

# 1

## The 4th

His ribs hurt. Over an hour had passed and only his inability to comfortably grip the smooth hard surface beneath, distracted him from the intermittent conflict between bone and steel. Letting go would provide him with immeasurable relief but the cost would be money, respect and possibly his life. His blonde hair pressed hard against his face in the wind and his purple tunic rippled like waves over his body, bunching in rolls around his iron belt and shoulder brace. He held his place in the dark. The voices around him, obscured by air thick with reverberation, continued to promise him a moment of relief.

The train slowed rapidly as it pulled into the station. The four stowaways clinging to the roof let out a discrete groan as the carriage came to a stop. The jolt of the buffers brought an end to their ordeal with one final slam of metal against sore limbs and aching muscles.

Two of the four were quick to depart, they were eager to begin their task yet equally keen to avoid detection. It was approaching midday yet the yellow lights hanging high

above the platform struggled to illuminate the walkway below. The darkness provided little comfort as they knew their proximity to the locomotive would attract swift attention. They left the platform immediately. The third traveller who was also anxious to exit the station paid little attention to his comrades sprinting into the distance, and stepped gracefully and slowly out of the black void between the carriages and into the dim amber light. He turned to face the train and watched carefully as the fourth passenger made a dramatic and inappropriate leap onto the platform.

The feel of grit on his hands was a sharp contrast to the feel of the clean exterior of the train as he placed them on the floor to soften his landing. A prick of pain shot through his knee as he lifted it from the ground. His eyes, rising with his body were quick to focus upon what he'd seen earlier before but still couldn't quite believe; a six barrel canon attached to the upper left arm of the man who was stood watching him. Before his curiosity could evolve into physical questions the man spoke with an uncomfortable tone of authority. The volume and power of his voice was phased little by the need to maintain a low profile "C'mon newcomer. Follow me." There was no time for a response, the gun-armed man turned and ran in the direction his companions had fled just moments before, forcing his way between two station guards as he moved.

The fourth stowaway stood hesitant and wary, he quickly examined the belts of the station guards who were moving rapidly towards him; two black bands of leather broke the colour in their stark and intimidating red tunics, each secured a small pistol and a few grenades. Reluctantly he raised his hands up and over his shoulder, tightened his fingers around a leather bound handle and heaved the weight

of the sword held on his back over his head and into an attack position. As the two soldiers moved closer to his location he swung it as if it were weightless, its blade tore through them effortlessly spraying their blood high into the air, yellow light bounced from drop to drop. Before their bodies could hit the floor they faded into nothing, he watched for a second, shrugged, and then turned and ran.

He reached the end of the platform and quickly made his way up a small flight of stairs; it appeared to be the only way to leave the station.

Within moments he caught up with the first two stowaways however there was no sign of the gun armed man. "Hi! I don't think we've been properly introduced my name's Biggs" the man who spoke was fiddling with a security panel located to the right of a large rusted security door. His hands were working quickly and with skill but he looked less than professional in a shabby green jumper and brown trousers. He sounded enthusiastic and excited. Despite failing to spark a conversation he continued to talk undeterred whilst concentrating hard on his task. "Wow! You used to be in SOLDIER?? All right!...not *every day* you find one like you in a group like AVALANCHE!" Before his excitement could carry him further the other passenger, a woman acting lookout, suddenly spoke with a flare which shocked the two men "SOLDIER? Aren't they the enemy? What's he doing with us in AVALANCHE?" she said discarding her duty as lookout and turning to Biggs "hold it, Jessie" replied Biggs taking his hands and eyes away from the security panel "He was in SOLDIER, he quit them and now is one of us!" Jessie remained unsettled. "By the way I didn't catch your name..." said Biggs turning back to face the fourth passenger standing between them. "Cloud." replied the man

“it's Cloud.”

Cloud was beginning to feel frustrated. Violent encounters and passionate operatives were not what he was here for. He'd been promised money in return for help, a simple in and out job, nothing more nothing less, and here he was listening to the chatter of two people who were incredibly relaxed considering the plan they had been given. He decided to try and change the pace of the conversation.

“I don't care what your names are, or for your opinions on SOLDIER. Once this is over I'm outta here!...” but before he could continue his bitter testimony Biggs sharply turned back to his work on the security panel and Jessie quickly looked into the distance with panic. It didn't take long for him to realise what had drawn their attention, as a familiar voice broke the silence. “The hell you all doin'!? I thought I told you never to move in a group!” It was the gun-armed man. “Our target's the North Mako reactor. We'll meet on the bridge in front of it!” The two AVALANCHE members gave a quick nod and Biggs stepped back letting out a gasp of delight as the rusty iron door slid open, a wave of warm air bellowed out and fused pleasantly with that of the cold night. The man turned to Cloud as Jessie and Biggs disappeared through the door. Cloud couldn't help but feel small next to the him. He was around six foot three inches tall, at least half a foot taller than Cloud was. His skin was dark and his hair was shaved short. The small brown waistcoat he wore revealed many tattoos each carefully positioned over scars which Cloud could only presume were the marks of battle. He held an expression of great determination and sadness. His face changed little when he finally spoke to Cloud “Ex-SOLDIER huh? Don't trust ya! The names Barret...this way.”

The view through the doorway stopped Cloud in

his tracks, those who took residence within the city of Midgar were familiar with the eight reactors that surrounded the capital, but few had the opportunity to see them up close. They stood in a ring around the perimeter of the city and were wide at the base tapering slightly towards the summit. Cloud could only guess their size but they easily succeeded any building in the area, rising high above the skyline. The green glow which emanated from the concealed chimneys lit up the dark boundary walls bathing them in an eerie glow. The furnaces never stopped burning. Without hesitating any longer he moved towards the towering structure, passed through a small machine filled yard and headed for a small door. Wedge another member of avalanche who had arranged to meet them all there, was waiting for him on the other side "I'll secure the escape passage. Concentrate on the mission Cloud." his childlike voice and appearance made it hard for Cloud to hold back laughter. A moment later he crossed the T-shaped walkway and made his way into the reactor itself, now there was no time for criticism of his company. He was in, the mission had begun, the air was hot with steam and radiation.

## 2

### **Hurry! Run faster!**

Cloud emerged from the doorway and found himself in a small corridor, he could see Barret waiting impatiently at the other end, Jessie and Biggs were working tirelessly on another security panel. "Yo! This your first time in a reactor?" said Barret looking at Cloud with an air of disappointment. "No. After all, I did work for Shinra Y'know!" Cloud replied sharply taking Barret by surprise, after a tense moment of silence, Barret sighed. "The planet's full of Mako energy. People here use it every day." He said pointing at Cloud's face, his voice filling with anger "It's the life blood of the planet but Shinra keeps suckin' the blood out with these damn machines!" Cloud, uninterested in Barret's preaching, calmly pushed the finger aside and walked past him and towards the door. "I'm not here for a lecture let's just hurry!"

They made their way through the reactor, Biggs and Jessie took care of the numerous security doors whilst Barret and Cloud kept watch for enemy Shinra soldiers. Eventually they found the elevator which would take them to

the reactor core and closer to their objective, Barret took advantage of the lengthy descend to bombard Cloud with more information. "Little by little the reactors will drain out all the life. And that'll be that." Cloud rolled his eyes "It's not my problem." "The planet's dyin', Cloud!" Cloud tightened his fist and moved closer to Barret "The only thing I care about is finishin' this job before security catch us."

Eventually the elevator came to a standstill. Biggs and Jessie led the way, following their memorised maps so methodically that Cloud began to wonder if this *really was* the first time they'd carried out this operation. Biggs and Jessie stopped on a platform of pipes and girders high above another T-shaped walkway and gave the signal for Cloud and Barret to carry on alone. The climb down to the walkway was awkward and painful, Barret, whose physique was less suited to such daredevil feats, struggled with his weight but he hid it well and not wanting to appear weak in front of his new recruit, blamed his share of the pipes for his slow descent.

The walkway provided a welcome feeling underfoot but the air was choked with rising Mako fumes and steam, the substance, emerald green in colour and slimy to the touch swam in thick pools beneath the platform and occasionally belched spurts of liquid high above the heads of the two intruders. Barret, eager to press on ran ahead to the core of the reactor, Cloud on the other hand was on his hands and knees, searching for the object which had caught his eye with a glimmer only a few moments before. "Found it!" he whispered to himself as he slipped the spoil into his pocket. Barret who was only a few yards ahead paid little attention to Clouds attempt to conceal his new found treasure as he was far too busy playing with a stick of dynamite, spinning it between his fingers, putting Cloud on edge. ""When we blow this place, this ain't gonna be nothin' more than a hunka

junk." He said with a gleeful sound and the face of a maniac "Cloud, you set the bomb." "Shouldn't you do it?" Asked Cloud wondering how he gained such trust so soon "Jus' do it! I gotta watch to make sure you don't pull nothin'" Cloud took the stick of dynamite with care and kneeled down to set the timer "Fine, be my guest!" He adjusted the dials on device, it was a simple alarm clock mechanism attached to enough explosive to take out enough of the reactor to disable it.

He adjusted the clock to read ten minutes and was just about to activate it when suddenly a scream of white noise filled his ears. It was unbearable, he placed his hands over his ears to help calm the noise but it made no difference, it was piercing his brain, his thoughts, his vision blurred and soon the only colour he could see was red, blood red. He writhed in pain, clutching at his head, wanting to pull out the pain, but it was no use, he was suffering, just as he was about to pass out, unable to take any more, blindness set upon him, the noise stopped and a quiet voice whispered. "Watch out, this isn't just a reactor"

Barret looked at Cloud with confusion; who was lying on the floor muttering to himself with his head in his hands. "...what's wrong?" asked Barret. Cloud sat up and suddenly seemed more aware "huh?" "What's wrong Cloud, hurry it up!" "Cloud shifted his weight and pulled himself up, he focused on the bomb and set the timer. "Yeah. Sorry." Alarm bells rang and behind them appeared Shinra's latest piece of defence technology.

The robot stood in the shape of a scorpion, only ten feet tall and strengthened with solid steel armour. There was no other way out, so Barret and Cloud faced it head on and prepared themselves for the worst. The scorpion



shuddered as its internal engines creaked and groaned, moving its tail upright. The tip of the tail pointed right at them, showering them in powerful search lights, the targeting system for the two high calibre machine guns mounted on its front. There was no time to lose, Cloud leapt forward, swinging his mighty sword against the hull of the mechanical beast, other than sparks and a piercing shriek, their was little effect, not afraid to fight but smart enough to know when a battle can't be won he turned to run, only to halt in his tracks mesmerized by the spinning gun barrel on the end of Barret's arm. Bullets and shrapnel filled the air, the Scorpion lurched forward in an effort to retaliate however the effect of Barret's assault took its toll and one by one the motorized legs of the behemoth snapped and stumbled as the hydraulics within leaked their fluid like blood onto the floor. There was little time for celebrations, only seven minutes remained on the timer, they had to escape. Barret and Cloud slowly made their way back out of the reactor fighting off security guards and dogs as they went. Eventually they reached the T-shaped walkway at the entrance of the reactor, Cloud saw Wedge lying face down on the floor, expecting the worst he picked him up to find that he was only slightly dazed from an attack, not wanting to waste any more time he urged him towards the exit and into a service tunnel, the heat wave from the explosion tingled on the back of his neck.