hate boiling within them. “Now, it's time for you to disappear.”

Eric still found himself unable to speak, no words coming to him. Finally, he was able to cough out a fragment of a sentence.

“What....have....you-?”

“Done,” the demon finished, “It doesn't matter because you won't live to see it. Now, to silence your voice forever.”

“Can't...reach...full-“

“Full power? Don't worry, I'm sure there's some way to extract it from your broken mind.” The demon raised his hand, and a sword formed in it. The blade was black, and tipped with wicked-looking barbs. Cire looked at the blade, then at Eric, the most terrifying gaze set on his face.

“Now,” he said quietly, “DIE!” He thrust the blade forward, and Eric squeezed his eyes closed, hoping it would be quick. But the blade never came. After a moment, he opened one eye, expecting to see the demon gloating some more. Instead, he saw the arms of Cire being held back by someone he never would have expected. With a burning spin and toss, Ifrit, the spirit of Burning Rage, threw the demon Cire away from Eric and into the darkness. Turning back to the captive Eric, he released to burning shots from his hands that turned the hands holding him hostage into nothing but black ash. Eric fell free, and Ifrit caught him, lowering him slowly onto the ground.

“How?” was all Eric managed to get out.

"When you fused wiith my materia," the spirit explained, "I was given a link into your mind. We became junctioned, so now, I may enter your mind and vica versa." Ifrit voice was deep and strong, kind but powerful, and Eric felt completely safe with him standing next to him. "Now, to take care of your wounds," he said thoughtfully. Putting his palms towards Eric, he said something quietly under his breath. A steam went forth from his hands and surrounded Eric. Feeling the warmth pass through him, all his pain and injuries melted away, and he found himself able to stand again. Rising to his feet, he looked at his savior. He looked much different then when he summoned, though he still had a head of bright orange hair and orange eyes. His skin was a dark tan, and a tall, strong build made Eric feel almost intimidated.

"Thank you," Eric said, "I don't know what would have happened if-

"Now is not the time," Ifrit interrupted, "Cire shall return soon. I only banished him from this area for a time, but my powers are limited. You must face and defeat him if you are to regain control of this body."

"What! You can't expect me to fight him!"

"Indeed," the spirit nodded stoically.

"But I can't! Can't you do it?"

"No," was the answer, "Because this is not my body. I would never be able to permanantly defeat him. Only you can do that."

"But...but I can't."

"You must," Ifrit replied, "But you shall not be alone."

Eric smiled slightly. At least he had Ifrit on his side. How could he be expected to destroy such a powerful being on his own? There was no way.

"I shall lend you my power," Ifrit explained. Before Eric could ask what he meant, Ifrit formed a ball of white fire in his hand. Without any warning, he shoved the flame into Eric's chest. It melted in, and Eric felt power surging through him, a burning energy that seemed to spread through him. A flash of light surrounded him, and when it dulled, he founf himself standing before the fire spirit, completely clad in a dark red armor. It was not heavy, and as he moved his arms, he found that he could move as easily as if he were wearing street clothes. On his back was a set of wings composed entirely of flames, and buckled on his waist was a sword and sheath, and as he drew the weapon, the blade burst into flames. He looked from the weapon to Ifrit in amazement.

"As I said, I have granted you my power for a short while. Use it to defeat your enemy."

"Defeat my enemy? You mean I actually have to kill him?"

"I believe I've already said that."

"I know, but I don't want to kill anything."

"It's either you or him."

"But I can't fight! I can't use a sword!"

"Then you better learn," the spirit shrugged, "For here comes your enemy."

Eric whirled around and saw Cire shooting straight at him, his wings fully extended. Eric leapt to the side and rolled across the ground, leaping to his feet when he stopped. "When did I learn to do that?" he asked himself, but didn't really have time to think it through. Cire swooped around and brought his blade to bear, swinging down at Eric's head. Without even thinking about it, Eric raised his blade to block, and the black sword bounced harmlessly off of the burning fire brand. His arms moving almost by themselves, Eric thrust the sword forward, towards the heart of his opponent, but Cire flew upwards. Eric spread his own wings with a simple thought and gave chase. Following close behind, he pointed his sword up and a blast of flame erupted upwards. It encircled Cire, and he growled in pain as the flames burned him. Spreading his wings, he dispersed the flames, and shot a ball of absolute darkness from his palm. Eric moved gracefully to the side, but the ball clipped his foot. A numbing feeling spread throughout his left leg as the ball clung to his foot.

"Burn away the poison," he heard Ifrit say in his mind. The blade flashed as a beam of flame seared across his foot. It did not injure him, but instead burned away the foul orb and brought the feeling back to his limb. Cire looked at what his enemy had done, and, becoming enraged at the unsuccessful attack, hurled his sword at Eric. It spun around, straight at Eric's head, but missed as he ducked, and continued on its flight, curving back around to the left and stopping as it reached its master's hand. Eric, seeing this as his chance to strike, flew forward, an upward swing smashing against the dark blade. Cire countered with a downward swing, which Eric managed to block. Pressing his own blade against Eric's, the two clinched their swords masterfully, neither one giving quarter.

"Very nice," Cire grunted as he tried to force Eric down, "I didn't expect this from you."

"We don't have to do this," Eric replied, "I don't want to hurt you."

"I do," Cire retorted. Grinning wickedly, jerked his head upwards and pushed off from Eric's blade. Eric prepared to follow, but instead found himself bound. Another black hand, this one much larger than the last two, had wrapped its bony fingers around him, pinning his arms fiercely against his torso. It squeezed tightly, and Eric let out a grunt of pain. The grasp grew even more painful, and struggled as much as he could against the deadly constriction. Suddenly, a thought came to him.

Cire watched as his prey struggled against the dead hand.

"Now, how to kill you. I could let the life be choked out of you, but then, you did put up such a good fight. Hmm, decisions, decisions." He looked on as Eric's struggling began to slow once more, then snapped his fingers. "I've got it. I'll wait until you're almost dead, then kill you. That way, I get enjoyment from both choices." Eric looked at his enemy, no words coming from his gasping mouth, then his head fell limp.

"I suppose that's long enough," Cire said to himself. Moving in close, he brought his sword next to Eric's

neck. "Pleasant dreams," he murmured, then brought his sword back for a swing.

The hand suddenly burst into flame, and Eric shot forward, sword leading. Cire had no time to respond, however, and before he could bring his blade up to block, he felt Eric's own, fiery sword slip easily into his stomach.

Eyes open wide with horrified surprise, Cire dropped his own blade, which disappeared in a cloud of smoke before it hit the ground. A black cloud swirling around him, Cire reached his hand forward and grasped the collar of Eric's armor.

"I..hate.." was all he was able to mutter before he exploded in a flash of smoke and flame.

Eric lowered himself slowly to the ground, his entire body shaking. He had just killed someone. He had just taken a life. What had he done?

"I killed him," Eric murmured as he sat on his knees, looking at the blade in his hands.

"No," Ifrit said, appearing behind him, "You have not killed anyone."

"But didn't you see him? Didn't you watch him die?"

"No," Ifrit answered simply, "I saw you face a personal demon and win."

"A personal demon?"

"Yes," the spirit nodded. He sat down in the air, legs crossed, and hovered lightly in the air. "You see, when you undergo an extreme event in your life that effects you negatively, you may develop a personal demon, some form of the negativity that you can't face or don't want to think about. However, we must all face these demons, especially you. You see, your mind breaks these emotions and gives them separate entities and existences of their own, it's simply the way you are. Because of this, these demons will vie for control, and unfortunately for you, your first one has done a bit of damage; doing much more than it should have been allowed to do."

"What do you mean?"

"You shall see when you awaken. For now, you must get some rest. Things are no longer going to be easy for you, but you must stand firm, and face troubles that come your way."

"Why are you saying all of this? Is something bad going to happen?"

"You're too young to have faced pure hardship, but you will in the future. Your innocence is something very rare, but, like what happened earlier this evening, it will slowly be broken. For this, I am truly sorry. Simply know that myself, as well as any other spirit that you junction to yourself when you use your powers, will always be connected to you, and as long as you have our materia, you can speak with us any time."

"But how-?"

“Get some sleep,” was all that Ifrit said, before fading away into the darkness. Eric sighed heavily as he watched his armor fade away. Perhaps Ifrit's right, Eric thought to himself as he laid back. He suddenly felt exhausted, and the moment he laid his head down, sleep overcame him completely.

12 - No Other Choice

As it settled its long, stalky legs in the shallow water, the heron's eyes followed its prey, the tiny, silver fish, around the small pond. It came to the swamp every morning for its morning catch, and today was no different. The fish suddenly stopped swimming, its tiny eyes open wide, its mouth opening and shutting quickly. The heron edged its beak closer and closer, inch by inch, almost tasting the fish.

A horrified scream ripped through the mists of early morning, startling the heron into flight. Its beating wings sent the fish wild in an attempt to escape its doom. The heron glanced around annoyed as it flew off, frustrated at its loss.

Eric screamed again as he tumbled over his own feet. He landed on his rear, staring with terrified eyes at his clawed hands and silver hair. He clutched at the shimmering strand of hair, and then ran his fingers over the huge wings on his back. His tongue slid across the pointed tips of his fangs before his mouth released another scream.

"What happened to me!?" he screamed.

"You underwent another transformation last night," Vincent replied, seeming to appear out of nowhere. "I suggest that you try and remain calm."

"Calm?! Calm?! How do you expect me to remain calm!? I look like a monster!" Eric shouted, jumping to his feet, or trying to, anyway. Because they had always been weightless before, having the extra weight of the wings on his back made it difficult to keep his balance. Falling on the ground once again, he slammed his fists on the ground in frustration. Vincent watched as Eric threw the biggest display of an enraged temper tantrum he had ever seen. Kicking into the air, screaming and flailing for several minutes. When he had finally tired himself out, he stopped, heaving and panting, tears welling up in his reddened eyes.

"Now," Vincent said, unaffected by the show, "Are you finished?" Eric did not respond, not having anything to say. He was not finished, but he was too tired to say or do anything.

"Good, now listen carefully. You need to close your eyes and take a deep breath." Eric did not move at first, but when Vincent repeated his order, Eric obliged, probably more out of his own need to be calm than because Vincent said it. "Now, this transformation took place while you slept last night," Vincent explained quietly, "You looked as if you were having a nightmare. Did you have any dreams last night? Anything at all?"

Eric opened his eyes, their red irises matching Vincent's own color, and stared into Vincent's face. Of course, he dreamed. But was it a dream? This all seemed to be a bit real to have what happened last night classified as just a nightmare.

"I think so," Eric mumbled, trying to recall all that had happened. It all seemed so distant, like a dream

would, but he tried to dig up everything he could remember. "Well, first, there was this being," he started. He sat there, and explained everything to Vincent, his meeting with Cire, being rescued by Ifrit, and his battle. Surprisingly, he managed to keep calm, despite his transformation, and his overwhelming fears. Vincent listened, his face not losing his stoic gaze. When Eric finished, Vincent closed his eyes in thought. Silently, he contemplated what he had been told, and Eric fidgeted slightly, looking at his hands, and feeling his wings again.

"They just can't be real," he said quietly, "They just can't. I need to wake up." Vincent rose to his feet slowly, and walked over to where Eric sat. Not saying a word, he reached down and quickly plucked a single feather off Eric's right wing. A small, sharp pain ran through him, and the young man clambered to his feet, his face red with anger.

"What'd you do that for!?" he demanded.

"Did I hurt you?" Vincent asked, spinning the feather between his thumb and forefinger.

"Uh, yeah!" Eric answered, trying to rub the spot where the feather had been removed.

"Then I think we've established that this is real," Vincent replied calmly. Eric stood dumbfounded, but slowly, he felt the sickened feeling of despair creep over him.

"So, it's true..." he mumbled to himself, "I really am a monster!" He cried out, fear sinking into his heart, as he slowly yelled out all the things he felt. "What am I going to do!? I can't be seen like this! What will people say!? What will they think?! What will Yuffie say!? She'll make fun of me, be scared of me, or maybe even try to kill me! People will hate and fear me! No one will want to be around me!"

"Eric, calm yourself," Vincent said quietly. Eric didn't hear him.

"I'm going to become a wild animal, and live alone in the woods or the mountains!"

"Eric..." Vincent tried again.

"And then I'll slowly sink into madness, and try to eat human flesh, and kill women and children, and-!"

Before Eric could finish, he heard a click. Opening his eyes, which he had shut in his weeping, he saw the barrel of Vincent's rifle in his face. Vincent was looking at him with an annoyed gaze, one that he had given Eric when he had assaulted the man with a dictionary in the Shinra Mansion.

"Now," Vincent said slowly, "Remain quiet, and do not speak again until I instruct you to do so." Eric nodded quickly. "I want you to look into my eyes," he ordered, and Eric found it hard to do. He didn't want to look into them, partially from embarrassment, and partially, from the slight guilt that hung over him from what he tried to do last night. Just the thought of trying to kill Vincent summoned up the sound of Cire's laugh again; Eric left Cire's offer out of his tale.

"Look in my eyes, Eric!" Vincent said, louder, more forcefully, so forcefully that Eric jerked his eyes upward. His newly red irises met Vincent's, and he looked into them for a long time, what seemed like an eternity. At first, he just saw Vincent's serious, almost lordly gaze, like a wise king. After a moment,

however, Eric saw below that a sad look, full of sorrow. This is how it happened, each passing moment stripping away each layer of emotion, each sin shown through the man's eyes, and Eric felt their heavy weight. Finally, though, the final emotion, one that seemed almost innocent and joyful, a strange contrast to the sad things that came before it. This slight happiness disappeared, and Eric saw something in his pupils, something moving. Suddenly, the demon he had seen last night seemed to leap straight at Eric, clawing and roaring, and Eric fell back once again. Vincent, his face seeming satisfied, lowered his rifle, and placed it back within its holster.

“So, you saw him then?”

Eric didn't answer again.

“I see,” Vincent said quietly, “As you can see, you are not the only one with personal demons, at least one like yours.”

“Vincent,” Eric said, rising up and moving closer, his eyes starting to tear up again, “I'm so sorry about last night. I didn't mean to-“

“There is no need for apologies,” the gunman interrupted, turning away. Eric, usually not one to force himself on people, ran around in front of the man.

“No, I need to do this. I am sorry for almost killing you,” he said, and tears slowly crept down his face, “I'm sorry for getting so angry. I should have known better. I should have understood-“

“You acted as anyone else would have,” Vincent said.

“Darn it, Vincent,” Eric almost shouted, “stop interrupting me! There was no reason for me to do that. I don't know what happened. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.” By now, his voice was trembling, and his soul started to feel heavy. All the emotions that had built up within such a short period suddenly rushed forth. All the anger from last night, the fear from his fight with Cire, the horror of his transformation, and the pity and remorse he developed when he saw his friend's spirit. All of it came out, like a broken dam, and rushed out in the form of the tears falling from his eyes.

“I understand,” Vincent said, placing his hand on the young man's shoulder, “And I must say that I am sorry for what I have done to you, all the pain that I have caused you since you were young. I would give anything to bring back your parents, to bring back all the many lives I have destroyed, but that, along with the demon I hold within my heart, are my curses. To know that because of your own cowardice, you have stolen away the most precious thing a person can ever have is perhaps one of the greatest burdens one could be forced to bear.”

Eric looked at his friend, a smile on his lips. It was small, almost unnoticeable, but through the pain, Eric knew only one thing. It was the one thing he wanted to say, the one thing that he felt would help both of them feel the shame of the past be lifted.

“Vincent,” Eric started slowly, “I.....I....I forgive you.” He couldn't believe how easy it was to say them, and how much fear was lifted from him when he spoke those words. In fact, the only way he knew he could say these things truthfully was because of his parents. Something in his heart and been

whispering these words of forgiveness ever since Cire was defeated last night, and when he listened closely, the voices were those of his parents. Eric knew that Vincent would never look the same to him, but also knew that forgiveness was probably the greatest gift he could give to Vincent. For all that he had done for him in the short time he had known the man.

Eric couldn't be sure, but he thought he saw that small layer of happiness appear in Vincent's eyes for a moment, before it disappeared again.

"Now," the man said, turning away once again, his cape fluttering in the slight marsh breeze, "About your transformation...."

"What am I going to do? Maybe I should just stay here....become just another beast-"

"Stop acting like a child," Vincent reprimanded, his eyes growing hard again. "Let me ask you something. Do you think me a monster?"

Eric shook his head, not too sure how to answer. "You have a monster in you, but you look normal."

"Precisely," Vincent said, "Now, if I am able to remain human, despite what lives within me, what makes you a monster, when it is only your appearance that would say so?"

"Nothing."

"Then, instead of shedding tears for what cannot be changed, let us instead think of how we can use this to our advantage."

"And how is that?"

"With enough work," Vincent said, "I believe that we could get you in the air."

"What!? You mean, like, flying!?"

"Don't make me repeat myself...."

"But...but, I hate heights. I passed out on the roller coaster at Gold Saucer, what makes you think I could get up that high again?"

"Necessity," Vincent answered simply. "At this point, we don't have many options for getting out of here. While I have been in these swamps before, crossing them is no easy feat, especially on foot."

"So what should I do?" Eric asked, starting to become intrigued. Maybe flying wouldn't be so bad, he thought to himself. It may even be fun.

"The marshes flow and move wherever the current takes the patches of mud, and saturated areas may have sinkholes. I think, though, that if you were in the air, pointing out the more solid patches, I could make my way across."

Eric looked dumb-founded once again. "You trust me like that?"

"With my life," Vincent answered. Eric smiled again.

"Now, it's time for, as Cid would say, a 'crash course' in flying. I hope you will be able to keep the crash portion to a minimum."

Eric chuckled. Vincent must be feeling better; he thought to himself, he made a joke.

For the next two hours of the morning, Vincent showed Eric the basics of flight. The training was slow, for Vincent had to teach from what he knew, versus actually showing Eric. As difficult as the learning was, it was nothing compared to when it was time for Eric to actually take flight.

"Perhaps we could do this some other way," Eric asked, looking skyward nervously.

"You must," Vincent said simply, "Now go. I do not wish to breathe this air any longer, and I am quite certain you do not as well."

Eric nodded, the scent of rotten earth becoming stronger at that moment. Vincent had said that his wings were just like his arms, and that using them was just like moving or breathing. His mind just needed to send a message to his wings, and they would begin to work. Eric imagined the wings spreading out, and felt the muscles and bones attaching them to his back move in response. Envisioning the flapping motions that Vincent had explained, the wings moved, and soon, a current started to lift him into the air. The current grew stronger as he flapped again, and then again, and soon, he had risen a whole six feet in the air. He continued to rise as Vincent watched, and if Eric had been close enough to his friend, he would have been able to see the look of pride in the dark man's eyes.

A smile on his face, Eric pushed himself a little higher, and felt the freedom that comes with being in the open air. He breathed in the clean air, dipped quickly in the lower clouds, letting their cold mists envelope him. It was the most amazing thing he had ever felt, more than being on the road, and more than casting a spell. In his rush, he pushed himself slightly higher than he was comfortable, and after making this startling discovery, he stopped when he realized just how high he was. Lowering himself closer to the ground, he called down to Vincent, trying his best to maintain the image of his wings moving.

"Vincent! I think I'm ready!"

Vincent nodded, and then called back. The words, however, were caught by the wind, so Eric was forced to call out again.

"What?!"

"I said....ahead!" Vincent called again, the winds still catching some of his words. Eric guessed that having him repeat himself was probably getting annoying for the man, so he pieced what he said together. Looking ahead, over the vast expanse of marsh, he saw just how much ground there was to cover. Miles of marsh stretched out into the distance, though a thin line of green and gray could be seen in the distance in every direction.

“Just ahead,” Eric shouted, “There's a big patch of land. There's lots of grasses and stuff, so I think it's solid.”

Vincent nodded, and headed straight forward in the direction Eric pointed, hopping across the small breaks of dirty water. Soon, he reached the land Eric had spoken of, and then looked back up at his guide. Eric's altitude had decreased, a result of his fears, but he still maintained flight.

“Most of it looks like water, except to the south. I see some more land, and what looks like a building or something.”

“A building?” Vincent asked himself quietly. Any form of civilization in these marshes was impossible, but perhaps someone had managed to carve out an existence.

Following Eric's flight, Vincent jumped across the swamp, stepping quietly as possible through the thick weeds. The last thing that was needed was a monster finding them. The brown mud stuck to his shoes, and his clothes became tangled once or twice in the thick brush and growth. Eric stopped whenever this happened, and though he offered to help, Vincent always got himself out.

Eric landed after the last tangle, and sighed heavily.

“I'm beat,” he huffed, “These wings are so heavy, and it's so hard to breath when flying.”

“The air is thinner the higher you go,” Vincent explained, “So it would be unwise to try and go too high. How much further is the spot you saw?”

“Just beyond this next water flow, if you can call it that.”

“Then let us continue....”

The pair made their way through the brush, but Eric slipped several times, his hold body feeling winded from his first flight.

“We can rest when we get to the next stop,” Vincent commented, helping the young man to his feet. He got up slowly, trying not to fall again, and the two proceeded through the grasses.

As they stepped into the clearing in the weeds, they found that the ground was much more solid. The tall plants seemed to be either spread out, or smashed down, like something had pressed them all flat.

“Something has done this,” Vincent muttered, “Something large.....”

“Like....what?”

“Just-“ Vincent started, but stopped when they both turned and saw what Eric had thought was a house. It was a house, but certainly not one used by any human.

The whole thing looked like a pile of rotten logs and weeds, but upon closer examination, the two found

that the materials were woven into a swirling pattern, like a serpent curling up on itself.

"It's a nest..." Vincent said, a quiet, almost fearful tone on the edge of his voice. A low hiss came from the bottom of the nest, and Vincent and Eric jumped back at the sound.

As they did, a huge snake with a wide hood appeared from above the rim. It spread its hood, revealing eye-shaped designs underneath. It opened its huge mouth, revealing two sharp fangs, and many other small ones, though they appeared to be just as deadly.

"An anaconduar," Eric whispered out of sheer terror.

The anaconduar stared down on his prey, then turned its gaze towards Eric. Although it had never seen a creature like it, the little thing must have been a bird, for it had two shiny wings on its back. Besides, it was too hungry to pick and choose.

The huge serpent turned to face Eric, and before Vincent could call out a word of warning, the huge monster started to sway its head rhythmically, side to side. Eric stopped, fascinated somehow by the movement, and soon lost himself in the eye patterns on the snake's hood. He heard and felt nothing, not the sound of Vincent calling out to him, and not the feeling of his own feet walking closer towards the nest.

"Eric!" Vincent called out. When the young man didn't respond, and Vincent saw the way he swayed side to side as he walked; he knew that his young friend was in trouble. Without a thought, he rushed forward, tackled the young man just as the huge snake's jaws snapped forward. Eric was flung out of the way, the trance broken, but the jaws of the snake clamped down on the end of Vincent's cape, and the huge serpent swung his victim back and forth.

Vincent felt his stomach start to heave from the movement, but brushed the feeling aside as best he could, and grabbed onto the cape. Using his clawed hand, he punctured a series of holes in the cape, and let force take care of the rest. As the anaconduar swung its head again, the cape ripped along the edge, and Vincent fell free. He soared through the air, landed with a jolt on the ground, rolled two feet, then stood up, slightly disoriented, but no more worse for the wear. Suddenly, the ground below him shifted and sank, and he quickly found himself up to his armpits in mud.

Eric rose up from ground, the trance still fogging his mind slightly. Shaking his head, the smog before his eyes cleared in time to see Vincent's trip. As the gunman sank into the slimy mire, Eric watched the snake hiss, almost in a smug way, then turn back to face his original victim. Its hood spread wide again, and it once again began its hypnotic dance.

"Fool me once," Eric shouted to the monster, darting to the side, his eyes clamped shut. Turning away from the snake, Eric looked over to Vincent, who was trying his best to pull himself out of the muck. Eric realized, in that moment, he had a choice. He could leave, escape on his own, and leave Vincent there. He could be safe and sound, while the man got what he deserved. But, once again, Eric heard the laugh of Cire in his mind, and brushed aside the thought. He dove across the ground and slid on his belly towards the trapped Vincent. By this time, the anaconduar, seeing that its hypnosis had failed miserably, slid out of its nest, and towards the two. Its tongue wiggled as its sensitive taste buds tested the air, searching for its prey.

"Vincent," Eric practically shouted, his fear for them both evident on his face, "What are we going to do?!" Vincent didn't answer. Instead, he mumbled something inaudible, and continued to simply look forward, his eyes blank and empty, and his head moving slightly from side to side. From his expression, Eric could guess exactly what was going on. Resisting the urge to look up, he tried to awaken his friend with a few slaps to the side of his face, but to no avail.

Eric could think of only one solution, and with Vincent entranced and shoulder-deep in mud, it was the only real option available. Slipping his arms under Vincent's, and setting his feet in the most secure position on a solid piece of land, he pulled as hard as he could. Vincent's body seemed to lift slightly, but no farther. The anaconduar, seeing its moment of triumph, started to slither forward once again.

"Ifrit, lend me your strength," Eric cried out as he pulled again. Suddenly, the materia on his belt began to glow, and a voice echoed in his mind.

"But of course."

Eric felt his entire being course with energy, and he gave his wings one more flap. He flew into the air, with Vincent in his grasp, and the mud making a horrible, slurping sound as the two rose upward. They shot straight up, farther than even the anaconduar could reach. Eric took a moment to catch his breath and looked around. They were in the air, safe and sound. Not wanting to waste the moment of energy, he flew straight for the green fields that lay before them.

The cold air rushing by as they soared through the sky, Vincent groaned as he came out of his hypnotic state. Eric looked down and waited for Vincent to become startled by his surroundings, but was disappointed when he saw Vincent react stoically to the whole thing.

"Glad to see you're alright," Eric said to his friend.

"Likewise," Vincent replied.

"You're actually pretty light," Eric commented, "Do you eat properly?"

"Now is hardly the time," Vincent answered, his eyes narrowing as he tried to look ahead. "There, there's the edge of the marsh," he pointed out, "Land down there."

Eric nodded and swooped down to the expanse of fields that ran next to the marsh.

Setting down in Chocobo Fields, Eric placed Vincent lightly on the ground, then folded his wings as he landed completely. When he turned to look at his friend, he suddenly burst out in laughter.

Vincent was covered in mud. His shoes were almost completely off, his hair was matted with filth, and his cape was tattered and caked with muck. Eric couldn't stop laughing, for it was strange to see Vincent, usually one who kept a tidy appearance, looking so filthy. Vincent simply glared at the young man, and that look was enough to silence Eric.

"I'm sorry, Vincent," Eric sighed, trying to cover his giggles, "But it's just so funny."

"You shouldn't be laughing at appearances," Vincent countered, "For was it not you who was mourning over your looks not two hours ago?"

"Touché," Eric nodded, feeling guilty. "So, what now?"

"Now we head north, towards Midgar."

"Midgar!?"

"How many times must I ask you to not make me repeat myself?"

Eric wanted to say that Vincent had just repeated himself, but decided it unwise, and decided to say instead, "But, should we really be going back to the place the Turks were trying to take me?"

"No, of course it's not," Vincent answered, to Eric's surprise, "But we have no other choice."

Eric sighed as he followed the man quietly. His whole life, and especially after meeting Vincent, seemed to revolve around that phrase.

"No other choice," Eric mumbled to himself. He could only wonder when choices would no longer be a rare luxury for him.

The two walked on, neither one saying much of anything. As the sun began to set, and the black outline of Midgar appeared on the horizon, Vincent turned to Eric, his red eyes showing a hint of gratitude.

"I wanted to thank you, for once again saving my life," he said quietly.

"Well, you said you trusted me with your life, right? I didn't want to betray that. Besides, you saved mine, like, five seconds earlier."

"Indeed, but you did not have too. You could have ran, which is why I feel the need to thank you."

Eric didn't realize it at the moment, but Vincent saw more than just Eric rescuing him. Vincent saw that Eric had at least given up on ideas of revenge. He did not think that Eric would kill him himself, but he could have easily allowed the anaconduar to do that for him. For that, he was eternally grateful, and he silently whispered a promise. A promise he had made only once before, to the woman he loved. A promise that he had been unable to fulfill. A promise to protect Eric, no matter the cost. He owed a life debt, a debt that he intended to repay with his own life if it ever came to that.

Suddenly, the sound of a helicopter's propellers filled the air. Eric ducked as Vincent reached for his rifle. But, as luck would have it, it was not in its holster. In fact, the holster was not there either. He looked down at his mud-caked pants and came to a terrible conclusion. When he had fallen in the mud, and when Eric pulled him out, it must have come off. He wasn't sure how, but it must have. And as the chopper came closer, and both he and Eric saw the Shinra symbol printed on the door, he knew that this was certainly not an agreeable situation.

As the propellers started to slow, and the doors popped open, Vincent almost released a small gasp of surprise.

“Vincent? Vincent, is that you?” Tifa Lockheart called as she climbed out of the helicopter.

13 - Bad Blood In A Bad City

"And so that brings us here," Vincent said in conclusion. His audience, Cloud Strife, a man with a shock of spiked, blonde hair and green eyes that seemed to glow, and his wife, Tifa Lockheart, now known as Tifa Strife, listened carefully to the tale. Cloud threw a glance over to Eric, who sat with his head down, his silver hair falling over his face and his black wings draped heavily over him.

"So, he used to be human then?" Cloud asked, turning back to Vincent. Eric looked up at the three of them, quietly listening. After the initial introductions outside of Midgar, Tifa took the pair back to the city. They were now sitting in "Cloud Nine," a small tavern owned by the Strife couple. Both Tifa and Cloud's initial reaction to Eric was as he expected it to be, with both giving him strange, suspicious glances. However, after Vincent explained the situation, they seemed to have a change of demeanor, and looked at him with pity.

Personally, Eric would have preferred suspicion.

"How terrible," Tifa said, shaking her head. "To think that anyone should have to go through something like that...and you said he was orphaned at a young age?"

"Indeed," Vincent nodded, and Eric looked once again at the man. His eyes were cold, emotionless, as usual, but Eric could not help but notice that Vincent had left out the details of how Eric had become an orphan in the first place. This did not bother Eric, for he had already started to recover from that shock. Instead, it made him see that Vincent kept secrets, even with his closest friends.

"Well," Cloud said, rising to his feet, "It seems you both have had quite a journey." He smiled now, the grave look in his eyes vanished, while a young, kind look replaced it. "Now, why don't I show you guys to a spare room?"

"I believe I could use a bath somewhat urgently," Vincent added quietly, looking down at his mud-caked clothes as he rose from his own chair.

"You should be careful, Vincent," Tifa laughed, "Or some might find you vain, the way you feel about your appearance. After all, appearances aren't everything."

"But they certainly matter a great deal in the long run," Vincent replied.

"True," Tifa agreed with another, quiet laugh. She started to stand up when she let out a slight sigh and sat back down. Cloud rushed to her side to help her up.

"Are you alright?" Cloud asked, "You know the doctor said to be careful."

"Doctor?" Vincent asked, his voice sounding slightly curious.

“Didn't we tell you?” Cloud asked, turning back to his friend.

“No, no,” Tifa smiled, “We shouldn't tell Vincent. He's always been secretive, so I think we deserve to have one of our own.”

Vincent did not say anything and the look on his face made Eric want to laugh himself. Vincent seemed at a loss. It was not apparent in his face, but his eyes betrayed a slight pout, as if he wanted to know, but certainly did not appreciate the teasing.

“Very well,” Vincent replied, simply, nodding as he turned, “I shall simply find the bathroom on my own.”

“Oh, don't pout, Vincent,” Tifa said, placing her hand on his shoulder, “If you want to know, we'll tell you.”

Vincent turned back around after a moment, the look in his eyes returning to normal.

Tifa giggled slightly with delight as Cloud walked up beside her, “Vincent.....I'm four months pregnant!”

“Pregnant?” Vincent asked, not seeming surprised in the least, “I must say that does come as news....for I certainly would not have been able to guess it, looking at you now.”

“Yes, well, the doctor said there might be a drastic change, or there might not, but regardless, in five months, I will give birth to my first child.”

“We've already made a room for the baby,” Cloud added, a look of fatherly pride in his vibrant, green eyes. Eric smiled at the three. It seemed to him that, despite how desperate things had seemingly grown, he could still find happiness, even in a place like Midgar. He smiled slightly, and felt better almost immediately.

“It's nice to smile, don't you think?” he heard Shiva's voice ask. He just nodded in agreement.

Cloud led Vincent upstairs to the living quarters of the tavern, while Tifa led Eric into the kitchen.

“You must be hungry,” she asked, going towards the fridge. “I made these a few days ago, but no one's really touched them.” She reached in and pulled out a plate of sugar cookies. Eric was glad to see the sweet treat, for cookies had always been one of his favorites, and it seemed so long since the last time he had one.

“Here you are,” his hostess said, setting the plate down in front of him, “I hope you like them.” Eric picked up one, and bit into it with a smile. Very quickly, however, he learned why no one else would eat them. They were hard, much harder than any cookie he had had before, and instead of the usual sweet taste of sugary goodness, Eric's taste buds were assaulted by a horrible, salty taste. Trying his best not to cough in front of the kind woman, he forced a smile as best he could.

“You like them then?” she asked, a slight sparkle in her eyes. Eric swallowed hard, forcing down the urge to vomit, and just kept looking at Tifa with same, stupid smile.

"No good, huh?" she asked, still smiling, but her eyes falling slightly. "Well, it has been a while, so I guess I shouldn't expect perfection..."

"Well, I guess it's not really my place," Eric said, placing down the lethal cookie and looking back up, "But perhaps you're using too much salt?"

"Hhm....you may be right," Tifa nodded.

"If I may be so bold," Eric started, "But, I think I need to ask you something..."

"Yes?"

"Well, I'm not too sure how to ask this, but...how is it that you came to accept me? I mean, I'm not exactly the nicest looking person on earth."

Tifa looked into his eyes for a moment, her own, brown eyes searching for an answer. After a moment, she began to twirl a lock of her thick, chocolate hair, and then stopped.

"I think that a lot of it had to do with Vincent." Eric looked at her curiously. Tifa just smiled and nodded, "Yes, Vincent. You see, I have spent a good deal of time with him. In fact, I was one of the first to meet him when we found him in the Shinra mansion."

"So, he hadn't just been living there this entire time?"

"No, he had accompanied us in our fight against Shinra and then Sephiroth, but you see when we first found him, he wasn't as cordial as he is today."

"Cordial?" Eric asked, looking slightly shocked, "If that's cordial, then I would hate to run into him when he's angry."

Tifa just laughed and replied, "Yes, he certainly is a bit foreboding, but when we first met, we had found that he had sealed himself in a coffin in the basement of the Shinra Mansion."

"What!?" Eric asked, thoroughly surprised. He had always thought Vincent was strange, but certainly not that strange. "You mean I've been traveling with a vampire!?"

"Vincent is no vampire," Tifa said, her voice growing suddenly serious, as if the very thought was offensive, "He was just....overwhelmed."

"What do you mean?"

"He has never been very clear on the subject of his past, and usually would go off in one of his black moods if I tried to bring it up, but I know the reason for his self-punishment, as he would call it, was because of his guilt."

"But why a coffin?"

Tifa sighed heavily, "I think that Vincent could explain that better than I could....and I don't think he would like me telling you anyway. He's always been like that."

Eric's head dropped as he thought it over. Tifa was right, whether Eric like it or not. Perhaps he should try asking Vincent about it. It was doubtful that the man would tell him, if he would not even tell his closest friends.

"Can you keep a secret?" Tifa asked, leaning in closer. A mischievous look was in her eyes, and it made Eric feel better about the situation.

"Of course," Eric nodded, "What is it and who do we keep it from?"

"Well, Cloud knows, but don't tell Vincent..."

"Alright," Eric nodded again.

"Now, we've already decided on names for the baby. If it's a girl, we want to name her Aerith, a small tribute to a friend, but if we have a boy, we want to name him.....Vincent."

Eric chuckled slightly, amused by the idea.

"What?" Tifa asked, pretending to be hurt, "What's so funny?"

"Well, can you imagine what Vincent would say? He be all like, 'That would be an unwise idea!'," Eric said, mocking Vincent's unemotional monotone. "Perhaps you should name him after Cloud, because he has so much more than me, and I would hate to burden your child with anything related to my legacy....."

Tifa did not say anything for a moment, and then suddenly burst out laughing. "That's just like Vincent!"

"What's so funny?" Cloud asked, coming around the corner into the kitchen. He glanced down at the two, and then the plate of cookies on the table.

"Oh no," he cried in mock horror, "You didn't eat some of her cookies?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Tifa shot back playfully.

"I mean, your cookies could kill a cactuar."

This continued for a while, the two throwing back banter, and Eric sitting in between, laughing quietly. The couple was so nice, and they had such a sweet relationship. I wonder if this is what mom and dad were like. He wondered to himself.

"To produce a child like you," he heard Shiva whisper, "They must surely have been good people..."

"Or you just happened to grow up that way on your own..." he heard Ifrit counter.

“Why must you say such things?” Shiva hissed at the other voice.

“I only wish to keep things in perspective....”

Eric just rolled his eyes. “Listen you guys,” Eric said, somewhat hesitantly. He did not want to irritate or anger the two powerful beings, but he just couldn't have the two bickering in his head. “If, um, you guys are going to argue, could you please, uh, take it out of my head?”

The two voices fell silent for a moment, but Eric could still feel their presence in his mind. Suddenly, both the presences were gone.

Eric decided to head upstairs, and try to find the spare room. He looked down the hall, but was worried about opening any doors, for fear of something private being shown. Finally though, at the end of the wooden hallway, he heard a voice, Vincent's voice. Eric, curious about who the man was talking to, got down on his knees and peered through the slight crack where the door was open and watched.

Vincent sat on one of the beds, looking at something in his palm. He looked strange, because he was wearing a simple black t-shirt and and jeans. As strange as this was, the fact that he was talking to himself was even stranger.

“Lucrecia,” he said quietly, “I never thought I would return here, to Midgar...I suppose I should have guessed that this city would not let me be, even after its demise...Still, it is a relief to know that those who have caused so many people pain are finally realizing just what they have done...and yet they still continue to do as they please. But I digress....I only wished to speak with you again. I miss you dearly my love, and with what tomorrow being what it is, I fear that I will lose myself, and be unable to speak with you....still, I shall make sure to carry out my usual tradition, though....I promise you...”

Eric didn't move or even breath. It was obvious that Vincent was “talking” to a love, probably that woman he had mentioned a long while back. But what was tomorrow, their anniversary? Eric couldn't be sure, but as he started to stand, he heard Vincent say something else quietly.

“If you are finished eaves-dropping, you may enter, Mr. Constantine....”

“How does he do that?” Eric whispered to himself as he sheepishly opened the door.

“Sorry about that, Vincent,” Eric said quietly, as he stepped into the room. Vincent didn't respond, but simply motioned for him to shut the door. Eric did as he was instructed, then turned back to Vincent, his head down. He knew Vincent was not going to be pleased, but still felt bad. Now Vincent would never answer his question.

The man didn't say anything, and for several moments, though it felt much longer to Eric, a horribly uncomfortable silence pervaded the room. Finally, Eric worked up enough courage to ask, “So, how did you know I was out there?”

“The moment you knelt down outside the door....I could here your wings rustling.”

“And yet you went on with what you were saying.....why?”

“To show you that, despite the unwanted interruptions of the world, Mr. Constantine, sometimes one must press on with anything that means a great deal to you.”

“I'm sorry, Vincent, didn't realize-“

“Of course you didn't. You never do! You are so naïve that you believe that the world is centered about yourself and your problems. You think that you everyone else lives as you do, and that the only one who has any problems in his life is you!” Vincent voice had grown to a louder tone, louder then Eric had ever heard it. It seemed fierce, as if it wasn't even him speaking.

“I said I was sorry!” Eric snapped back, not realizing his own voice was growing in volume. “How was I supposed to know you were wanting some privacy!?”

“Because...” Vincent said, his voice growing low, almost menacing, “I have been asking for you to leave me be since the first time you entered into the Shinra Mansion.....and yet, as perceptive as you may believe yourself to be, you have yet to see that I do not enjoy your company, nor do I wish to have you hanging on me like a dog who follows his master!”

Eric was speechless, completely unable to think of any kind of response. He thought that Vincent liked him at least, and he had told Tseng so. Evidently he was wrong.

“You....you...you think you're so high and mighty?!” Eric spat back, losing control of his mouth, “You tell me to think about others! Why don't you practice what you preach, MR. Valentine!? You sit all day brooding about things that have happened in the past, and then take it out on other people! That's vile behavior! I've tried to put up with it, because I actually thought you were cool! I looked up to you, Vincent!” At this, his face started to turn a bright red, and he fought hard against tears again. “I wanted to....I don't know, be like you! You seemed so smart and cool, but now I'm not too sure at all! You called me naïve? Well, you know what I see in you right now?! All I see is a spoiled little boy, pretending to be an adult, and who thinks only about himself!”

Vincent didn't say anything as Eric finished his rant. The man's eyes were glowing ferociously, and his breathing was slightly quicker then usual.

“Get....out!” he growled, his voice sounding like he would have liked nothing more at that moment to leap across the room, tackle Eric, and rip of his face. However angry Eric may have been at the moment, he knew that he had overstepped his boundaries by leaps and bounds, and that it would be best to get out of the reach of Vincent's wrath. He ran out the door, down the stairs and out of the bar, slamming the front door behind him. He stormed down the path that wound around the bar and went straight forward, into the city; not a single thought of who saw him or how other people felt about him crossed his mind.

Of course, no one can go very far in any new place, especially one like Midgar, without becoming lost; this is, of course, exactly what Eric found himself doing.

“Vincent,” Tifa said, knocking lightly on the door. In her hands was his normal clothes, neatly folded and

fresh from the drier, and she had come up to give them back to Vincent. She had heard raised voices earlier, and saw Eric go storming out of the building, his face red and his wings fluttering angrily. Still, she decided, from past experiences, that it would be best to leave Vincent alone for a while. She waited until his clothes were done, then plucked up enough courage to approach him.

“Vincent,” she said again, knocking on the wooden door again. When the door opened slightly by itself, she pushed it open and walked in slowly.

Vincent was once again on his bed, staring into space it seemed, and a cold, empty gaze met Tifa's when she leaned over to get his attention.

“Hey, Vincent, you okay?” she asked, leaning over so her face was in his line of sight. Vincent didn't respond, except a simple blink, as if he had just woken up. Tifa took this moment of recovery to place his clothes next to the distracted man.

“I said, are you okay?” Tifa repeated, and this time, Vincent just sighed heavily. “Okay, I can see you're in one of those moods, so why don't I ask the questions, and you just pretend to care, okay?” she asked, smiling slightly. Still no response.

“So, what's bothering you?” she asked.

To this question, she knew there would be no answer, or at least she expected that, so it came as a surprise when Vincent turned to her and said, “Tifa...do you know what tomorrow is?”

Tifa thought for a moment, trying to recall anything that seemed important about tomorrow. When she could think of nothing personally, she decided to take it from Vincent's perspective. This time, she remembered.

“Oh, tomorrow's the day, right....when she...when you have...” Tifa could not find the proper words to say what it was. She knew what the day was. She had first seen Vincent mention this two years ago, during their journey together when they had returned to Midgar. She also recalled Vincent returning to Midgar at this same time last year, and when she recalled what tomorrow was, it caused her to shed a tear.

Tomorrow was the day Lucrecia, Vincent's one and only love, was declared dead.

“It has been thirty-two years....” Vincent said quietly, “Thirty-two years of hearing nothing but her silent voice in my mind....”

“Vincent...are you going to be alright?” Tifa asked, gently laying her hand on the man's shoulder. She knew then that he must have been deeply upset, for he didn't make any motion to say that he did not want her touching him, as he had done with anyone under normal circumstances.

“I do not know anymore,” he answered honestly, “For I barely know my self anymore.....At any other time, I suppose I would I was fine, but very recently, many things have changed that feeling...”

“Like what?” Tifa asked, her brown eyes full of concern for her friend. She had seen Vincent melancholy before, but never like this. It was as if the cold exterior was stripping away, to reveal a

broken man underneath.

“Vincent....I heard you....I heard you growing angry up here at Eric. What was that all about?”

Vincent said nothing, but turned to look at Tifa for the first time since their conversation had began. When he did, Tifa felt her heart break, for Vincent very face showed a pitiable countenance, the sad look of a child, almost, who has broken a vase, and is still dumbfounded that it had happened.

“I never told you how Eric became an orphan...did I?” he said slowly.

“No, no you didn't,” Tifa replied, and felt her stomach tightening. She could almost feel where this was going, and she didn't like it one bit.

“Stupid Vincent,” Eric said, kicking idly at the street, “How dare he call me naïve? If I was so naïve, I would have left him in that bog, and ran like a little kid. I didn't though....stupid Vincent!” He saw a tin can lying crushed on the side of the street and he kicked it hard, sending it ricocheting into a wall down an allyway. He sighed heavily and continued walking.

Suddenly, he looked up again. Glancing around, he saw that the street was empty; rather strange for a big city like Midgar. Even if it had been totaled, it had been two years since then, so surely there must have been some kind of life, right?

“Great, now I'm lost and alone...” he mumbled, “Plus Vincent's angry at me. Can this day get any better?” The question was a rhetorical one, so when he got an answer, it made him jump.

“Of course it can,” a woman's voice said from behind him. Eric turned to see Shiva stnding before him.

“Shiva! Don't do that!” he said, still startled.

“I am sorry,” she replied, “I did not realize you did not want an answer.”

“Well, I kinda did want and answer, though I didn't expect one. But what do you mean that it can get better? It hasn't exactly been all that great of a start?”

“Well, you are still alive, for one,” the icy woman replied, “And you have arrived here safely.”

“But I still look like a demon, like Cire...” Eric mumbled.

“Something that will end as well,” another voice said. Eric turned to see a burst of flame appear out of thin air, though it gave off no heat. Then, when it had vanished, there stood Ifrit, his dark face and grave orange eyes framed by his orange, tangled hair.

“What do you mean by that?” Eric asked, starting to grow tired with always having to ask for explanations.

“I mean, the power of Cire is not boundless, and the transformation will eventually end.”

"But when? I can't stand being this way! I look like a monster....and a cruel one at that."

"But, have you not still found happiness, even in your discomfort?" Shiva asked, hinting at something.

Eric thought it over for a moment, then looked into the blue eyes of the ice goddess. That was when he remembered the only thing that had given him any joy in this new look.

"Well, I will admit that flying was amazing..." he said quietly. As much as he didn't want to admit that the transformation had done him any good, he couldn't deny that it hadn't.

"Besides..." Shiva added, "Have you actually examined yourself in a mirror?"

"Why? I don't want to see myself looking the way I am. If I look like Cire, then it must be horrible."

Ifrit shook his head. "That is not necessarily true. You are only judging by what you saw, and that was a twisted being. You are not Cire, therefore, your appearance is different, even if he was your reflection."

Eric nodded, not truly understanding, but wanting to get off the subject. He started to walk forward, not really thinking about the pair behind him.

"Don't you think you should try to head back?" Shiva asked, coming up beside him.

"It is growing dark," Ifrit added, "And you are in the city of Shinra. Do you think it wise to be wandering around the city when you are being searched for?"

"They don't know I'm here..." Eric mumbled, but he knew they were right. "Even if I wanted to, I'm lost."

Shiva just laughed. It was the first time Eric had heard either of the two laugh, and to him, the lady's laughter sounding like icicles when they are tapped against each other.

"I don't think it's very funny," Eric said, "I mean, it's fine for you, `cause you're not being hunted."

"So, now you admit that you are being sought," Ifrit said, in more of a statement than a question.

"Yeah," Eric agreed. "But that still doesn't help my situation any."

"Well, if you had let me finish," Shiva said, a sounding slightly annoyed, "The I could have told you that while you were not paying attention to where you were going, both Ifrit and myself were. We shall be your guides back."

Eric smiled as the two walked ahead of him. At least there were people, even if they were not necessarily human, that cared about him.