

Jenova Project
by Junj
Part 1: Nibelheim

"Don't do this to me. Lucrecia!"

The young woman, the misty gale of wind enveloping her, only turned back to her love, silent tears streaming down her cheeks. Her soft, white dress fluttered in the wind as though it was the pearl wings of a dove waiting to fly free to heaven. Her delicate features were marred with pain, the hurt running deep in her large emerald eyes.

"I can't do this anymore," she whispered, though her voice was somehow carried over the roar of the waterfall beneath her. "I can't live with what I've done, the sins I've committed. Look at you, my love. I've murdered you."

"I love you!" he said, the pain in her eyes mirrored in his. His throat constricted, and he felt the tears coming on, unbidden. "Do you think this matters? Do you think I care? I want to be with you. I want to love you."

She shook her head, her chin quivering as the tears streaming down her cheeks were renewed. "I know you love me," she said, her voice soft as the silk garments she wore. Her eyes turned cold as they bore into his. "But I can't live with the constant reminder of what I've done to you. And every time I look at you, I won't see your love, and I won't feel my love. I'll feel the hate come creeping up on me. Hate at myself. And hate at you." She broke her gaze. "Why can't you let me lose?"

"Lucrecia..."

She laughed sharply, cutting off whatever he was going to say as she turned back to him. "Just set me free. For once, let me fly free." She took a unsteady breath, shaking her head and looking to the crystal sky. "I've made the worst mistake of my life. I've made a destroyer. God, help me."

He stared at her, his mouth moving, but no words coming forth in reply. "You didn't do anything, Lucrecia. It was Hojo. He made you do this –"

"Don't give me your pity!" she snapped. "He didn't make me do anything! I made the choice. Me!" Her voice reverberated through the canyon, rising above the wail of the falls. "I made the choice, and I'll be damned if I let anyone think otherwise. I'm not a puppet! I haven't any strings to pull and parts to prod. And if I did, I'd be the most pathetic creature this Planet has ever seen. My son is the puppet."

"I can help you through this. We can get through this. You don't need to do this."

"I don't need your help!" she shouted, her voice trembling with anger. "I don't need your sympathy, and I don't want your help! Damn your help! I'm not a child. I can make decisions."

He shook his head, taking a tentative step forward, his good hand outstretched. "This is the wrong one, Lucrecia. Come with me, and we can forget this and the entire world."

She fell to her knees, suddenly very tired, the tears still running down her wet cheeks. "This isn't what I want. I don't want to be the pretty bird locked up in someone's cage for all eternity. I don't want to live in a world that I can only see and never be a part of." She gave a small chuckle. "The Planet knows I don't want that."

"You don't have to have that, Lucrecia," he declared softly, his voice tight with the emotions he had bottled up for so long. He wouldn't fail her; he would help her be happy. He would be happy. "It doesn't have to be like this."

She stared up at his outstretched hand, oblivious to the tears dripping off her chin and onto the ground beneath her. She slowly stood of her own accord, watching as he slowly inched closer to her. She took another shaky breath before she nodded resolutely. "Yes, it does." A small smile played on her perfect lips, the pain easing out of her eyes. "It's time to set this caged bird free. Goodbye, my love."

With one backward step, she jumped silently into the rushing water below her.

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"Don't... press... your... luck..."

If there had been any air left in his lungs, Cloud Strife would have screamed.

Sephiroth drove the Masamune deep into Cloud's chest, stumbling forward from his own wound. The long, wicked blade cut deeper and deeper into his flesh, stabbing through his lung and out through his back. Warm blood ran freely from the wound, soaking into his uniform, running down the blade as he was lifted from the ground.

Cloud couldn't help but cry out as the hot pain enveloped him, stealing the breath from his lungs, driving sanity from his mind. All he could hear was Zack's voice. Zack, a friend telling him what to do, a superior officer issuing an order.

~*~

kill sephiroth kill

sephiroth kill sephiroth

sephiroth kill him cloud kill sephiroth

~*~

kill kill kill kill kill

~*~

He would kill Sephiroth. He had taken Nibelheim, he had taken Tifa, he had taken Mom, he would take nothing more. No more.

~*~

How does it feel?

This is your first time in your home town in a while.

first time...

How does it feel?

I don't have a one...

don't have one...

How does it feel?

~*~

feel... how does it feel

~*~

Cloud could feel the tears stinging at his eyes. I don't have a home town. They were hot tears, born and shed in anger. This would never happen again. No one would ever take anything from him again. He had nothing left. No life, no home, no love.

An angry cry emerged from the depths of his throat, echoing through the Mako Reactor. He would not lose anything else.

His feet touched the ground with a clang he couldn't hear over the pounding in his head. His hands grasped the cold, slender blade of the Masamune, but he was oblivious to the pain the cut into his palms. He wrenched the blade from his chest, the crimson liquid of his own blood the only thing that met him. There was no pain. The pain was gone. There was only anger.

His gaze sliced through the green eyes before him. And his rage boiled.

"W... what's going on?" Sephiroth stammered, his eyes locked into the blue Mako irises of the young man. He was raised in the air by the sheer will of the nameless guard in front of him. His own blood dribbled from his wounds, splattering to the ground in an all too audible drip.

They were locked in one breathless moment, each staring the other down. Two separate people yet somehow the same. And, with a cry of anguish and grief, Cloud hurled Sephiroth to the side, the bloody edge of the Masamune slicing through his skin and slipping from his grasp.

Sephiroth did not cry out as he fell from the bridge into the churning green liquid below it. It engulfed him and encased his body. There was no way he could cry out to someone as his soul was ripped from his body, and the green liquid flowed red with his blood as he drowned within its depths. It curdled in his mouth, burning down his throat and into his lungs, melting his eyes until he could no longer see the monsters of his own wicked nightmares cackling before him. All he could see, all he could feel and hear, was the fire of the pain as he was slowly ripped apart and disintegrated into nothing.

Mother...

Cloud could not watch as the green liquid engulfed the man he had just killed, and he tore his eyes from the scene, falling forward in pain. He clutched at his wounds as if hugging himself could somehow prevent the blood from leaving him. He hit the metal with a dull thud, gasping for breath.

This is the end.

The eerie, green light of the room filled his vision, dancing merrily in front of his eyes. And all he could hear was the sound of his own heart thundering in his ears as it slowly beat his life away.

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Dr. Hojo mopped his forehead with a handkerchief, glancing up at the stars in the black velvet sky above him. His breathing was the ragged kind often heard after hours of exercise even though he had only been hiking the crude path through the Nibel Mountains for a matter of minutes. He needed to get into shape.

"Damn path," he growled, taking a deep breath as he plodded further up into the higher altitudes. "Damn Planet has to make the damn Lifestream so high in the damn mountains." He stumbled and barely caught himself in time to save himself from a nasty fall back down the path. "What was that fool Shinra thinking anyway?" he demanded, coming to a halt.

His assistant, Dr. Nygel Huiji, stopped beside him, shrugging nervously. He pushed his glasses higher up on his nose, wiping the sweat from his brow. "I don't know, sir. They were probably thinking that this was a convenient, out-of-the-way place to have a reactor for your experiments."

Hojo began walking again, his face twisting in a grimace of mocking disgust. "Probably thinking that this was a convenient, out-of-the-way place to have a reactor," he repeated, his voice in a high-pitched snide tone. "Nygel," he declared, turning back to his compatriot, "when I want your opinion, I'll give it to you."

Nygel gave him a blank look on his young features, and Hojo turned away in distaste, tugging mercilessly at the remaining strands of hair atop his head. The hairs that fell from his scalp, he ignored as they continued on their way.

"Sir, I think you'd better see this!"

Hojo frowned, shaking his head. He glanced at the silhouette of the reactor barely visible in the distance before he turned around with a sigh. He raised his eyebrows, the frown still on his lips as he looked over the soldier in front of him. No one said anything.

"Well, wait the hell is it?!" he snapped, his tone harsh.

The Shinra soldier swallowed nervously as he turned back to where a group of men were hauling a dead body onto the path. He stepped aside to provide a clear view for both of the geneticists. "It's Loris Deverell. He went out with the first group."

Hojo nodded, a grim expression on his face. Deverell had been his spy. Unfortunately, from the rather large, gaping hole in his abdomen, it didn't seem as though the guard would ever have a chance to spy for him again.

Nygel looked away from the dried intestines and gnawed on flesh, his throat constricting in an attempt not to be sick. The stench was horrid, the decaying flesh hanging onto his bones by mere tatters in some places. Blackened sockets were the only evidence that the cadaver sprawled on the ground before them had once seen anything at all.

Hojo sighed, waving the air in front of his nose and mouth in a futile attempt to wave away the putrid aroma of an old death. "I know who he is." He shrugged. "Come on, let's get going." He turned back to the path. "I would like to see my son before he goes and does something more stupid than burning down Nibelheim."

Nygel glanced uncertainly at Hojo. "But, sir, he's dead."

"I can see that!" he shouted, agitation clearly evident in his voice. He turned back to Nygel, his clenched fists shaking as he struggled to retain his composure. Finally, he let out a long breath, and his hands relaxed. He smoothed out the remaining hair on his balding head with a sigh. "As I was saying. Let's continue on."

Nygel gave him a small nod and, with a jerk of his head, set the group of soldiers continuing up the path to the reactor. They were almost there. The small lighted silhouette was slowly increasing in size before them as the charred debris and smoking rubble still burned with a ferocious crackle behind them.

Hojo truly wished his son had not gone and done something truly stupid in his insanity. Sephiroth would soon see the light. He would realize that the Promised Land had so much more to offer to him than the Planet ever could. There would be fortune and power, and Hojo would have both. And as soon as President Shinra and his company were destroyed by Sephiroth, nothing would stand in their way. The Promised Land would be theirs.

The Mako Reactor grew large in his sight.

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"Tifa, honey, wake up," Zangan murmured, touching her cheek lightly. Her skin was pallid and waxen as pale as the blood that flowed from her wounds was dark. She was dying. It was evident from the wounds that she had that she was not going to live long without someone to save her. She needed help. "Cure."

The healing, green light enveloped her body, forming around her an aura of power almost into which it was almost too bright to gaze. When the aura faded and the dark of the night returned, her wounds had not healed. Blood still trickled between the ragged ends of her clothing from the long slash marring her chest, though not in the gushing manner in which it had been flowing. But Zangan found that he no longer had the strength to cast the spell again.

He had picked her weak body from where she had fallen, carrying her out into the healing air of the night before returning back to carry out her male companions. His strength was waning he approached the bridge of the Mako reactor. Lying lifelessly on the bridge was a young man whose name now escaped him, with wild, unruly blond hair. Blood puddled around him and dripped off the bridge to the pit below, the source a gaping hole in his chest. Zangan knelt beside him and rolled him onto his back. He shook his head sadly.

The other young man he had carried out onto the platform beside the bridge and left him near the door. He was in as grievous a state as his friend, and unless some help arrived soon, neither of them were likely to survive.

He had never felt so helpless in his entire life. First the entire town, and now the young girl who meant so much to him. He had lost in a few moments what it had taken his entire nomadic life to gain. He couldn't force the idea out of his mind that he had somehow failed.

"You haven't failed."

Zangan looked up sharply at the men that walked into the reactor room. He clenched his teeth as he saw their uniforms. More who would hurt, steal, and kill to get what they needed. He stood slowly, his eyes narrowed in anger. He had wanted help. This wasn't what he had had in mind.

"Shinra," he spat, his voice barely a growl. "You've already taken so much. Why don't you just leave this plunder for another time and go home to your wives?"

The balding man who had spoken first merely shrugged. "I, good sir, have no wife." He looked contemplative for a moment before shrugging again, slowly walking across the bridge, his shoes making a hollow clank. Guards dressed in blue uniforms fanned out behind him. "I once had an assistant who bore onto me a monster for a son. I can't say I loved her, but she did give me what I wanted as they all do. As you will."

"You don't deserve anything."

Hojo smiled with a sigh. "Don't I? And how about that girl you carried out of her?" He was obviously referring to Tifa. "Does she deserve life?" He coolly arched an eyebrow. "Or death?"

Zangan frowned. "And what about them?" he demanded, nodding towards the two boys.

"Ooh." His grinned widened. "Only one of your friends can you save. And in return, you must give me something for your own life."

Zangan's eyes darkened, his fists clenching. "Is that a threat?" he asked, his voice low.

Hojo's gaze was ice. "You tell me." When Zangan didn't respond, he continued, walking closer towards them, stepping over the young soldier's body. "Right now, you can do nothing against us," he declared, crouching over the guard and jabbing his fingers to the dying man's neck. He was silent for a moment and then he stood, continuing with, "A dozen guns trained on you, a dozen soldiers trained to shoot to kill. And if you tell me what you saw," he leaned closer to Zangan as he approached, "and I do think you saw something, I'll let you go free. As a token of my goodwill, you can take one – only one, granted – of them with you."

"Or else?"

"Or else everyone, including you, dies." Hojo nodded, his lips pursed in thought. "I can see that this is a very difficult decision for you, but you ought to hurry up or I suspect all of them will be dead. You can either tell me and live, or die." He chuckled. "You know, there's a saying somewhere. 'Silence breaks the heart.' Oh, it's gonna break yours."

Zangan cursed angrily and shook his head. "Alright! Alright. I'll tell you what I saw, but you've gotta help them in return."

"I've no intention of not helping them," Hojo declared. "I wouldn't want my painful trip out here to be for absolutely nothing. I can guarantee that they'll all live. Now, tell me, old man, what did you see?"

Zangan took a shuddering breath. "Sephiroth is dead, killed by that blond-haired guy," he declared, gesturing towards the young man on the floor.

"What?!" Hojo turned around to Zangan so fast he felt whiplash sting him. Anger coursed through his veins, pounding in

time with his heart. It couldn't be true! Nobody could destroy Sephiroth. He was the ultimate power on the Planet. Not even the Materia Guardians could scratch him! How could a nameless guard, a pathetic weakling kill the Great Sephiroth? It wasn't possible.

"That boy killed Sephiroth," Zangan stated again, a smile coming unbidden to his face at seeing Hojo's reaction. The thought of Tifa lying in the cold night exposed destroyed the small grin quickly enough. "Took the blade of that sword and pulled it outta himself before he threw Sephiroth into the Mako Pit." He shook his head. "It wasn't a pretty picture."

Hojo couldn't believe it. His entire body was shaking with rage. His son had just been killed by a worthless pool of slime, and all this old man could do was laugh. Hojo did not enjoy being made to play the part of a fool. It couldn't be true.

Hojo whipped around back to the Mako pit, scanning the green depths for any sign of his son. Zangan took the man's moment of shock to dart past him and the guards who let him pass freely, too surprised to do anything about it.

Hojo shook his head in denial. It couldn't be true. Sephiroth couldn't be dead. His own creation, breathed to life by his cells and the cells of another, given power by the love of Jenova. It couldn't be true. The Planet would not let her son die. Never.

It couldn't be true.

But it was.

Hojo leaned far over the railing of the bridge, oblivious to the blood slowly dripping in between its metal grating and into the Mako Pit below it. And there, down within the confines of the boiling, green liquid, was the Masamune, the long edge gleaming wickedly in the eerie light created by the Mako.

Hojo staggered back, stunned. It was true. Mako, the very power that had helped to create Sephiroth, had killed him. It wasn't possible, but somehow it had happened. And all because of that nameless Shinra guard.

"Damn," Hojo muttered, clenching his fist in rage as if that could stop the years of hard work from slipping through his fingers. "Damn, damn, damn, damn! Nygel!!"

The call echoed loudly through the gaping, hollow chasm. A moment later, before the cry could even finish reverberating off the walls, his assistant hastily made his way down the stairs and unto the bridge. "Yes, sir?" he said, nearly breathless.

Hojo rounded on him, anger flashing in his beady eyes which reflected the sick green light from the Mako. "Sephiroth is dead!" he shouted, the echo of his voice slamming it into his ears.

Nygel flinched. "Are you sure?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes, I'm sure!" Hojo exploded angrily. He kicked the body lying on the bridge at his feet viciously. "This – this kid, this nobody killed him! Damnitalltohell, all of that work's wasted! Don't you see what happened here, Nygel! We're screwed! Damn!!"

Nygel backed up a little, intimidated by Hojo's outburst. He watched as his superior turned away from him in disgust and braced himself on the railing of the bridge, breathing heavily. For a few moments, it was silent besides the hum of the reactor churning energy. Then Hojo sighed heavily and turned towards the guards behind him. Tiredly, he ordered, "Go into Nibelheim and look for survivors. If you find any, shoot them on the spot." He ignored Nygel's surprised look as he began wearily down the bridge. When his assistant didn't follow, he ordained sharply, "Come on. Let's go. There's nothing else here."

Nygel glanced at the body on the bridge, watching the blood spread around him. He looked over at his shoulder to the other body, propped up beside the door to the Jenova room. "Wait, sir," he said, shaking his head. Hojo looked at him with murder in his eyes. "We're just leaving?"

"Yes, we're just leaving," Hojo snapped. He flung his hands up in irritation. "Excuse me if I don't want to spend the worst day of my life in a Mako Reactor."

"What about them?" Nygel asked, crouching beside the boy on the bridge.

Hojo waved it off. "Let them die," he said bitterly.

Nygel was a bit surprised as he looked up at Hojo. "Sir, don't you see the possibilities here?" When Hojo only glared him down, Nygel swallowed his stomach back down and steeled himself to continue. "If Sephiroth was the ultimate power on the Planet, how does some lowly guard manage to defeat him? There has to be some explanation."

"What's your point?" Hojo snapped, clearly annoyed, as he stood there and folded his arms across his chest.

Nygel stood and wiped the blood on his lab coat. "My point is, sir, that if this man killed Sephiroth, he must be special. You don't find somebody like that everyday. Even the First Class SOLDIERS couldn't touch him. We ought to take care of their wounds to find out what happened."

Hojo shook his head. "What does it matter? Sephiroth, my precious creation... Sephiroth's dead! What does it matter how he was killed?"

Nygel began to grow impatient and only his fear of Hojo kept back his sharp words. "I'd like to know," he said simply. "It might prove to be useful to find out what Sephiroth's weaknesses were. And furthermore, if this guard is something special..." He didn't need to say any more. "Besides," he said, shrugging, "if we get nothing out of this, then you can kill them both later."

"Alright, alright!" Hojo said resignedly. He shook his head. "Take care of them. I guess we'll hang around here a little longer." He shook his head once more before storming out of the room.

Nygel smiled smally as he leaned down over the young man. Pulling a green materia out of his lab coat, he began to heal the murderer of Sephiroth back to health.

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Nygel sighed as he flipped on the lights of the library buried deep in the basement of the Shinra mansion. The fixtures overhead winked to life, spreading illumination across the room. Shadows fled to reside only in the corners and behind large objects, as if cowering in the presence of light.

The lab was a complete mess. Papers were strewn everywhere; all over the tables and floor, whatever order they had been most likely meticulously placed in destroyed with the swipe of somebody's arm. Books were stacked high beside the towering wooden cases, leaving very few on the shelves. Some lay open, some ripped, some mutilated. A few chairs were toppled and desk drawers had been yanked open and their contents spilled about. It looked as if a tornado had blasted through and left a mess in its wake.

Sighing again, this time more heavily, Nygel scanned the room wearily, analyzing the situation. All those files needed to be straightened. All the books must be replaced back in the proper order. The chairs and desks needed to be straightened. These were Shinra's most important files, after all, and they needed to be in perfect working order.

Somebody needed to straighten this all up to find out exactly what had enraged Sephiroth.

That somebody, as it usually was when it came to drudgery work such as this, was him. Far be it for Hojo to descend from his throne on high and join the simpletons in the tedious tasks that kept his kingdom in order. He was always reduced to such menial jobs; Nygel often thought of himself as Hojo's book keep rather than his assistant. He had, in the last five years or so, found himself filling out paperwork and filing more than working with genetics. He shook his head ruefully as he continued to stare at the mess. One day that would change. One day he would make Hojo get down on his hands and knees for once and get his hands dirty. But not today.

Stepping over a fallen chair, Nygel surveyed the room one last time, trying to decide where to start. He began by righting the office furniture and then he picked the papers up off the floor. Thankfully, these documents were all stamped,

numbered, filed, and labeled. It took him well over an hour sitting in one of the stiff, red office chairs to get them all back in order. After that he replaced the files back in the large cabinet and locked the doors securely. Wiping his brow with the back of his hand, Nygel made his way to the two parallel book shelves, gazing at the heaping piles of books disdainfully. Summoning up his will, he plopped down in the chair that was conveniently placed in the center of the small hallway. For a moment he just sat there and rested his weary bones.

There were apparently no other survivors of Sephiroth's rage than the two young men found in the Mako Reactor; Nibelheim, what was left of it, was deserted, leaving only the smoldering remains of buildings and ash. The town was dead, all life seemingly expunged. Only a few buildings had been left unharmed by the devouring flames, still structurally intact. The rest of the area had been leveled. The smoke cleared on the winds of the morning, but remained thick in air, blocking out the rays of the sun. It cast despondency over Nibelheim, which only lowered the moral of the people present. The fires had been put out hours ago, leaving the crumbled framework of many houses. Puffs of smoke rose from a few smoldering chunks of charred wood and they meshed with the misty cloud forming over the town square. There was no sign of morning upon Nibelheim. The lingering smoke blocked the sun. Half the houses about the square were burned to the ground. Their frames of wood were black and crumbling, their shingles reduced to impotent ash. Some of the buildings about the town square stood half demolished, like a soldier marching on with an arrow in his side. The only houses still standing and completely intact were a few residences and the Shinra Mansion. Thus, the base of Hojo's operation had been obviously planted in the old, but still opulent, house.

As far as the two young men went, neither of them had regained consciousness. They had, however, made strides towards identifying them. Zack was easily recognizable; he had been one of the more popular members of the First Class of SOLDIER. Putting a name to the face of the other boy was a bit more difficult. He was as Hojo had deemed him: a nobody. He had no form of identification on him, though his blood-soaked soldier's uniform had been thoroughly searched. It was pretty much assured that the Zack fellow would survive, although it took a few passes with the cure. The other boy, though, was worse. He had barely pulled through the first few hours. Nygel was confident that he, too, would make a full recovery. So he had not deemed finding out what had happened as hopeless as Hojo at first had. That was one thing he never understood about Hojo. The man had no aspiration and was a phenomenal pessimist. If something didn't work right away or wasn't easy off the bat, he simply gave up. No endurance whatsoever. No patience, either, and patience was one thing the successful scientist must possess. The will to keep trying even if it doesn't work the first time, or the second time, or the third time... the ability to admit to the mistakes in the procedure and fix them instead of labeling the entire system as faulty.

Be that as it may, Hojo still believed they were wasting their time on a couple of worthless peons. Nygel begged to differ. Something deep inside him, instinct possibly, told him that these two were important, that they would become pivotal players in the Jenova Project. Of course, instinct was all well and good as long as you had some sort of evidence to back it up. Nygel needed that evidence. He also needed the guts to explain what he thought to Hojo. On top of all that, he must do it soon. Hojo also had a very short temper and if he wanted to leave Nibelheim, they would. Going against Hojo wasn't wise.

Hmph. Instinct worked well enough for gamblers, warriors, and businessmen. For scientists, it was only folly.

Nygel willed himself to lean forward. He began to pick up the books off the floor one by one and place them on the shelves. As he did so, he gained energy and anger. Who was Hojo to say this was worthless? What did he know anyway? Even though he may have trained under Gast, whom Nygel had great respect for, he had acquired none of the inspiration for which the old scientist had been famous. Gast's search for the Promised Land had been purely out of science. Hojo's sick quest was out of the power. He had manipulated those around him. He had hurt many, including his own son. Nygel shook his head spitefully as he shoved another book rather unceremoniously back onto the shelves. He would never stoop as low as Hojo to create a being and then use it to conquer and hurt.

Of course now the question became what to do after Sephiroth. They couldn't just as well make another Sephiroth; that would be far too suspicious not to mention foolhardy. They still as yet didn't know what was wrong with the last one. To create another with the same flaws could be disastrous. Thankfully, this time, only a small town had been destroyed. Next time it could be something far greater and less repairable. As Nygel thought back on it now, he realized Sephiroth's little explosion had been inevitable. Sooner or later, he would have found out about himself, about what he was. Hojo had seen it coming; that was why he had sent that soldier out with the first party to spy and report. The sad thing about it was that Nygel was almost certain that Hojo had sent Sephiroth out to Nibelheim, out to the reactor where his mother was kept,

only to see his son's reaction. God, the man was a sadist.

Nygel was too disgusted with him for words. But he couldn't just back out now. The quest for the Promised Land, the Jenova Project, was his life. He'd have to deal with Hojo, and that was that.

As he swerved back in his chair to pick up another book, he accidentally knocked the stack of about ten next to him over. "Damn," he moaned as he slid out of his chair to begin picking them up. He reached over to the furthest books, just by chance glancing down at one of the open ones. And he stopped.

The book laid innocently open, exposing pages that began some chapter. The writing was relatively foreign, but Nygel recognized it after a few moments. It was Cetra text, and he only knew this because a few books on the Promised Land, which he had tried to read, were written using it. Cetra text was very beautiful and angular compared to the language they used. Beside the page was a picture of a man with wild hair. A large sword was gripped in his right hand and shoved to the sky. The clouds were drawn parted, rays of light spiraling down towards the lone soldier and engulfing him. Around him was a field of corpses, many dismembered, but distinctly human. The words in large writing that no doubt named the chapter Nygel could actually read.

The Destroyer.

The other books forgotten, Nygel leaned back up in his chair, carrying the text with him. With a furrowed brow, he scanned down the page intently. He could only pick out a few words, for he was no expert in reading and translating Ancient writing. However, two words were repeated often in the passage and through the next couple of pages, he realized as he flipped through. Promised Land. Nygel's heart leapt in ecstasy. It was so rare to find any books with mention of the Promised Land, being that most everything considered it a legend. Of those books, ones written by the Cetra were the most important and the most in-depth. Nygel grinned broadly at his find.

As if jerked to life, he stood abruptly and kicked the books on the floor out of his way, his treasure clamped tightly in his hand. Somewhere, buried down here, he knew there was a Cetra text translation book, written by Professor Gast himself. He pawed through the books on the shelves rapidly, in the process knocking most of what he replaced back to the floor again. "Where is it?!" he snapped angrily, frustration mixing in with his energy. Finally he found the green leather book, nestled in the corner in its own, dry home. He ripped it off the shelves and, with the two books in his hand, jogged his way back towards the desks in the front of the room.

Nygel sat quickly into one of the desk chairs and nudged it up to the red oak desk. Pulling open one of the adjacent file cabinets, he reached in and produced some blank paper. With that, and a pen he had found on the desk, he opened both books and began to translate.

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Zack gave a low moan and he struggled to open his eyes. Electrifying pain shot through him the minute light burst through the blackness, causing him to tense all his muscles. Thankfully, the sharp agony faded quickly and left only a dull hurt and soreness plaguing his limbs.

He opened his eyes again and blinked them a few times to get his surroundings into focus. When he did, he nearly gasped and sat up abruptly.

What the hell?

"I'm alive," he breathed softly, in a clear state of shock. He pulled his hands out from under the blankets he had been covered with and stared at them. They were cold and quivering, but he could feel his fingers. He gently flexed his hands. The last time he had seen them, they had been covered in his blood as he held the wound in his side, attempting to slow the crimson flow as it gushed from his body. He cursed again as he realized the wound that had nearly killed him... the bleeding hole in his side was gone. He suddenly felt the greatest elation, as if he would leap from this bed and sing to the world. Somebody had saved him! At that moment, he didn't care if it was President Shinra, Sephiroth, or Chocobo Billy... somebody had saved his life, and for that he was eternally grateful.

Once the sense of overwhelming joy and excitement fled his body, he took the time to look around more carefully. The room he was in had dull, yellow striped walls, obviously having been papered. There was a large window to his left with the white lacey curtains drawn back, letting the welcomed rays of the sun burst through. It was moderately furnished, with two large, polished oak chests of drawers pushed up against the wall, and a desk seated between them. Two doors marked the closet near the other end of the large room. The floors were wood and looked to be the kind that creaked if a mouse stepped on them. The room looked recently dusted and smelled moderately musty. It must have been abandoned for quite some time, although, Zack thought, it had probably been rich and palatial at one point. A small crystal chandelier was suspended from the ceiling, but it, too, looked unused and neglected.

As Zack turned to the other side of the room, he found another bed and it was occupied.

"Cloud," he said softly as he slid out the bed he had been in. When he felt the cool air touch his upper thighs, he realized he was stark naked. Despite the fact the room was obviously empty except for the two of them, he blushed, grabbed the sheet from the bed quickly, and wrapped it around himself.

Sufficiently covered, he made his way to the other bed. It was indeed Cloud that laid in it, the young man's eyes securely closed. His face was pale and almost sallow. Zack would have thought him to be dead if not for the steady rise and fall of his chest. Leaning closer, he gently shook the kid on the shoulder. "Cloud, wake up."

"It won't do any good." Zack whipped around at the sound of the masculine voice, nearly dropping the sheet in the process. The man standing in the door, dressed in a white lab coat with balding black hair and glasses, Zack recognized immediately. He took a stepped forward in the room, hands clasped behind his back. "He can't hear you."

Zack backpedaled in surprise. "Dr. Hojo..." He shook his head and hugged the sheet tighter around himself. "What's going on? What are you doing here?"

Hojo approached and glanced at Cloud for a few moments. He then turned to Zack whose eyes were wide. "You were hurt very badly," he said in after a few seconds, the statement taking Zack by surprise. "Your friend here even worse. I'd say it's fortunate that we arrived when we did, or you'd both be dead right now." Zack watched him with narrow eyes as he stepped around Cloud's bed to him. He began to pull the sheet back at which Zack only tugged tighter. "Oh stop it," Hojo admonished as he succeeded in yanking the sheet down to his waist. Crouching, the good doctor examined the area where the Masamune had sliced through his flesh, gently probing the spot with light fingers. Zack fought the urge to flinch back. "Any pain?"

Zack shook his head, watching the man suspiciously. "Under the circumstances, I've got no complaints," he answered back, slowly.

Hojo nodded and rose, upon which Zack immediately pulled the sheet up over his shoulder. The feel of the man's ice cold fingers on his skin... he suppressed a shudder. "Well," Hojo said, turning back to Cloud. "You've healed nicely. It's a good thing, too." He folded his arms over his chest and shook his head. "After losing Sephiroth, I don't think SOLDIER can afford another dead member."

Zack nearly did a double take. "Sephiroth's dead?" he asked in disbelief. His jaw was on the floor.

Hojo nodded again in, what seemed Zack as almost forced, melancholy. "'Fraid so. As of yet, we don't know what killed him. I happen to think it was some of those monsters we sent you up here to deal with." He shook his head again. "It's a real shame."

Zack looked to Cloud's prone form, shocked, eyes wide. Had Cloud killed Sephiroth? Was it possible that his friend had succeeded where he himself had failed? The last thing he remembered clearly was telling Cloud to take his sword and stop Sephiroth. Had Cloud actually done it?

"Of course, we intend to find out," Hojo continued, glancing at Zack out of the corner of his eye. "We'll need your statement, Mr. Garek," he said plainly. He tipped his head towards Cloud. "And your friend's as well."

Zack nodded slowly, trying to straighten all of this out in his head. Something about this just wasn't right. "But why did

Shinra send you out here.... Sir?" he added belatedly.

Hojo glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. "I wasn't sent out here," he said simply. There was a cold note in his voice that was not lost on Zack. "My position in Shinra is one of great... flexibility. Nibelheim was considered a dangerous area, one to be contained and dealt with accordingly. Let's just say I needed to check up on an experiment out here, and President Shinra had no objections."

Deep down inside, Zack felt what Hojo said wasn't entirely true. He had never personally met the man before, but he seemed to be one with his own personal agenda and who would stop at nothing to see it fulfilled. It was only a first impression, but Zack had learned to trust them. Thus he put himself on edge. Besides, Cloud and he were in a very... peculiar position now, being the only two alive who had witnessed Sephiroth's complete and utter obliteration of Nibelheim. Shinra would not be pleased to hear what happened. Sephiroth was their pride and joy. To lose him might generate some heat in Zack and Cloud's direction. A little wariness on their parts was in order.

Hojo sighed and folded his arms over his chest. "We'll be leaving for Midgar in two days. I have to finish my work here before we can head back. If there's anything you need, just talk to the guards and they'll see to getting it for you." He turned around and began out of the room.

"Wait," Zack said. Hojo turned around and faced him. "What about Cloud?" he asked, gesturing to his friend.

"That's his name?" Hojo responded, taking a step closer.

Zack nodded. "Strife. Cloud Strife."

"Hmm." Hojo's eyes narrowed as he stared at Cloud. Zack shook his head in confusion, watching Hojo who seemed to be in some sort of trance. After a long moment, Hojo nodded sharply and began to walk out of the room. "He'll heal." Zack glared at him in a mixture of contempt and bewilderment as the man stood in the doorway. "I suggest you rest. The trip to Midgar is long and rather tiring." He smiled; the gesture sent shivers crawling up Zack's back. Then he walked out of the room.

Out in the hall, Hojo grabbed the arm of one of the guards posted outside the room. Tugging the man down the elaborately carpeted stairs of the Shinra mansion, he snapped softly, "Call Midgar. Get me the personnel file on Cloud Strife."

The man nodded firmly and then made his way down the stairs. Hojo stood there, rubbing his chin for a few moments. His eyes were distant and he appeared to be a thousand miles away, thoughts on far off things. He was deterred from his pondering by a guard who ran up to the foot of the stairs. "Sir!" he gasped, nearly breathless. "Dr. Huiji wants to see you, sir. Says it's urgent."

Hojo snorted. "Where's that fool been these past few hours?" he demanded of the soldier.

The man swallowed nervously. "In the library, sir."

Hojo darkly stomped back up the stairs. "This better be worth my time," he growled before walking down the hall. The sound of a slamming door echoed through the house.

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Nygel raised his head at the ruckus, momentarily looking up from the pages upon pages of translation before him. He winced at the echo of clomping feet and another crash of a door. Hojo was not in a good mood. For the briefest moment, he considered forgetting about this whole crazy idea. But it faded as quickly as it came. Not even one of Hojo's illustrious mood swings was going to deny him this.

The library door opened and banged shut, and into the room burst Hojo. Nygel watched him and shook his head barely perceptibly. God help me. He's a freaking lunatic!!

Hojo stared at him expectantly for a few moments, breathing heavily. Then, eyes flashing brilliantly, he said, exasperated, "Well?! You dragged me down here for a reason, didn't you?!" He shook his head disdainfully. "Million better things I could be doing..." Nygel bit back the sharp reply; what he had discovered was far too important.

"Sir, I think I've found something important," Nygel announced, unable to keep the excitement out of his voice.

Hojo had murder in his eyes. "For crying out loud, Nygel! Cut the dramatics and just tell me what's so damn important that you had to get me right now!"

Nygel refused to be intimidated. "Have you ever heard of an Ancient legend called the Destroyer?" He handed the book to Hojo open to the beginning of the chapter with that picture. Hojo took the text in his hands and stared down at it. His hard expression softened as he looked it over, the anger melting from his face.

"No," he said softly, his brow furrowed in confusion. He skimmed the text with quick eyes and then looked up at Nygel, excitement clearly etched into his features. "Does this say 'Promised Land'?"

Nygel couldn't help but smile as he nodded. Like a child to candy. "I've taken the liberty of translating the chapter." He picked up the papers on the desk, enough to constitute a bunch. He watched Hojo continue to look over the book. "Most of the phrasing and dialect I've never seen before, but I was able to understand most of it from context." He stood up quickly, the energy of discovery fueling his tired body. "This book speaks of some sort of Destroyer that, at one point in Ancient history on one of the planets they inhabited, killed a good portion of some inferior race to create the Promised Land."

Hojo's jaw fell open. "Are you sure?" he snapped. "Give me that!" and he snatched the papers out of his assistant's hands. He quickly read them over. That smile crept to Nygel's face again. After a few moments, Hojo looked up again at him. He actually grinned; feral, granted, but grinned nonetheless. "This is incredible."

"I know. This Destroyer apparently had the powers of the three major materia; the Black Materia, the White Materia, and the Holy Materia. According to that legend, he was given all three materia by the Council of the Cetra to expunge the Planet of the inferior race, whose name I can't even begin to pronounce, and create the Promised Land for the Ancients living there. The next part of the story I can't translate correctly; it's not written in the same dialect that Gast was able to figure out. But still..."

Hojo shook his head. "But still is right. I'll be damned... Where was this book when I was creating Sephiroth? Had I known this I would have spent more time looking for the White and Holy Materia! Damn!"

Nygel shrugged. "I don't know why it was missed, sir. It was buried down here. My guess is that Sephiroth found this and got it stuck in his head that you had created him with this in mind."

Hojo staggered a bit. He laughed as he plopped into a chair. "Oh, I gotta sit down. Whooo!" He let out a mad giggle and tossed Nygel's translation into the air like confetti. Nygel winced; his cleaned room once again a mess. "Break out the champagne, Nygel old friend! All of our problems are solved!"

"Sir?" Nygel shook his head.

Hojo sat up a little. "Oh, the genius strikes again. Don't you see? We create another Sephiroth and instead of this time letting him lead us to the Promised Land, we get him the materia and have him create it for us! All this Destroyer is is an Ancient with materia on the mind, right?"

Nygel sighed and shook his head. "We can't just create another Sephiroth, sir," he declared, almost shocked at Hojo's presumptuous tones.

"And why the hell not?"

"For one thing, sir," Nygel began, averting his eyes from his superior in almost fright, "we don't know what went wrong with Sephiroth last time. To create another one would be a waste of time. If we couldn't control the last one, what leads us

to believe another will be any different?" Hojo looked enraged and Nygel flinched, feeling a heavy stream of insults coming in his general direction. When none came, he looked back at Hojo.

The man sat back in his chair, rubbing his chin. "You do have a point."

Nygel breathed a small sigh of relief. "Yes, sir. Furthermore, if we give him so much power in those three materia, and we can't control him, how do we know he won't turn around and kill us, too? I mean, with all do respect, sir, Sephiroth wasn't entirely fond of you."

Hojo was silent a moment, his eyes contemplative. He smacked his lips once and then focussed his gaze on Nygel. "Okay. So what do you suggest we do?"

The great Hojo asking for his input? Nygel basked in glory, singing inside. "Well, sir, I have thought about this. The Destroyer did have one weakness and that was the removal of any one of those materia. Once he was without all three, the other two wouldn't function properly and he had no power. I think that was how the inferior race managed to bring his downfall, but I'm not sure. I am sure that for him to be infallible, he needs to have all three materia with him at all times."

Hojo shook his head. "And how do we accomplish that?"

Nygel let out a long breath. Now for the kicker. "I see only one option, sir. We infuse all three materia into the Destroyer."

"What?!" Hojo demanded, exasperated. He leapt to his feet in disbelief. "That can't be done. No human, no Cetra, no nothing can withstand that! It would be liked dumping the entire power of the Planet into one's mind! It's not possible!" He shook his head. "The shear absorption of the Black Materia alone would poison to the brink of insanity and then kill."

"Maybe, maybe not," Nygel said almost matter-of-factly, surprised by the bravado in his voice. He had never felt so strong against Hojo as he did right then, never had so much of a backbone. "You're right; to outright take anybody and infuse one of the materia into them would kill them. What I propose is that we slowly integrate Mako into the specimen until they are ready to receive the materia."

Hojo cocked an eyebrow at that. "Go on. I'm listening."

Nygel stood and began to pace the library rapidly. "If we were to very slowly and very moderately build somebody up with Mako to the point where they were nearly poisoned by the exposure, they might be able to withstand the infusion of the materia. It's like practicing for a sport or rigorous treatment for a disease. You keep doing more and more until you're ready for the real thing. After all, materia is very concentrated Mako."

The look on Hojo's face was promising. "You think it might work?"

Nygel shrugged again. "I think it's worth a try. This would involve years of work probably and it won't be easy. You've seen what happens when you inject somebody with a little too much Mako too fast."

Hojo grimaced, obviously remembering some of their first experiments with the potency of Mako on a few SOLDIER recruits. It hadn't been pretty. "It won't be very pleasant either," he murmured, rubbing his chin once again. "But I agree with you. It's definitely worth the time. Whoever we do this to, we will have to have complete control over. What he eats, thinks, drinks, when he sleeps, what he says... Whoever we turn into the Destroyer must be completely dependant upon us."

"I agree," Nygel said. He sighed, feeling the adrenaline rush through his body. Slowly, the high left him and he looked to Hojo. "Now the question becomes... who?"

He watched his superior expectantly as he began to pace the room again. "Hmm." Hojo rubbed his chin slowly, his beady eyes narrowed in thought. "Who indeed. Well, I suppose we have the answer right in front of us. We need test subjects; we have them. We'll try this out on Strife."

Nygel's brow creased in confusion and he shook his head. "Who?"

Hojo waved a hand at him. "The guard that killed Sephiroth. Garek awoke a little while ago and told me who he was. One Cloud Strife. I sent for his record from Shinra."

"Why him?"

Hojo had clearly regained his air of superiority. "Why? Because I said so, that's why." Hojo stopped passing and turned towards his companion. "I want that man to suffer for the years of work he's destroyed. Besides, in a certain way, he's responsible for the birth of the Destroyer. If he hadn't killed Sephiroth, would we even be talking about this right now?" He folded his arms over his chest and put all of his weight on to his left leg. "Wouldn't it be fitting for him to become the Destroyer?"

Fitting? Nygel didn't know about that. He didn't want to press his luck too much, though. "I guess so, sir. What about the other one?"

Hojo walked to the door. "Well, we need him, too. In case this kills Strife, we need a backup plan. It's not as if we can just let him go, not with what he's seen. He's worth more to us dead than alive. Besides, if we separate them now, it will begin their inevitable struggle against us far more earlier than it needs to. I want to get back to Midgar first."

Nygel nodded and rapidly felt the credit for this idea slipping from his fingers. Oh, well. It wasn't as if this was the first time this had happened. And it wasn't likely to be the last. He looked up to Hojo, who was smiling and no doubt thinking of his glory, when his eyes landed on a silent intruder.

"Uh, sir?" he asked, licking suddenly dry lips.

Hojo glanced sharply at him. "Not now. Not in my moment of triumph!"

Nygel frowned. "But, sir, I – uh, that is – well..."

"Out with it," he growled, his patience dwindling.

Nygel raised a finger, pointing beyond Hojo. "B – behind you."

Hojo frowned as he turned around and found himself looking straight down the barrel of a gun. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he swallowed nervously, looking from the gun back to its owner. He jumped backward involuntarily.

"You!" he exclaimed, knocking into the hard wood desk Nygel was standing behind. "What do you want, you freak?!"

The man's red eyes narrowed angrily, his thumb cocking the handgun with an audible click. "You bastard," he growled. The menace in his voice couldn't be cut by the Sister Ray. "You took her from me."

Hojo smiled was feeble. "A simple misunderstanding, Mr. Valentine," his nod was slight, "and a bad choice of words. You see, I didn't do anything to take her away from you. She chose to be a part of my experiment, and she chose to kill herself almost immediately after that experiment was carried out. Freedom of choice is what this life's all about, isn't it, Mr. Valentine?"

"I had a helluva lot of choice with this!" From the darkness of his shrouds, he revealed a metallic hand ending in five, wicked claws. He raised the gun to aim at Hojo's head again. "The next time you want to have some fun with genetics, ask permission first, Dr. Hojo. It's the courtesy of the thing."

Hojo nodded. "Yes, I can definitely feel that my lack of courtesy could cause some resentment towards me. But, you see, you got in the way. You know how I feel when someone gets in my way, don't you? I get in that shoot first and ask questions later mode, you know? I don't like it when people get in my way, but I do like free experiments. Your experiment came out pretty well. A lot better than Lucrecia's. But, then again, she was weak."

Vincent felt his trigger finger itching as anger enveloped him. "She wasn't weak; she was fooled into helping your perverted

slime."

Hojo smiled sweetly. "And suicide is the pathetic's way out." His voice twisting mockingly. "She couldn't live with what she's done." The smile turned to venom. "Don't make me sick. She killed herself because she couldn't stand to look at you. She hated you because you couldn't save her. You couldn't stop me from destroying that young, handsome Turk you used to be. She hated you because you reminded her of herself. Pathetic, weak, impuissant. A fool."

"That's not true!" he growled, feeling the anger stir the creatures nestled in the back of his mind. "You lie."

"Do I?"

Vincent re-gripped the handgun, pulling slowly back on the trigger. "I'm going to kill you, now." His voice was tight with anger, his head pulsing in time with his heart, his blood boiling in his veins.

Hojo merely snorted, a twisted smile lighting his features. "I think... not."

Vincent staggered forward, and the gun fell from his numbed fingers. Fiery agony enveloped him as he stumbled to his knees, clutching his chest as though his heart was going to pound through his tightened fingers. He gasped for the air of which there did not seem to be enough, and he let loose a cry of agony reverberating through the small library chamber. The pain let way to his anger, and the nightmarish beast emerged from its hibernation, feeding off that anger as though it had been starved and deprived since its creation. The howl of pain transformed to a feral snarl of anger.

Vincent Valentine was now the small creature in the back of the beast's mind, unable to stop the anguish and pain of himself from forming tears in corners the beast's eyes. The beast did not care, oblivious to everything except the anger from which it fed. With a snarl and a lunge, the beast launched itself toward Hojo, one thing overriding the pain and anger.

The thought of blood. Blood fresh from its prey.

The beast never completed the lunge and never reached Hojo. Gunfire exploded in the silence of the library, emanating from down the hall. Twin shots embedded themselves deeply into the back of the beast.

The pain was from the beast, but stung Vincent the most. The beast let loose a wailing cry as it landed on the hardwood desk, sliding over the books and papers and leaving a long, bloody trail in its wake. It fell from the desk and to the floor, landing in a heap of paraphernalia. It was too angry to feel the pain yet too hurt to use the anger. It did the only thing it could do; it let Vincent take control.

Nygel wiped the sweat from his brow, slowly straightening from where he had dove when the monster had lunged. He took a shaky breath, bending to where the young man, clothed in red and black was slowly rousing. "What the hell was that?" he asked, his eyes finding Hojo's.

The other man merely shrugged, wiping some dirt from his white lab coat. "That was one of my first creations; also, might I add, one of my favorites."

Nygel frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"I made him, you see. During the first leg of the Jenova Project, before Gast's untimely demise, I had a lovely young assistant too attached to that young man for my liking. I shot him, made him... better, and let him loose on the world. Shame that he keeps coming back to me. A waste of time and effort. He could wreak havoc everywhere if he only had the heart." Hojo looked back to the guards which had heard the howl and shot the beast. "Go lock him up somewhere, and throw away the key."

Vincent groaned as he rolled over onto his back, his vision slowly coming back into focus. And then he felt the strong arms grasping his own and hauling him to his feet. It wasn't supposed to be like this. Sephiroth was finally dead; Hojo was to follow. What had happened?

"Let me go!" he demanded, struggling within the seemingly iron grasp of the soldiers pulling him from Hojo. "I'll kill you,

you bastard! I'll kill you! I swear!"

Hojo smiled. "Swear by Lucrecia's name, you miserable wretch, and I'll believe you."

"No! Let me go!" He tried to pull from the soldiers, to somehow wrench his arms from their hands but found he had no strength left in his bones to offer more than pathetic struggle. The beast had stolen his stamina, using it to heal the gun shot wounds. There was no more strength left in him to fight. There was nothing. "No..."

"What do you want to do with him, sir?" one of the guards asked, his voice gruff behind his helmet.

Hojo shrugged nonchalantly. "I don't know. Throw him in the crypt." His smile widened. "Give him a premature burial."

Vincent's cries were left unheeded as they carried him from the library and out into the hall where a single door marred the rocky surface of the wall. The door was opened, and they pulled him inside the room. A coffin was cracked open, and the bones were thrown about as the remains of its owner were removed. Vincent was thrown in it.

The heavy lid was placed over it.

He was secured inside the darkness.

No amount of pounding and crying for help would release him now. With click of the door locked by a key, he was sealed inside his own personal hell for all eternity, left only to dwell on his demons and forever hear the cries of Lucrecia as she begged him to set her free.

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The hours rolled by slowly with little to do. Zack never considered himself to be impatient; he usually had the ability to sit still and wait for things to happen. He wasn't impulsive. He was surely not temperamental.

But he never felt as bored in his entire life.

It wasn't really boredom when he thought about it, more like sense of anxiety. There was nothing to do but wait for something to happen. At this point in time, Zack didn't care much what happened, just as long as it was a little more eventful than waiting around Nibelheim, or what was left of it anyway.

Time crept along very slowly in the small, isolated town, as if it had no place to go, no destination in mind, so it was in no rush to get there. One hour dragged on to two; two sluggishly continued to four; four grew to eight as the hands on the clock continued in their weary path.... And no amount of wishing on his part could convince the time to go by any faster. He realized that the empty hours themselves weren't what was bothering him; on the contrary, Zack usually cherished the precious moments of rest and recuperation. The restlessness that plagued him was due to the waiting for the other shoe to drop. And it would drop. That he was sure of.

Most of his day was spent sitting around the Shinra mansion, wandering through ancient and preserved corridors. There was some boyhood wonder in old, rickety houses that even in these serious times managed to seep into him. He was glad, for it to add a little life to the monotonous hours. He wasn't let out of the mansion unless accompanied by a guard and even then he was watched like a hawk. Hojo had repeatedly assured him that he was their guest but Zack knew otherwise. Why all this security for him? The overall feeling of the guards watching him inconspicuously, twenty-four hours a day, rose his gooseflesh. There was a lot more going on here than he was being informed of, that much he became sure about the subsequent days. And that feeling put him on constant alert.

Cloud had not regained consciousness though Zack was told time and time again that his friend would be fine. Zack did not doubt it really; he had this uncanny sixth sense about these sorts of things. Cloud wasn't going to die like that. He was positive about that. Still, with little else to do, he hung around Cloud's bed, trying to coax him back to the living world. He highly doubted Cloud could even hear him but he did it anyway. It made him feel a little less lonely talking to him. Besides, the sort of vigil gave him a reassurance, like he was helping Cloud get better. And if something was happening here beneath the innocent façade, Zack felt it was his duty, as Cloud's senior officer and, more importantly, his good friend, to

protect him.

The food was bland, the days were long, and the nights were lonely. Zack was feeling as though if he didn't escape this ghost town, he would burst. The only times he was let outside the mansion was before breakfast and in the late afternoon. He spent those precious free moments running, working out, trying to get some of the stiffness out of him. Thankfully, his Buster Sword had been recovered from the Mt. Nibel reactor. After he practiced with it, he spent hours cleaning it. That sword had never been so immaculate.

But most of the day he spent idly sitting in his room, laying on his bed and staring up at the ceiling. A great deal of questions, thoughts, and concerns buzzed through his head, most of which pertaining to his present situation. Although he had questioned Hojo diligently, he had been unable to obtain any information on Tifa, their tour guide. Zack himself hadn't known her all that well, but, somehow, he felt responsible for whatever had happened to her. She had been caught up in this mess and had been hurt, possibly fatally, by Sephiroth all because of them. He didn't even know if the young woman had escaped with her life. Hojo maintained that they had found no one else up at the reactor, only Cloud and himself. Zack felt a great swarming depression when he thought of the cheery girl which only amplified when his mind drifted to Cloud. It was pretty obvious from the stories the two had shared on various missions that Cloud had been sweet on her. To find out that she was missing would crush him.

What had happened up there? Even now, three days after the incident, Zack was still unsure. At first, his memories had been as clear as crystal, perfectly sequenced and plain as day. Sephiroth had flipped out and torched Nibelheim. Zack remembered that clear enough. He had chased the deranged soldier out of the Shinra mansion, arriving in front of the well just in time to see Sephiroth raise his hand and spray a violent shower of fire onto the houses. The cry from his mouth went unheeded as the man viciously set the town aglow with flames. Sephiroth had then turned around, his emerald eyes flashing as though they were pools of green fire. Then he brutally ripped out the Masamune and cleaved his way through the throng of panicked people desperately trying to escape the scorching heat. Zack had watched in disbelief as Shinra's greatest walked coldly out of town, his great, long sword dripping red blood.

Cloud had arrived upon the scene then, his hair mussed, dressed in a rumpled Shinra uniform. He had been sleeping as most of the town. The sight of his home burning, of everything he ever knew quickly slipping through his fingers, had enraged and panicked him. Without even a passing regard to Zack, he charged to the opposite end of the square to his mother's house, burning brilliantly. Cloud had tried to go in there, to save her, but Zack, his emotions far less out of control, had forcibly restrained him. Cloud, swept up in grief and anger and fear, had struggled for a few seconds, but eventually succumbed when he, too, realized she was gone. His attention then snapped to Tifa.

With amazing speed considering the fight he had just put up, the young man had darted to her house. The flames had eaten straight through the roof, the whole structure threatening to collapse in on itself. His voice hoarse, Cloud had stood there despite the heat and hollered her name. When she didn't answer, he was about to run in to save her, and this time Zack knew he wouldn't be able to stop him. Unfortunately, Tifa's father had shown up. Actually, as Zack thought back on it now, it did turn out for the best that the man had arrived when he had, or else Cloud might have charged into that burning house looking for Tifa and been killed. Tifa's father had been in a fit of rage, first at his missing daughter and second at his burning home. Naturally he took out his rage on somebody that was easy to blame. The man had picked up a large piece of splintered wood and hit Cloud hard, without warning, across the back of his head. Raving his own head off, the man had then just ran straight out of the burning village, heading straight to the Mount Nibel Reactor. And Zack had followed as well, not because he wanted to, but because he knew Sephiroth was at the reactor as well, and if Tifa's father confronted him, it would mean his death.

The run up to the reactor carefully hidden by the rising peaks of the Nibelheim mountains had been, in Zack's mind anyway, slow and laborious. The hike had exhausted him by the time he reached the steps into darkened reactor, sweat covering his body in a thin sheen. Every second had seemed like a minute, every minute an hour, every step twice as short as it should be... Ignoring the weary muscle fatigue, Zack, drawing his huge sword from his back, sprinted up the wrought iron steps and burst into the reactor.

It was incredibly hot inside, like a Mako sauna. Zack didn't wait for his eyes to adjust to the neon green hue that showered over everything. Gripping the Buster Blade in his hands, he jogged across the bridge. He could hear Tifa's shouts in the distance, barely audible over the clank of his boots and the pounding of his heart. He ripped open the door to the Mako Room, nearly tearing it off the hinges in the process. Zack catapulted into the room just in time to see Sephiroth slash the

young woman. The cry in his throat was lost as he watched her body tumbled down the stairs and land in a heap on one of the narrow platforms with a resounding clang.

Sephiroth only glanced back at him with his living Mako eyes before sheathing his bloodied sword and heading into the Jenova Room.

Zack had gripped his sword tightly, his knuckles white with the strain, before following, grim determination set in his jaw.

And this was where his memory became fuzzy. He was pretty sure he had stepped inside that room and blinding light had enveloped him. He was almost positive he remembered Sephiroth standing up there, bathed by that light like God descending from heaven. He sure as hell was certain he had been stabbed. A few days ago, he would have sworn his name to his memories. He had seen Sephiroth standing upon those stairs before the cast that held Jenova. He had felt, he had seen the warm blood rush from his body. He remembered the pain, the bright light, the cold, hard surface of the floor as he collapsed upon it. His senses had fed his memories. Now, after being cooped up inside all day with nothing to do but think, he was beginning to become unsure.

Had Sephiroth done what he thought?

Zack sighed and sat up on his bed. He swung his legs to the floor and braced his elbows on his knees, running a hand through his thick black hair. A long breath exited him, his shoulders sagged. Dammit, it was all a mess now. He was probably right before and wrong now. He silently clenched his fist in fury. Hojo should have asked him for his statement days before, when he had had everything clear in his mind. If they wanted tainted witness accounts, they were certainly going about it the right way.

Of course, the real question thus was: had Cloud killed Sephiroth? If he had, and, by some cruel fate, Zack was wrong in his memories, then Cloud was in very serious trouble. He could be charged with murder. They both could. They would be deemed as traitors. Zack sighed again and glanced up at his friend's still form, a long lock of his raven hair rakishly hanging over his brow. He was jumping to conclusions, he knew. Still, especially in a situation like this which gave him more creeps than a horror movie, it was never bad to be cautious.

It really angered him that he couldn't remember anything straight. It was understandable of course; he had nearly been killed, after all. However, he wished for a just a second the murk that had been invading his mind for the past few days would just lift and he could see it all clearly. Zack didn't doubt what he remembered; he believed what he had seen. There was just some little speck of his soul starting to get nervous. And that was enough to put him on edge.

He stood and walked to the window, folding his arms across his chest. This Shinra uniform he had been issued was a little tight, the cloth pulled taut over his muscles. Hojo's assistant, Doctor What's-his-face, had supposedly done his best to find clothes for him seeing as his own attire had been ruined. Zack shook his head darkly as he looked to the wreckage of Nibelheim below with narrowed eyes. That man... Nygel, that was his name – that man gave him more shivers than Hojo himself. He seemed to be so odd, his dark eyes cold, scheming, and calculating. Zack didn't know what it was about him, but somehow, though he was half the size of Zack himself, he seemed very threatening. I feel like a damn guinea pig. Zack rubbed his face tiredly and decided right then and there. The minute Cloud was up, they were gone. He didn't care about the consequences. Something was going to happen to them if they let Hojo push and prod. Zack couldn't subject himself or Cloud to that.

As if on cue, a low moan cut through the soft silence. It took Zack a few seconds to realize where it had come from. He ripped around from the window, his heart leaping in his chest. "Cloud?"

Another low groan issued forth. Zack scrambled to his friend's bedside. "Cloud," he said, kneeling beside the bed. The young man slowly turned his head, his eyes sealed shut still, and then was once again still. "Cloud," repeated Zack, insistently, not about to let him nod off again. "Come on, wake up."

~*~

Air.

Breathe.

Light.

Pain.

What the hell?

Am I still alive?

His eyes shot open and he drew a short breath. Shock and a grotesque sense of relief wash over his body with a chilled shudder as he realized he wasn't dead. For a moment, he couldn't think. He couldn't see; everything was blurry and black. Then his eyes focused on a form looming over him. Green light seemed to stare back. No... it couldn't be. Was this... was this the Lifestream? No, it wasn't. Green eyes, glowing with Mako.

Sephiroth.

He moaned and closed his eyes against the glaring lights overhead that were turned up about five notches too bright. Slowly, feeling spread out to all of his body and he became aware of his arms, hands, and fingers, legs, feet, and toes. Pain burst through him in a sharp wave that provoked another groan, but then subsided to a dull ache. A million sensations invaded him, overloading his mind to the point where his memories and thoughts were a jumbled mess, a tangled knot. He cracked open his eyes again and this time had better success in taking in his surroundings. He recognized the figure leaning over him, and, with that, the memories snapped into their correct order with a burst of pain. The Mako Reactor. Tifa, lying bleeding. Zack, run through by Sephiroth. The anger coursing through him as he stabbed Sephiroth in the Jenova room. The pain he had felt as the sword was plunged into his chest. The anger. The burning hate. Sephiroth's silent scream as he tumbled into the sickening green of the Mako pit. His warm, sticky blood pouring between his fingers. The pain, oh god, the excruciating pain... His heart thundering.

He was still alive.

Cloud groaned again as Zack peered closer. "Come on, kid," he heard the other say. An insistent hand shook his shoulder gently. "Wake up." Forcing his eyes open, Cloud slowly, very slowly, rubbed them with his left hand. When he was finished, he finally managed to focus on Zack's face. He was met with a reassuring smile and a relieved light in the other's light green eyes. "I thought you'd never come out of it."

Cloud suddenly jerked back into reality. With fervent energy, close to panic, he sat up quickly, glancing about his surroundings. A little bit too quickly, it seemed, for the room, which he defined to be some sort of bedroom, spun and twisted around him, causing his stomach to flip and twist and his head to pitch in dizziness. Cloud shrugged it off, the need to know what had happened being too great. "Zack," he said, turning to his friend. A sudden ache coursed through him, emanating from his lower, left chest. Pulling the blankets away from, Cloud was more than surprised to see nothing but healthy skin and strong muscle where he expected a gaping laceration gushing blood to be. He ran his fingers over the area in disbelief. "It's gone..." he whispered.

Zack nodded, grinning. "The wonders of a little materia. You're lucky. We both are."

Cloud's eyes suddenly snapped up to his friend, remembering Zack's own grievous wounds, lying in a puddle of his own blood on the floor... He shook his head. "How? Who saved us? I thought we were dead..."

Zack reached onto the bed stand upon which was an untouched glass of water that he had never gotten around to drinking when he had come up here an hour ago. He smiled and handed it to his friend who took it gratefully. Cloud drank the water in earnest; his mouth felt like sandpaper. The feel of the cool liquid running down his throat was the best sensation in the world. "Shinra arrived in the nick of time. They saved us. If they hadn't been there..." Zack shook his head and ran a hand through his black hair, completely mussing it. He let out a slow breath. "You've been asleep the last few days. You were hurt a lot worse than I was. They didn't think you were gonna make it. Like I said. Lucky."

Cloud nodded slowly, taking another sip of the water, his eyes wandering around the area, taking in the unfamiliar

surroundings. For a moment, the only sound that could be heard was their soft breathing. Then he turned to Zack and asked, "Where are we?"

Zack stared at him firmly. "In the Shinra mansion, in Nibelheim--"

"Oh my God!" Cloud was up and out of bed before Zack even had the word out of his mouth. Thankfully, he wasn't stark naked as Zack had been. Wearing only a pair of thin shorts, he ran to the door. Dizziness assaulted him and zapped the strength of panic from his limbs. He stumbled and hit the floor with a thud.

"Cloud! Cloud, wait!" Zack shouted, spurring into action as he saw his friend scramble to his feet. Grabbing a robe on the desk chair, he ran out of the door after Cloud. The guards that had been dozing lightly outside their door snapped to awareness at all the ruckus but did not react fast enough to grab either of the two young men as they ran down the short hall to the left. The grand stairs of the Shinra mansion folded out before Zack, leading down to another floor. Another curving, ornate staircase was adjacent to the wall on the left. He stopped to catch his breath a second, leaning on the red oak railing. Cloud was already rapidly descending the second staircase.

"Cloud!" Zack called and he muttered a low curse as Cloud gained more ground on him. The guards were coming up behind him, yelling for him to halt, but he paid no heed. He took the stiffly carpeted steps by two, leaping to the floor. The landing jarred up through his knees but he stumbled on, reaching for the door flying back. "Cloud, wait! Hold on!"

The other had either not heard him or ignored him as he ran down the short path to the fence. Cloud snapped it open with such force that it almost whacked Zack when it flung back. Zack watched sadly as his friend ran to the remains of his town. Once he reached the blackened structures that had once been buildings, he stopped dead in his tracks.

Zack swallowed hardly as he pushed through the gate and jogged up to his friend. Cloud did not turn as he approached, his boots crunching ash and debris alike. Standing still behind him, breathing heavily, Zack watched him keenly, feeling a horrible pit swell where his stomach usually was.

Cloud was staring around at the remains, wide-eyed, shaking his head in silent denial. His face was ashen, whiter than milk. Zack bowed his head in silent grief. "No," Cloud murmured, taking a step forward. Quickly, his chest heaving, he walked to the lone well which miraculously still stood in the center of the town. "What happened?!" There was no answer from the weary remains. All the town was now was destroyed lives, loves, and memories, like a garrison of battle-beaten soldiers too weary to continue fighting. The fires had burned more than just wood; it had destroyed a community. "What..." Whatever he was going to say was lost, a gentle breeze blowing thought that ruffled his wild, blond hair. On it was carried the stench of burnt flesh and wood, still strong long after the fires had been snuffed out.

Zack didn't know what to say. He simply stood there, watching his friend gaze over what remained of his home in stark denial, ignoring the guards as they approached.

"No!" Cloud suddenly howled, stepping forward to where his house had once stood. His home, all his memories, his mother... reduced to a blackened frame burnt beyond recognition by the devouring flames. "Mom..." he whispered, his lips barely moving.

Zack could no longer stand to watch in hush. "Cloud," he said, stepping forward and setting a hand on the other's shoulder. "Cloud, I'm so sorry."

Cloud only shrugged the friendly gesture off. His bright blue eyes were alive with anger as he pivoted. "Tifa!" he shouted in indescribable terror as he analyzed the destroyed Lockhart home. Nothing was left, all of their possessions burnt to ash. All of Tifa's pictures, dolls, toys, clothes... her pretty, yet modest jewelry. "Tifa!" Cloud scrambled up the wreckage to the house, frantically digging through the ruin, searching for some trace of her. He pawed through it all, ripping up a charred table, cutting his hands on sharp glass. He searched with blind fury as Zack watched helplessness. Finally, he stopped out of weariness and depression. There was nothing. All of her, all of her kindness and beauty and love for life, her gentle grace and sweet, but vibrant, attitude... all gone in the rage of the flame. "Tifa!" he cried, in one last desperate hope that she was there. That she would answer. But there was nothing beside the clomping of approaching feet, the gentle breeze, and Cloud's own charged breathing.

Cloud suddenly doubled-over and fell to the ground. Silent tears fell from his eyes as he sat there, not caring about how dirty he was getting, his bare flesh rubbing the soot-covered earth. He braced his elbows on his knees and hung his head, hands blackened with soot and blood. His fists were clenched into tight balls as he viciously pounded the earth. "Damn you, Sephiroth!" he screamed, looking to the sky. His eyes were alive with hot anger and vengeance, tears welled in them. "Sephiroth!!"

Zack stood in stiff, uncomfortable silence as his friend grieved. Listening to Cloud's harsh sobs tore into his heart. Then he stepped forward and gently laid his hand on Cloud's shoulder. Ice blue eyes red and swollen with tears shot up to meet his. At first, Zack withdrew, stepping back at seeing the sheer violence in Cloud's gaze. And then his expression softened and his eyes dropped to the ground. He let out a shaky breath. "Thanks, Zack," he said softly.

Zack nodded silently and squeezed Cloud's shoulder reassuringly.

"What's going on here?" Hojo demanded as he appeared upon the scene, a dozen soldiers and his assistant in tow. Zack turned around to face the man, glancing at Cloud from the corner of his eye. He draped the dark gray robe over Cloud's shoulders and stood protectively in front of him as the group approached. Hojo peered around Zack. "Oh. Oh."

"Just let him be, sir," declared Zack, trying not to sound too suspicious. He couldn't help but glare at Hojo.

Cloud suddenly stood with a very heavy sigh that shook with controlled grief. He turned to face them, folding his arms across his chest. "No," he said softly, his voice weak and somewhat hoarse. "I'm okay, Zack." With the back of his hand which was the only part of him not soot-streaked, he wiped the tears from his cheeks.

Zack gripped his arm tightly. "Are you sure?" he asked lowly.

Cloud met his gaze, his eyes distant and weak for a few moments, the tears once again building. It was as if he was struggling to maintain control over his emotions and was losing the battle. Then, tight-lipped, he nodded, and the moment passed.

Hojo smiled. "Cloud Strife, I presume," he said, offering his hand.

Cloud looked at the outstretched palm dubiously before stepping forward and grasping it. "Dr. Hojo..." He shook his head. He had heard of the infamous Dr. Hojo before; who in Shinra hadn't? The man was rumored to be an extremely gifted scientist, border-line genius. The notion had also been spread by the enlisted men and bureaucrats alike that he was a little crazy. To Cloud's understanding, the good doctor worked a lot with Mako and Jenova, pulling crackpot experiments in a mad quest for the so-called Promised Land which may or may not exist. Cloud had never once guessed in a million years that he'd meet the notorious Hojo, much less in these circumstances.

Hojo grabbed his wrists and yanked his hands forward. "For the love of the Planet, boy! We just spent three days healing you, nursing you back from the brink of death, and you have the nerve to mar all our hard work." He tsked, shaking his head as he examined the bleeding cuts on his blackened hands. "Nygel, get the Restore." He ordered over his shoulder and his assistant, briefly looking indignant at being ordered around, and then walked briskly back to the mansion.

"I – I, uh-" Cloud stammered and for reasons he could not understand, he began to blush in embarrassment at his behavior. "I'm sorry, sir. It was just a little shocking, that's all."

Hojo finished examining the young man's wounded hands and straightened. He pushed his glasses up his nose. "Yes," he said, looking around the remains of Nibelheim. "It is unfortunate to say the least." Cloud visibly stiffened. "I'm truly sorry for your loss, Cloud."

Cloud just nodded solemnly and looked to the ground, guarding his emotions, trying desperately to hold onto his composure once again. Zack stepped forward, his only aim to change the subject at seeing his friend's discomfort. "Sir, have you made any strides in discovering what happened?"

Hojo shrugged neutrally and turned around, his hands clasped behind his back. Very slowly, as if waiting his good time to answer, he ambled back to the well. Cloud and Zack watched him with narrowed eyes as he turned to face them. "Yes.

Some, I believe. Have you any knowledge of Mako monsters?"

Zack glanced at Cloud, the latter's brow furrowed in confusion. "No," Zack answered plainly.

"I didn't think so," Hojo responded. "That's what you were sent up here to deal with initially. Of course, they weren't termed as such. Your mission was highly classified. If the citizens of Nibelheim had known that such dreadful creatures were running loose around their town, surely they would have had the reactor shut down. Thus, Sephiroth, you two, and another guard were sent to deal with the threat."

"What's so special about these monsters?" Cloud asked, a doubtful note in his voice.

Hojo shrugged again, his attitude one of arrogance and carelessness. "They aren't your typical monsters. We noticed them in other places, Gongaga and Corel to be exact. We believe that the output of Mako from the reactor has something to do with their development. Somehow, these animals are becoming highly infused with Mako to the point where they are virtually impossible to destroy. Sephiroth knew this. He was Shinra's best and most able. That's why we sent him to contend with these monsters."

Cloud's face was broken in disbelief. "With all due respect, sir, we never saw these creatures."

"You didn't run into any monsters?"

Zack and Cloud shared another quick, questioning glance. This didn't seem right. "Sure we did," Zack declared, shaking his head.

"Well, since you didn't know anything about the Mako monsters then, do you think you would have recognized them?"

Cloud blew out a short breath of air as he looked at Zack, his mouth hanging open. All at once he seemed to regain that cocky attitude that, despite the dour situation, irked a smile to Zack's lips. The look in his eyes seemed to ask "Is this guy for real?" Zack couldn't help but grin.

Hojo turned back to face the well. "At any rate, what we now believe it that these monsters, breed from pure Mako itself mind you, destroyed this town and killed Sephiroth."

"What?!" All the bemusement was gone from Zack now as he snapped around and looked at Hojo.

Cloud stepped forward and shook his head vehemently. "That's not possible!" he retorted. "That's not the way it happened!"

"Oh? And what do you have to add, Mr. Strife?" The ice in his voice chilled them both to the bone. Zack stared at Hojo as if he were staring at a ghost; he almost wished he was. A ghost would have scared him less. He suddenly felt as if he were ten again, standing before a teacher after talking back or getting in trouble, knowing he was in for a beating. Except with Hojo the threat was much more pronounced and dangerous.

Cloud must have picked up on this but made no move to back down. Most people who had known Cloud when he had been studying for SOLDIER said his attitude in moments like this was damn infuriating and inappropriate. He often came off as a smart-ass with his short temper and quick mouth. Zack knew Cloud better than that; the young man didn't mean to come off like as such. He just didn't like being jerked around and was rather frank in expressing it. He never had once chastised Cloud on in the past, though it had gotten the young man kicked out of SOLDIER before he had even been given the chance to make it in. However, right then, he silently wished Cloud would just once keep his trap shut. Mouthing off at Hojo would get them nowhere fast.

As if on a note from God, Cloud backed down, clenching and unclenching his jaw in an effort to control his temper. Zack silently thanked his lucky stars. Nygel then reappeared, a green materia orb in hand. He knelt before Cloud and grasped his hands. Immediately, powered only by his will, soft green light streamed from the materia and enveloped the flesh. It penetrated the wounds, healing torn muscle and skin, sealing the blood. Then, with a small flash, it faded from existence, leaving behind healthy skin. Cloud looked at his hands before his face in amazement. He had never seen anything like that

before. The wounds had just vanished, leaving no trace that they had ever existed. Gently kneading his hands with shaking fingers, he turned back to Hojo.

Hojo continued on in his rambling as if nothing had ever interrupted him. "I know well what you believe you saw, Mr. Strife and Mr. Garek. You think you saw Sephiroth burn down Nibelheim." He waved an arm widely at the ruins around them. "In actuality, it was the monsters, manipulating your minds. It has been proven to happen before in other documented cases. It seems Mako gives these creatures the ability to read into people's thoughts, to make them see things that aren't true. They made you see Sephiroth destroy this town. They made you believe he had stabbed you. They made you believe he has done all of this when, in truth, it was all the monsters' doing."

"No," Cloud said immediately, ignoring Zack's hand on his arm. "That's not true. I saw him in the reactor. I watched him pull the head of that... that thing in there! I-"

"Killed him, Mr. Strife?" Hojo finished for him, coolly raising an eyebrow. Cloud stepped back, clearly shocked, his eyes wide and suddenly frightened. Zack, even in his own shock, did not miss the glance between Nygel and Hojo, betraying much without a single spoken word. "I highly doubt that. Your memories are, what say, tainted." Cloud clenched his teeth. "Not that's entirely your fault. I've read cases of these Mako monsters turning one soldier against his platoon, and that one soldier slaughtering all of his comrades." Hojo shook his head; there was a seemingly feral glint in his eyes as he observed Cloud's reaction. "And not to put you down or anything, but I sincerely doubt that you had the ability to kill Sephiroth. With all due respect, my dear boy, Sephiroth was Shinra's greatest soldier, infused with Mako, and a top grade swordsman. You couldn't even make it into SOLDIER."

Cloud's hands were clenched into fists at his sides. Zack stared angrily at Hojo, desperately trying to diffuse the situation before Cloud did anything rash that they might regret. Not that Zack would particularly blame him. "With all due respect to you, sir, what the hell do you want?"

"Watch your tone," Hojo admonished sharply, his gaze harder than diamond. "And in answer to your question, I want to learn the truth."

"If you don't believe us, then what's the point?" Cloud snapped, unable to keep the ferocity out of his usually calm voice.

Hojo snapped back, "I've no reason not to believe you any more than I have to do so. My gut instinct tells me... absolutely nothing for once. Usually based on my feelings, I can judge a situation, make intuitive leaps, solve any puzzle. But here, I am at a loss. You two are the only surviving witnesses and your memory may or may not be reliable. That leaves very little to go on." Hojo shook his head. Cloud's jaw dropped at the last remark. "At any rate, there's nothing left for us to discover here. We'll be heading back to Midgar tomorrow morning." The man started to turn away, nodding to his assistant.

"Wait!" Zack said, stepping forward. "We're leaving, just like that?"

Hojo raised his hands to the town. "You want to stay here, Mr. Garek?"

Zack glanced at Cloud beside him but didn't answer. Cloud beat him to the words. "Sir," he said, a hopeful look in his eyes. "Did you – did you find a young woman in the reactor? She was hurt."

"Do you mean Tifa Lockhart?" Hojo said suddenly, turning back to face the two young men. Cloud didn't answer, staring at him with a wistful, expectant expression on his young face. "Yes. Zack has told me that she was with you up there." Hojo walked back them again and laid a compassionate hand on Cloud's shoulder. "She's dead."

"What?!" Zack snapped. He angrily stabbed an accusing finger at Hojo. "For three days all you could tell me was you never saw her up there and now she's suddenly dead?" There was hurt in his voice. Anger.

Hojo glared at him. "We only found her body last night, Mr. Garek," he modified, a dangerous tinge to his voice. He then turned back to Cloud, whose head was bowed. "I'm sorry, Cloud. She was your girlfriend?"

Cloud didn't answer, only letting out a slow breath. He bit his lower lip and looked up. In his heart, he hadn't truly believed Tifa to be alive. In his heart, the hope had died with the burning of his home.

Hojo nodded all the same. "Go get cleaned up and eat something. Rest up. The trip to Midgar will be long. We'll leave for Costa Del Sol tomorrow morning bright and early."

Cloud seemed petrified by his grief, unable to move, as if frozen in time. Zack gently took his arm and said, in an attempt to lighten the mood, "Come on, Cloud. I'm starved." Cloud looked up at him with teary eyes, but only weakly nodded and began to walk up towards the mansion, letting his friend lead the way.

The sound of Hojo's voice stopped them. "I know it hurts now, Mr. Strife," the doctor said from beside the well. Cloud gazed at him, looking at him but not truly seeing. Hojo offered a reassuring grin. "But there are worse things."

Narrowing his eyes suspiciously, Zack felt his anger rise. How could the man be so cold... Cloud stiffened again, tensing his muscles and the tears were gone from his eyes in a blink. Without another glance back, the young man tugged the robe tighter around his shoulders and headed morosely back up to the house.

~*~

Later that night, Nibelheim became as silent as a graveyard. Even with the troops mulling about, loading up the trucks with supplies, the town had never seemed so dead. With the darkening of the blue sky, the life was sucked from the area, leaving only a blackened husk. The dreariness has penetrated into all present also, and the soldiers moved with lethargy and sloth. It was as if Hades himself had condemned the village, and his hungry kingdom had not simply been fed by the souls departed in the town's destruction; longing for more, he was slowly wrenching the energy from all those imprisoned in the dead hamlet. Everything seemed to be dead or dying, even the living's enthusiasm.

That is, everything except Hojo.

Nygel knocked lightly on the door to the library, wrapping gently with his knuckles. At the muffled "come in" he entered the room.

Hojo sat crunched over the desk, his back to the door. Across the oaken surface were open books, paper, and manuals. He did not look up, tapping his pen against his head, giving his assistant no attention what so ever. Nygel grit his teeth in anger but clung to his manners. Hojo would stop at nothing to degrade him. "Sir?" he said gently. Damn bastard, he thought as the man still remained buried in his work, purposely ignoring him. "Sir!"

"What the hell is it, Nygel?!" Hojo suddenly snapped, swinging around in his chair with such force it almost toppled. Nygel nearly flinched at the rage in the man's voice. He was practically breathing fire. When Nygel remained still in the doorway, practically paralyzed by his own fear, Hojo grew even more impatient. "Well?!"

"I – Sir, I just came down here to give you a report on the preparations like you requested," he stammered, cursing himself for his weak, quivering voice. No wonder you're never going to get anywhere in life, Nygel old pal, his mind whispered coldly. You take this crap from him all the time and never have the guts to do anything about it.

"And?" Hojo said, dropping his pen back unto the desk.

Nygel stepped forward meekly. "Everything's going according to schedule, sir. They're loading the last few trucks up now."

"Well, have them put some speed on it; it's getting late," Hojo said. He glanced at his watch to see exactly how late it was. "Crap. It really is getting late." He sighed and leaned back in his chair. "I guess time really does fly when you're having fun."

Nygel shook his head. "Excuse me, sir?"

Hojo shuffled his papers together on the desk so they formed a neat pile. "I've got a preliminary schedule worked out for the Jenova Project. Very tentative, mind you, but for right now it will suffice. I suspect we'll be back at Midgar by the end of the week. We'll have to move quickly. I don't foresee much of a problem from Shinra, but I won't to minimize the risk that our two charges will put a kink in our plans."

"They will not be able to escape, sir, if that's what you're worried about. They don't know what's going on at all," Nygel assured him, leaning against the desk with his arms clasped behind his back.

Hojo's fingers roughly massaged his clean-shaven chin. "Oh, I wouldn't be so sure about that. They know something's amiss, at least Garek does. Strife is still grief-stricken, but once he breaks out of his funk, Garek will convince him that we're 'out to get them' and they'll both put all their efforts into escaping. Thus I want to get to Midgar before their inevitable full-fledged struggle against us begins." He shook his head and stood from his chair, stretching his arms to the ceiling and yawning wildly. Tendons popped and limbs creaked. "Speaking of which, where are they now?"

Nygel tilted his head up above. "Sleeping. After dinner, Strife was wiped out. He seems like he's living in another world."

"That's good," Hojo commented. "The less concentrated he is on the situation at hand, the easier it will be for us to control him. His reaction to the destruction of his home and the supposed 'death' of that girl was better than I hoped."

Nygel suddenly felt a little defensive, remembering how crushed the young man had appeared after hearing the news that the Lockhart girl had been killed. It had hit him hard; that was clear enough from his solemn mood and downcast expression. Despite several attempts by Garek to raise his fallen spirits, Strife remained aloof, depressed, devastated. It seemed the death of this girl had driven a knife through his spirit, even more so than the death of his town. He must've really loved her. It wasn't necessary, what Hojo had said. For once, he felt the courage and anger to voice his opinion. "With all due respect, sir, you didn't need to tell him she was dead." So it was a little padded and not exactly as harsh as he had intended. He didn't want to be on the receiving end of Hojo's wrath. He didn't feel that sorry for the kid.

"Yes, I did. Strife's lost everything. A man who has nothing left to live for won't care if his life is taken from him." Hojo pointed a finger at Nygel. "I don't want any spark of hope kindling in this man's heart. Lying to him about the girl and about Sephiroth was an imperative step in this process, Nygel. You can't have remorse about the specimens. You can't treat them as humans, with feelings and a mind. You do and you run the risk of letting your own humanity interfere with science. Treat them as animals."

You cold son of a bitch. Nygel couldn't help but glare at Hojo as the man collected up his things. You have no humanity left. But he couldn't say that. He would grin and bear it as he always did. Hojo was, in a sick sense, right about the whole notion. It was so much easier to treat a person you hurt as inferior. That way, it was easier to justify. Easier to live with. Science had casualties. "You have to understand that the search for the Promised Land will hurt people. But it will bring power in the end." Power to us. No. Power to you. "The fruits of science are worth the pain it may cause the selected few." The ends justify the means. That term is a crutch, Hojo. A crutch to justify all the hell you put people through. And all the hell you will put Strife through if you do this. "So you see that everything we do is for the sake of science. We'll never get to the Promised Land unless we do this." Maybe the Promised Land isn't meant to be reached. Maybe doing this is wrong, Hojo. Maybe we should think about this first before we let loose a Destroyer with the power of Black, White, and Holy on the land. Maybe we shouldn't be doing this for power. Maybe... "I don't know, Nygel. If you want power, which you must, you have to be willing to use people." I do want power. I want the Promised Land. But I don't want to hurt people to get it! "Using people is power in itself. Think of the control we must get over Strife. The minute he had independent thought again, all our work will be for naught. Our power over him will be absolute. We can use him to destroy enemies." Yes. We can use him to rule the world. "You and I a lot alike, Nygel. We are passionate and heartless in our quest, and we will stop at nothing to achieve our goals. We seek power no matter the costs." I know I'm like you, Hojo. But somehow that manages to disgust and delight me at the same time. "We will have power, my friend." I know, Hojo. Such are the casualties of science.

There was a silent moment, Hojo staring at the ceiling in deep reflection, rubbing his chin again. Nygel watched him in the emptiness, eyes contemplative. The moment dragged on, filled with thought and pondering. Then Nygel shook his head and put his weight onto his left leg. "Sir, I've been thinking about this. Between the two of them, Garek seems to be the leader. The one who will put up the most resistance. Perhaps it would be wise to use him instead of Strife."

Hojo looked at him suddenly with a hard glint in his eyes. "What?"

Nygel shrugged weakly. "He was in SOLDIER, sir. You said so yourself. Strife washed out. He didn't make it. Garek is clearly stronger. If we want to have a greater chance of survival, perhaps we ought to use him."

With a wild gesticulation, Hojo announced, exasperated, "But Strife killed Sephiroth!"

Nygel immediately dropped it there, not willing, once again, to be the recipient of the infamous temper of Hojo. He wanted Strife, fine, that was all well and good. But if they wasted years of work on the boy and then he died... well, then, for once, Nygel would say "I told you so".

Then a realization came to him as he watched Hojo keenly, the other scientist turning around and stuffing his books and papers rather haphazardly into his black suitcase. Hojo was angry at Strife because the man had killed his son. It really was that plain and simple. Sephiroth was, in some strange and sickening sense, Hojo's pride and joy. He had created him as a father does. He was feeling the perfectly and psychologically valid anger and vengeance that any normal father would at the killer of his son. He was human, underneath the cold, scheming, power-hungry sadist. It didn't matter that Sephiroth had destroyed Strife's hometown, murdered dozens of people, burned his mother, slaughtered his girlfriend, and nearly killed Garek and himself... It didn't matter to Hojo. In some perverted manner, Hojo had been proud of Sephiroth. He had raised his son on high as all fathers do. It didn't matter that Sephiroth was an insane, cold blooded murderer... Hojo had loved him.

And he wanted to hurt the man who had taken his son away.

Somehow, after coming to this conclusion, Nygel no longer had the urge to contest the use of Strife in the experiment any longer. Suddenly, it seemed valid. It seemed the right thing to do.

Hojo snapped shut his brief case and headed abruptly out of the room. At the door, he said back to Nygel tightly, "Make sure we have all the books. Lock this place up." Then he stomped out and up the stairs.

Nygel stood there, leaning against the desk in a state of satisfaction with himself. So Hojo was human after all. Somehow it gave him a great sense of pride to know this fact. A fleeting sense of power and elation bubbled through him as he stooped to pick up a fallen piece of paper. Infallibility was a dream, after all. Hojo could only dream that was as invincible as he claimed himself to be. Strife had hurt him. As a natural reflex, he would hurt back. It was all tied into power and pain. And Hojo, never one for subtlety, would hurt Strife in the worst way possible. Revenge for wrong-doing had been a part of humanity since the beginning of time, as germane and common as love or prejudice. And as much as Hojo silently denied it, he was only human.

Nygel shook his head. His position now was much more than tenuous. What happened in the next few years could very well change the course of humanity on the Planet. Whether he helped Hojo create the Destroyer or worked against him would determine his placement in the future. Whether he lived and had power or died and had honor. He was now playing a pivotal role in the path of life on the Planet. That fleeting sense of power enlarged his hunger even more. Hojo was right; he wanted the ability to control. It fed him like a five course meal, and still left him hungry for dessert. What did he want more? To save the suffering of many or to have the power to extend his will across the Planet? Power. The thought was grand. Power it would be. He would be lying to himself if he told himself that he was in this for the life of the Planet. He was selfish and conceited; he admitted to it. By nature, he would follow Hojo to the power like a mouse to cheese. By nature, he would do what needed to be done to see himself powerful.

They would create the Destroyer.

They would have power at the cost of thousands.

But such were the casualties of science.

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Zack stared at the darkness around him, simply glazing into the black vacuum light. He had no particular need to actually see anything in the endless dark, without shape, form, or texture. He was just looking. It wasn't overly unnerving oddly enough, staring into that depthless nothing. One might expect one's mind to conjure up ghostly specters and haunting apparitions that hovered and crept closer, melding with the shadows. Zack didn't see anything, just content to watch the black. It relaxed him.

Unfortunately, Cloud, who laid in the next bed, wasn't so lucky.

The last hour they had spent in an uncomfortable silence. The melancholy cast over them was too thick to be cut by meager small talk. There seemed to be nothing that could break the endless silence. Everything slammed down on them: the pain, the sorrow, the fear.

Cloud turned over again in his bed with a shaky sigh. Zack listened in the black for any more movement, for any words, but none came. His heart went out to Cloud in the silence. He felt horrible, like he wanted to crawl out of his skin and hide. It was partly because, like most good friends, he was upset that he could not share some of Cloud's grief. He also was somewhat glad that it hadn't been his hometown that was destroyed. That small comfort made him feel guilty as hell. He wanted to help Cloud deal with this. But he didn't know how. And even if he did, who's to say that Cloud would even want his assistance?

Screw that; he couldn't let Cloud drown in his emotions as light did in the darkness.

"Cloud," he said suddenly, shattering the heavy stillness. It surprised him how loud his own voice was, the sound of it reverberating off the walls and striking his ears at seemingly ten times the normal volume. The other didn't answer; Zack knew he was staring at the opposite wall even though he couldn't see him. "Cloud, please. It wasn't your fault."

Cloud gave a short laugh abruptly with a mad tinge to it that ran shivers up Zack's back. Then the silence fell again as if its monotony had never been interrupted.

Zack sat up in bed, the blankets and sheets collecting in his lap. "Don't do this to yourself, Cloud," he warned firmly. "There wasn't anything you or I could have done."

"Don't tell me that just to make me feel better," the other snapped sharply in the dark. Zack nearly jumped at the sound.

"I'm not telling you that to make you feel better," he assured him. "I'm telling you that 'cause it's the truth."

Cloud suddenly turned over, the rustle of cloth filling Zack's ears. "You don't even know what you're talking about, so just shut up," Cloud hissed. There was the pounding of a pillow and then Cloud again was silent.

Zack felt his temper pique, anger coursing through him with a sharp sting. "Oh, come on," he retorted, unable to keep the ice out of his own voice. "What could you have done, Cloud? Nothing. It wasn't your fault Sephiroth did this. It wasn't your fault he burned Nibelheim, and it certainly wasn't your fault that he hurt Tifa."

"The hell it wasn't!" There was short silence. "I could have told her not to go up there! I could have stopped her! I shouldn't have been such a damn coward and showed my damn face to her! If she had known I was here, then she wouldn't have run up there by herself! I would have been with her!" A choked breath filled the room. "But I was too damn ashamed to even say 'hi' to her! I was too damn selfish to even let her see me! And because of that, she's dead!"

"No, Cloud," Zack amended, forcing confidence and reassurance into his voice, "that's not true. Sephiroth killed her. You did all you could."

He heard a wracked sob. "She's gone, Zack! I feel like there was so much I wanted to tell her and I never did! And now I never will!"

"It is possible she's not dead, Cloud," said the other calmly, quite out of the blue. Cloud's breathing suddenly stopped. The silence was kept anxiously. "I mean, I don't trust Hojo. It could be he's lying. About a lot of things." Another empty moment passed, Zack listening intently for some sort of response from his friend. "You saw him lying about what happened."

Cloud let out of long breath. Then he said, more softly, his voice weak with tears, "Why is he lying to us?" He suddenly like a little boy who had been mistreated and was unable to understand why.

Zack laid back down in bed, his mind racing as his head struck the pillows. He sighed heavily. "I don't know. I don't know even why he's here. Why would Shinra send a scientist out here to deal with a situation like this?" He shook his head and

tugged the blankets up over himself stiffly, indignant of the whole situation. "And what's with all the troops? While you were out, they treated me like a prisoner. I couldn't leave the mansion. I had to eat and sleep when they told me to." Cloud didn't answer, obviously perplexed by this. "Hojo wouldn't tell me anything about what he was doing here, or Sephiroth, or Tifa no matter how many times I asked."

"Why?"

"I don't know," Zack said again, frustrated. There were too many questions clearly not enough answers. "All I do know is there's something goin' on here, and it's not good. I don't trust Hojo, or his little servant, or any of these people here. I feel like we're being led blindfolded to the firing squad."

There was silence, that thought having hit home on both of them. Their suspicions suddenly being brought out into the light made the situation all that much more dire and immediate. After a few moments, Cloud ventured, "What are we gonna do?"

Zack sighed again, chewing his lower lip somewhat nervously. "I don't know," he said simply. "I was planning on jamming out of here once you were well enough, but now... I don't think we'd get very far. I've counted at least fifty soldiers here. We try to escape and they'll hunt us down. And even if, by some miracle, we do get beyond Nibelheim, Hojo will have all of Shinra on us." Silence once again followed as that assessment made their situation seem all that much more bleak. Zack was completely right, no matter how much the both of them wanted it to be otherwise. Trying to escape would be pointless. It was as if Hojo had taken to account the fact they might try to leave. There was no way they'd ever be able to outrun, outfight, or outwit a whole garrison of first class Shinra troops. The two of them, if they were to make a break for it, would probably be able to get moderately far until the Shinra caught up with them. And then it would only be a matter of how injured they became before they gave up the fight. That avenue was hopeless and was thus abandoned. They'd have to find different means of getting away.

Zack wracked his brain in the quiet, trying to conjure up some way out of this mess before... something happened. But he suddenly found he couldn't think. All his mind concentrated on was what had happened and all the questions that were still left unanswered. Fortunately, now he could quiet at least one booming unsolved mystery, the one that had been bothering almost constantly for three days, threatening to consume his thoughts. "Cloud, did you kill Sephiroth?"

Silence.

Then a slow breath. "Yeah," he said softly. "I... I think I did. It's all foggy, but I can remember..."

Zack wanted to know badly but didn't want to push him too hard. "What happened?" he asked gently.

Cloud didn't answer at first and when he did, his voice sounded tired and drained of strength, almost as though he was tired of thinking about this. "When I woke up, it was too late. Everything was destroyed. Then I thought of Tifa. I knew she would have gone up to the reactor after Sephiroth. So I went up there too. When I got there, I saw you and Tifa, lying there. I saw Tifa's father, dead. I was... I didn't think. I grabbed your sword and ran up into the Jenova room. Somehow, I knew he was in there. I – I stabbed him. I don't know why he let me do it. I was just so angry. Then I went back down to Tifa." He sighed again. "Sephiroth was pretty badly hurt when he came down from there, holding that thing. I watched him walk out onto the bridge, shocked. You told me to kill him... so I did."

Cloud suddenly sat up in bed and shook his head vehemently. "It doesn't make any sense! I know what happened, but..."

"But what?" Zack prodded, sitting up too.

"He stabbed me with that bastard sword of his. The blade of that thing went right through me. I... should be dead. I don't know what happened, why I didn't die. I was just so angry. I wanted to kill him and wring the life out of his body. He took everything! I stared in his eyes..." Cloud sighed. "I don't understand it."

Then he was silent. Sharp, charged breathing filled the room. The silence this time was punctuated with anger. Cloud gently laid back down in his bed. Once he was again settled, he exhaled out another long breath. "I killed him. I looked into his eyes. I felt that sword in me. I felt my blood and his... I looked into his eyes, Zack." His words were so strong; it left Zack no

room for question. "That's the truth. And nothing Hojo says will change it."

Cloud was right; what they remembered was what had happened. The experience was engraved into them. It would forever be a painful part of their souls and no amount of healing would ever fully expunge it. Hojo had no right to tell them what was true and what wasn't. He hadn't been there. He hadn't felt the heat of Nibelheim burning, nor the pain of the wounds, or the anger at Sephiroth. He knew none of that.

Zack stared at the dark for a few moments and then settled himself back into his bed. He was suddenly exhausted, his eyelids drooping. Tomorrow they would begin their long trek to Midgar after this climactic experience. And no matter what happened, he knew the truth.

And that was all he needed to know.

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