

GLORIOUS

PART SIX

THE MAN IN
KALM

Under Pressure – *Queen and David Bowie*

[μ]-εγλ 1999 – May,26

"This mission is a bit special, I agree, we needed someone old enough to make a credible Shin-Ra director and seeing your ages I was the only one fitting," Veld said, "...unfortunately those men know my face so that's why I came to this option."

"Hmm, I see. Gonna be a lot of fun, dood."

"Surely. Now I suggest you to quickly think about your mission and brief Tseng about what you're up to, if he thinks you're going to do anything wrong just do what he tells you to. And one last thing..." Veld kept silent some seconds, "...If the things went wrong in any way keep in mind that getting the information and keeping yourself unseen is what really matters, if that man gets in troubles do not try anything for him, his death would just be a tragic detail for the Company. It's unfair but that's what life is worth according to Shin-Ra and you know that perfectly."

Reno and Rude nodded and Veld let them out of his office. Outside the boys met Tseng who had obviously been waiting for them.

"So, what is it about?" the Wutain asked.

"Hehehe, you'll know when we'll brief you, dood," Reno answered in a proud and mocking tone.

Tseng almost winced. "Hm. I see. See you later then." He would fume at Reno's pretentious behavior only once alone.

[μ]-εγλ 1999 – May,27

Tseng's final comment about Reno's plan had been something like "Okay, okay, do it the way you want! But just do that goddamn mission and do it right!". So Reno and Rude left a somewhat upset Tseng to prepare their mission. Rude thought Reno's ideas could be weird but he knew they could still work incredibly well. The young man just kept silent as usual while his friend "explained" the "situation" to the Shin-Ra director they were escorting.

"So Shin-Ra sends you to Kalm to talk with some guy and we've been hired to ensure your security, that's it?" Reno summed.

"Yes, somewhat..." the man answered. "Are you coming along? You don't really like a bodyguard... I mean... you rather look like... like..."

"Like a junkie?" Reno cut off. "Surely. But that's good. Me and my mute friend there

are experts, we're from one of the best bodyguard companies but you've probably never heard of it, discretion is our master word and Shin-Ra paid us enough to do a proper work. So Rude there will act like a normal bodyguard and about me, I'll check you two anytime. I'll never be far but you'll surely not notice me a lot as I'll get lost in the crowd within a second."

The director gave the redhead a doubtful look.

"Do you know Kalm, mister Director?" Reno shook his head.

"Just a little, sir Bodyguard," the man answered with a smile. "I heard the old town was wonderful and things alike."

"Then it's like you know nothing. The first thing you should mention is that weed and prostitution are legal over there."

"Oh, right, I heard about that too. It was a bit shocking..."

"Shocking?" Reno raised his eyes. "It's just seeing the things a different way. Many people smoke weed because it's illegal so if it's not illegal anymore it's not fashion either and even smoking looks more rebel 'cause it can cause cancer and that's even more dangerous. Since the government legalized weed people smoke it less."

"I see. And do legalizing prostitution has the same effect?"

"Not really, but maybe you could try to guess how it can be something good," Reno smirked.

The director sighed. "It's morning, boy, and I don't have enough coffee in my brains to make them work properly."

Rude stopped by a nice black car and opened a door. "This is your car, sir."

The director gave it an impressed look before taking a sit inside. "Very comfortable..."

"Thank Shin-Ra, your employers seem to care for you," Rude said before closing the door. He took the driver's seat and Reno the passenger's one. As the engine roared the three were gone.

Some hours later they joined Kalm's suburbs and its traffic jam. Rude thought they would never cross the city's walls for lunch but was finally quite glad to find out he was wrong. The small group went down some hotel to take a room and tasted the local dishes in the hotel's restaurant.

"What's the program now? It's only tomorrow that I must see Mr Visconti," the director asked.

"We've got some spare time until tonight," Rude said. "You can stay in the room unless you'd like to visit the town a little."

"Visiting sounds nice to me, I'd go for this option!"

Rude smiled. "Then we'll go together, Reno has other things to do."

The director felt they wouldn't tell him what kind of things so he didn't ask. Soon he left with his young bodyguard and they went downtown.

"It's true the town is nice," the director took a photo of some old building.

"Would you like me to take a shot of you?" Rude proposed.

"Oh, that'd be really nice!"

The man posed and Rude took the photo.

"I hope I'll look good on this one, I often look weird or stupid on photos... My wife often complains about it, she says she'd like to have more cool shots of me to put on her desk at work and make her colleagues jealous."

Rude just smiled.

"You're not much talkative, isn't it?"

"I guess that's the least we could say. I've always been rather silent."

As they walked the director saw a jewelry store and decided to enter it. There he took some time to choose some piece. As the man was paying Rude checked his watch and

mused they'd better get back to the hotel.

Soon after Rude and the director arrived at the hotel Reno came back as well. The redhead knocked and entered their room.

"Excuse me, I'm not alone, I've met an old friend, is it okay to enter or do you prefer that I take an other room?" the boy politely asked.

"No, it's okay," the director answered.

Rude got up to see what kind of friend Reno had found and rolled his eyes to the sky behind his sunglasses. Reno entered, followed by a pretty woman.

"This is Ashley," Reno introduced her, "We've known each other for some years, I first met her in Midgar but she's from Junon."

"Junon, really?" the director's eyes brightened, "I'm from Junon myself!"

And the two began talking about Junon, how the city changed those last years, what was the composition of the population, where there more or less Costan and were they just tourists or settlers?

Rude quickly took Reno apart in the bathroom.

"Do you really know her?"

"Sure, dood. There's nothing to worry about."

"She's a prostitute, I'm not sure I can trust a prostitute, those girls can't tell anything but lies."

"That's often right but it depends who they're talking to. Don't trust her if you want, she probably won't stay here tonight anyway."

"If something goes wrong Tseng will have your ass, Reno."

"Mmh, that'd be nice," Reno laughed.

They exited the bathroom and found Ashley and the director in a mad conversation spoken in their mother tongue.

"Tu es aussi rentrée au collège Cid Fabre cette année là !? C'est incroyable ça ! En quelle classe étais tu?"

"En 6ème B je crois," Ashley answered.

"Moi aussi !"

There Ashley put her hands on her mouth like shocked.

"What's up?" Reno asked.

"We were in the same class in the Cid Fabre junior highschool..."

Reno tried to stifle his laughter but didn't manage for long "Sorry, I couldn't know, Ashley!"

The director was obviously trying to remember the girl. "Oh that's strange, I don't remember you though I've an excellent memory! I recall someone named Ashley but it surely wasn't you..."

Ashley smiled. "If you've got such a good memory then I think you're recalling me perfectly, I was that Ashley, I just changed a bit since."

The director laughed then understood it wasn't a joke. He looked at the others, Rude like him was absolutely puzzled and understanding even less than him, and Reno was shaking from laughter.

"But... the Ashley I knew... it was a boy!"

"From my point of view, it never was," Ashley gently said, "I tried to act like society demanded me to but inside I never was a boy. That's why I decided to make my body look more like what I was inside. I hope you're not too shocked..."

"I'd rather say that's quite a surprise."

Then went many questions like did it hurt? What did you go through? You don't regret? Are you happier now? Did you got your... you know... removed as well? Will you make it remove? Why didn't you change your name? How can you get the money for the operation?

As Ashley answered the director slightly discovered another world where people make the difference between gender and sex which sounded until now like exactly the same things to him, a world where people may belong to a gender that's neither male nor female but something between or something different... Didn't it sound crazy? And finally the man could guess why Kalm was a better place for prostitutes, there a rape wasn't considered as an unpaid trick and prostitutes could enter a police office without fearing being jailed. They had rights like any citizen and worker.

At some point hunger came along the hours coming by and they all joined the restaurant. Rude and Reno walked some steps behind and the redhead felt that for once his elder had his word to say.

"If things keep on this way you'll lose the control."

"I know you're not at ease with people you don't understand enough but don't they look happy to see each other after all that time?" Reno replied. "Don't worry, the situation is still under control, Ashley will leave just after the dessert."

"Seeing how confident you are and knowing you I'll keep my doubts, but I hope you don't take it as a personal offense..."

"Sure I do!"

The dinner was pleasingly animated by Ashley as she didn't want to stay on the unpleasant aspects of her life. She told the men about the different fun, shocking or weird situations she went through, with clients, administration, doctors, transsexual fellows or just random people.

Rude observed her with curiosity and in the end maybe with some sympathy. She managed to make him smile and even laugh with her stories, in some way she was captivating.

After the dinner Ashley left just like Reno predicted and the men got back to their room.

"That was a nice day," the director frankly said.

"I'm glad for you," Reno replied, "but before you go to bed there are things we must discuss."

"Things?" the man tensed a bit.

"I think it's important for you to know why you are seeing Visconti."

"Isn't it just to bring him papers?"

"Indeed. You'll also have to ask him some questions and witness his reactions. I'm gonna put a tiny earphone inside your ear, it'll be so small no one will see it, and I'll tell you what questions to ask through it and you'll be the only one to hear my words."

"Why do we have to act this way?"

"Because the questions won't be the same according to the reactions. To answer your next question you were chosen for this job because Shin-Ra puts a lot of hope in you, you're a worthy employee from what I've been told. You just got involved in this because Visconti doesn't fully trust in Shin-Ra, he's a little paranoid and thinks certain Shin-Ra directors are trying to fool him so he needs to see new faces regularly."

Part of this was true but it wasn't all truth for sure.

"Tomorrow you'll act as a good director of the Weapon Development Department. Visconti seems to be willing to cheat on Shin-Ra and we need clues to know what he's up to, getting those clues is the job of both of us. And Rude's job is to show Shin-Ra cares about its employees and offers them a bodyguard."

The director swallowed his saliva. "You're working for Shin-Ra too, isn't it?"

"Yes, but the least you know the safer you are. Just act like someone really worthy and everything should go alright even if something had to go wrong."

Rude put a hand on the man's shoulder. "It'll go alright, just do what Reno tells you

and it'll be perfect."

The director took a deep breath. "I suppose I don't have the choice anyway..."

"That's right, but I like you so I'll make sure everything goes more than alright," Reno promised.

The man weakly smiled. "Well... I'm still okay but I guess I'd better go to sleep to rest properly for tomorrow..."

Rude and Reno nodded, glad things could go that easily. The man was a good obedient employee. He quickly went to the bathroom to get dressed for the night and took a bed. There Reno put a hand on the materia orb in his pocket, just pronounced the word "sleep" and the man fell deeply asleep.

"Now we can talk." Reno took the man's suit and replaced them by a similar one stored in their luggage until then.

"How was the place?" Rude asked.

"Great, it's an old building of a good size but old only about the appearance, yet from outside I could see an anti-metal detector frame and some security cams, I assume they've got some more pretty devices I couldn't see. There are some guards but really few for such a building, obviously since all those guys are Mafiosos the guards are there more to impress civilians like our director than on a real security purpose. As long as he's not getting in troubles with Visconti there should be no troubles at all. And no troubles at all is our goal... We can do it, dood."

"I hate when you're that confident."

"I hate when you're that negative, you're like that since we left Midgar and you'd better change yo' mind for tomorrow, dood!"

Rude raised an eyebrow. "Do you remember I could crush your little punk head with my bare hands?"

"Sure no, my brains are too spongy to be crushed, dood. You'd crush your own head."

"It doesn't make sense."

"That's why you can't crush my head, you're bound to a logical physical world while I belong to a dimension made of virtual possibles and concepts, so you can't touch me, the more you'll try the more you'll hurt yourself."

"I really hate you and your illogical stuff, I always end with a headache when you come with it."

"You see, you crushed your own head!" Reno laughed.

Breathe – *Prodigy*

[μ]-εγλ 1999 – May,28

"How do you feel?"

"Could be better."

"Relax. You had actor classes when you were younger and you surely remember them thanks to your great memory, it's now time to make good use of that."

The director gave his bodyguard a suspicious look. "How do you know that?"

"I know many things."

"Then you should know I was good in theater because I could remember any text perfectly but my play was rather poor," the man smirked. "At least now I think I can guess why I was chosen for this mission."

The two stopped in front of the great building. The director took a breath and went up the stairs leading to the main entrance, Rude following him closely. Inside the hall a security guard asked them why they were there, as politely as a security guard can do.

"I've an appointment with mister Visconti, I think he wouldn't appreciate me to be late," the director answered with a bored and almost scornful look.

"Oh, you're the guy from Shin-Ra?"

"Yes, that's it. Now if you could connect your brains in a way to allow us to keep on our way that would be something good."

Rude mindlessly cracked his fingers and cervical bones. The security guard nodded and let them pass through the detector frame. Rude gave the guard his gun before passing then gave him his hand, waiting to get his gun back.

"You know I've got one so you can give it back to me now, right? Your colleagues have plenty as well and we're not here to kill your boss anyway."

The security guard laughed. "Yeah, sure." And he gave Rude his weapon.

The young man looked at the guard like he was a helpless whore and put his gun back in his holster. "You're cool but that's not really a compliment."

"Are you done?" the director fumed at his bodyguard. "I'll have you fired if you make me late!"

"S'cuze me sir."

They went to the elevator, Visconti was supposed to await them in a room of the 2nd floor.

"Was it okay?" the director asked in a whisper.

"You're doing better than I thought you would, keep on this way."

"I'll try, Visconti is surely more impressive than this man but the trick should work."

"The trick?"

"Yeah, I was told it for my job interviews, to relax. When facing someone impressive imagine him on the toilets, he'll look a lot less impressive."

Rude stifled his laughter. "Nice trick."

The elevator's doors opened and they found themselves in a corridor with few doors. At the other end of the corridor was a particularly beautiful door guarded by two men.

"I guess that's where we're heading to," the director said.

"Once you'll enter Visconti's office do what I'll tell you, right?" came Reno's voice in the director's ear.

"Sure."

As they reached the door the two guards approached, a hand on their guns.

"You're the Shin-Ra director?" one of them asked.

"Yes, can you tell Sir Visconti I'm there?"

"He's ending his breakfast, he'll see you once he's done with it. He hates to be disturbed during breakfast..."

The director smiled. "I see. Then I hope you've got a pretty lounge for me and my bodyguard to wait until then, hm?"

The guards looked at each other.

"Uh, yeah, sure, I think you'll even get a cup of coffee."

"You don't have tea?"

"No, only true Costan coffee and it's far better than any sort of tea," the guard replied, obviously close to be upset. "Angelo, make sure they get a good cup of coffee to wait the boss."

The other guard nodded and led the way to a small but really pretty living room. The director thought the tiniest piece of furniture surely cost more than his monthly wage but he acted as cool as he could, like he was used to this kind of place.

They soon got their coffee cups and for sure it was nothing compared with the bitter drinks of the coffee machine at work.

"You had guts to talk about tea," Reno said in the director's ear.

"That was to be sure I was right about the man I'm gonna see. You could have told me," the man answered in a low voice.

"I thought it was safer for you to not know Visconti's a Mafioso. He's making you wait to show he's the master here but don't get fooled, he left Midgar some months ago and this means he lost influence. Still we think he may be up to something, he's been seen once with a person we consider as public enemy."

"Hmm."

The director raised his eyes to Angelo who just entered the living room.

"The boss will see you now, come."

He lead them to Visconti's office and opened the door.

"Not you," he stopped Rude as he was going to enter. "That's a private interview."

"It'll be okay," the director told his bodyguard. "Your presence is a mere formality after all."

Rude nodded. The order surely came from Reno. So the director entered in the office. The furniture looked even more expensive than the one in the living room. Some master piece paintings were hung on the walls and there were smaller or bigger sculptures made of precious materials on some tables and in the corners of the room. Sat behind his desk on a large chair was Visconti. The man was impressive, yet from his size, though he looked more large than tall, but also from this strange charisma he had. His face was neutral but his tiny icy eyes looked quick and able to see and analyze anything. Slightly tanned, he had dark hair, a bit curly, and wore a splendid suit though obviously a little too tight. The director thought Visconti surely didn't want to face his weight and ordered suits he could hardly wear as he wasn't the kind of man who'd keep an unfitting suit.

"Good morning, Sir, I'm glad to finally meet you," the director greeted him as Reno ordered him to.

"*Buongiorno*," Visconti greeted in return, "please, take a sit." – So did the director. "How was your trip from Midgar?"

"Nice, very much so, how kind of you to ask. There's quite a great distance but nowadays it's just a matter of hours and leaving Midgar's madness is always pleasant."

"Isn't it?" Visconti smirked. "Are you trying to know why I moved to Kalm?"

"Hm? Not really, should I?" the director followed Reno's words.

"Probably not," Visconti answered.

"Then what about discussing of more serious matters? After all I didn't come just to talk about geography."

Reno thought Visconti wouldn't be that easy to fool. The director was quick enough to find the right words to stick to his indications, his job at Shin-Ra wasn't much different in some way, but would it be sufficient?

After one hour of talk during which the director tried to know if Visconti could be interested to give some financial support to a new project of the Weapon Development Department the Mafioso started to relax a bit. Reno noted the man wasn't willing to give the first Gil and decided to aim the conversation in way to know why.

"I see... you must have other projects I assume."

"And what if I just don't want to help Shin-Ra?"

"Oh, everybody loves Shin-Ra and everybody is always ready to lend a hand to the Company, only losers do the opposite. You know perfectly Shin-Ra is the one making the winners ...or the losers."

Visconti's smirk turned bitter and something in his glare changed a second.

"That may be true but I definitely can't give my support for personal reasons. I've my own business you know and things aren't going for the best currently, I can't risk a Gil for now."

"I hope Shin-Ra has nothing to do with your little troubles..." the director slowly pronounced. He felt pearls of sweat starting to prick on his back but still tried to keep cool.

"You're the one who should know about this," Visconti replied. "Do you have something else to say or is it over now?"

"Actually yes, I've an other matter to talk about seeing your reaction," the man said, "but we've been talking for a while now and to be honest I'm turning a bit thirsty..."

"Oh, this is bad," Visconti almost looked sorry – surely more for his lack of manner than for the director. "See what we've got here, what would you like? Tequila? Vodka? Scotch?"

"A Scotch will be fine, thank you."

Meanwhile Reno was giving the man details on the new matter he would talk about.

"So, what is it about?" Visconti asked.

The director sipped a bit of his Scotch then raised his eyes from his glass. "Obviously you will not help us this time and we can understand you've got to rule your own affairs but you will surely get back right on our side in a while, isn't it?"

"Surely indeed..." the Mafioso whistled. Shin-Ra owned him even if he hated that.

"Yes, it would be bad that you could suddenly be considered as a public enemy, and fortunately it won't happen, that would be so prejudicial... But still there's a rumor putting a little doubt on this."

"Oh, a rumor?"

"Yes. You know we're not much different in Shin-Ra, we're a big family and we treat our friends just as we treat our family members, and the friends of our friends are our friends and our friend's enemy are our enemies. And of course we hope our friends

see the things the same way, so our enemies are our friend's enemies as well."

"I see, I see."

"So, we come to the point that it's been heard you've been seen with one of our enemies. Does it ring a bell to you?"

"Uhm, no, not really," the Mafioso frowned.

"It's said you've met Lazlo Cunningham."

"And you trust rumors like that?"

"Who knows what is true and what is not? But Cunningham's name is enough to make Shin-Ra wary about you"

"I see...That's really sad because I didn't see Lazlo." Visconti got up and went drinking his own Scotch in front of a window.

"You know, if you had met him you could still tell us what you planned and Shin-Ra will both forgive you and reward you. Probably reward you enough to make sure your business gets stable for long."

Visconti went back to his desk, staring right at the director's eyes, studying his expression. The man started to breath slowly, feeling himself turning a bit pale while his heartbeat grew faster and his armpits got wet from sweat. He didn't dare to picture the man on the toilets, fearing to burst in a nervous laughter. The Mafioso started to grin then to smirk.

"It's a pity I haven't seen Lazlo because your proposition sounds really nice to my ear. And about you, is there something sounding nice to your ear?"

The director went blank, a deep feel of fear taking control of his whole body. Did Visconti find out?

"Keep your calm, please, keep your calm," Reno whispered in the man's ear.

"What would sound good would be a good ending to this interview," the director almost stuttered.

"You look bad there, what's happening to you all of a sudden? Is it the Scotch?"

As the director glanced at the glass in his trembling hand Visconti smacked his hands on his desk before sitting. The director dropped his glass from surprised and tried to catch it for some seconds, dropping and catching it again and again until the Scotch ended on his sleeve and the glass on the floor. Visconti would have been amused if they didn't both ear a little scratching sound coming from the director's sleeve's button. The man got up in panic, fought to take off his jacket, threw it on the floor and stepped away.

"Wha'-What's that!?" he screamed in terror.

Visconti took the jacket and looked at the buzzing button. "Looks like you were bugged?"

"Try to act as cool as possible," was Reno's last advice.

I am small but I'm strong – Cabron, the Red Hot Chili Peppers

[μ]-εγλ 1999 – May,28

Rude and Reno were taking their breath in the small hotel room.

"You think we're safe, dood?"

"Sure not, it won't take long for them to find out where we are. We should get back to Midgar before getting in more trouble, for now they just think I'm a coward bodyguard but if they found out what we really are..."

"Yeah, let's not think about that."

Rude got up. "Then let's pack up our stuff and go."

At the same time in a room somewhere in Visconti's basement the director was undergoing some interrogatory with Angelo.

"Who was listening to you and the boss?" Angelo asked.

"I don't know, I told you didn't know I was bugged!"

"You'd better talk, really."

"What can I tell you if I don't know!"

"If you don't talk I'll give you a reason not to talk, your jaw will just hurt so much..."

"But I really don't know..." the director whimpered.

Angelo knocked him so hard under the chin that he fell down his chair, screaming in pain.

"Oh my GOD! That hurts!"

"That's not even a scratch, so will you talk?" Angelo caught the man by the hair to force him getting back onto his feet.

"Aow, aow!"

"Stop screaming and answer, moron!"

"I can't leave him behind," Reno said.

"But it's the order."

"I know, but I've never been kind of orders and we both know he'll die if we don't help him. Shin-Ra would never pay for him."

Rude sigh. "Forget him, Reno, there's nothing you can do."

"That's cruel..."

"I know nothing! Please, let me!"

There Angelo knocked him again but in the nose this time. The director fell onto his knees, screaming even louder, hands on his nose unable to stop the huge amount of blood coming from the wound.

"You broke my nose!"

"I know and I'll break you something else if you don't fuckin' answer!" Angelo growled.

The man at his feet started to cry. "Maybe... maybe my bodyguard was listening, I don't know who else could..."

"The young bald man?"

"Yeah, him...! Oh please let me now, it hurts so much!"

"What? But we're just beginning! All you can do to shorten this is telling me all I want to hear."

"I'll tell you but please don't hurt me..." the man managed to whine between some sobs.

One hour had passed and Reno yet had a plan.

"Count me out," Rude said.

He still looked calm but Reno knew he was mad at him.

"That's what I'm doing," the redhead mindlessly answered.

"You can't do it alone, you'll get killed."

"By Visconti's men? It's surely better than being killed by Tseng," Reno snickered.

The boy stood just in front of his friend and took off his glasses to look at him right in the eyes. "I'm going now, see ya. Dood."

Rude put his glasses back on his eyes and sighed as Reno closed the door after him.

"Stupid brat."

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Reno's plan looked like a big joke as his plans often did. The boy had managed to get aware of Visconti's schedule for the rest of the day and so knew he intended to go to some great restaurant for dinner. He could have taken the opportunity of the owner and a part of his men's absence to sneak into the building, find the director and help him escape. But since Reno's mind was too twisted for such a simple plan that wasn't what he intended to do.

So it was night and Reno was smoking a cig, laid against Visconti's car, waiting for him to get out the restaurant and see him.

Some random guy stopped by him.

"How much for the trick?"

"Sorry, I'm yet going with someone else," Reno replied with the most feminine voice he could.

"Oh, c'mon," the man tried again, showing some bucks.

Reno was yet pissed. He merely drew a switchblade and put it against the man's groin.

"Should I press the button and let that blade cut something here or will you leave me alone?"

The man gulped his saliva. "It's okay, I'll leave."

Reno sighed and looked at his watch once the man away. The night wasn't extremely cold but it was far to be warm and the boy was chilling in this outfit. He tried to close a little more his fur coat without losing his balance and mentally swore at his high-heels.

Fortunately Visconti finally arrived. He had two bodyguards with him but they didn't

seem to be the ones that guarded his office earlier in the morning.

"Hey, get away from the car!" one of them yelled at Reno.

"Oh, excuse me, I was just having a break before finding some nice company..." Reno walked in Visconti's direction, giving him a smile.

Following Ashley's advice Reno managed to interest Visconti and sat beside him in the car. It was also thank to Ashley that the boy could cross dress with prostitute clothes. The hardest part had been to hide the boy's tattoos under tones of make-up and add him some breast. Hopefully Ashley was a pro on this matter and she also had male-sized high-heels.

Once arrived Visconti brought his prostitute to his bedroom.

"Wow, it looks great!" Reno commented.

Visconti laughed. "It doesn't just look."

Reno giggled and went straight to the mini-bar. "You've got nice bottles there... Do you now I happen to make extremely hot cocktails...?" the boy took a bottle of Tequila and suggestively licked it. "I'm sure you'd love to taste."

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Rude couldn't help but fume as much at himself as he did at Reno. The boy had less or more explained his plan and it just sounded terrible to the young man.

That's why he bullied one of Visconti's employee to find out the best way to approach the director. According to the employee the best moment was when bringing him food. So this is why Rude was currently disguised with the employee's clothes and carrying a plate with some food to the prisoner.

"I bring this for the prisoner," he told the guards. "Can I enter the room?"

"You're new here?" one of the guards asked.

"Yeah, why? Should I let you do it? I thought you were too important persons to take care of such a job..."

The two men looked at each other.

"That sounds interesting but actually we take care of any communication between the prisoners and the outside."

They wouldn't let him pass.

"Well that's fine for me, I prefer not seeing such guys, could be dangerous, huh."

The guards laughed. "Yeah but not this one!"

To kill or not to kill them was the question in Rude's mind but before he could take a decision they heard an explosion.

"What's that?" Rude asked.

"Dunno but it comes from upstairs."

"I'm going to see what happened, stay here, Mike," the other guard said.

Once he was left Rude looked at the plate he was still holding. "Could you give it to the guy inside the room?"

"Yeah, sure, put it there, I'll give it later," Mike said.

Rude looked at the door, it was a nice wooden door. "Okay... Mike?"

"Yes?"

Rude just sent his fist in Mike's face, knocking his head against the wall. The man collapsed and Rude quickly searched after a key in his every pockets. After two minutes he could find one that opened the door.

The room's furniture was more common there and didn't count a lot of different pieces. The director was sat down a chair and looked deeply scared. His face was covered with blood, his clothes were scratched and the skin that could be seen was all bruised.

"Come, it's me, Rude," Rude told him. "Can you walk?"
"Rude...? That wig changes you a lot, I hadn't recognized you..." the man whispered. Every word seemed to be a pain to pronounce. "Help me please..."
He tried to get up and Rude helped him to walk.
"I'll take you to a safe place."
"And Reno?"
"He's trying to save you but I don't know where he is."
The director just nodded.
As they were getting out of the room a woman entered the corridor, striding in their direction. Rude instinctively drew his gun and aimed.
"Hey, no! Don't shoot me, Rude!"
"Reno!?"
"Yeah, I know, come, my diversion won't last long for sure."
Rude shook his head and followed Reno. "You told me you'd make a diversion but why this outfit?" the young man asked as they ran.
"I hooked Visconti to get alone with him in his room, there I made him a cocktail with some drugs and he fell deep asleep soon after I tied him to his bed. Then I opened the window and threw sheets through it like a rope to escape, put a small explosive on the window and left after writing "Fox wuz here" with lipstick on Visconti's ass."
At an other moment Rude and the director would surely have laughed.
"God, you're so stupid, Ren' but I owe you for this..."
They managed to get out of the building even if they had to kill some guys on this purpose. Rude threw keys to Reno and indicated him a car.
"Open a door for the director!"
Reno executed the order but as the director was entering inside the car they heard a bullet being fired and the man collapsed on the rear seat.

Crime and the Punishment – Jo Yeong-wook

[μ]-εγλ 1999 – May,28

"How do you feel?" Reno asked.

"Terrible..."

Coming back to the hotel room had been some sport. Rude stayed to give Reno a chance to escape with the car and the redhead hoped his friend didn't get caught or worse. For now all he could do was checking the director's wounds and try to heal them.

"How bad does it look?" the man whimpered.

Reno bite his lips, he didn't really feel like answering the truth.

"This bad, so...?"

"I'm sorry, magic can do a lot but I'm not sure I have enough knowledge of human body to heal this wound. I have to remove the bullet first but it seems to be gone through your liver. I think the bullet is blocking the blood inside the organ and prevents it from flowing out, but it still has to be removed. But I'm not really sure I'm right..."

"I see..."

There was a moment of silence as the director tried to drive back his sobs.

"Could you go in the bathroom and look under the shower tray? You should find a little box there, I didn't want it to be stolen by the maids..."

Reno nodded and did as he'd been asked to. The little box happened to be a small case surely containing some jewel.

"What is it?"

"A curb chain... I'd like you to give it to my wife for me, it's for our child."

"I promise I'll deliver it to your wife."

"Thanks... I'm feeling so weak... my head is really heavy," the director whispered.

Reno put the case away and looked the hour on his cellphone. He had called for an ambulance yet before they arrived, why did it take so long?

"Stay awake, talk to me, tell me what's your child's name for example," Reno asked.

"I don't now yet..."

Reno shivered. That was too unfair, this man couldn't die, his child had to know its father.

[μ]-εγλ 1999 – May,31

Reno rang at the door and waited until a pretty woman opened. She looked nice, the kind of person who's got a simple life, the kind of life anyone would probably envy in some way, a life without much questions and without much trouble either.

"Hello? What can I do for you?" she asked, "I've yet got all the insurances and kitchen tools I need."

"I'm from Shin-Ra," Reno said.

"Really? ...Do you've got news from my husband? He told me he would be back from Kalm yesterday..."

Reno didn't really know what to say, he had been thinking about it but hadn't find any answer. All he managed to do was to dress in a serious way for once, he had combed his hair and removed his goggles. He looked down and his eyes couldn't help but set on the woman's belly.

"I'm sorry..." he whispered.

"What do you mean? ...Something happened?" she worried. "You've got to tell me, I've been so anxious!"

She let him enter, looking more worried each second. She asked him if he wanted something to drink but he refused.

"Your husband..." Reno began, "...He was someone great and I do regret he got involved in this mission, that was just unfair and too dangerous..."

"Stop, stop, I've got to know how my husband is going! Where is he? How is he going?" the woman cut off in a hurry.

Reno swallowed his saliva and bite his lips, then put the case on the living room table, pushing it in front of the woman.

"He bought it in Kalm, his last will was that I give it to you, it's for your child."

"His last will..."she repeated, taking the case.

She opened it and her eyes got filled with tears.

"What happened? I need to know... You understand?"

Reno took a breathe. "We needed your husband for a special mission and I was the one who planed it, I was the one who chose him and he didn't have the choice but doing what I told him to. He did it willingly for the Company, as the good employee he was, he did his best, but some trouble occurred and he got caught by our enemy. My orders were to not try to save him in this kind of situation but I tried to make him escape anyhow. It didn't turn as good as I intended and your husband was wounded, he died in the ambulance, I couldn't save him. I'm sorry, really, I'm so sorry..." Reno tried not to let his voice tremble and keep his eyes quite dry.

There was a moment of silence, the time for the woman to accept what she just heard.

"How old are you?"

"Fourteen, almost fifteen."

"I can't believe you then, such a young boy as you couldn't lead missions with enemies and wounds."

She was like frozen in pain, her voice was low and soft to avoid trembling and crying.

"I was too young for this indeed, I can be bright sometimes but maybe that's just luck. You can hate me and Shin-Ra for the loss of your husband, that would be fair."

There she couldn't drive her cries any longer.

"If what you say is true then you've got to tell me what exactly happened to my husband! I need details!"

"I can't tell you that, it would be too dangerous for you and I've done enough bad to your family. I'm sorry for you and your baby, I so wanted your husband to live because I've never known my father."

She cried even more. The redhead wiped tears pearling at the corner of his eyes, took

a photo case out his pocket and gave it to the woman. "There are... photos your husband took in Kalm, I thought you'd like to have them..."

The woman tried to dry her tears to clear her sight and looked at the photos. Buildings... so kind of her husband, he liked cityscapes, that was the reason he could enjoy his job in the Shin-Ra Tower... She gasped when she saw him on one of the photos.

"He's so handsome...!" she managed to say before bursting in sobs again.

• • •

At night Rude and Reno went down a bar. A bit earlier they had reported Tseng and Veld about their failure and none of those two acted like oh, it was your first solo mission and it was a hard one so it's normal you didn't succeed. They just weren't that kind of forgiving persons.

"Hey, stop drinking, Ren', you're gonna regret it," Rude nudged his friend, a bit worried for him.

"I can't regret it more than this failure," Reno emptied one more glass.

"Your plan wasn't bad and everything would have been alright if this mess with the bug didn't occur."

"When there's a 'if' somewhere it yet sounds like failure. I was too confident, I'm just a stupid brat in the end..."

Rude sighed. "C'mon, you're just a bit twisted but you're a clever boy, you're really bright for your age and you know it. This mission was just too much for you, too few time and too few means to plan such a mission. Don't give up now."

"I won't give up... Just let me get so drunk I won't be able to know where I am and who I am when I'll wake up somewhere tomorrow. It'll be a new start and I'll be all dood again, I promise."

"...If that's what you think you need..."

Be free, be free to yourself! – *Innuendo, Queen*

[μ]-εγλ 1999 – August,17

"You've been staring at your coffee cup for something like half an hour now, something's wrong?"

Tseng had almost startled as he heard the voice. He raised his eyes to the man and weakly smiled, somewhat embarrassed. He hadn't expected anyone to get him out of his musing, and surely not this very person.

"Does it look like something's wrong, Professor?" Tseng replied with a blatant lack of confidence.

"Oh, my, my... Looks like you've got no idea..." Hojo chuckled. "You look like you're gonna get engaged or something..."

Tseng frowned. "If only..." he hissed. "...My father wants me to get married and I finally came to the point it could be okay for me but I've no girl in mind..."

"Hmm, tricky situation, huh?" Hojo smirked. "Fucking Wute spirit, that's it?"

Tseng nodded. "...Do you have some advice by any chance?"

A sparkle of amusement passed through the scientist's eyes and he took a sit at Tseng's table. If the young man asked *him* for advice it surely meant his situation was probably disastrous. The CMR was rather quiet at this hour of the afternoon and maybe it sometimes feels good to just share a coffee cup and memories with someone.

"I was about your age when my father sent me a letter to ask me to get married. My mother died few years before and I knew he feared he could die before seeing me living in my little happy family. So I thought I should find a girl. And I did it, I asked the first one near by me as I read my father's letter, it was an assistant of mine... She happened to have a crush on me because she couldn't seduce Gast, that was kind of a love square story..."

Tseng was amazed to hear Hojo speaking about such personal things.

"A love square? You, her, Gast, ...and someone else?"

"Yeah, the last one was a lost puppy, a poor boy by the name of Vincent, he was a Turk like you, though at that time the Turks weren't exactly like they are today... Anyway he loved my assistant, Lucrecia. I knew it but I asked her to marry me before thinking and of course she said 'yes'. I didn't manage to tell her I didn't love her and would have preferred to ask an other woman, all I could do was hoping Vincent would make opposition to our so-called 'sacred union'..."

"And did he do it?"

"Sure no...! He was such a romantic emo bastard! ...He preferred to shut up and keep on loving her from the shadows of his suffering heart or whatever..." Hojo sighed. Tseng kept silent some seconds before asking one more question. "So you married a woman you didn't love?"

"Yes. I learned to love her though, but for a short time..."

"What happened?"

"I became what I am today and she left me for her own sake... I hope she's alright somewhere..." Hojo answered in a bitter tone. "Falling in love isn't that hard... She was a bit strange, as brilliant as naive, as intelligent as pretty... I really loved her at some point..."

There was a moment of silence again and Tseng smiled.

"It's really nice to share this with me, Professor..."

"There are things I had to keep for me for so long now... Maybe I felt guilty and needed to talk a bit, I'm not fond of that but it makes me think I'm still human."

"Oh, you're a bit sadist and you do really weird experiments but I think you're human your way, Professor," Tseng frankly smiled. "You never experiment on cats so you must be human somewhere."

Hojo looked at Tseng with eyes full of surprise.

"I noticed it," Tseng laughed. "...Reeve is really special to you, isn't it?"

"Beware your words," Hojo harshly said as he got up. "I knew another Turk who tried to talk me about this matter and guess bad things happened to him."

The scientist turned on his heels and strode out of the CMR, leaving a puzzled Tseng alone with a cold coffee cup but a clearer mind about girls and engagement. The young man smiled, silently thanking his elder for this strange moment. Looking at his coffee cup he mused the man spared him drinking that horrible bitter brew and his smiled widened again.

[μ]-εγλ 1999 - September,24

Sachiko and Yukari looked at the flat's plans for some minutes again.

"So you'd move for this flat? It's interesting..."

"There would be some work to do but that's what we thought it could be like," Tseng said.

"We?" Sachiko asked.

"I and Reeve, the... architect."

"Oh, yeah," Sachiko stared back at the plans. "I like the idea to have in fact two flats with a common room, that way each of us could have their side but we still could meet and act like a family."

"I'd even say it'll be important when there will be children, if you wish to act a bit like a good father," Yukari added.

"That's right," Tseng smiled. "So do we finally come to an end with this story?"

Sachiko and Yukari looked at each other.

"Well... I think it can't be better than this..." Sachiko began.

"...We would be stupid to refuse any longer," Yukari frankly smiled.

Tseng who kept a bit tensed until then just sighed in relief. "Finally! ...I don't know what else I could have done if you had refused again. But thanks."

The girls laughed.

"You're such a lucky man, Yoshiaki... Marry a girl, save a second one!" Sachiko snickered.

"You'd better make us a beautiful baby!" Yukari warned him.

Tseng passed a hand in his hair and just nodded with a very confident look. Sachiko and Yukari were two pretty young women Tseng knew from the Slums. Back when he was a teenager he once got hooked by Sachiko. The girl was confident and gifted with a great leadership spirit, she was intelligent and Tseng liked that. Their experience together wasn't long but the man had kept a good memory from it even if Sachiko left him for a girl.

"Tell me, Yosh, what are the chances that you could get harmed or such during one of your missions?" Yukari asked.

"Who knows, depend of the job..." Tseng wondered. "...but be sure I'll try not to come back home covered with blood."

"Good then."

As he was seeking for a girl to marry Tseng heard Sachiko was seeking for a man. Tseng was just a bit surprised when he understood Sachiko wasn't willing to get a husband, she just wanted a man to make her pregnant and give her a child she could raise with her beloved Yukari. Somehow the idea pleased Tseng. Not for the fact he had the chance to share a relation with two pretty lesbians, but rather for the opportunity to be father and not having to care too much about his absence, and also because offering a nice place to live on the Plate to old Slums fellows made him glad.

"And what's your father's opinion about us?" Sachiko asked.

"My father... he raised his eyes to the sky, put his hands on my shoulders and sighed something like 'as long as they can take care of you I'll be okay but I hope you're not doing it only for me' and that's all."

"Hizashi is really cool as a father, you're lucky to have such a caring papa..."

"Sure, sure..." Tseng smiled. Finding a girl had been somewhat troublesome but now the young man was really thrilled by the situation and couldn't wait to try this new cohabitation. He was confident in the fact it would be, and without a single doubt, way better than living with Reno.

[μ]-εγλ 1999 – December,31

It was new year's eve and all Midgar waited for the final countdown. The coming year being special the Shin-Ra had financed a particularly special and expensive celebration, in main avenues of the city and the hall of the Tower were filled by a cheerful crowd, a new millennium was on the way and it wasn't something that usual.

"And what's your opinion about the millennium bug? Do you think it's gonna happen?"

"In fact we're not turning to a new millennium yet, it'll be only next year that the third millennium will begin."

"Third millennium... It sounds big... But about the bug?"

"We took our dispositions for Y2K and honestly I don't think we'll get in so much troubles than people seem to think there will be, there will be no time travel nor any other illogical stuff happening, maybe just some minor system dysfunctions."

"And, hum, forgive me but everybody's talking about Y2K but what does it really mean?"

"Year two thousands, just this. Y stands for 'year' and K is the letter representing the Kilo unit, 2K makes 2 Kilos or 2000 units of one year if you prefer."

"Wow, that's twisted!"

So there was a great discussion topic to animate the night. Somewhere among the crowd though some managed to talk about other matters.

"Yes, it's a sapphire, it's really wonderful, isn't it?" Sachiko giggled.

"And mine is an emerald, its green color is so deep, I couldn't resist!" Yukari laughed, showing her own ring.

"Crap, that's worth a lot, dood! I can't believe Tseng accepted to pay such precious things to each of you!"

"He didn't have the choice," Sachiko said. "It would have been unfair for Yukari if I was the only one to get a pretty engagement ring..."

"I see... And why didn't you marry him yet?"

"Because this way makes more rings of course!" Yukari answered.

"I like this, dood!"

Reno put his empty glass on a tray as a waiter passed by.

"Don't you know where is Hizashi? I've got to congratulate him as well..."

"Near the door over there I think," Yukari pointed the said door.

"Thanks, see you later then!"

Reno left them and tried to clear himself a path through the crowded hall of the Shin-Ra Tower to join an elevator's door. Hizashi was there indeed and Tseng as well, trying to explain his father how to open the door.

"You press this green button and it opens, the red button closes the door but you don't have to use it if you don't need to close the door absolutely, the door will close on its own after a little while or a second once you've selected the floor."

"And what if it *c*roses while I'm *c*lossing?"

"It won't happen, there's a detector and if the door meets some obstacle it automatically opens."

"So no danger?"

"Yes, no danger, many people use it everyday so it would be stupid to put a dangerous door there..."

Tseng really felt like banging his poor head against the said door.

"Ho, Tseng *no papa! Omedeto!*" came Reno's voice as the redhead approached them.

"It's *omedetô*," Tseng corrected.

"Whatever, dot-head," Reno ignored him. "So, so! Dotty is engaged! You must be so happy!"

"*Hai, totemo* happy!" Hizashi replied with a wide smile.

"Oh, God..." Tseng sighed. "I'm so leaving..."

Reno and Hizashi tried not to laugh as Tseng strode away and Hizashi pressed the green button of the door.

"Let's go," the Wutain said with a cunning look.

As they crossed the door Hizashi pressed the red button and the door closed right after them.

"It's the first time you come here, isn't it, Midnight?" Reno mindlessly selected a floor.

"Yes and I hope you'll lead the way correctly, E-S."

"I work here, dude."

"Oh, really? Didn't know you really worked," Hizashi snickered. "Will the Void join us?"

"Not sure, he surely prefers to keep his identity secret for some more time since we didn't manage to track him yet. I'm sure he's from Shin-Ra like me but it's not enough to find him."

"Mmh, we'll find out someday."

Yes, Reno and Hizashi had common interests. Tseng surely couldn't believe it if he knew his father spent most of his free time on the Internet and learning programmation.

The elevator finally stopped and they exited it to come in a room filled with cubicles.

"Most of the floors of the tower look exactly like this one," Reno commented. "Choose your office, dood."

Meanwhile people were enjoying a great and expensive concert happening in front of the Shin-Ra Tower and displayed on giant screens in the main hall of the tower and in the main avenues of the city. As midnight approached the Black Mages, a rising metal band, ended their last song and the singer invited all the crowd to count down together the last seconds of the year.

And so did everyone, "TEN! NINE! EIGHT!" at home or in the street, "SEVEN! SIX! FIVE!" everybody shouted the numbers scrolling down the screens, "FOUR! THREE! TWO!" and finally hold their breath, "ONE!", waiting to see the splendid fireworks show to come...

"HAPPY NEW YEAR" the screens proclaimed.

Everybody looked at the screen with a puzzled expression. The inscription was written in white on a black background and the font reminded those used in the computers' command invites.

"HELLO WORLD," the screens said. "MY NAME IS Y2K."

The whispers in the crowd quickly turned into a loud hubbub.

"I COME IN PEACE," the message kept on, "I TRUST IN YOU AS HUMAN BEINGS SO HEAR HOW YOU CAN BECOME THE TRUE HEROES OF YOUR PLANET. STOP WASHING YOUR BRAINS WITH TV AND SUCH, RATHER TRY TO MAKE GOOD USE OF YOUR NEURONES. GIVE LIFE SOME CONSIDERATION AND TRY TO BE PROUD OF WHAT YOU ARE WHATEVER YOU ARE AND BE WHAT YOU WANT TO BE WHERE YOU WANT TO BE, BEYOND ADVERSITY TRY TO BE FREE. YOU EACH ARE THE HEROES OF YOUR LIVES. BE FREE, SAVE THE PLANET AND STOP WARS."

Inside the Shin-Ra Tower Tseng had reached Veld. "Is this normal, sir? It doesn't sound like Shin-Ra, isn't it?"

"It's surely not normal, the fireworks didn't even started. It looks like we've been hacked."

"Save the Planet... Do you think it could be AVALANCHE?"

"I don't know, really."

"BE LOVE." the screens said. "...Now I'll stop with the Caps, it must hurt your eyes and it's not Caps Lock Day today. Happy New year, folks, take good resolutions and enjoy what is to come, here goes good music and fuzzy lights!"

And the fireworks show started on the majestic opening of an opera recording.

"Ha...!" Veld chuckled. "Really I don't think it's AVALANCHE this time but it doesn't help me guess who's doing this. Tseng, we've got to call the programming operators and find out what's happening and who's doing this and from where in order to stop them. And arrest them."

"Understood, sir... Let's hunt the geeks, then."

"There's activity, E-S, they're looking for us."

"No need to worry, the copy will be over before they understand what's really going on."

"Mmh, something weird's happening."

Reno glimpsed at Hizashi's screen.

"I think it's the Void trying to cover us, good he finally shows up, wish him a happy new year, dood."

Hizashi nodded and did so, humming the melody of the waltz played in the opera.

"Here the king Ralse and Maria are dancing together, but then... ..Draco shows up for the love of Maria. 'Never shall you have Maria's hand, I would die before that day comes'."

Reno smiled. "And the two men duel until Draco defeats Ralse. I've been told it's an

unusual event in an opera, usually everybody dies for hours, especially those who had a chance to be happy together."

"True, true. Ah, those words are just wonderful... Ralse is defeated on his wedding day and sees Maria's love for his rival. 'I yield, this day is yours, Draco, curse you should you let Maria go'. And Draco answers... 'Peace then for you have my word, with me she'll know nothing of this'."

"I wish this opera wasn't an exception," Reno sighed. "I wish real life was more like this opera and less like the others, I wish things and people could all turn better and happier... This is what we all hope for in the Canyon."

"Making the world better is a good resolution, son, I hope you'll keep it for the third millennium."

"...Son?"

...It felt so good to the boy's ear...

TO BE CONTINUED
IN PART SEVEN

MIDEELIAN ECOLOGY