

Jenova Project
by Junj
Part 2: Playing God

The trip out to Midgar was relatively uneventful. The caravan of nearly twenty trucks trekked slowly through the treacherous passes through the Nibel Mountains, moving at an antagonizing gradual pace. Hojo repeatedly tried to order the truck drivers to move faster, but, even faced with his wrath, they would not jeopardize the trucks on those high roads. Thus, the ride through the mountains was long and nerve-wracking with very few stops. The entire garrison breathed an easy sigh of relief when the road stretching away from the high peaks appeared before them.

The stop was made that day at Rocket Town, despite Hojo's wish to press on. The tense ride through the mountains had left most of the crew weary, exhausted, and hungry. Rocket Town was a small establishment, easily comparable to most other small villages. The only thing that made it truly unique was the spiraling body of a rocket reaching up from the ground to the blue sky, like a statue towards the heavens. It was an impressive sight, the pointed rocket looming over the town below. The only slightly disturbing aspect of its towering height was that it was precariously tipped to one side, leaning at a strange angle. There it stayed as if suspended by some invisible, incomprehensible force, tethered to the sky. Unnerving it seemed, but to the people of the quaint town, it was home.

Hojo yanked on his hair viciously as the trucks slowed at the small village. The troops began to immediately set up camp, hauling out tents and supplies. This strange ruckus attracted a lot of the attention from the town folks who very rarely saw anything beyond the borders of their small community. All this excitement had spread through the place very quickly, escalating as the Shinra troops had walked into town to the item shops, seeking to buy more supplies. Such important news as Shinra arriving wouldn't stop until it reached the ear of every last soul in Rocket Town, including Cid Highwind.

"Yo!" came the call over the din of the soldiers.

Hojo rose from the crouch he had been in, his face scrunched rather unelegantly. "Oh, crap," he moaned under his breath as he looked to Nygel who had been taking inventory with a clipboard in hand.

Cid Highwind, the normal cigarette stuck between his lips, smacked Hojo on the back. "Man, I knew you guys'd finally get yer asses over here if I pestered ya long enough," he declared, quite satisfied with all his hard complaining over the years.

Hojo refused to even look at him, directing the flustered Nygel to follow as he moved to another truck. "Mr. Highwind, I assume that even you with your meager intelligence can realize that I'm not here to discuss your space program with you."

"*&%!!" Cid exhaled a plume of smoke as he followed Hojo, arms crossed over his blue flight jacket. "Even in yer super intelligence, Hojo, you still manage to come off as a dumbass."

Hojo snapped angry eyes at him and finally turned to face the pilot. Folding his arms indignantly over his chest, he snapped, "What are you talking about? Speak in coherent sentences!"

Cid's brow furrowed as he thought over what he just told Hojo. "That was coherent. I just said you were a dumbass. What's not coherent 'bout that?"

Hojo barely suppressed the urge to scream, pulling mercilessly at his hair. The man was as annoying as his assistant, even more so. Hojo took a deep breath, his face red with strain as he attempted to calm his anger. He even managed a weak smile. "Go home."

Cid frowned, taking a drag off of his cigarette before dropping it to the ground and crushing it under his heel. "Now, look here," he said, anger evident in his own mood. "I know you ain't out here about my rocket. I don't give a damn why you're out here. Just get that fat ass Palmer out here when you get back to Midgar."

Hojo clenched his teeth as Cid pulled the pack of cigarettes from his goggles, took one out, and lit it. "Do you have to do that?" he growled. "It's a sick habit." In response, Cid just blew a plume of smoke at the doctor. Hojo snapped. "Fine! Damn it! I'll get Palmer out here if I have to kick him! Just go home! Pestering asshole," he muttered.

Cid set the pack of cigarettes back in his goggles. "I'll find some way to take that as compliment."

The doctor's brow furrowed as he crossed his arms over his white lab coat. "You would. Go home!"

Cid's frown deepened as he turned away. As an afterthought, he flipped Hojo the bird before disappearing around the corner of a house. Hojo's face clouded over in rage. He had no intention of telling Palmer anything; if he had had any intentions of doing so when he had said he would, they were now crushed. Cid Highwind could rot in Rocket Town forever.

Fortunately, for the duration of the short stay, Highwind kept his ass in his house where it belonged. And with the come of dawn, the caravan moved on.

From there the herd of trucks rumbled their way to Costa Del Sol. The ride was surprisingly peaceful. Zack and Cloud spent most the ride sleeping, under constant guard. They had devised a sort of system in which one of them would always be awake, just in case. Most often, that was Zack by his choice. Cloud hadn't been feeling well due to his motion sickness and was grateful for the smooth terrain. Very little conversation occurred between them, not with the guards in the back of the truck with them. The journey was over that evening, upon which the caravan reached the port city. The night time life of Costa Del Sol was in full swing as the soldiers once again set up camp. The people were in a full-swing party, celebrating something that the weary travelers didn't care to learn. There was loud, dance music, singing, and the aroma of sweet drinks and pungent spices was heavy on the warm air. The sight of so many people having the time of their lives only made Hojo wish they could have stopped any place but there. He and Nygel directed Cloud and Zack into the inn and ushered them into bed. Two guards were posted outside their door, despite the objections made by the manager of the establishment. Hojo wasn't about to let his prizes escape now.

By the time Hojo arouse the young men the next morning, the ship they were taking to Midgar had already been fully loaded and packed by the men. The trucks had been returned to the ship's belly, all of their supplies inventoried and locked away in the cargo hold. By the time the weary Zack and Cloud made it to the docks, the last of the soldiers were boarding. With a final head count and roll call, they were off.

From Costa Del Sol to Junon took a few more days of traveling. The large steam ship plowed steadily through the waves of the ocean, cutting through the murky, deep blue waters. Thankfully, the weather had been agreeable without any major storms or heavy winds. Only on the last few days had darker, ominous clouds began to threaten drops of soft rain. The trip was smooth and easy, a grateful release for the soldiers who were now able to lounge about without any orders or menial tasks to complete. Hojo and Nygel spent most of the trip planning for the Jenova Project, working from dawn till dusk to have the experiment procedure firmly formed before they reached Midgar, seeing as how they wanted to begin immediately upon their arrival. Studying the Ancient's books, they hardly took breaks for meals, nestled in their cabins. The soldiers paid really no attention; none of them really gave a damn about Hojo and his work. Besides, they were enjoying their free time. Why waste it by chatting with superiors that on a moment's notice could conjure up some servile errand for them to run? Thus the two plotting scientists were left alone.

For the most part, the trip was nice, even pleasurable.

Except for Cloud.

Two lone figures stood on the deck of the ship, near the railing. They were both dressed in gray rain ponchos as the light drizzle fell from the dismal, gray clouds above. The weather was becoming more and more dour as the forlorn thunderheads dripped their dreary, cold tears upon the land. A chilling breeze nipped at them, cutting across the ocean and slicing through their clothes. The cold rain seemed to penetrate them, as if their ponchos, clothes, and skin did not exist. The clouds were not the only ones emptying their innards.

"It's okay," Zack said, rubbing Cloud's back as he leaned far over the protective railing at the edge of the road. "This is what too many hours cooped up traveling'll do to ya."

Cloud's response was only to retch, vomiting all of the meager breakfast he had managed to keep down. Zack grimaced but said nothing, patting Cloud once on the shoulder before leaning back against the railing. He winced again thinking of the last few days. It had been hell for Cloud, first the bumpy truck ride and now the steady swaying of the ship to help settle his stomach. He silently thanked his parents for not passing on any sort of motion sickness to him.

"Maybe it was that cup of water you had for breakfast," Zack declared, a small grin coming to his face, trying to lighten the mood. The sad thing was all Cloud had had for breakfast was a cup of water, and he hadn't even drank it all. "You know what unpurified water can do to someone."

Cloud groaned, wiping his mouth with one hand as he slid down to a sitting position, oblivious to the wet, cold deck beneath him. He coughed once and moaned, his head bowed between his knees. "Very funny," he muttered and sniffled. He took a shaky breath, running a hand through his hair. "Damn it, I hate this...." Cloud closed his eyes, fighting another wave of stunning nausea and dizziness as the ship broke a particularly rough wave.

Zack watched him in concern. "You gonna be okay?"

Cloud sniffled again and rubbed a hand down his face, his skin damp with rain and sweat. "Yeah. Believe it or not, that helps."

Zack grimaced again and turned to face the ocean behind them, bracing his hands on the steel railing. White, soft foam crested the waves behind them, rolling like fields of tall grain in the wind. The low clouds seemed to meld in with the endless waters, stretching to the indefinite horizon. It seemed to go on endlessly, without bounds, spanning the Planet. The waves traveled their watery home wherever they pleased, completely random, not tethered by rhyme or reason. Zack wished he could be as free.

They were a day out of Junon and from there it was a short ride to Midgar. There they would face their fate, whatever it held in store for them.

"We're sticking together," Zack suddenly said, staring with squinted eyes out to sea. Cloud didn't answer, his stomach doing flips. The other turned away from the view and looked down to his friend. "Right? No matter what happens, we're friends, and we'll stick together."

Cloud nodded with solemn strength. Their future was as hazy as the sky and as uncertain as the path of the waves, but they would stay together. The rock would be their friendship and loyalty towards one another. He looked up at Zack in the drizzle and pulled his poncho tighter around himself. "What do you think is gonna happen there?"

Zack shrugged and gazed back out to the water. "I don't know," he answered softly. He looked down at Cloud again, a lock of his raven hair sticking to his forehead in moisture. "But I have a really bad feeling. Let's watch out for each other, okay?" Zack crouched beside Cloud. "Promise. If anything happens to one of us, we'll never leave the other hanging. We won't walk out on each other. You'll be there for me if I need it, and I'll be there for you." Cloud's eyes grew misty and he turned away from his friend's expectant face. He closed his eyes and shook his head meekly. Zack observed his friend's reaction with confusion. "What?"

Cloud turned back to face him. There were tears in his bright, blue eyes. "I promised Tifa that, too," he said softly, as if greatly ashamed. "Look how well I lived up to it. You're better not depending on me."

"Cloud..."

"No, Zack," Cloud said, tucking his knees up to his chest, slowly being soaked by the rain. "It's true. I promised her that if she were ever in trouble, I'd help her. I'd save her." His voice choked up in his throat, and he could say no more. It was as though he had been ripped in two. He had expected the hurt, but it stung him deeply nonetheless, cutting deeply into his core. His family was gone, his home was gone, his entire life was changed forever because one man was too angry to care that his actions destroyed a town of innocents. But Tifa... Tifa was the worst of it. Guilt swarmed through him like a virus. He knew her disappearance, in death or life, would be one last shred of proof that he had no strength to save her.

He knew it would hurt him, but he hadn't expected it to hurt so much. The loss filled him to the core. It was a bottomless pit, a black hole slowly pulling into itself all the light-hearted moments that sought to fill it, or plug it, or hide it. And there was nothing he could do to stop it from emerging again; there was nothing he could do to stop everything he loved from being sucked into that void of hurt.

His stomach churned as another wave of queasiness coursed through him, causing the gray world to spin wicked circles around his head. The pain would never go away. He would carry it as he carried everything else he loved and despised. He could live with the fact that he had not fulfilled his promise to Tifa nor to his town, but he wasn't sure he could die with it. And with each bout of motion sickness he ever developed, he would remember the pain he felt right now.

He couldn't promise Zack. It hurt too much.

Zack grimaced, his heart twisted. He looked away, shaking his head. "Cloud, I'm so sorry." God, how shallow that sounded. But he could think of nothing else to say.

Cloud took a shaky breath and blew it out slowly, watching his hair shudder from the breeze. "You don't have to be, Zack," he declared, pushing himself up into a sitting position. "It's not your fault."

"Cloud, you've got to let it go." He watched as Cloud closed his eyes against the tears. "If it's anyone's fault, it's Sephiroth's. It's not your fault." What could he say to convince Cloud of this?

Cloud could feel the tears burning his eyes, his throat constricting in a futile attempt to keep from sobbing. His defenses against the black hole of hurt were slowly moldering, dust beneath his fingertips. He looked down to the floor of the ship in an attempt to maintain some dignity as he silently shed his tears.

"I couldn't save her," he said softly, his voice catching in his throat. "I promised her I would be there to save her, and I never am. This isn't the first time, you know. I can't – can't let that happen to you."

Zack put his arm around the other man, merely a comforting presence rather than an intruding one. The remainder of Cloud's barriers crumbled down to nothing, and he could no longer stop the tears from flowing freely or the sobs from shaking through his body. He broke down onto Zack's shoulder.

"I failed her, Zack," he cried, his eyes closed against the burning tears. "I failed her. I failed."

Zack slowly shook his head, his gaze once again falling on ocean. "You didn't fail her, Cloud. You know it, I know it, and she knows it."

He shook his head. "I did."

Zack could offer no more solace with words. There was nothing to say, nothing he could do besides being there for his friend. He listened quietly to the rain thrumming against his hood and to Cloud's sobbing, thinking to himself. He glanced down at Cloud's dejected head, pursing his lips in thought. What would he do if he had lost his love? Blame himself for her death as Cloud did now? He bit his lip, closing his eyes against the thought.

What would he do if he lost Aeris?

One thing he knew for sure was that he would want Cloud, if their roles were so horridly reversed, to restore his faith in himself. There may be little else he could do to ease Cloud's hurt, but he could do that. "Cloud, I trust you to be my friend," he said strongly. Cloud pulled away and looked at him with teary eyes. "Your promise is still good. Tifa wouldn't want you to feel like this."

Cloud stared at him blankly for a few moments, his eyes narrowed in thought. Time seemed to stand still as he thought, sharing his memories only with himself. Zack watched him keenly. Then he seemed to break out of his trance. "You're right," he said softly. "I promise I'll be your friend no matter what, and I won't leave you when you need me." They clasped hands together firmly, like blood brothers swearing to an oath.

Zack nodded, grinning, relieved to see a little of the light back in Cloud's eyes. Then he stood and turned back to the sea. "I hope I'm wrong about all of this," he said softly.

"Gentlemen." Zack turned around at the sound of Hojo's voice.

Hojo appeared behind them, his assistant in tow. Cloud slowly stood as Hojo walked up to them, rubbing his brow as he did so. A grimace appeared on his face, and he looked as though he was fighting another round of retching. He won and managed to give Hojo a weak smile as a salutation.

"Sir," he greeted, though he was no more in the mood for pleasantries than he was for a five course meal.

Zack straightened. "Please excuse Lieutenant Strife's appearance, sir; he seems to be fighting off some sort of stomach flu."

Hojo waved a hand in Zack's direction, cutting off the rest of the explanation, a polite way of saying "I know all about the motion sickness, so shut up." Hojo managed to put a smile, weaker than Cloud's if it was possible, on his face. "How're you feeling?" he asked.

Cloud shrugged. "Been better, sir."

"We still have a little way to go until Midgar," he declared, looking across the breaking waves as if he could see the large city even though they were still far out on the ocean. "I may have some Dramamine, if you want it."

Cloud slowly shook his head. "That won't be necessary, sir." He managed another weak smile. "Thanks for the offer, anyway."

It was Hojo's turn to shrug. "No problem. I wouldn't want you two to not make it Midgar in prime health." The smile on the man's face almost made Zack as sick as Cloud had been. Hojo's wicked grin disappeared, leaving only a stern expression. "I've spoken with President Shinra." Zack glanced at Cloud, a question poised on his lips. Hojo nodded. "He wasn't very... pleased with the situation. He wants a full inquiry held into the matter. You two, obviously, will be the key witnesses."

"What's going to happen?" Zack asked, the rain running down his poncho.

Hojo shrugged, non-committed. "I don't know. Considering the fact that there's still a great deal of mystery surrounding the whole incident, I can't say for sure what might happen. I don't know whether they'll believe my theory or not. Your story seems a little ludicrous, but President Shinra has been known to be a fool time and time again." Cloud narrowed his eyes in hate, fighting another bout of nausea. "Either way, with no body, it will be incredibly hard to determine what killed Sephiroth. Like I said, I highly doubted it was you, Mr. Strife. Unfortunately, whether President Shinra believes my theory or yours may not matter. Both can support you killing Sephiroth. Even though I doubt it, President Shinra might not. If he doesn't, you most certainly will be charged with murder."

Cloud went ashen; he had obviously not been considering that avenue of thought. Zack felt some of his spirits plummet. That distinct possibility had been harboring his mind since Nibelheim.

"I wouldn't worry, though," Hojo said reassuringly, glancing at his assistant. He turned back to them. "There's not enough evidence to make a case against you, boy. I suggest you 'modify' your story, however. You running around proclaiming that you killed Sephiroth won't help your defense any."

"Lie?" Zack said, incredulous.

Hojo shrugged again.

"What kind of answer is that?!"

"The best one I can give you right now," Hojo declared, almost matter-of-factly. His gaze went between them. "You do what you need to. I'll support whatever you want and, trust me, my voice carries some weight in Shinra. If I say you didn't do it, you will probably get off."

Cloud suddenly perked up. He stared at Hojo dubiously, all his concerns and doubts clear on his face. "You'd do that for us?"

"Of course. I'm on your side here, Zack, Cloud." He turned around and began to walk across the deck, Nygel behind him,

leaving the two confused and befuddled young men by the railing. "Oh, and Mr. Strife," Hojo said in a sudden thought, turning around, "drink a lot of liquids. You wouldn't want to get dehydrated." Then he disappeared below the deck.

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The boat arrived at Junon the following morning. It had been a restless night of sleep for both Cloud and Zack, filled with tossing, turning, and fitful dreams. As the ship was unloaded by the soldiers, they wanted nothing more than to stay in bed and sleep another few hours. The caravan once again got under way, this time on the final leg of the journey.

The ride was rough and bumpy, making it hard for the two young men to catch up on their sleep. Thankfully, Cloud was able to keep a control over his motion sickness and kept the meager amount of food he had had for dinner the night before down. Everyone was anxious to reach Midgar so very few stops were made. Finally, the impressive city appeared before them.

They were taken to the Shinra Headquarters in the center of the eight huge sectors of the metropolis. The smog was so dense and the buildings so towering that it seemed night, even though it was a little past noon. The lights of the city, powered by the Mako reactors, were on almost constantly, bearing their bright illumination. The city was crowded and busy; it always was, like a hive of bees. One could easily get lost in Midgar no matter who or what one was.

As Cloud and he were led into the spiraling Shinra towers, Zack wished for nothing more.

They were taken up to some impressively high floor; Zack preferred, after the long elevator ride, not to know how high they were off the ground. Their guards directed them down a series of gray hallways, monotonous and utterly boring in texture and color, to a series of rooms. Cloud and Zack were ushered inside.

Much like the outside decorations, the room was furnished sparsely. It consisted of two beds covered in gray blankets and sheets. The walls were the color of dead skin. There was a steel bureau that contained very plain clothes against the wall. A small almost walk-in closet was the bathroom. The entire room looked sterilized and cold. However had defined it had obviously had an affinity for gray and practicality.

Neither of them really cared. Bone weary from their travel, the two of them relished the thought of a bed that didn't shake, sway, or lurch. But before they could slip under the blankets and rest, the door open without even a knock.

Hojo appeared in the portal, flanked by two guards.

Zack glanced up at him from where he sat on his bed and Cloud leaned up from the prostrate position he had taken upon his. "Mr. Strife," Hojo said, a forced cheer in his voice. "Get up and come with us."

"What? Why?" Zack asked, swinging his feet to the floor.

"You were sick the entire trip out here. I want to have the doctor look at you," Hojo said simply. Zack stared at him suspiciously, unwilling to let them be separated. It sounded like a legitimate reason but the entire sense of it ran shivers up his back.

Cloud said, "But I feel fine."

His words were waved away by Hojo. "This is not a request," he snapped, his voice gaining a threatening edge. Zack and Cloud locked gazes for a few moments, and then Zack slightly nodded. Cloud stood slowly, his eyes stuck on Zack. There seemed to be a tinge of fear in his blue eyes mixed with a lot of apprehension as he walked toward the door. "Good, boy. He'll be back soon." Hojo smiled pleasantly at Zack before ushering Cloud out of the room. "Don't worry," he said, hand on the knob, preparing to close it. "We'll take really good care of him." The door slammed shut with a bang.

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The doctor was snobby and pushy. Cloud hated him from the moment he laid eyes on the man, taking in his short stature, blond hair, and square face. He gazed at the man warily as Hojo directed him to one of the examination beds.

Cloud sat upon it, wanting nothing more than to dart out of there but knowing well by the two armed guards at the door that he would get nowhere fast. "Now, just cooperate with this, Cloud," Hojo declared once he was sure the young man was pretty much herded into the doctor's office. "It won't take long. When the doctor's done, these guards will escort you back to your room."

Cloud began to slid off the examination bed. "Dr. Hojo, I'm fine. I don't feel sick-"

"That's not the point!" Hojo barked back, startling Cloud. "Just get it over with and quit acting like a two year-old! Damn it!" The man's face was red with rage. Cloud stared at him with a mixture of loathing and bewilderment. Their eyes locked, big, bright, blue on small, beady, black. For a moment, all the two could do was stare at each other, hating the sight of one another. Then Hojo gave a short snort before leaving the room.

The doctor stepped up to Cloud who was still glaring at the shut door from which Hojo had departed. "Well," he said briskly and with a short sigh. He stared at his patient. "You were sick on the trip here, were you?"

Cloud abruptly looked to the doctor and snapped out of his trance. "Uh, no, not really. I mean, it was motion sickness. Had it since I was a kid."

The doctor laid a hand on Cloud's forehead, pushing his hair out of the way. Cloud nearly flinched from the suddenness of it and the feel of the man's cold skin contacting his own. "Any fever, headaches, nausea, muscle pain?"

Cloud shook his head in exasperation. "It was motion sickness! Of course I was nauseous!"

The doctor's eyes flared with anger. "You don't have to yell," he snapped sharply. In any other circumstance, Cloud was have blushed, been embarrassed, and stammered out some sort of an apology. But not here. He had never liked doctors, not even when his mom took him to get shots when he was a kid. But this guy... and Hojo and Nygel and all of them... they all seemed like they were out to get him. A cold sweat gathered at his hairline. The white walls of the office seemed to close in... "Were you at all in any kind of muscle pain? Aches? Fatigue?" The doctor grabbed his wrist.

Cloud shook off his feelings. "Well, yeah. I was pretty sore from the thing at Nibelheim. And the trip out here was tiring."

"Hmm," the doctor said, taking his pulse. He looked up. "Take off your shirt, please."

"What? Why?"

The man sighed, irritated. "Would you please stop making this more difficult than it has to be, young man? Take off your shirt. I want to listen to your heart."

"Look, this really isn't necessary. I feel fine and I just had a physical a couple of months ago-" Cloud began to get off the examination bed and make for the door. Just then the guards cocked their guns menacingly and stepped closer, clearly barring his exit. His mind screamed for him to get out of there, that last move escalating his panic. But he couldn't.

The doctor grabbed his arm and forced him to sit back down. "Kindly remove your shirt," he ordered. "Now." He turned away, looking through his tools for his stethoscope. The man watched out of the corner of his eye as Cloud slowly tugged the long, woolen shirt over his head. He set the article of clothing on the bed beside him, observing the doctor like a hawk. The man turned around, exhaling on the metal end of the stethoscope to warm it. Approaching Cloud, he placed it on Cloud's lower left chest. The touch still made him jump, but not completely out of the chill. "Inhale," the doctor ordered gruffly. Cloud did as he was told, wanting nothing more than to knock the man upside the head and make a break for it. He felt like he was a pig being made ready for slaughtering. "Breathe out."

He went on to listen to his patient's heart and breathing in various other places on his chest and back. Cloud sat tensely, trying hard to figure out a way to get out of this, trying harder to determine whether or not what he was feeling was true. He clenched and unclenched his jaw as the doctor finished up. "Well, your breathing's fine. Heart rate's a little high."

Gee, I wonder if it's because I feel like I'm jumping out of my skin?! He wanted to strangle the guy. Instead, all he did was

make another attempt to get out of there. "Can I go now?" he asked insistently.

"Hold your horses," the doctor viciously replied, obviously rapidly losing his patience. "Lay down."

Seeing no other alternative, Cloud just simply obeyed the command. Once he was flat on his back, the doctor leaned over him. His fingers pushed and prodded Cloud's firm stomach. "Any pain?"

Feeling helpless, the young man only shook his head. The feel of that man's cold hands touching him sent shivers up his back, his gooseflesh prickling and the fine hairs on the back of his neck rising.

The fingers moved to his neck and pressed at the juncture of his jaw to his ear. "That's all okay," the doctor murmured. The man turned away from him, saying, "You seem to be fine. Good health. You'll handle this nicely." To the guards, he said, "Go inform Hojo that I'm ready."

Then he turned around.

In his hand, his thumb poised on the plunger, was a syringe.

Cloud's blood turned to ice water. "No," he said, sitting up and edging away from the doctor as he loomed closer. "No! NO!" One of the other guards approached; now he and the doctor completely trapped Cloud on the bed. A hand wrapped around his arm. The guard leaned on him, pinning him firmly.

The doctor held his arm violently. "Keep him steady." Cloud struggled, panicked, but nothing came to any avail; the holds on him were too strong. He screamed in anger, terror, and defeat as the doctor plunged the needle into his arm. "Easy," hissed the man as he injected the entire contents of the syringe into his bloodstream. Once he was done, he retracted the needle and leaned up.

Cloud was held down, breathing heavily for a few seconds, waiting in paralyzed fear. It seemed to take hours for the sedative to take effect, when in actuality, it was only a few brief seconds. He suddenly felt flushed and feverish, his eyesight blurring. He couldn't move, his entire body numbing instantly. It was as if the message from his brain was intercepted before it reached his nervous cells. Paralyzed, he couldn't breathe. Then, his eyelids grew so heavy, he could not keep them open. With nothing more than a weak moan, he tumbled into unconsciousness.

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Hojo finished snapping on his latex gloves as the guards brought in Strife's unconscious body. "Here, here," he said to the group. "Set him here."

Gently, the guards hefted the limp form unto the medical table. Nygel and the others righted him before they began to secure him onto the surface. His hands were locked into strong, iron bonds. His ankles were manacled likewise. Thick, strong black straps were tightened over his chest, waist, and thighs. Hojo grinned as he stood above Strife's head. There was no way the young man could get free even if he were conscious.

Once the guards cleared out of the lab room, the two doctors huddled closer. Hojo and Nygel. The two men destined to reach the Promised Land. The two men intent on creating the Destroyer.

"Do you have him on the monitors?" Hojo demanded.

Nygel looked at the various equipment around the examination table and glanced at the two nurses assisting them. "Yes, sir," he replied, glancing the machine that was watching Strife's vitals.

"Good," Hojo declared, standing above the specimen's head. "I don't want him to suddenly die on us. Let's prep him." One of the nurses handed Hojo a syringe filled with a red liquid, darker than blood. The doctor proceeded to find a vein in Strife's forearm. Gently, he slid the needle into the vein and injected the drug. Hojo hummed softly to himself as he pulled the needle out of Strife's arm. One of the nurses pressed a cotton swab over it, wiping the bead of blood away.

"Alright," he said, looking up at Nygel. "Let's give that a few minutes to kick in."

They all stood in silence for a few minutes, listening to the machinery and Strife's steady breathing. Hojo nonchalantly flicked a piece of lint from his lab coat, humming once again. Nygel shook his head darkly as he prepared the highly intense sample of Mako they would be injecting into Strife. They had never attempted an outright exposure with Mako of this strength before. They weren't sure if Strife would even survive it. It was deemed necessary to try, though. If Strife survived it this time, he would again in the future. Being able to move at such a more rapid speed than the slow, normal exposures would be a great boon to the project. If he survived. If he did not, they would know not to try this on Garek.

A low moan suddenly filled the room, breaking the silence. Hojo looked down. Strife turned his head and took a short breath. The sedative the doctor had administered was clearly wearing off. Oh, well; they couldn't drug him again, not with the Mako prep running in his system.

Strife opened his eyes and looked up. Hojo smiled at him. "What's..." the young man trailed off. "What's happening?" His words were slurred and his eyes kept shutting. He attempted to lean up; it must have been then he realized he was securely bound to the table. He yanked his hands in a futile effort to get free. "What are you doing?!" He was more awake now, the monitors beginning to beep more quickly.

Hojo ignored him and glanced at his watch. "Okay," he said to the nurse. "Give me the second one." The woman obliged, handing over another needle full of the red prepping fluid.

At the sight of the syringe, Strife began to panic. He struggled, though it was hopeless. "No!" he shouted, his voice hoarse and cold with terror. Hojo grasped his jerking arm tightly and found a vein again, preparing for the second injection. "Get the hell away from me! No!!"

He couldn't concentrate. "Will somebody please shut him up?" he snapped. "And, Nygel, get over here and hold down his arm. I don't want to get an air bubble in his blood."

One of the nurses walked to the head of the table and, with the lack of any other method, clamped his hand securely over Strife's mouth. His muffled screams were far less nerve-wracking, but still rose Nygel's gooseflesh as he stood beside Hojo. He held Strife's arm down while Hojo injected the second dosage of the Mako prep. The specimen quivered in fear as the two doctors backed off.

The nurses covering the young man's mouth released him as he stopped making noise. Strife gasped and lurched up, his eyes wide. His head hit the back of the table with a thud, and he was breathing quite hard. Nygel watched his fists clench and unclench, locked in the irons. He'd seen that reaction with a lot of specimens that they exposed the Mako. The Mako prep drugs (there were four of them, depending upon the level of exposure) had varying amounts of Mako mixed in with a few other ingredients, mostly inhibitors that would slow down the reaction in which Mako infuses with one's cells. The drugs themselves often caused a sense of nausea, excessive dizziness, and the unnerving feeling that one's skin was crawling off. It wasn't really painful, just uncomfortable.

It also was quite helpful in debilitating a specimen briefly so as to expose him to Mako without his interference, which was Hojo was about to do to Strife right then. From Nygel he took the tiny, glowing green vial that was the intensified Mako. Tiny wisps of green tendrils floating about inside, creating quite a beautiful sight. Hojo paid no heed as he loaded the Mako vial into a large, hypodermic needle. Nygel held Strife's arm steady once again as Hojo inserted the needle in the vein. Strife jerked as he felt the small pinprick.

Hojo shrugged, a hopeful expression on his face. "Here goes nothing," he said with a wistful note in his voice. Then he thumbed the plunger and injected the entire contents of the vial, all of the highly intensified Mako, into Strife's blood.

They all backed off as Strife began to regain his senses. The young man was breathing through clenched teeth as he looked to Hojo. "What... what did you do... to me?" he gasped.

Hojo folded his arms over his chest after handing the needle back to one of the nurses but chose not to answer, watching Strife's shaking body with an almost feral glint in his eyes. The monitors were racing as the young man's heart beat quickened. The first waves of the pain were coming. "What..." The word escalated into a shrill scream.

Nygel winced as Strife howled in agony. He watched indifferently as the young man writhed in his bonds, pulling at the strong manacles until his wrists bled. Strife screamed again, the cry hoarse and deep from within his chest. It reverberated off the white walls, bouncing from the surfaces and crashing into the ears of those present. It was cry of agony, a cry of immense suffering and terror... a plea for help. But nobody would help him.

Strife screamed until he had no more breath to, his lungs clamping in terrible spasms of pain. His body quaked in seizures. He kicked violently, trying with all his might to get free as if that might somehow end his suffering. Sweat and tears ran down his face. Blood smeared on his hands, the table, and on the irons from the cuts in his wrists. He didn't care; he just threw his head back and cried for the horrible pain to end.

Grimacing as a particularly loud scream filled the room, Nygel turned to Hojo. "Sir," he said, getting his superior's attention. "Sir, shouldn't we gag him or something? All of Midgar can probably hear this, sir!"

Hojo shook his head, watching the sight before him with a hungry, evil tinge in his eyes. "Let him scream," he said gruffly and bluntly. And that was it. Nygel drew back and shook his head. God, it was horrible listening to Strife suffer. He had known that this process would cause the specimen extreme pain, but he had never dreamed it would be so terrible... 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...Hojo's words filled his skull, chanting over the hoarse screams. Nygel glanced at Hojo, watching the man glow with delight and lust. He was enjoying it. He loved the way Strife struggled and shook and bucked... the screaming was like music to him. The bastard was enjoying it. He was wallowing in the pain they had caused. He was thriving in the hurt they had inflicted.

It took a full hour of Strife's pain-filled screams for Nygel realized how much they had hurt. And even then, he remained stoic and indifferent, forcing himself not to think about it as Strife finally passed out from the pain. Even though Hojo was a cold sadist, he did have a point with his words. It was easier to bear when you treated them lower than you. He wouldn't ever sink to Hojo's level, though.

Nygel felt sick to his stomach. He had decided he would hurt for power. But he wouldn't enjoy it.

~*~

Zack opened his eyes as he heard the lock of the room being opened. The subsequent clanks signified the knob being turned and the door being opened. He sat up quickly on the bed.

"Cloud," he gasped, standing immediately as he saw two uniformed guards carrying the limp form of his friend into the room. The two men set Cloud on his bed far from gently and then turned around and left, slamming the door behind them. "Cloud," Zack said as he fell to his knees beside his friend's bed. "Cloud, can you hear me?" He gently laid a hand on Cloud's forehead but was met with no response. Cloud was quivering violently. Short, shallow breaths charged the air, heavily labored. His pale skin was lined with perspiration and strikingly cold.

Not knowing what else to do, Zack took Cloud's pulse via his neck due to the fact that both of his wrists were bandaged. It was racing, far too fast to be safe. "Damn," Zack murmured, shocked and fearful. Gently, he pulled open Cloud's eyelids. And he gasped.

Not because the eyes were blank and didn't focus when he did this.

But because they were glowing. White, hot, and alive, his eyes sparkled with their own inner light, shimmering brilliantly upon the blue irises. Zack recognized what it was immediately: Mako. Cloud had been exposed to Mako and a lot of it. Zack shuddered, remembering his own experiences with the infusion process. It was a painful thing to endure; that was one of the reasons why only the strongest were chosen for SOLDIER. Candidates for SOLDIER were only exposed to very little amounts of Mako, though. From the intensity of the glow in Cloud's eyes, he had clearly been treated with extensive quantities of Mako in a very short time. Zack didn't know a lot about that, but he suspected it was why his friend was clearly hurting and nearly catatonic.

"You bastards," he whispered with danger in his voice, seething hostility. He had heard the screaming. Hoarse, and

somewhat faint, but he had heard it none the less. He hadn't recognized it then. Now, he knew it must have come from Cloud. "Damn bastards!"

But what to do now? Cloud was obviously in dire need of medical attention. With a heart rate so high, he could very easily lapse into cardiac arrest and die. Zack stood and pounded on the door even though he knew that no one would care. "Help! Somebody! We need a doctor, please!! Help!" It took only a few moments of silence for him to realize that nobody had heard him. He headed back to Cloud's quaking body. Should he try to get Cloud to drink something? He shook his head to his thoughts. In the state he was in, Cloud would never get water down enough to do any good. Make him comfortable? Get him warmer? That he could do.

He retrieved a heavy sweater from the closet and returned to his friend. He didn't know if Cloud was shivering or shaking because whatever they had done to him, but was willing to bet that the young man was cold. Returning to Cloud's side, he said, "Now to get you into this." And he set to work dressing the half naked Cloud into the gray shirt, gently tugging his arms into the sleeves. It was harder than it looked, especially without Cloud's help. Finally, after a few moments of maneuvering, Cloud was wearing the sweater. His body was still convulsing horribly, but at least he wouldn't be as cold.

Zack crouched at the foot of the bed and untied Cloud's boots. He tugged them off and set them on the floor beside them. Cloud made no movement, no indication that he had even felt it. Zack stared at him worriedly. Then he turned back to his own bed and ripped the blanket from it with the whoosh of cloth. He laid the blanket up over Cloud's prone form, drawing it over his shoulders and securely tucking him in.

He silently cursed Shinra, Hojo, his damned assistant, and Sephiroth as he pulled the chair against the wall closer to Cloud's bed. There he sat, watching his friend's shivering body. Cloud hadn't moved an inch of his own volition. Zack shook his head sadly and leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. "What did they do to you, Cloud?" he asked softly. Zack bowed his head in concern and rage. "What happened?"

~*~

There was a knock at the door.

The hollow rapping struck Zack's sensitive ears. He opened his eyes wearily and winced as the bright light assaulted them. He blinked his green eyes a few times to clear them and then lifted his head from the side of Cloud's bed. It took a few moments but eventually his mind cleared enough for him to remember what had happened. When he did, he sat up abruptly, the muscles of his neck and shoulders crying in protest. Sleeping in such a position, sitting in the chair with his head on Cloud's bed, had been far from comfortable.

The door opened sharply with a clank and a bang as it struck the wall behind it. In stepped Hojo, his assistant, and few soldiers. Another man stood between the two scientists, and by the stethoscope clinging to his neck like a tubular pendant, Zack guessed he was a doctor.

The young man stood abruptly, anger flaring energy into his cramped muscles. The chair hit the floor with a crash behind him. "Get the hell away!" he barked, his voice hoarse and throaty.

Hojo shook his head. "Mr. Garek-" he began, but he was not given a chance to finish.

"You bastards! Sephiroth was right!" Zack stepped forward threateningly, standing protectively in front of Cloud's still form. "You are experimenting on people with Mako, aren't you?!" Hojo only stared at him coolly, with one eyebrow raised. Zack, infuriated, spat at him, "You damn bastard! You can't just do this to him! Cloud's a human being, not some guinea pig you can experiment on!"

"Mr. Garek, I suggest you lower your voice and calm yourself. This spectacle you're making is accomplishing nothing." Zack clenched his jaw as his bit down harsh words. He was too enraged to even think. Hojo nodded to the doctor beside him curtly. The man began to approach Cloud.

He would have to get through Zack first as the young man stood like a wall between them, denying access to his friend's unconscious body. "You won't hurt him!" he hissed dangerously.

"He's a doctor, Mr. Garek. Hurting others goes against everything that stands for. He would never hurt anyone," Hojo said calmly.

"It obviously wasn't that way last night," snapped back Zack through clenched teeth.

Hojo sighed tiredly. "Be reasonable. You want your friend to get better, don't you? Let the doctor take a look at him."

Zack looked warily between Hojo and the doctor. He did want Cloud to get help, but he didn't want any person affiliated with Hojo to even lay one finger on him. Still, with the guards bearing their heavy rifles positioned just outside the door, what choice did he have? Tense with caution and rage, Zack backed away. His gaze stabbed daggers into the back of the doctor as the man knelt beside Cloud. He watched like a hawk as the man pulled back the covers.

The doctor jabbed his fingers to Cloud's neck, seeking a pulse. He glanced at his watch. A few minutes later, he remarked, "His pulse is still high." He listened to Cloud's heart again, sliding his stethoscope up Cloud's shirt. Cloud for his own part made no movement, his body completely still. At least he had stopped that horrible shaking. Strangely enough, he seemed to have regained a little color to his cheeks, and his breathing was far less labored. "Still erratic though." The doctor withdrew his hand and laid a palm on Cloud's forehead. Long fingers roughly pulled open his eyelids. The doctor peered closer at the irises lustrous with Mako. "He shows no sign of recovery from the infusion."

"He won't come out of it?" asked Hojo's assistant meekly, as if he were afraid to speak.

The doctor sighed and stood. He made his way back to the group. "I don't know. It's a severe state of Mako poisoning. If he'll survive it, I don't know. It's too soon to tell." He shook his head.

Hojo folded his arms across his chest. "I'm hopeful. If Strife pulled Sephiroth's sword out of himself and then had the strength to toss him into the Mako pit, he'll be able to take a little poisoning."

Zack flared. "How can you be so damn nonchalant about what you did to him?" he demanded, shaking a fist. "Was this all an elaborate lie to get us here to Midgar so you can take advantages of the only two survivors? Besides, you wouldn't want anyone to know about Sephiroth, would you?!"

He was promptly ignored. The doctor nudged his way through after declaring to Hojo, "I'll run a few more tests on him this afternoon." Hojo muttered thanks as the man left, his eyes dark and contemplative. He began to rub his chin again as he looked to Cloud's body and then to Zack. Those beady eyes mirrored his soul, the capacity to hurt, the pleasure he derived from it, the sheer evil and cold arrogance... Zack forced himself not to shudder as that heartless gaze fell upon him.

Hojo took a step into the room, his assistant close upon his heels. The door slammed shut behind him. "Now, Mr. Garek, I think it's about time we had a little discussion about what you're doing here." He said it so matter-of-factly, so calm it was almost vile.

"You bastard! This isn't some pathetic game!"

Hojo raised a hand to silence him. "Let's not resort to petty name-calling and argumentative statements, shall we? We can deal with this as two rational adults."

Zack fumed, his chest heaving in ire, his eyes burning with anger. Too enraged to speak, he simply stood stiffly, glaring at Hojo murderously. The scientist began to pace. "You are correct in your assumption that it was never my intent to bring you here to tell of what happened at Nibelheim. I lied about the monsters, I lied about my theory, and I lied about President Shinra." No pain or regret at admitting it even appeared on his face. "I had to appease your suspicions somehow. Fabricating such a story seemed to be the easiest way to do so."

All of Zack's feelings of foreboding and his fears were true. "I knew it," he hissed through clenched teeth. "I knew it."

"Yes, I figured you might." Hojo stopped pacing and turned to face him. "I brought you here for one purpose only: to continue the Jenova Project." Zack's face splintered in a mixture of fear and rage. "You see, Sephiroth was, what say, the

head of the Jenova Project. He was an essential player. And he-" Hojo stabbed a finger at Cloud's still form. "He killed him. Without Sephiroth, all this work is for naught. I wasn't about to let that happen."

Hojo waved a hand into the air. "So, in all my genius, I developed a new plan." Hojo's assistant stiffened, but the scientist didn't notice. "For reasons I will not explain, the last obviously failed. This new plan centered very directly on you two."

Zack was silent in anger and shock. He didn't know why he was so surprised; deep down inside, he had expected something like this. It didn't, though, in any way erase the fear and panic suddenly coursing through him. Almost meekly, he asked, "What are you going to do to us?"

Hojo smiled at seeing him afraid. "To you, my dear boy, nothing. To your friend, though..." He smiled again, almost savagely. "With Sephiroth's murder, Mr. Strife has suddenly become a very important individual. He has accomplished something we thought to be impossible. He killed Sephiroth. That either makes him very strong or very lucky, both traits of which are useful when trying out a new procedure. We needed test subjects; we had them. You and he were at our fingertips. There was no need to look any further.

"I hope you won't be too disappointed we chose Strife over you."

Zack fought the urge to kill Hojo, right then and there. "You're crazy," he snapped darkly.

"Crazy?" Hojo gave a short laugh. "I'm not crazy, Mr. Garek. In fact, I'm the most sane person alive on the Planet. I see things for what they truly are. You and Strife are insignificant in the great scheme of things. You are merely the tools I will use to reach the Promised Land."

"There is no Promised Land! It's just a myth, a fable, a dream! Can't you see that?!"

Hojo shook his head. "I would be most obliged if you'd refrain from making judgments on things you do not understand." Zack clamped his mouth shut in rage, his lips forming a thin line. "I have spent the better part of my life studying the intricate details surrounding the Promised Land and I can assure you it does exist." Idly, Zack wondered if Hojo was truly assuring him or assuring himself. "Professor Gast took me under his wing, taught me all he knew. Bless his bones, he was wise. He had studied, examined, and analyzed all that was ever said or placed upon paper about the Promised Land. He was a genius in all rights, but he was no scientist. Do you know why, Mr. Garek?" In a state of stupefaction, Zack numbly shook his head. "Of course you don't." Hojo shook a finger at him. "He had no initiative. He had no power or will to even try to reach the Promised Land. He had no perseverance. He was weak." Hojo cracked a mad scientist's smile before shaking his head. "That's why I will succeed where he failed."

Zack looked back to Cloud's prone form. "I won't let you use him to your own gains," he hissed dangerously, low threats in his tone.

"You have no power to stop me," Hojo said plainly, as if he were announcing the day's lunch special.

"That won't stop me from trying."

"Honestly, now, Mr. Garek, what can you do?" Hojo said, almost aristocratically. The rage melted from Zack's face. "You can't escape. There's no place to go. You can't fight me, not without getting yourself hurt or killed. And, if you're killed, that sort of defeats your purpose, doesn't it? Who will protect Strife then?" Hojo stepped closer to him, seeming strangely compassionate. "I don't want to hurt you, Mr. Garek. I have no intention of doing that. But fighting this, hindering the Project... that will only cause you grief. You will regret it if you try to interfere." There was danger in his voice, cold and seething threats.

"Not as much as I will if I don't," snarled back Zack, defiance lighting his green eyes.

Hojo sighed tiredly like a parent weary of disciplining a disobedient child. "Mr. Garek, I don't think you're understanding me. Read my lips. There is nothing you can do." Hojo's eyes grew into coal. "Nothing. You cannot stop me. And the sooner you accept that, the better for me, for yourself, and for Cloud."

Zack stopped suddenly and stared at his friend's body. Hojo smiled. "The gift we are giving him... and it is a gift, mind you. He will lead us, all of us, to the Promised Land, as Sephiroth would have."

"You're... turning him into another Sephiroth?"

Hojo smiled again at some silent joke, obscure to Zack. His reaction only fueled the young man's anger. The doctor, however, refrained from answering that question. "This process we are attempting on him is highly unpredictable."

"In other words," Zack said, "you don't know what you're doing."

It happened in an instant. It was as if Hojo's anger had suddenly been ignited. With bright fury in his eyes, he stepped forward and decked Zack sharply. The young man stumbled back over his own feet in surprise and fell painfully backwards, landing sharply on his rear and nearly smashing his skull against the metal bedpost behind him.

Zack wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth, raising his hands protectively before him. Hojo loomed over him like an ominous killer, screaming. "You don't know the slightest thing, the most minuscule detail, of what I'm doing! You don't understand the Promised Land! You don't have the neither intelligence nor the strength to accomplish half the things I've done in life! I've studied under the greatest minds alive! I've completed thousands of experiments, successfully! This world you live in and take so for granted would not exist if not for me! I am the genius, bred from raw talent pulsing in my life and hours of hard study and a tedious strive towards excellence! I am the omnipotent mastermind so precariously balanced between god and human... What you say, what you think, what you are all depends upon the whim of my creation! I am life! I have to power to breathe the very substance you cower before me this instance protecting into the innate wretches of this Planet! I have to power to turn him-" he pointed a finger sharply at Cloud "into a somebody, give him strength where he had none, give his misdirected and meaningless existence purpose! I could commend his life to eternal bliss! I could condemn his soul into an agony-filled hell-" Hojo paused, snapping his fingers. "All upon my discretion. Me, not you! I'm the one in power! You have no concept of the strength and challenges of my sovereign position! You, the measly peon of life, have no idea what it took to attain what I have! So don't you tell me what I do and do not know!"

For a moment, all time seemed to stand still as Hojo stood, a towering tyrant. Zack's charged breath was especially loud in the silence as he lay at Hojo's feet, staring with quivering fear at his captor's wrathful eyes.

Hojo glared at him with his damn violent gaze for a moment longer and then tore his eyes away with a snort. "Killing you will do me no good, Mr. Garek. But I suggest you start to accept the fact that I have complete control over you and your friend." Hojo started towards the door. He glanced once at Nygel. The man's face was white with shock. He looked stiff as a board, slinking closer to the door, trying to avoid his fuming superior. "Mr. Strife will need you," Hojo declared. "I suggest you be there for him. That now is the only thing you can do."

The door slammed shut.

Zack lay on the floor, trying desperately to catch his racing breath and calm his pounding heart. He wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth with shaking hands and stared around the room, trying to regain his composure. It was so empty and hollow, vacuous.... He didn't want to be alone with his guilt, terror, and anger.

He struggled up to his knees and stumbled to Cloud's bedside. Grasping his friend's cold hand, he buried his face into the sheets. "I'm sorry, Cloud," he whispered. He closed his eyes against the pain. "I'm so sorry."

~*~

The Shinra building was starkly quiet that night, far different from the loud screams that had reverberated through it the night before, bouncing off the walls and echoing down the bare corridors, striking the ears shrilly of all closest to hear, striking the hearts painfully of those sensitive enough to care.

Hojo thought it sounded rather empty and incomplete without it.

He sat in his office, his feet upon his desk, reading over some trivial figures that needed attention. And he was utterly satisfied with himself and life in general. Everything was going completely according to plan. Hojo loved it when the

circumstances cooperated to his liking. Sure, Strife hadn't regained consciousness and remained in much the same comatose-like state that he had been in since the night before. But Hojo knew deep down inside that he would wake up. He couldn't substantiate his beliefs; he just knew the fates wouldn't play such a cruel trick on him to yank his newest pet. If they did, he would be royally peeved.

There was a knock at the office door. Hojo looked up from his clipboard. "Come in."

The door slammed open and Nygel burst through. The look on his face was ecstatic. "Sir! Sir, you'll never believe what just happened!"

Hojo stood, setting his files on his desk. He smiled broadly. "Strife come out of it?"

Nygel looked surprised and taken aback, the excitement fading slightly. "Uh, no sir. There's no change in his condition."

"Damn," Hojo muttered, rubbing his chin. He began to yank on his hair in anger. "Dammit, that boy better not fizzle out on us! I'm tired of my specimens being unpredictable! The element of entropy and chaos in life sucks," he grumbled.

Nygel grabbed his arm, nearly jumping up and down for joy. "Sir, I have wonderful news. It seems the Turks have finally uncovered something useful!"

Hojo looked at the man clinging onto him through narrowed, irritated eyes. "Nygel, quit frolicking! Now, what's happened? For all we've paid those good for nothing Turks, this better be good."

"Oh, believe me, sir," Nygel said as he forced himself to calm down, "it is." Hojo walked back around his desk and sat down. He carefully resettled himself in his chair and propped his feet, once again, on his desk, crushing his files. Nygel waited patiently for his attention, too thrilled to be angry. "They've found the Ancient, sir."

If Hojo was amazed or even happy about this, he didn't show it. "They did?" he asked incredulously.

"One Aeris Gainsborough. She lives in the Sector Five Slums, somewhere. They've spotted her repeatedly." Nygel paused to catch his breath and see his superior's reaction.

It was one of obvious doubt. "Are they sure?"

"Tseng was when I spoke to him a moment ago, sir," Nygel confirmed, unable to understand why Hojo wasn't more interested. The search for the Ancient had been long and hard, not too mention expensive. Many man hours had been put into the hunt. The Turks had only recently been enlisted, seeing as how they had a reputation for accomplishing such tasks. The Ancient was another essential player in the Jenova Project. Besides, she had something they needed very dearly. "Now we can retrieve Holy Materia."

Hojo didn't answer, rubbing his chin once again. There was another knock on the door standing ajar causing him to look up and Nygel to turn around.

It was the doctor. "I just came to inform you," he said, standing in the portal. "Strife has regained consciousness."

Hojo jumped out of his chair as he jerked by a live wire. "He did? Is he lucid?"

"He's getting there," the doctor remarked. "I'll have him bathed and fed." Then he left.

"Nygel, this is excellent! Come on, we have work to do!" Hojo sprinted towards the door, spring in his step. There was laughter in his voice. "Damn me, it worked!"

Nygel stood dumbfounded by the desk. "But sir, what about the Holy Materia? What about the Ancient?"

"We don't need her right now. We have something better."

Nygel nearly did a double-take. "What?" All that work...

"Don't just stand there gawking, Nygel. We don't need her. Now come." Nygel stared at him in anger and disappointment. Hojo grabbed his arm and pushed him out of his office. "On with the Jenova Project." Then he kicked the door shut and headed for his lab.