

Jenova Project
by Junj
Part 3: Players of the Game

And thus it began.

The Planet continued on its daily course, orbiting its sun as it had since the dawn of time. The life-giving rays of the sun, the energy that had caused the first oceans to fill from melting polar ice caps, the first random clumps of organic and inorganic molecules to bond together and form the inaugural cells, reached the Planet as it always had. The light struck the clouds and brought them to life with illumination. The winds continued to blow, sweeping across the land in their age old patterns.

Life also flourished as it was meant to, the Planet filled to the brim with vitality. Plants, animals, and humans alike lived in a constant system, tuned perfectly to cyclic changes in their environments. The Planet pulsed with its own inner effervescence, its own heart beat, the holy tendrils of the Lifestream flowing through its veins, embracing the Planet in soft, ethereal light. It fueled all of the energy and vivacity, the spirit of the Planet rejuvenated by the steady rhythm of birth and death among its inhabitants.

Forces governed all existence, all life and death, all substance and nothing. Forces spread power, poverty, fortune, and pain. Forces kept the complex, interweaving systems that ensured the Planet would function as a single, breathing unit in order. Strong, secure order meant peace. Everything was in a constant state of equilibrium, with opposite measures of good and evil, wrong and right, life and death, chaos and peace. Without that equilibrium, there was nothing. Shattering that pattern would cause catastrophe. Everything, from the sun to the smallest unicellular organism was imperative in the system of the universe. It all had its own place, its own part. In this seemingly fragile structure, one small inequality, one small weakened support, could lead to its entire collapse. No one part of anything was meant to have complete and uncontested control. No one variable was meant to support the stress of the entire unstable arrangement. For there to be tranquility, it must be at balance.

As there were forces that kept the many facets of the Planet in order, there were also powers that protected that important symmetry of all existence. For that reason, and possibly that reason alone, did those that made bloody grabs for power fail. The Planet protects itself and its child, life, with all of its strength. Holy and the Lifestream would spew forth in the greatest sacrifice, pounding the danger with the power of life to guard the well-being of all under its care. Fate, too, was such a force, intervening where it was needed to make sure that elemental energies had the ability to fight back. Viewed in that aspect, fate did indeed control and manipulate one's life to its own gains. But if its gains were to save all that was life upon the Planet, perhaps it was wise to simply let it do as it may and not struggle with something that one had no power over. Humanity in itself was the most paradoxical genre of life that flourished in the green riches of the Planet, even more so than nature herself. It had the capacity to love and spread compassion, simultaneously wringing the life from others without a second thought. It had intelligence beyond that of anything, yet that intelligence, more often than not, was used selfishly to create inventions that caused mass destruction, pain, and exploitation of others. Humanity was the most dangerous species on the Planet, and yet, as if in direct contradiction with that fact, it was the most glorious and wondrous, too. Even in humanity, forces balanced, kept peace within the species. Good always fought against evil, no matter what form it took. These battles, however, very rarely neglected to touch all other living things. No other species had the ability to cause so much destruction as humanity did.

But that too was all part of the system. It was meant to be that way. It was intended as such. Everything was created with a specific purpose. If humanity's purpose was to wreak havoc and terror, then so shall it be. It has happened before in the history of the Planet and will happen again. There is a counter strength for every power. There is a constant thought: things will work out in the end. The balance will be restored eventually, no matter what happens. It will turn out all right. Whatever happens will be. The genius of the disorder in life.

Thus the Planet can continue in its orbit around the sun daily, and the winds can blow as fiercely and as calmly in their same old tracks as they always have. Trees would continue to grow, changing their leaves with the cyclic seasons. Flowers would bloom next spring and the spring after. The predators would hunt. The prey would die. Humanity would continue to destroy and create with no rhyme or reason. People would go about in their daily lives, rising, eating, working, playing, sleeping. All that exists would continue to do just that, abiding by the simple laws that governed the universe without a

second thought, content with the soft reassurance that they would be taken care of. That heaven and hell could be shifted and altered, but it would balance itself again.

No matter what, life would never be expunged.

Not unless those forces could be controlled. And so the sun rose, the winds blew, and life lived unknowing, blind to the fact that perhaps it wasn't as safe as it deemed itself to be. Safety can at times be an illusion. To control the forces that controlled existence was the ultimate power. Could such an incredible manipulation be achieved?

Surely it could, for the universe has made a habit out of creating monsters out of its simple folds and substances. The struggle for power is the greatest folly. Those that crave power do not understand it, or what that shift could do. Thus the grab for the ultimate power could only produce ultimate destruction. The moment has passed to stop it. Fate did not intervene.

Thus it began, and life continued in blessed ignorance.

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A week passed.

To Zack, it seemed to simultaneously last forever and mere hours. An eternity seemed to stretch before him at times, time wearily continuing in its monotonous march. They had been completely ignored for nearly a week, trapped in that dreary cell. The only way to gauge the hours was feeding time and sleeping time. There was nothing to do but sleep and worry, worry and sleep. Zack was driving himself crazy. Every moment that slipped by empty, every fleeting second that he did nothing, ate at him. He knew this breathing period would not be as infinite as it seemed. He knew the other shoe would drop. Hojo would return to terrorize them. He knew it. Thus the time wasted by doing nothing, by sitting around and waiting, was killing him. They should be fighting. They should be escaping.

If he only knew how.

Their days were spent in idle conversation; there was nothing else to do. And they only spoke if Cloud was feeling up to it. Since his ordeal, he had changed. The first few days since he had awoken he had spent sick and weak, unwilling to get up, only sleeping. Fever and nausea had assaulted him relentlessly, and he wouldn't eat or even drink. Zack had watched over him with care and concern, covering him with extra blankets at night when his body wracked with chills and delirium, cooling him during the day with wet wash cloths as the fever overheated him. The doctor examined Cloud every morning during feeding time. He had refused to administer any kind of medicine to lower the fever, despite Zack's anger and pleading. The man was positive that the ailment would eventually run its course. Cloud was left to cure himself.

The doctor, as much as Zack didn't want to admit it, had been right. Three days after they had arrived in Midgar, the fever broke. Cloud remained weak and nauseous for next day, but began to eat again slowly with Zack's help. By that evening, besides a headache and some stiffness, his physical state was much improved. His mental state, however, was a shrouded mystery to Zack. At times he seemed like he always had, friendly, young energy and enthusiasm in his bright blue eyes. Other instances surrounded him in a cold demeanor, aloof and distant, as if he were fighting battles millions of miles away. He could change between these relative plights in the blink of an eye. As the week wore on, Zack began to get acclimated to Cloud's mood swings. For the most part Cloud was quiet and withdrawn, his eyes misty with hidden thought. His silence only served to escalate Zack's own curiosity. He was dying to know exactly what had happened to his friend, what had been done to him. He wouldn't push Cloud, though, not until he seemed better.

Zack now lay in bed, staring at the blackened ceiling above him. He absently ran his fingers along an ancient scar on his left lower chest, tracing with his forefinger the smooth skin marking the old wound. How long ago had he tripped, falling upon that sharp rock? How many years had it been since his friends had helped him hobble home? How distant was the memory of his mother patching him up, wiping away the blood and his tears, kissing it and making it all better? God, how he wished he was home. How he wished it would all just disappear. He missed his mother. He missed his father. He wanted to return to his bed and fall asleep in its soft, cool sheets, unmolested, undisturbed. But the hard, chilled slab beneath him and the

stiff blankets reminded him of exactly how remote and unreachable that all was.

He heard Cloud turn over. In months gone past, before Nibelheim, the night would have been filled with conversation and laughter. They talked of their dreams, their childhood, their friends and girls... Now, the silence was almost deafening. He couldn't speak. He didn't know what to say. All he knew was that Cloud wasn't the same any longer. No amount of friendly conversation could change that, could make things as they were before. It would be vacuous, an empty lie, a meager attempt to hide from the truth. And the truth was: he was afraid. For the first time in a long time, he was utterly frightened. He had no control. He was helpless. That's what scared him the most. If Hojo was true to his words, he would be left unharmed. But the fact that he was unable to protect Cloud, like an older brother turning his back upon the younger when a flock of tormenting bullies picked on him... He was helpless. He hated the feeling more than anything. Guilt ravaged through him like a hungry virus seeking the warmth and protection of his own cells to multiply and plan his destruction. Guilt at his inability to stop Hojo. Guilt because he hadn't even tried. Guilt because now he lay in his bed, thinking only of his own problems, while Hojo was busily planning their suffering. The clock was ticking. Their time was running out. And all he could do was think about his guilt.

He sighed, feeling his chest rise and fall. But what could he do? Honestly, what course of action could he take that would prevent the inevitable? Hojo was right; there was nothing. Admitting the cold bastard had been speaking the truth was too hard, though. The realization bit into him more than the guilt. For some reason, it seemed worse to acknowledge his helplessness than to just be helpless. It made no sense. But in those long, lonely hours, the only way he could save himself from the terror, hurt, and guilt threatening to consume him was to deny the fact there was nothing he could do. He promised himself he'd find a way to escape. He'd think of something. Later, he promised himself when his mind drew a blank. Tomorrow. The day after.

Now the week was over. It seemed as though time was against him; it always was when you dreaded the coming of unwanted events. But he had even less control over time than he did over Hojo. Cloud did not seem to know what was ahead, or if he did, he showed no fear nor dread. Zack had thought it wise not to tell his friend of Hojo's sick, insane plans. What good would it do, anyway? Besides terrify and enrage him? Nothing. Zack kept the horrifying knowledge to himself, tucked away in a guilty heart. He felt like he was leading an unwanted dog in the pound to be destroyed. He couldn't look into Cloud's eyes; when he did, his guilt gnawed at him too sharply.

Maybe another day would mean the difference. Maybe another day would grant into his mind an ingenious escape plan. Maybe another day would see them free before Hojo's touched their lives again with the venomous hands of science. Another day was all he needed.

The lights suddenly turned on. The glaring, bright illumination caused Zack to squeeze his eyes shut in pain. He leaned up, ripping the covers off his bed in the process. Cloud, too, was sitting up, staring at the front of room. Hojo stood in the doorway, smiling hungrily.

Their time was up.

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Nygel looked up to the door of the lab, watching it swing open with a bang, colliding violently with the wall behind it. Hojo walked in, a clipboard in hand, his glasses hanging low on his nose. "Bring him in," he ordered sharply as he made room for the guards behind him. They dragged young Strife bodily through the door, two grabbing his arms securely, another pushing him from behind. They made quite a ruckus, banging into the lab carts on the side, knocking tools and an assortment of vials to the floor with a clatter and the explosion of glass.

"Let go of me!" Strife hollered as he struggled, yanking his arms away from the guards' restraining holds. He landed his foot into the shin of one of the men, causing him to yelp in pain and to release his hold on the young man's arm. Strife pulled away despite the fact that he was still half restrained, managed to trip over his own feet, and fell to the floor with a thud. The guards immediately recovered and grabbed him again, this time anger set in their jaws and tightening their grip. They forcefully and far from gently dragged Strife across the floor. "No!"

“Please be easy with him,” Hojo admonished tiredly as he came to stand beside Nygel. “Take him over to container C.”

The guards grunted or nodded, and hauled the screaming Strife over to the designated place, one man keeping his gun trained on their charge. The lab was one of Shinra’s more expensive ventures. A row of nearly five “containers”, as they were called, stood like soldiers at attention to the left of the door. They were glass cylinders, nearly three feet wide and almost seven feet tall. At the steel cap numerous gray pipes and wires were attached, all having a specific purpose. A small platform built into the floor lifted the container slightly. A vent was constructed into the bottom, connected to a very specific air intake which was in turn connected directly a supply of Mako kept under high pressure. There was only one way out of the container; the front of the pod opened in a door. The frame of it was indistinguishable from the rest of spotless, clear glass. The only sign of it was a steel knob. The glass of the containers was far from fragile. It has been industrially reinforced to become harder and far stronger to break. It was for obvious reasons this had been done. If one struggling specimen were to break the glass, had it been of normal composition, not only would the subject be able to escape, but the contaminating Mako would very quickly spread around the room. The Mako in the pipes below it was not of incredibly high concentration, but still potent enough to cause significant problems to those exposed. These containers were very rarely used for anything more than the ordinary SOLDIER Mako infusion. Those specimens were usually the most worried about, since they were already strong even when not driven by the pain of the infusion. Extra precautions were taken for such instances. Guards were always on hand, armed and ready to deal with an escaped, insane subject. Also, the room had emergency lock down and quarantine procedures.

Hojo was not worried about it in the least as the guards hauled Strife over to container C and dropped him rather unceremoniously at the foot of the platform. He stood behind the control panel on the right of the room, watching with arms folded about his chest. Nygel picked up a needle full of Mako prep from the cart beside him and headed over to the young man.

Upon seeing the approaching scientist through the legs of the guards towering over him and the needle glinting in his hand, Strife began his struggles anew, his eyes wide. “No!” he screamed as he scrambled away. The guards restrained him before he could move so much as a foot. Nygel grabbed Strife’s arm as the guards held him steady. The young man continued to howl futile orders to be released as Nygel without problem injected the prep into his arm.

They used Strife’s dazed moment as the drug coursed through his blood stream to load him into the container. Nygel glanced at the crumpled form quivering on the vent once behind rising from his crouch and heading back to Hojo. He set the empty needle back on the cart before turning to his superior. “Shall I begin, sir?”

Hojo shook his head. “Let him come out of it first.”

They waited.

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Cloud opened eyes that had been squeezed shut, not remembering having closed them. He sucked in breath after breath of air, finding there was not enough to feed this sudden hunger for oxygen. His blurry vision cleared after blinking a couple of times, and the nausea began to fade as the steel top of whatever object he was in took one position instead of three, stopping its seemingly endless spinning. He shuddered and closed his eyes again as a receding wave of dizziness and grotesque pain claimed him. After a few shaky breaths, it passed. He opened his eyes again and struggled to sit up.

It was then he realized what had happened.

With eyes wide with fear and panic, he looked to Hojo and Nygel outside, standing behind some kind of console. “No,” he whispered. He stood, forgetting the weakness in his limbs, and pounded on the glass. “No! Let me out of here!” he screamed. His heart was thundering in his ears in time with his fervent pounding, his breath hissing. “Let me out! Please!!” They ignored him, chatting about something. He could only hear the faintest of words, too low to make anything out clearly. The guards stood around the container he was locked him, staring at him with a sickeningly gleam in their eyes, hefting their firearms threateningly. They wouldn’t help him. Nobody would help him.

He fought back tears of despair as he continued to pound on the glass. Why wouldn't it break? He stood back as far as he could and kicked it with all his might. His boot pounded viciously again and again, each time not even marring its perfect surface. It was futile. It would not even so much as crack. He was trapped. He refused to give up, though, as he kicked again and again and again, hot tears flowing down his cheeks.

Why wouldn't it break?!

A sudden hissing caused him to stop in mid-kick. He lowered his leg, tensing every muscle in his body, straining his ears. The hissing was growing louder. He started to shake in terror, in anticipation, in panic. What was it? Where was it coming from? Oh God, oh God, oh God, somebody help me!

Something cold suddenly ruffled his leg. He looked down with a gasp as his heart leapt to his throat.

Green gas was slowly seeping up through the grate in the floor, rising with reaching wispy tendrils, caressing and embracing his leg, melding through his blue pants and reaching inside to his sensitive skin. He simply stared at the intruder for a moment, frozen with panic and fear, his stomach clenched, his brain dead. The gas climbed before him, rising higher as more and more of it filtered through. He wanted to scream as the air became tinted a horrible shade of neon green, but his voice would not come. His mouth could not form words. He could not think. Trembling uncontrollably, he watched as the green tendrils wrapped around his quivering fingers like cloth. It was filling the container. It was replacing the air. Air.

Cloud suddenly snapped back into reality as though jolted with a live wire. "NO!!" he screamed as he began his assault on the glass hell he was imprisoned in anew. "Let me out! LET ME OUT!!!" With panic in his cracking voice and powering his body, he slammed his full weight into the side of the container. Again. Again. God, he couldn't breathe. The poison invaded his lungs with every betraying breath he was forced to take. He didn't feel the bruises he had sustained. The panic and the pain in his lungs forced him to keep trying, despite how utterly useless it was. His mind was too far gone to realize it was a lost cause. His body wracked with despair, sobs, and pain at every breath. "Help me!" he wailed in desperation. "Help me!!!"

But nobody did.

The green blinded him as he fell to his knees.

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Hojo watched as Strife continued to strike the glass surrounding him, smiling smugly with the knowledge that no amount of strength could break it. He stepped up closer to the container, leaving Nygel wincing by the console. Passing the guards, he reached the platform and leaned near the cylinder as Strife fell to his knees. His eyes were bulging from his head, his face hideously red, as he struggled not to breathe. Hojo smiled again. How he writhed against the needs of his own body. Sad, indeed.

"Don't fight it, Mr. Strife," he said, loud enough for the prisoner inside to hear him. He put a hand on the container, watching as the young man coughed, collapsing utterly. "Take deep breaths.... That's it. Good."

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The fight was becoming too strenuous.

Cloud gasped weakly, staring blindly through the green mist. He could vaguely make out a form watching outside, somebody... Coughing, he reached out towards the form. "Help me," he whispered. Please, God, I can't breathe...

"Don't fight it, Mr. Strife."

Hojo.

Even in the pain and mist in his mind, Cloud recognized the voice. In utter defeat, he dropped his arm, not having the strength to reach any longer. He coughed violently, feeling the poison take hold of him, wrapping his body in its death shrouds, enveloping him and claiming him as its own. His world was collapsing around him. He was on a boat on a green sea, threatening to capsize and fling him into the depthless hell. He couldn't breathe. There was nothing to breathe but poison. He couldn't let himself breathe poison.

"Take deep breaths..."

Cloud sagged, his oxygen-deprived body too weak to fight nature any more. How could he go on? Air, so sweet and soft... it was all sickeningly twisted with the cold touch of evil. How could he fight? He couldn't.

He inhaled deeply, struggling to fill his lungs with something.

The boat tipped.

The poison filled him, blinding, burning.

And the pain came.

"That's it. Good."

Cloud moaned in the haze. His world faded to green. The pain came swiftly and without remorse. He had no will to scream. His defeat was complete. He sank into the green hell.

And drowned.

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Once Strife passed out, the infusion went well. Hojo watched the specimen take deep breaths of the Mako air, observing his chest rise and fall with the rhythm inhaling and exhaling. He smiled in satisfaction at remembrance of the fight and his subsequent victory. Then he leaned up, pushed up his glasses, and walked back to Nygel. "Leave him in there for a few hours," he ordered one of his peon assistants who had been cleaning up the mess Strife had made during his entrance. "Once he's through, take him back to his cell."

The assistant only gave a weak nod, watching wide-eyed as Hojo picked up his clipboard and made his way to the door. Nygel followed briskly giving the container one last look.

Once out in the hallway, he walked alongside his superior. "Gave quite a fight, didn't he, sir?" he remarked.

Hojo shrugged, scribbling a few notes on his clipboard. "They all do, Nygel. He'll be easier next time. They always are." He was making obvious references to the SOLDIER experiments he had headed up in the last years since the beginning of the Jenova Project. "We'll do this every other day with the injection procedure at the end of the week. It should be moderate enough to prevent poisoning."

"Yes, sir," Nygel said. A moment of silence passed between them as they reached Hojo's office. He pushed open the doors and walked to his desk. Rather unceremoniously, he tossed his clipboard upon his desk and flung himself into his chair. Immediately the feet were upon his desk. Hojo closed his eyes and leaned back his head. "Sir, what about Garek?"

He lazily opened one eye. "What about him?"

"Sir, we can't keep him cooped up like an animal for years," Nygel said plainly.

"Why not? It's what he is."

"Sir..."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Nygel!"

Nygel sighed. "I just think we'd have better cooperation from him if we give him a little freedom. Let him out every once and a while," he offered.

Hojo leaned forward, setting his feet upon the carpeted floor where they belonged. "I told you not to have sympathy on them," he said, the arrogant tone in his voice more prominent than ever. "Didn't I tell you? Now you're feeling sorry for poor Zack Gark and Cloud Strife."

"Not feeling sorry," Nygel amended with a stiff upper lip, "simply thinking of the welfare of the project, sir. He's seen nothing but the inside of that cell for a week. It would be good to let him out once and awhile, let him get some exercise. If nothing else it will waste energy that would have otherwise been spent on devising plans of escape."

Hojo obviously had some quick retort, but he stifled it, leaving his mouth hanging open. He closed it and narrowed his eyes, analyzing Nygel. "As much as I hate to admit it, you may be right. I can see the logic in that." He rubbed his chin. "Once the pattern sets in, we'll see about it. Not until then. Not until they both realize they're helpless and their lives are in our hands. They have to earn every freedom we give them."

Nygel beamed at his small victory. "Understood, sir," he said, barely controlling the excitement in his voice.

Hojo rolled his eyes. "Now," he said, picking up his clipboard, "onto far more important matters. This here is the list of the doctors I've requested to join the Jenova Project."

"Doctors you've..." Nygel trailed off in shock. Hojo requesting help? Never before had this happened. They had tackled the project thus far without assistance. What made Hojo think now that they could not? Nygel was simultaneously angered and curious. "Why?"

Hojo sighed. "Not that I doubt my talents nor yours, my dear friend. I just believe we might need, what say, underlings. Gofers. Do you want to be the one in charge of every one of Strife's Mako treatments? We've projected he will be ready for the Black Materia infusion in four years. That's three times a week for fifty-two weeks. One hundred fifty-six treatments per year. Times four years. Six hundred twenty-four treatments. You want to be present for every one of those?"

Nygel hadn't thought about that. He was aghast at how much time this project would require. "N-no, sir," he stammered.

Hojo smiled. "Neither do I. So I've compiled a list of all the doctors I've worked with in the past. We'll need about five, I think. Five competent ones." He handed the clipboard to Nygel. "I'll let you choose."

Nygel scanned down the list and couldn't help but smirk, despite the relative foul mood it placed him in. The list was near thirty names, but most had already been crossed off by Hojo. He read the names of those who had been lucky enough to make the cut. There were six left. Four had already been circled. Two remained. Thanks, Hojo. I'm so happy my opinions mean so much to you. Instead of cursing the bastard off, he looked at the two remaining choices. Dr. Oleana Mantissa and Frederick Lastima. He had never heard of them. Still, even if it was luck of the draw, he was going to use this limited power bestowed upon him and pick. He circled Mantissa's name with a pen he pulled from his lapel and handed the clipboard back to Hojo.

Hojo received it and leaned back in his chair, rubbing his chin once again. "Ah, Dr. Mantissa. A lovely young woman. Even though I only worked with her briefly before she was transferred to Dr. Weston, she still had remarkable... talents."

Nygel cocked an eyebrow but did not even bother to delve into the personal affairs of Hojo. "I noticed you included his name, sir. Do you think it wise to choose him?"

Hojo stared at him intensely. "Have a personal objection to the man, Nygel?"

He did. Well, in truth, it wasn't really personal. Nygel had never spoken a word to him, had never seen him on more than a handful of trifle occasions. But he knew the history of Dr. Airen Weston well, as well as any other well-versed scientist. The man was incredibly talented. He had graduated top of his class with honors all around and was considered one of Shinra's greatest. But he was incredibly power hungry, even more so than Hojo himself. And like Hojo, he would use whatever means necessary to achieve that power. He had to be in control of every aspect of his life, or he was highly volatile and dangerous. Two men such as that working together on the same project? To the best of Nygel's knowledge, they had never directly assisted each other on the same experiment. They had always been one ahead of the other, first Hojo, then Weston. It was highly ironic that when Hojo had taken over the Jenova Project and left the SOLDIER experiments, he had chosen Nygel over Weston to be his protégé, his right-hand man. And Weston had been left in control of the SOLDIER experiments, which, consequently of Hojo's leaving, lost its flare and importance and became dwarfed by the Jenova Project. To this day, Weston still felt sore about it. Had he had all that ambition slashed, Nygel would have been bitter, too. Despite all of the crap Hojo put him through, he was still proud that he had been selected over the garish Weston. An abused honor was better than no honor at all.

Still, he said none of this, keeping his tongue in check as usual. All he stated was, "I have no problem with it, sir. I'm just wondering how well he has gotten over his rejection."

Hojo couldn't help but smile. "Worried he'll steal your glory?" Nygel's ears burned red. "Don't worry; he'll be under you in the grand scheme of things. Besides, I do not intend on creating an operative here. When the time comes, they will receive nothing from this. The power will be ours. Only we will reap the fruits of our venture."

Despite the sick undertones and the complete selfishness in the reassurance, Nygel felt oddly consoled. Still, he had a bad feeling that he could not shake. A dark cloud of foreboding fell over his heart. From that moment forth, he dreaded the instance in which the cloud would burst and rain terror upon his Promised Land.

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The days grew to weeks and the weeks to months. Life slowly settled into a very concrete and predictable pattern. In some ways it lent stability to an otherwise shaky and capricious situation. In others, it only served to antagonize and depress those locked within its striking monotony and infinite repetition.

Hojo couldn't be more pleased.

Everything was going completely according to plan. Approximately two weeks after the initial infusion process, the Jenova Project was completely set up and operating smoothly. The team of five doctors beneath Nygel and he worked relatively well together, considering that most scientists tended to be loners and prefer solitude. A work schedule was determined and carried out nicely. There was little arguing, no disruption, complete ease. Hojo liked it when things went smoothly and without incident. It brought a peace to his life and a sense of contentment when he knew things were in his control. So naturally, his carefully planned and masterfully carried out schedule allowed him to relax and let things go on their own.

For Zack and Cloud, it couldn't be more the opposite.

Their entire existence became hinged upon the treatment schedule. Every other day, Cloud was taken in the morning from their cell after they ate and was marched to the lab area. Every other morning he was subjected to the Mako gas for three hours. After being checked by the doctor, he would be returned to Zack around noon. Sadly enough, all the young man could do after the treatment was vomit his breakfast back up and collapse wearily into bed. Zack would care for him without any questions asked, partly out of grief, partly out of guilt, mostly out of duty. Cloud usually regained his health later in the evening, in time for the doctor to return and run a quick physical. They ate dinner, which usually consisted of bland and unfilling food. There was little conversation. Night would have provided a solace from the constant boredom of

the day that was punctuated by brief moments of action if not for the heavy silence and the pain of their thoughts. Zack stared into the dark, feeling his spirits sink as easily into it as did his vision. He felt cut off from Cloud. He felt as if a complete stranger were sleeping on the other side of the room, somebody he could recall meeting before but could not latch onto a name or personality. His friend was being ripped from him piece by piece. The more he tried to hold on, the less he found remained. Cloud treated him very often like he did not exist, or if he did, he held no meaning. Zack couldn't be angry about it; what choice did Cloud have in the matter anyway? It hurt all the same. The loneliness was amplified greatly. Cloud was there, but he wasn't. Zack might as well have been alone.

On the off days, things were far better. Cloud often managed to haul himself from the Mako pit he was drowning in and rejoin the world of the living. The first few weeks after the beginning, they were kept locked in the cell on the off days, their solitude only broken by feeding times and the morning and nightly visits of the doctor. It was a relief and respite, a time to relax a little and be left to themselves. Cloud and he would talk then about anything, their favorite movies, music, their homes.... Anything except their present predicament. Zack still desperately wanted to know what had been done to him. It might as well have been a wall between them. Any mention of Nibelheim, of Hojo, of the Jenova Project caused Cloud to wrap himself in a protective cloak of indifferent secrecy. Zack opted more to not speak about it than to lose Cloud's companionship, despite how much he wanted to know.

A change had come over Zack as well as time rolled on. Escape seemed less and less important. Well, perhaps not less important, but less feasible. He began to abandon his stubborn position, as Hojo had predicted, and simply let things happen without a fuss or struggle. Cloud was taken every other morning. After the third or fourth time, Zack gave up the fight. There was nothing he could do. He had bowed down to the fact that he was helpless to prevent it. It didn't mean at all that he had lost hope of escape for, he knew that if he let such a thing occur, they were truly beaten. He had utterly realized that as long as things adhered to this air-tight, indomitable pattern Hojo had devised, they could not escape. When he was not guarded by men, he was by his morals. Hojo knew this. When Cloud was taken, Zack was very rarely guarded. The door was left unlocked. But Zack remained in his cell, never once setting a foot outside. It was pointless to even try. He wouldn't let himself leave without Cloud. It was as if the bastard had left him such a clean escape route to tantalize him; he had promised Cloud he would never abandon him. He wasn't about to go back on that promise.

But he hadn't lost hope. He was never going to lose hope. He had sworn to it. Losing hope meant giving in, giving up. He wasn't willing to do that. They simply had to bide their time, to wait until the moment was right. It was the only option. As things became more routine, people begin to get comfortable, lazy, careless. When that happened, and it would happen, then he would strike, like a snake lying in wait in the grass. Then they would make their move and get away. Until then, he simply had to wait. He wanted Hojo to think he was whipped, beaten, depressed and giving into the harsh cruelties of his life. He wanted Hojo to think he had lost hope. That way, when he made his move, it would be unexpected and they would be totally unprepared. That was the way he saw things. That was how it would happen.

If only he could survive the wait.

As time continued to plod, things began to turn to their advantage a little. With Hojo grumbling all the while, they were let out into the arboretum which was conveniently placed on that floor. Zack was amazed at the size of it and its beauty, despite the fact it was a pen to keep them locked in. Plants of every variety, shape, and color filled the huge, glass room. The air was saturated with a mixture of aromas pleasing to the nose, some sweet, some pungently strong. It was moist, warm, the surroundings of such consistency that it clung to the skin, heavy and tight, leaving a residue of water. The sight of the sun, of green plants, the feel of air that had not been recycled and cleaned was so warming and inviting that often their brief periods of recess on the off days became the milestone of their week. They were kept under constant guard, both human and mechanical with soldiers stationed through the paths of the arboretum and security cameras hidden within the dense foliage watching their every move. They didn't care much; for the both of them, it was a much needed escape, a chance to burn off some energy, a chance to run and exercise, a chance to forget everything for a couple hours. They almost acted like two children, playing around and chasing each other, climbing trees, laying in the grass. It was the only freedom they had and they both lived it up to its fullest. Using branches, Zack taught Cloud how to fight. He passed on the moves he had learned from his father to his friend, teaching him when to advance, what cuts would inflict the most damage, what would do the least, and when to retreat. He showed Cloud how to gauge up an enemy, how to predict his strengths and weaknesses, how to foresee moves and counteract accordingly. He finally taught Cloud how to spin his sword, as he had learned from his father so long ago. The sword play brought them closer than anything else they did. It seemed to be a bridge to could both cross and meet the other half way. It was a great escape.

As the days wore on, they also began to see less and less of Hojo and his assistant. Replacing them were a whole slew of doctors, the most prominent of which was Dr. Weston. He most often handled the weekday treatments. He was a young man, well, younger than Hojo anyway. His face was etched and fair, thin lips always pulled into a tight frown. His gray eyes seemed to constantly be taut with weariness, bunches of skin collected about them. He never smiled. He was a larger man, bigger than Hojo and far stockier. He never spoke to them other than to give an order or to insult. Neither Zack nor Cloud could stand him. Even though they hardly knew him, they could see the dangerous aura glimmering about in those cold, gloomy eyes. He was not a man to be trusted.

Dr. Ferris was a different matter entirely. He was a coward of a man, with shifty green eyes hidden behind thick spectacles. He was tiny, standing well beneath both their heights and incredibly thin. He had a large nose and a cleft in his chin that seemed to divide his face as a river divides a canyon. His brown hair fell about his shoulders in such a chaotic manner that it was almost painful to look at. Zack could not keep track of the times he almost whipped out a comb and tackled the man, forcing him to comb the rat's nest atop his head. He was the kind of scientist that lived in his lab. He was also the type that would be the first to bail if trouble arose. His loyalties belonged only to science and to himself. And any sort of discomfort might as well have been a knife in his side. A hypocritical hypochondriac.

The third of the five other doctors was a quiet man. His name was Lankski. He was the coldest of all of them. Not that he was harsh or cruel to them. Far from it. He never laid an unnecessary finger on either of them. He was never insulting or degrading. He was, however, a zombie. He never had any emotion at all. He had no fire, no anger, no love, no... nothing. He seemed to be just a machine, doing what he must without any qualms or complaints. He seemed hollow, lifeless, indifferent. His blue eyes would look at you, and you would look back, but you would see no soul. In a way, that scared Zack and Cloud more than Hojo or Weston. Somebody so apathetic and so chilled would not care what he did to another. Somebody with no conscience would feel no remorse about hurt.

The other two doctors were women. They could not be the more opposite. One, Dr. Hennessy, was a pretty, young scientist with chocolate brown hair always wrapped into a bun and large green eyes. Her figure was trim and her skin was fair. She was quiet and mouse-like, meek and gentle. Of all the doctors, she was the only one who was nice to them. She went out of her way to save them as much pain as possible. She replaced the doctor that had been examining Cloud. She was the only one who smiled, genuinely smiled, with friendliness, compassion, and warmth. She was the only one who seemed human.

And then there was Dr. Mantissa. She was truly a piece of work. She seemed to have one thing on the brain and it was not the Jenova Project. If Hojo could have a female counterpart, it was indeed she. She treated the two young men as meat. Zack hated her more than any of the other doctors. The way she leered at them, watched every move they made... It ran shivers up and down Zack's spine just thinking about it. He couldn't help but wonder if Hojo had brought her aboard his little experiment for her talents as a scientist or for her looks, which were quite pleasing. If she didn't seem like such a slut, she would almost be pleasant. Almost.

That was the team in charge of the project. Seven doctors striving to create the Destroyer. And they were quite a team. One would expect such a hodge-podge grouping of conflicting ideals and personalities would create a volatile situation. On the contrary, they seemed to work well together. That bothered Zack. Internal problems weakening the command structure would have created the perfect hole for he and Cloud slip through. By some sick twist of the fates, Hojo had managed to choose a group of scientists got along. At least, they appeared to. In front of Zack and Cloud anyway.

Time continued to pass, and Mako treatment after Mako treatment was completed. Everything went according to plan. Before anybody realized what happened, a year had gone by.

~*~

Hojo leaned back in his chair and sipped his coffee. All eyes were on him as he tossed his clipboard to the red, oaken surface of the conference table with a clatter. "Well," he said as he braced his elbows on the surface, setting his steaming cup down upon its spotless surface. "Everything seems to be going well. I don't even know why we bother to have these weekly get-togethers. All you do is tell me what I already know, that it's all fine. Waste of time."

"I agree," Weston muttered.

"But you have to admit it's reassuring to know we're in control," Dr. Ferris declared, twiddling his thumbs almost nervously. Mantissa huffed smugly. "And why wouldn't we be? There's nothing they can do." She shot a supercilious look to Ferris and glared at him, completely satisfied with herself.

Nygel rolled his eyes. He absolutely hated working with these people, and he only endured it for the sake of science. They were so childish. They wasted valuable time trying to best each other like children in front of a watching father. They should be concentrating on more important matters. Like finding the Destroyer's other half. "Sir, if I may bring this topic up." All eyes around the table turned to him. Nygel swallowed hard. He hated being the center of attention. "We should begin to consider how to go about acquiring the materia, sir."

Hojo's eyes narrowed in thought. Could it be that he, in all his genius, in all his omnipotence, had forgotten the three materia, the White, the Holy, and the Black? Without all three, according to the Ancients, the Destroyer was incomplete. Having one or two of the materia was not enough. All three were required. And since they knew where none were, finding them would make the Mako infusion seem easy. Gast had in his hands the Black Materia before his unfortunate demise. Since then, it had gone missing. The other two materia were more myth than fact. The Black Materia was the only one proved to exist. In all their research, they had never found any sort of evidence about the White or Holy. All of the world was open, and the world was a huge place.

"It is an... issue," Hojo muttered, and then he sipped his coffee once again, the tendrils rising into the air before dissolving before their eyes.

"To say the least," rumbled Weston. "Perhaps you ought to have considered this before."

Hojo's eyes grew colder than ice. "Perhaps you ought not judge my judgment, Dr. Weston. I'm in charge, need I remind you?"

You would remind us even if there were no need, Nygel mused in disgust. "Sir, the fact of the matter is, we should begin the search now, long before Strife is ready. We'll have plenty of time."

"I agree with Dr. Huiji, sir," remarked Ferris, still twiddling. "We should speak with Tseng and have him put the Turks on the search. They'll get results."

Mantissa shook her head disdainfully. "They wouldn't even know where to look."

"And I suppose you have a better idea?"

She smirked. "Compared to you, any thought in my head is a better idea."

"Enough!" Hojo hollered, slamming his fist down upon the table with a bang that shook his cup of coffee. It was so silent the whoosh of the air vents was all that could be heard. He glared them down, fuming. "For now," he said through clenched teeth, staring at each in turn, "the Turks will have to do. We must deal with one thing at a time. Our first priority is to prepare Strife. We'll figure out what to do with the materia later."

Of course, Nygel mused as Hojo adjourned the meeting and stood, why do today what you can put off until tomorrow? Why are you such a fool, Hojo? Don't you see that by neglecting to find the materia now we threaten the future? Don't you see that we're widening the gap the narrow bridge that we walk upon spans? Don't you know that every moment we waste is one more Garek and Strife have at their fingertips? Nygel shook his head to his thoughts as he rose from his chair. Oh, I forgot. Animals can't think. Apparently humans can't either. With one last shake of his head, Nygel headed off to his lab.

~*~

The door opened again. It did every morning. By no will of Zack or Cloud could it be stopped. It had, in fact, become a way to gauge the time. The door opened; the day began.

They were both glad that the first face they saw every morning was Dr. Hennessy.

She smiled as she stepped through the door with light feet and shut it behind her. Her blue eyes lit up with gentle cheer. "Good morning," she said. Her voice was soft and melodic. It reminded Zack somewhat of Aeris. "How are you feeling this morning, Cloud?"

Cloud, as he always opted to do on treatment days, didn't answer. He stared darkly at the floor, his eyes narrowed. Dr. Hennessy's smile faded somewhat at his cold response. It was understandable that Cloud was never in a good mood on the treatment days. He had a right not to be.

She stepped forward and crouched before him, her white coat lapping at her heels. "Are you alright, Cloud?" she asked, laying a hand across his forehead.

"I'm fine," he muttered.

Zack stood behind her, his arms folded across his chest. "He's okay. Just tired," he supplied readily.

A pair of angry blue eyes shot up and locked onto his. The ferocity in them frightened Zack, danger and tangible warning visible in the brightly shining blue orbs of Mako. "Don't make excuses; you know that's not why. Why are you always making excuses?!" Cloud snapped viciously. The contempt in his voice couldn't be smothered by a thousand kisses.

Dr. Hennessy looked up at Zack with sadness in her eyes and a silent plea to be patient. Cloud's mood swings seem to become more violent as time continued and Mako in his blood intensified. Dr. Hennessy smiled sweetly. "Are you tired, Cloud?"

Cloud shoved her back and stood up. Rage was in his face. "Damnitalltohell! I'm not tired! Stop treating me like a damn child! I'm seventeen years old! I can take care of myself!" His breath hissed through clenched teeth, his hands balled into fists so tight his knuckles were white.

Zack winced at the anger in his friend's voice. "Easy, Cloud," he said with a soft, unthreatening note in his voice. Tentatively, he placed a hand on Cloud's shoulder. His eyes suddenly locked on Cloud's, and he stared into the depthless light. Even after a year, he still found the sight unnerving. Cloud's eyes, burning with their own energy, Mako the pulse of his existence... He forced himself to hold his ground though the gaze burned a hole in his heart.

For some reason, that tense moment seemed to calm Cloud. The fire left his eyes, leaving a shell of hurt, a hollow look, and a well of tears. Cloud's breath rushed from him in a choked sob as he collapsed back onto his bed. He buried his face in his hands. "I'm sorry," he said softly.

Dr. Hennessy glanced at Zack briefly before pulling Cloud into a firm hug. "Hey, it's okay. No harm done."

Cloud wrapped his arms around her like she was a life-line. It didn't seem to matter then that she was one of them, one of the people that were hurting him. He was crying into a caring shoulder. "I'm so tired of this," he sobbed softly.

"Shh," Dr. Hennessy said softly, comfortingly, into his ear. She stroked the back of his head gently, like a mother. "It's going to be alright. This'll all be over soon. Then you can go home." Zack flinched; she didn't notice.

She held him until he calmed down, Zack standing uncomfortably on their side. Cloud's sobs died to sniffles and he pulled away from her. He wiped away his tears with the back of his hand. Eyes red from crying and from mental exhaustion stared

up at Zack. "I'm sorry," he said again and bowed his head in shame.

Zack laid a comforting, forgiving hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry about it."

Dr. Hennessy put her hands on Cloud's knees and smiled at him. "Now, come on. Let me have a look at you and then we'll get you guys some breakfast. I'll be really quick. I promise." She grinned again. Cloud conceded finally and let her take his pulse and do the routine medical examination. It was the same every morning. His heart rate was high but it now always was a little faster than normal. Aside from that, no physical abnormalities. No fever or discomforts.

She smiled as she put her stethoscope away. "All done," declared Dr. Hennessy cheerily. Cloud rubbed his brow with his hand.

Zack ran a hand through his hair, sending the black locks into complete disarray. "What day of the week is it?" he asked with a yawn. Time was beginning to run together. In the earlier year he had taken great pains to remember the date and day, remembering birthdays and holidays. It was a way to pass the time, to give a relation to his life inside this hell and what it had been outside. Now, he found he didn't care any longer.

"Wednesday," she remarked as she stood. She stuffed her hands into her lab coat and put her weight onto her left leg. "I'd be careful. Dr. Weston's in a sour mood this morning. Something about his wife, I think."

Zack didn't give a damn about Dr. Weston or his wife. What did worry him was that any dour attitudes and anger at outside forces would be directed at Cloud and him and he did not want to be the punching bag that Weston let out on. As he saw less and less of Hojo and more and more of Weston, he began to hate Hojo at a distant and Weston up close. In a lot of ways, his hate was the only thing keeping him going.

Cloud scrubbed at his eyes vigorously. "Is it raining outside?" he asked, quite out of the blue.

Dr. Hennessy was quite taken aback. "Yes," she stammered, looking at him strangely. "It has been raining horrifically all week. How did you know?"

Cloud sighed, his shoulders sagging. He looked up at the two of them. "I dunno. I thought I could hear the rain hitting the building, you know, that popping noise you hear when the drops hit the roof." He leaned back, his shoulders softly striking the gray wall behind him, and he looked up to the ceiling wistfully. "I miss the rain."

Zack closed his eyes. The words brought about a deep sense of nostalgia. He missed the rain, too. He missed the sun, the wind, the heat. He missed the snow, and he hated snow. He missed the feel of a cool breeze striking your skin, softly caressing, whipping your hair about gently. He longed for the warm, cozy feeling sunbathing gave you, wrapping you in a soft blanket and sending you blissfully into a perpetual state between sleep and consciousness. He missed the smell of flowers and spring, that fresh scent the land acquires after a summer thundershower. He missed the sunrise and sunset. He missed being outside.

"Damn it," he muttered as he opened his eyes, every pore and sense in his body crying for the things it craved that were denied. "Dr. Hennessy, do you think that Hojo would let us out?"

She suddenly seemed very hesitant. "Out? Zack, you go out to the arboretum--"

"No, I mean outside of this building. Out into the city. Do you think he would?" There was no mistaking the plaintive note in his voice and the yearning look in Cloud's eyes. They both stared at the young woman so intensely that she averted her eyes and turned away.

She stammered, "I – I don't know. I'd have to ask. Maybe." The sound of her voice was far from hopeful. It was obvious that she was trying to find a way to say "no" without it sounding so negative and final. The implication of her words was not lost on either Zack or Cloud. The hope immediately fell from their eyes and was wiped from their souls. Zack could not be angry

with her, though. He could never be angry with her. She was the only one who cared about them. And it must be difficult for her. He would not hold it against her.

There was a knock at the door. "Come in," Dr. Hennessy said loudly so as to be heard through the thick steel. The door opened quickly and in walked the guards carrying their breakfast.

And then it happened.

Abruptly, startling them all the to core, the lights went out. Even though it was morning, there were no windows. The cell was deep in the interior of the Shinra building. No light from the outside reached it. All of its occupants were plunged into pitch black.

The building lurched and rumbled. Zack yelped as he felt the floor being ripped from under him as it quaked. Dizziness and nausea assaulted him as he fell to his knees. His lungs clamped up so tight, he could hardly breathe. His heart was thundering in his throat. For a moment, he felt like he was tumbling through space, falling into a black abyss. For a moment, he couldn't think, too shocked and stricken. It seemed to be an endless moment as he flailed in the darkness. Then, his mind came back to him and he snapped back into reality.

He had dreamed this time would come. He had played the scenario out in his mind a hundred times over while lying in bed at night, what he would do, how he would act... Now the time had come, and there was not a moment to lose.

This was their chance.

He would not let it pass.

Neither would Cloud, it seemed, for the young man grabbed onto Zack's arm and pulled him to his feet. Zack felt himself being yanked forward by Cloud, the other's fingernails digging into his flesh. They pushed through the black to the door; they both knew where it was from the dark of the night, memorizing its exact location so as to be ready if their prayers were ever answered. They raced through the open portal, smashing into the guards that were standing in it and sending their trays of food flying into the abyss and their bodies tumbling to the floor. They burst out into the hall.

The lights suddenly flared to life, filling the corridor with blood red hues. Emergency lights. An alarm wailed, its klaxon filling the halls with its shrill cry, signaling distress. Something had happened. Zack and Cloud didn't care as they stood there, glancing down the hall to the left and to the right. To the right were the labs. To the left was their freedom.

They only shared a glance as they began to sprint down the hall to the left in search of the elevators that had to be there somewhere. They forced all the speed they could into the run, their legs pumping, hearts thundering. Blinking lights filled the hall eerily, the alarm blaring in their ears as they rounded a corner sharply. They knew not where to go. They just had to keep running. The stampede of approaching soldiers, of their boots rhythmically striking the floor, filled their ears. They were being chased.

They came to another corner. Zack grabbed Cloud's arm and yanked him to the wall, pressing their bodies close against the cold, steel surface. A squad of soldiers ran by them, clanking and making more noise than a herd of elephants. Their guns were fully loaded. Thankfully, the shadows hid Zack and Cloud, obscurely hiding their forms. The squad ran by without incident.

Zack let out a heavy breath that he hadn't realized he was holding. Cloud doubled over, his hands on his knees, struggling to regain his breathing and slow his pounding heart. "Where are we?" he gasped.

Zack darted along the wall a bit down the hall to see down the next corner. He bit his lip when all he saw was more endless corridor, this one no better marked than the last. Damn it, why can't Shinra have "you-are-here" maps in their buildings? He skidded back to Cloud and then stopped, freezing his body and tensing every muscle. He could hear soldiers in the distant. He strained his ears and then sighed again when he realized the sound was growing fainter. They were moving

away. He jogged to the other end of the hall and looked down that corner. "Damn it!" he said under his breath. Another unmarked hall. He kicked the wall viciously. "Place is a damn maze!"

Cloud coughed and Zack came back and stood beside him. "We can't stay here," he remarked softly. Zack narrowed his eyes, darting his gaze up and down the corridor, straining to hear the slightest sound. "Those other halls probably lead back to the lab. We'll just be ba-"

He clamped his hand over Cloud's mouth and hissed, "Quiet! Do you hear that?" They both remained completely still, barely breathing, fighting to hear over their pounding hearts. But it was true. Somebody was coming. From the sound of the footfalls, a lot of somebodies were coming.

Zack removed his hand from his friend's mouth and whispered, "It sounds like it's coming from the left!" Their decision had been made for them by the rapidly approaching soldiers; they would go right. Zack hauled Cloud forward by his arm and pulled him down the short expanse of hall to the right corner. The soldiers were nearly upon them.

They rounded the corner, Zack in front, Cloud right behind him.

And came face to face with the business end of a machine gun.

"Good call," Cloud whispered, his face ashen, as he stared at the squadron of at least twenty soldiers bearing down on them from the other hall. Zack grabbed Cloud and shoved him back down in the opposite direction, ignoring the soldier's order to stop. They both skidded to the floor as the man opened fire on them, the bullets racing forward. The explosions of metal striking metal filled the air, accompanied by sparks and heat. Zack scrambled to his feet, yanking Cloud with him, as the array of bullets flew at them. By some fate, none struck home, all embedding themselves into the wall and floor with a fury of ricocheting metal.

"Run!!" Zack screamed as he pulled Cloud to his feet. They both of them tore down the hall to the other end.

Only to be met with another squad of soldiers.

Cloud cursed as he tripped and fell in surprise. Two of the men grabbed him from behind. "Cloud!" Zack screamed as he turned around to see his friend being restrained by the soldiers.

"You're dead," one of the new Shinra soldiers said, his voice gruff and snarling. Zack looked up just as the man opened fire upon him.

"Zack, no!!"

The blood of the hallway died to night.

~*~

The bombing had put Hojo in a considerably foul mood. Even the day after, long after the perpetrators had been caught and killed, he was grumbling and snapping at things and people left and right. His temper was not something to be taken lightly, as many of his assistants soon learned. After one day of Hojo flaring at everything and everybody, all inside the lab gave him a wide berth.

Nygel would have liked to be one of them but really had no choice in the matter. As Hojo's first assistant, as his right hand man, he was obligated to be with him nearly all the time. Whenever he needed something, whenever he wanted something, it was Nygel's duty to get it. Some people called it unfair. Nygel called it life.

Hojo slammed his clipboard down on the table with a bang that startled all the occupants within the conference room. Nygel winced inwardly as its edge left an unsightly blemish in the once flawless oak surface. Hojo rubbed his eyes tiredly

and sighed. "Damn, damn, damn," he muttered. "Oh, the folly of revolution."

Ferris cocked an eyebrow in confusion. "Sir, Shinra will never fall to AVALANCHE, no matter how many half-cocked bombings they attempt," he declared firmly.

Hojo looked at him, clearly unimpressed and irritated. "That is the folly of revolution, you idiot. The proletarians always rise against the state despite the odds. It's like a persistent mosquito. No matter how often you swat at it, it always seems to come back." He shook his head in disgust. Nygel swallowed the bile he found rising in the back of his throat. Since when have you given a damn about politics, Hojo? Since when has it mattered? Hojo pushed his glasses higher on his nose. "It seems to me, now, that we must tighten the leash on our pets."

Nygel looked at Hojo in shock. "What do you mean, sir?" he found himself asking, even though, deep down inside, he knew the answer.

Mantissa looked at Nygel tiredly, as she did with just about everybody except for Hojo. "He means we have to keep Garek and Strife locked up and under control, you idiot," she snapped icily. Her green eyes narrowed as she stared him down. Nygel felt his anger boil through his veins. Damn slut! Why did the fates have to be so cruel in allowing me of all people to pick your name from the list for this project?

Bright anger flashed in Dr. Hennessy's eyes, even though her face was meek and placid. "Sir, don't you think that's a little unfair?" she asked, leaning forward in her chair. She ignored the angry looks shot at her from about the table, especially the dangerous glare that sliced into her back from Mantissa.

"What I think is unfair is how close this project came to ending abruptly yesterday because our charges were underestimated and allowed to escape!" Hojo bellowed in rage, standing and slamming his hands upon the table in a brief moment. Fire gleamed in his eyes, white hot anger, directed at Hennessy's quivering face. She winced away, tears filling her eyes. The unspoken accusation was clear in Hojo's gaze. He blamed her for letting Garek and Strife attempt to escape. In his eyes, it was her fault.

There was a tense moment of silence, Hojo looming over Hennessy with murder in his eyes. Then Weston said calmly, "It doesn't matter now whose fault it was or why it happened." It was obvious he had picked up on what had been left unsaid. "The question is now: what is to be done about it?" Calm and cold.

Nygel took this opportunity to speak up, simultaneously glad and sorry that Hojo had turned his aggression on somebody else. "In my opinion, we should return to the schedule."

"As if nothing happened?" Ferris asked incredulously.

Nygel caught Lankski's raised eyebrow from beside him and suppressed a shudder. The man was like a drone and it took something massively important to get a response from him. He pushed on, though, pushing his unnerved feelings to the back of his mind. "There was no harm done except to Garek himself. Nobody was killed. They didn't even make it off of this floor." Nygel looked intently at Hojo. "It was bound to happen some time, sir. Better now than later." Nygel shook his head. "They would have been crazy to pass up a chance like that. It was to be expected, sir, looking back on it now."

There was a moment as they all considered what Nygel had said. There was truth to his words. It was logical. Strife and Garek, no matter how depressed and crushed they might have seemed, would not have let that golden chance of escape go. They had seen the opportunity. The AVALANCHE bombing had simply provided the distraction they had been waiting for, the distraction that Hojo had planned so meticulously in preventing. As much as he liked to believe, though, he was not God. He couldn't control everything.

"I think punishing them would be a mistake, sir," Nygel went on after the silence had taken its toll. "Garek's already in enough pain. And a couple more weeks of the treatment and Strife won't be functional enough to do anything. Revolt is a cycle, sir. Hurting them will only entice them to rise against us again."

"We need to punish them," Weston grumbled, a violent tinge in his eyes that sent sharp shivers up Nygel's back. "Garek's a smug, little wise-ass. We don't hurt them for attempting this, it'll only brand the thought into his brain that he can do whatever he likes without threat of consequence." He glanced around the table. "We should be hard, swift, and show no mercy."

"Oh, please," Ferris remarked, shaking his head. Weston turned his hard glare upon him and immediately crushed any bravado the man might have had.

Nygel was determined not to be intimidated. "Inflicting a harsh punishment will only make a tense situation worse. No harm was done. Let it go."

Hojo's face had softened somewhat in thought, not compassion, over the situation. He slowly sat again and rubbed his chin. "As much as I don't like the idea that we are soft before our specimens, provoking them into escape again has just about as much appeal to me. Whatever else he is, Garek is clever and tenacious. And he is determined to protect himself and Strife no matter what." Hojo tapped his front teeth with his forefinger nail as he paused. "As long as we keep a tight hold on Strife, Garek will be forced by his own conscience to concede. He has no choice."

"So you won't punish them?" The wistful note was not missed in Hennessy's voice.

Hojo looked at her sharply. "Why? Why do I have this feeling that you are... in league with the specimens, Dr. Hennessy?"

She flushed with fear and embarrassment. It was understandable. If there was one thing Hojo could not tolerate, it was compassion for his victims. "N-no, sir," she stammered. She averted her eyes. Nygel shook his head in pity.

"Good. Make sure you don't become... too close. Science rests upon objectivity; objectivity rests upon indifference," Hojo declared as if he was a great philosopher. It's not indifference, Nygel thought darkly. It's pleasure, and you know it. You do things, horrible things, simply because you have the power, and you feel no remorse. Not a single tear clouded your eye when you ripped Strife apart. You laughed. You should have cried. I should have cried. Nygel felt a cold burst wash over him when he realized what was happening. It was happening, wasn't it? As time wore on and on, Strife's pain seemed to affect him less. He no longer winced and cringed inside as the young man laid writhing upon the examination table as the Mako was being pumped into him. He no longer was moved by the screams. He no longer felt any of Strife's pain. Seeing the young man suffer had become part of his weekly routine. He was... acclimated. Hell, he was cold. Nygel closed his eyes against his thought and drew a deep breath. No. Not cold. Harder, he rationalized. What was one to do in his position? He was simply stronger, adapted, less susceptible to the pain he had caused. Rationalization was the only thing he could do. He did not enjoy Strife hurting. He simply didn't feel for him any longer.

"Well," Hojo said, taking a deep breath. "Let's make sure this never happens again. How's Mr. Garek doing anyway, Dr. Hennessy?"

The young woman still seemed frazzled. She took a few deep breaths to regain her composure before steeling herself to speak. "He still has not regained consciousness, sir. Not for a few days more."

Hojo nodded. He turned to Weston. "I want to up Strife's Mako exposure today. Put it up to twenty percent diluted." The other man nodded.

Ferris squinted and shook his head. "Sir, do you think that's wise? Strife is beginning to show more extensive memory deterioration." Ferris was the resident psychiatrist. His only purpose on the project was to examine Strife every week before his Mako injection to determine their charge's mental state. In Nygel's opinion, it was a useless job.

"I realize that, Dr. Ferris. However, I believe he can handle it. It will only speed up the inevitable total shutdown of memory functions, true?"

Ferris looked tongue-tied for a moment at Hojo's insistence. "Yes, sir," he stammered.

"Good." Hojo turned to Weston. "Airen, can you handle that?"

Weston was obviously struggling with a sharp, biting comment by the flash of anger in his eyes and the barely perceptible grinding of his jaw. "Yes."

Hojo nodded. "Dismissed." Everybody stood at once and began to vacate the room. "Oh, Airen," he said, grabbing Weston's arm. His eyes softened to a state to which Nygel was rarely privy. "I'm sorry about your wife." Weston bowed his head. "It's a great tragedy."

Weston's eyes narrowed and he stared blankly at the table's glossy surface as the rest of the group left the room for their own offices. "Life is a tragedy," he said darkly. He met Hojo's gaze. For a moment, Nygel could have sworn Hojo tightened his jaw and tensed his muscles in intimidation, maybe even in fear, at the anger in Weston's cold, belligerent gaze. Then the moment passed.

"That it is," Hojo muttered, patting Weston on the shoulder. He turned away and grumbled vilely. "That it is." Then he stalked from the room.

Nygel didn't understand it, but something had happened. He had seen Weston and Hojo slowly and subtly combat each other for nearly a year. They were quarreling, pushing each other's buttons as gently as they could, testing each other. It was always little things; going behind each other's backs to change orders, fighting for control over a trivial matter. A power struggle of the worse kind, and it was getting worse. It was as though a bomb was ticking beneath the Jenova Project. He couldn't help but wonder when it would explode.

~*~

Pain. Oh, God, it hurt. Make it stop.

So this is what it feels like to die.

The blackness enveloped him in its infinite, chilling folds. Somehow, though, trapped within the never-ending obscure black, he was oddly comforted. Despite the pain he felt, he would have rather remained in the abyss than chance escaping it. Sweet serenity. Peace. Death.

A light poked through the blackness, puncturing his sanctity.

"Zack?"

Damn. I'm not dead. Somehow, the thought did not provide much comfort or relief.

A light poked through, and continued to widen, slicing the comfort dark in two with its invading brightness. It spread out, eating the black like a hungry mouth stuffing itself, until there was no more.

Zack opened his eyes slowly and saw the source of the blinding light was a glaring overhead lamp. He squinted, moaned as a sharp pain assaulted his skull, and tried to block the wracking illumination with his forearm.

"Oh, I'm sorry," a soft voice said. There was a rustling, and then the light dimmed to far more tolerable levels. Afterimages plagued Zack's eyes for a few moments and he shut them until the pounding anvil in his head settled to a dull thud. When he was sure the pain was tolerable and his nausea was under control, he opened his eyes again.

Dr. Hennessy stood overhead. She smiled weakly at him, her eyes alive with relief. "I thought you'd never wake up," she admitted sheepishly, blushing.

The events that had led to this situation replayed themselves in Zack's mind in the space of a second. He sat up in abrupt shock quickly and cried out when searing pain sliced up and down his left leg. The sharp agony clenched his hip and muscles, sending spasmodic waves of hurt up his chest, clenching his lungs and lurching his stomach. "Easy, easy!" cried Dr. Hennessy. She gently helped him lay back down upon the bed he had been sleeping on.

Zack struggled to breathe for a few moments, his teeth clenched and muscle taut with pain. Then, the hot agony passed, leaving only a dull ache over all his body. He sucked in breath after breath of lovely, sweet oxygen and closed his eyes. The relief of it threatened to send him back to the depths of unconsciousness, but he fought against it and stayed awake.

Dr. Hennessy wiped the sweat from his brow. Zack opened his eyes again, still gasping somewhat. "Where... where am I?" She smiled again. "In the infirmary." She stroked the black hair from his brow. "You were shot, remember?"

It was coming back to him, albeit slowly and obscurely. The flight from the soldiers, the hall, Cloud... "Where's Cloud?!"

"He's alright," she said firmly, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Just relax. He wasn't hurt except for a few bruises. He's just fine." Her soft assurances seemed to ease his worries, despite the fact Hojo could have told her to lie and was doing who knew what to Cloud. For some reason, he knew he could trust her.

She gently touched his leg. The outer skin had gone numb, but the bone felt splintered and broken, pulsing with a sharp sting. "You were lucky," she said plainly. "The bullet missed the bone and the Femoral Artery. It was clean, through and through."

Zack reached up and rubbed his face, trying to clear the cobwebs from his brain. "How long have I been out?" he asked from beneath his hand.

"Four days."

"Four days?!"

Dr. Hennessy finished examining the wound and gently padded down the bandage. "You needed the rest," she said quickly, even a little harshly. "I didn't want to chance infection or fever."

"But Cloud-"

"Cloud is fine," she said gently, the heat gone from her voice replaced by her heart. "He hasn't been hurt. I've seen to it." She turned away for a moment, putting something on her tray of tools. Zack rubbed his chin, feeling about... four days of stubble lining his jaw. He leaned up on his elbows. "I convinced Dr. Hojo not to punish you," she said, her back still to him. "I managed to do it this time, but next time I won't be so successful. You have to promise me you won't try that again, Zack."

He stared at her strangely with eyes narrowed in question. "Why does it matter to you, anyway?" His voice was icy. "You're one of them. What do you care?"

Her voice was meek. "I care." Zack bowed his head in shame, wishing he could take back his words. She turned to look at him again. "I don't like what Hojo is doing to you and to Cloud. It isn't right, the way he's kidnapped you from the world and held you captive like animals. It's horrible."

A silent moment passed. Zack watched her keenly though she averted her eyes. "Why do you help him then?" he asked gently, mostly out of curiosity, partly out of concern.

She looked up from the floor and her green eyes locked on his. "I have no choice. Do you know what it means in the scientific world to say that you work for Dr. Hojo?"

Zack felt the ice claim him again as he said spitefully, "It always comes back to power, huh."

"No!" she shouted, exasperated. She stepped forward and shook her head, some of her hair falling loose from her bun and down the side of her cherubic face. "It's not like that. If Sephiroth had told you to do something, would you have done it?" Zack opened his mouth to declare the negative, but before he could get out the word, she stopped him. "Before he went mad." Zack was about to announce his original answer, but then slowly closed his mouth. She was right. If Sephiroth had told him to fight something, to kill some monster, he would have done it, no questions asked. It was the chain of command and the basis of any organization. If it failed, there was no organization. You followed orders, period.

Zack swung his legs over the side of the bed and winced at the pain. Dr. Hennessy grabbed his arm to steady him. He looked up at her as the hot hurt faded. "What's your first name?"

She looked at him strangely for a moment, and then answered softly, "Joanna."

"Help us escape, Joanna," Zack declared resolutely. She immediately tore her gaze from his again. "You don't belong here. You know that. You... you're not like them." She sighed deeply and shook her head as if denying his words. Zack took her hand into his. "Cloud and I are getting out of here. I can't let them keep pouring Mako into him. It'll destroy him."

"I know."

Zack shook his head when she remained silent, her eyes closed. "Please, Joanna. We need your help. If you won't do it for me or for yourself, do it for Cloud. You see what it's doing to him. Pretty soon there won't be a Cloud. He'll be just Mako."

She opened her eyes finally and stared deeply into his. There were tears collecting about them. "I'm sorry," she whispered. There was silence for a moment. Zack stared into her eyes, breathing heavily. He was trying to be mad at her. He was trying hard to hate. Hate made him strong. But he couldn't make himself furious. He couldn't make himself hate her. He let out a long sigh. "Alright, then." He squeezed her hand. "We'll do it without you."

"Oh, please, Zack. Don't try. It'll only get you hurt." She pleaded with all her heart. There was a plaintive look in her green eyes, a look that vaguely reminded him of Aeris... He didn't know why. Aeris had never pleaded with him not to leave. She hadn't even shed a tear. "The more time passes, the harder Hojo will hold onto Cloud. He won't let you escape, not after all the time, money, and work that has gone into the Jenova Project."

He brushed away her fear. "I have to try, Joanna."

"Then leave Cloud." He looked at her harshly, with violent anger swimming in intimidating green eyes. She held her ground. "It sounds cold, but hear me out. Escape on your own and come back for Cloud. If you can get in touch with AVALANCHE--"

"AVALANCHE?" Zack's anger was sliced by confusion for a moment.

It dawned on her then; he hadn't been outside in more than a year. He had heard nothing of the rise of a revolt against Shinra. He hadn't heard about AVALANCHE or the terrorist bombings. He hadn't been privy to the news. "The group that bombed this building when you got shot. They hate the Shinra for all their worth. They'll help you, Zack. Get out of here and come back with help. I can take care of Cloud--"

Zack turned away, gritting his teeth. "No."

"Don't you trust me?" she asked, somewhat hurt.

He looked at her again, holding her hand tight in his. "It's not that. It's..." He sighed tiredly. "I promised Cloud I wouldn't leave him if he were ever in trouble. I can't go down on my promise."

"Cloud's in a different world half the time, Zack. A few more months of this treatment and he probably won't even remember you," she argued.

Zack winced. "I can't do it," he said firmly through clenched teeth. "I won't let myself abandon him. I'm his friend, the only one he has left. He won't trust you, Joanna." He shook his head before she could even get another word out. "No. I won't leave here without him."

There was a silent moment. He rubbed her slender fingers with his, looking up into her eyes. The melancholy seemed too thick to be cut. Finally, she blushed. The gesture was almost out of place in the forlorn stillness. "I suppose you have some girl at home waiting for you," she said sheepishly.

Aeris. "Yes," he said, almost dejectedly. "I do." He shook his head and dropped her hand. His mind drifted back to when he had left for SOLDIER, when he and Aeris had said goodbye. "But we didn't part on the best of terms. I doubt she'll wait for me."

Joanna turned away. "Do you love her?" she asked softly.

"I thought I did," he answered just as quietly. His eyes clouded in thought, regret, and remembrance, thinking back to the moment when they left each other. Why do you have to do this, Zack? I need this, Aeris. Then go, then. Leave me. Aeris... Go!! "I don't know anymore. Being apart from her so long has made me think... about a lot of things." Zack shook his head darkly. "I don't think she loves me."

"Will you go to her after this?"

"I don't know. Everything's different."

Silence. Zack slid off the examination bed, putting no weight on his bad leg. Still, the pain sent him falling to his knees with a yelp and a gasp. Dr. Hennessy turned around faster than Zack could notice and grabbed him, easing him down to the floor. Zack sat there gasping for breath for a moment, blinking the tears and stars from his eyes.

"You can't push it," she said softly, her face mere inches from his. "You'll be weak on... on that leg for a few..."

Zack wasn't listening. The world closed in on him and only she remained. All he could register were her lips, lush and red, and her exquisite eyes. All he could think about was how close she was and how he hadn't felt the soft skin of a woman, smelled the intoxicating soft scent of a female, in over a year....

He leaned forward and kissed her.

~*~

Shortly thereafter, Zack was returned to Cloud. There was no more talk of the bombing or the escape attempt. They were not punished. It was as if the entire incident had disappeared, had been erased from all the minds of those involved. It was as though it had never happened. Everything, with amazing rapidity and stunning precision, returned to the age-old schedule.

Zack clenched his fists in frustration and anger as he limped back and forth in the cell. Pain flowered up and down his left thigh, shaking his bones, with every step. Joanna hadn't been lying when she had told him the leg would be sore for a few weeks. His relentless pacing wasn't helping any either. She had told him to take it easy, not to push it, to lay off his injury for a few days. The fact he was so sore and stiff only added to his foul mood. He collapsed wearily on his bed, wincing at the sharp sting in his leg, and pounded the bed beneath him violently.

"Damn it," he grunted, laying his face in his hands. His anger fired over and he let out a shout of fury. "God damnit!"

How could this have happened? How? Zack shook his head as he drew in hissing breaths through clenched teeth. It wasn't fair. In truth, the fact that their escape attempt had failed didn't really bother Zack. He had expected a bout of depression and grief to overcome him, to overwhelm him. He had waited for it. After all, they had come so close to ending this hell, to escaping this prison. But he didn't feel whipped, licked, or beaten. The infallible, crushing sense of despondency and despair had not infected him like a disease. Instead, all he could feel was anger. Anger because their blow against Hojo and his cronies had meant nothing. Zack almost wished that Hojo had punished Cloud and him because at least that would have been some sort of response, not this cold neglect and disregard which their captor was displaying now. As much as he didn't want to admit it, this was becoming all an elaborate game. He wanted to escape to save himself and to save Cloud, but he also wanted to spite Hojo. He wanted to strike back for all of Hojo's condescending looks, for all of Hojo's sharp and insulting words, for all of Hojo's damn irritating quirks and smirks... "Damn it. It's not fair!"

Zack fell back against his bed. When Joanna appeared at their cell door this morning, when she smiled at him with genuine affection and without feigned happiness, he knew things were back to normal. She had convinced Hojo to let them alone. For that he was grateful. She no doubt faced his wrath to protect them. She no doubt saved their lives.

Joanna.

He smiled despite the horror of their never-ending torture. She was something... special. Different from Aeris. Different from all the girls he had ever known. He had never met some one so willing to sacrifice herself to help others, to lend a helping hand when all her peers were against it. He once thought Aeris was as compassionate and selfless. Something had happened during his captivity. He didn't know if his mind was becoming clouded or if he was thinking clearer than ever. All he knew was that he didn't feel the same way about Aeris and was doubting everything they had. It was all different. Joanna brought light to his life where Aeris only supplied bitterness and regret. After that first kiss, Joanna had maintained a stiff control and upper lip. However, he caught a playful look from her once or twice when the guards were not paying dutiful attention. It was something not meant to be. She worked for the enemy and her allegiance was clearly divided. Their relationship was all wrong, borne of desperation and circumstance. All wrong, and he knew it. He didn't care. It was something to keep him alive, to keep the humanity in him alive. It was the only light in a dark sea of suffering.

God, when would this end?

He wanted to escape. He wanted to kill Hojo and wring the life from his bent body. He wanted to stab Weston and gut Ferris and shoot Lankski and mutilate Nygel. He wanted Mantissa and all her hormones to explode and never find peace. He wanted to ask Joanna to marry him and kiss her as though there were no tomorrow. He wanted to shield and protect Cloud and suck all of the poisoning Mako from his body and leave him as though he had never been touched. That was what he wanted.

And none of it could he do.

The utter frustration was what was killing him the most, he knew. Everyday he had the opportunity to jump upon Hojo and beat the crap from him. Everyday his chance passed. But he never did. It was hopeless. The more he tried to fight, the tighter they leashed Cloud. And he could never leave Cloud. He promised to stay with him and he would not go down on his word. That was about the only thing he had left that made him feel useful and human. He would not abandon Cloud, no matter what happened.

He had promised.

The door opened and shut before he could even look up. Cloud had been tossed back into his cell. He had obviously gone through his treatment for the day. Zack only glanced up.

It was enough to show him something was horribly wrong.

"Cloud, sweet mother," he gasped, rising quickly from the bed and stumbling toward the crumpled form before the door.

The body before him bore little resemblance to Cloud. Blood was all over him; he was covered in the red gore from head to

toe. His gray sweater was ripped and in some areas soaked with blood. Bruises and abrasions marred his flesh, blood running down his face. One eye was swollen shut. Blood ran down his chin from a split lip. His face was red and distended.

Zack fell to his knees beside him, shock running through him in a great petrifying wave. "Cloud," he said, grabbing his friend's shoulder as the other struggled to look up. Blood mixed with saliva dripping from Cloud's mouth. Zack winced. "Jesus. What happened to you?"

Cloud only moaned and passed out, his eyes rolling back into his head. Zack prodded at his prone body for a few moments, shaking his shoulders and calling his name, trying to rouse him. He was out cold. Zack leaned back onto his ankles, cradling Cloud's limp body in his arms, not caring about the blood, which smeared upon his clean clothes. It was pretty clear to him what had happened as he held his friend's bleeding form.

"Hojo!" Zack screamed in rage, tipping his head back and squeezing his eyes shut. "Damn you, Hojo! Damn you to hell!!!" How could he have let this happen? How could Hojo have done this? What kind of friend was he, anyway? Cloud's life was being ripped to shreds, and all he could do was stand by and watch. He was in no way, shape, or form keeping his promise. He was playing a game with Hojo, a violent game of war, with Cloud's life at stake. What right did he have to bet his friend's life in this physical and emotional combat? What right... Zack squeezed his eyes shut against hot tears of shame. "Damn you, Hojo," he whispered. "And damn myself."

Gently, he slid his arm under Cloud's knees and the other around his slim shoulders. He lifted his fallen friend with the care of a mother to his bed, managing to rip the blanket back from its dressed position with the rip of soft cloth. He carefully laid Cloud upon the bed. Bending back, he looked at the blood upon his hands. His hands, stained with the blood of the one he had vowed to protect. The hot tears threatened again.

No. He would not fall apart now. Cloud needed him.

He wiped his hands against his shirt and went to work. Cloud was bleeding badly from a multitude of wounds, slashes, cuts, and bruises. It was painful to look at. Cloud's breath rattled from him in a short wheeze. Zack delicately, with a permanent grimace painted upon his face, began to remove Cloud's loose fitting sweater. Even though Cloud was unresponsive, he was afraid that he might knock into a wound and hurt him. Finally, he worked the annoyingly tight neck of the sweater free from Cloud's face.

The skin that now became exposed was a mass of blood and bruise. Cuts and abrasions covered it, the red welts signaling internal hemorrhaging ruptured wounds. A large, inflamed purple bruise fanned out against his lower left chest as if somebody had squashed a plum against his skin. Zack winced as he leaned closer to examine the wound, the welt deep and seeping blood. Gently, he fingered about it, pressing lightly against Cloud's ribs. His father had always warned him about rib injuries. They could be fatally dangerous if not attended to properly. And they were deceiving. The surface wound could be the same for simple bruised ribs as for broken ribs. And badly shattered bones could puncture the lung. Not only does that have profound effects on breathing, but the lung could fill with fluid. One could drown in one's own blood. As he gingerly prodded the injury with light fingers, he hoped that it was not so serious. He became glad Cloud was unconscious right then; such an examination as he was performing was often times extremely painful. Rib injuries hurt a lot, and rightly so.

Thankfully, none of Cloud's ribs appeared to be broken. Zack heaved a heavy sigh of relief. The rest of Cloud injuries seemed to be varying in seriousness. Some were bleeding profoundly. They would have to be treated by somebody with experience. In the mean time, Zack could at least stop the bleeding and tend to the wounds. He could at least do that. He went to work with silent prayer and silent anger using the sheet from his bed to stop the bleeding and water from the sink in the bathroom. He hoped to God Cloud was not hurt worse than he could see. He was no doctor, after all. Who was he to judge the seriousness of his condition? He wouldn't let himself think about that. He would just keep Cloud alive. Joanna would come soon. She would know what to do.

Joanna would come, and everything would be all right.

They stood before Hojo in a rigid line, at attention, like a line of cadets before a drill instructor. Each was rim-rod straight, feet tight together, hands in fists at their sides, eyes staring ahead. Every muscle in their bodies was tense with anticipation, and though their eyes stared at nothing, they heard and felt everything with rapt and taut attention.

The first was the oldest of the group, bearing a crusty mustache that in years past might have been attractive. Weary lips were in a constant frown beneath the salty whiskers. His face was etched and worn, settling into clear lines and wrinkles brought about by age. The tanned face was always tired-looking, tired of taking orders, of giving them, tired of life generally but unwilling to quit and give up. Tired of routine. Dark gray, haunted eyes peered out from beneath bushy eyebrows. There was an arrogance about this old soldier. An arrogance borne from many days in his profession. He did not take lightly to being pushed around and delegated to menial tasks by those younger “idiots” and “damn fools” that had flown to higher ranks earlier than he. The chain of command had disintegrated into formality about him. He may follow orders out of decorum, but for no reason other than that. By his right, he was the leader of the whole damn Shinra army. By his right, he had earned it.

The next to his right was a quintessential young cavalier guard, branded with dreams of battle heroism and glorious fame. Bright blue eyes danced nearly all day with excitement and tense anticipation. He was the kind of green soldier that loved war and the thought of battle gave him more of a thrill than a date with a hot chick. He was the kind of soldier who had never seen a battle, who had never been a soldier. He had never seen the bloody gore of a long skirmish with the enemy. He had never smelled the rotting flesh after the vultures finished circling on a particularly hot day of fighting. He had never heard the cries of pain and anguish from those who lay bleeding on the field. Never tasted sweet victory nor tart defeat. He wasn't a soldier. He could play dress up as much as he wanted, but he wasn't a soldier... not yet, anyway. Those eyes would unlikely shine as bright or danced as merrily after a war was over and done.

The third soldier was a lonely man, quiet and reserved with contemplative, cold brown eyes. His face was long, his cheeks sallow and thin. Atop his head was a crop of hair that had seen fuller, more colorful days. His chin, even when clean shaven, was always darkened with the hint of stubble. His was all limbs, a right awkward crane of a man, the kind that marveled others with the incredible coordination that was seemingly required to perform the everyday motor functions. He was not the normal guard, did not have the build or gall. In this day and age, anybody could be whatever he wanted, supposedly. Not to say that aspiring to be a guard was a faulty career. For this man, though, it was a settlement. He could not be a doctor; he hadn't had the stomach. He could not be a lawyer; he hadn't had the brains. He could not have been much in Shinra, since, as much as the huge corporation tried to deny it, many of its positions were won by association. If not any of that glamour, a guard it might as well be. He did his job well, without any energy or love for it, but well nonetheless. He lived a lonely life without wife or children, without friends or foe. He was paid weekly. To him, that was all his job was good for. He retained no satisfaction from his thankless work. He could be cleaning toilets, as long as he was paid well and on time. The monotony of his life was surprisingly the only thing that gave him companionship.

The fourth guard all the way on the right was an idealist. His green eyes flickered with inner worth and vitality, something of which one does not see a lot. He was not young or old, but was at the point in his life when he wanted to make a difference. He wanted to make an impact, and to him, it was now or never. He was the kind that believed no matter what job one held, it was important in the great scheme of things. He was a soldier with a mission: to save the world. And if doing his job well was the way by which to accomplish this task, then so be it. He was quite stockier and shorter, he, too, not having the regulation build of a soldier. It didn't matter much; as long as he could do his job well, his superiors didn't care. And he tried to do his job well, no matter how bad things got or how disgruntled the others were. It was his ambition in life to do right by himself, by others, and by God. And by God, he would.

He was the most particularly shaken by the events that had brought the four of them there. And when Hojo stalked past him, he could barely keep his knees from shaking.

“Why?” Hojo asked, his voice surprisingly without menace. He scanned all of them. “What warranted this assault? It better have been a good reason.”

The first guard answered readily in a voice that seemed to declare this whole line of questioning a waste of time, “He attacked Dr. Weston, sir.”

"That was reason to detain him, not kick the crap out of him!" Hojo shouted in anger. He stopped pacing and tugged on his hair as if each pull was helping him control his anger.

"Sir, Dr. Weston gave us an order to do it," the second soldier claimed.

"You what?!" Hojo ripped around with a heaving chest and blind fury in his eyes.

Nygel winced and took a step back; he very rarely saw Hojo so murderously angry as he was right then. He didn't want to chance any of that fire being vented upon him.

Weston stood almost nonchalantly at the other end of Hojo's office, arms folded across his chest. He didn't even look up from the fingernail he was picking at when he answered, "He attacked me. Broke away from the guards and came after me like a madman."

Hojo fumed visibly. "So you should have restrained him. He is too important to this project to be used as a punching bag!"

"He needed to be punished!" Weston shot back, meeting Hojo's violent gaze for the first time with a glare just as deadly. "I don't want to appear before their eyes as weak or soft. He struggled against us. He was punished." He took a step forward and shook an accusing finger at Hojo. "I told you that letting their escape attempt go unheeded was a mistake."

The silent threat laced in his voice caused Hojo to actually retreat somewhat, taking a small step back. Then his gaze hardened once again and the shock left his expression. It darkened with all the wraith of the devil. "I would like to remind you, Dr. Weston, who is in charge of this project. I gave a strict order that Mr. Strife was not to be touched. Mr. Garek was not to be punished without my consent and discretion. You have gone above my orders and done what I have asked you not to do behind my back. For that, I should kill you. If Mr. Strife were to die because of his injuries, all of our efforts would be wasted."

Weston didn't even flinch. "You know Strife won't die."

Hojo began to pace before him. "It's the principle of the thing. You disobeyed a direct order from me. That alone, in my opinion, is an offense punishable by death. We cannot afford to have a breach in the chain of command in this project. Order and control is too important!" Hojo walked about, preaching like a politician. "We cannot appear to be disorganized before Garek and Strife. We cannot appear weak and disloyal to each other. We must be firm. If not, we will have no strength to control them."

Nygel shook his head at Hojo in complete disgust. Who did he think he was? God? If it were anything less, Nygel would have been disappointed. He wants our allegiance to control us. The control over Garek and Strife was never in dispute. He doesn't care about Strife. All he cares about is maintaining his perfect little Empire over all of us. What a sick man you are, Hojo. You would be the type to start a war simply for the sake of fighting.

Hojo stood in silence a few moments, breathing heavily as he fell from his furious high. Then he rubbed his chin and finally let his hands slap against his thighs in utter defeat. "I cannot kill you, Airen. As much as I don't want to admit it, I need you." He turned back to the line of guards. "But somebody must be punished. Somebody must take responsibility for this act." All four soldiers stared at him, all four knowing what he meant. "Did it ever occur to you four that my orders outrank Dr. Weston's?"

None of them answered. Then the youngest spoke up with, "No, sir. We were unaware of your previous order."

"That is no excuse!" In one swift motion, he reached forward and wrenched the gun from the holster of the young soldier. Throwing all decorum out the door, he stumbled back. Hojo sneered at him. "Pathetic. You'll never be a soldier, boy, unless you can learn to hold your ground." Hojo pulled back from him and began to pace back and forth in front of them. The gun was nestled in his hands. "Who dealt the first blow?"

There was silence. Hojo suddenly stopped and jabbed the gun in the face of the third soldier. "Who dealt the first blow?!" he screamed, shaking the gun at point blank range.

More angry than anything, the old soldier yelled vehemently and proudly, "I did, sir!"

Hojo turned the gun to him and fired one quick shot. The bullet shot forward and left a nice hole in the soldier's left hand. Blood poured from the wound, dripping onto the floor with a splatter. The soldier howled in pain and cupped his hand into other, falling to his knees. A wound like that was permanent; he'd never regain the use of that hand.

Hojo stepped up to the young soldier, uncaring, undisturbed by the soldier's crying. "And I supposed you kicked him, jabbing your foot into his gut."

The soldier's lower lip was quivering, but he refused to break down before Hojo. "Yes, sir!" he cried, his voice gruff with barely contained sobs and emotion.

The gun went off again. The soldier fell backwards with a scream as blood splurged from his right foot. The bullet had passed completely through his limb before embedding itself into the metal floor beneath him with a sharp clang.

Hojo stepped up to the next man, glaring him down despite the fact the soldier towered over him by a good foot. "And what did you do to him, huh? I suppose you dug your knee into his back. Those long legs are good for something, aren't they?" The man didn't answer, shaking. "Aren't they?!"

"Yes, sir!" The shot echoed the room, coupled with a scream, as Hojo shot his kneecaps, both of them. He fell backward, blood staining his pants already. He would never walk again. Is this fair treatment for lack of energy in life?

Finally, he reached the last soldier. The man was sobbing, quivering in fear. He looked like he needed a change of underwear. "Oh, be a man, man," Hojo said, disgusted by the guard's look. "You do something wrong, you pay for it. Did you hold him down so he couldn't fight?"

Salty tears rolled into his checks. "Y-yes, sir. But then he was down, and-and he couldn't get up! I backed off then! I swear to God I never hit him, sir!" he cried in desperation.

Hojo shook his head in pity. "Pathetic. Don't you know that the man who stands by and watches without helping the victim is worse than those who did the crime? You never hit him with your fists, feet, or knees, but you hit him with your heart, or whatever you call that black hole in the middle of your chest." Hojo leveled the gun over the man's sternum; he whimpered, nearly hyperventilating. "I'll make another black hole in your chest. This is your punishment, my friend." And he shot him.

The man's face was locked in a gasp of surprise as the bullet ripped through flesh, bone, muscle, and heart, and exited his back. He didn't even draw another breath, death instantaneous. A stiff body fell backward and hit the floor below with a dull thud. Blood pooled beneath him, his green eyes forever open but no longer seeing. So much for idealism.

Hojo looked at his handy work and smiled. He dropped the gun to the floor and wiped his hands on his lab coat. Little spots of blood and flesh dotted his white clothes. He glanced back at Nygel's ashen face and then at Weston's cold one. "Eye for an eye." Then he stalked from the room.

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"He'll be alright," Joanna declared, closing her bag full of supplies and replacing her stethoscope around her neck. She drew the sheet back up over Cloud's bandaged chest and gently tucked his sleeping form in it. She closed her eyes and wiped the sweat from her brow. "Is it hot in here?"

Zack didn't answer, staring moodily at Cloud's still bruised face. "I don't get it," he said in clear confusion and frustration. "Are you telling me that Cloud can regenerate himself? What the hell is that?!"

Joanna shook her head, her long brown hair shaking in the gesture. "Not so much regeneration as a stronger cellular structure. Mako does infuse a body with the power of the Planet. It is highly intensified Lifestream. It fortifies the body's natural defenses. It's nearly impossible for somebody as infused with Mako as Cloud is to bleed to death. The body will generate more blood cells faster."

Zack nodded in his understanding. It had been quite a surprise when he had awoken from a nap brought on by exhaustion to find Cloud's wounds close to being healed without any sort of attention other than a meager dressing of hot water and cloth. His breathing was far better, the struggled wheeze replaced by an easier inhale and exhale. Some of the bleeding gashes had closed, the tattered ends of the flesh stitching themselves back together. Many of the wounds had disappeared all together, leaving no trace of their existence, as if they had never been there. Not even a scar. Cloud had healed himself from a state from which it would have taken weeks to climb. It had been dumbfounding.

Things began to make more sense. Even though he himself had been exposed to Mako, he had never until now truly understood why. He had always thought Mako just enhanced the body, creating strength where they had been none, bringing agility to the clumsy man. He had no idea it was a self-remedy. "So that's why they infuse SOLDIERS with Mako," he mused silently.

Joanna nodded as she rose from her crouch and came to sit beside Zack. "Mako is the answer to war time medicine. It won't grow back arms or legs, but it can often give the body enough of a push to sustain until a doctor can treat it properly. I've never seen it heal wounds like that before, though. From what you described, Cloud was very badly injured."

Zack nodded grimly. "He was. Joanna, I thought..."

"It wasn't your fault, Zack," she assured him, entwining her fingers through his and squeezing them reassuringly. "There was nothing you could have done."

He didn't have the strength or courage to argue with her. He was so very tired of fighting. "It's all Hojo's sick little game," he declared darkly, closing his eyes and leaning against her shoulder. "He knows that I want so very badly to get back at him. To get revenge for all the pain he's caused me and Cloud and you... hell, for the all the pain he's caused the world. He knows how badly I want to get out of here. And he also knows that I can't leave Cloud. The only way I can get out of here is to leave Cloud. And I can't; I promised him I wouldn't." She gently brushed the hair from his forehead. Zack sighed and opened his eyes. "He's turning Cloud into a monster and I can't do a damn thing."

Joanna smiled softly at him. "You care," she said delicately, stroking his cheek. "That's enough." Zack collapsed tiredly into her embrace. She kissed his forehead and rubbed his back compassionately. "You care and I care. That's enough to give him hope."

Zack sighed and allowed his body to sink into her soft skin and gentle touch. Her soft, floral scent filled his nostrils. The tension left his body, fleeing with every slow breath he drew. His anger and fear and pain... all of it seemed to disappear with her closeness. The very presence of her eased his mind and soul, filling the void and easing the vice about his humanity. She completed him. He wrapped his arms tightly about her, never wanting to let go. She fulfilled his needs, the empty holes created by hours of solitude, guilt, and pain. She was the only thing keeping him going.

And then, she, too, wanted to leave.

"Zack," she whispered softly into his ear, stroking his hair. He could feel her muscles tighten with anticipation and her breathing quicken; she had to get up and go. She had to walk back to her lab and emerge herself again in the outside world. "I have to go. I have to get back. Hojo will-"

"Please stay," he said back just as softly, a wistful note in his voice. There were a million reasons he could have voiced to her: he loved her, he wanted to marry her, he wanted to talk to her, he needed her, he wanted to make love to her... He

could form no more words, too tired to give an excuse, too weary to have a reason. He just didn't want to be alone. He hugged her tighter and pleaded, "Please don't leave."

She looked down at him, at his closed eyes and tired face. His imprisonment had added years to his complexion, the skin forever tightened about his eyes. He was so beautiful to her just then. How could Hojo keep a creature so beautiful caged for so long? She held back tears. Nothing in the world could give her the strength to leave him just then, to leave his strong, warm arms, to back away from his desperate and exhausted body. The world could go to hell right then. She didn't care; Zack needed her. Hojo could wait.

She kissed his forehead and rocked his body gently, humming softly to herself. The slow rise and fall of his chest against her began to make her drowsy. He was asleep in no time, cradled in her arms, his head pillowed against her breast. He always had to look out for Cloud, constantly placing his friend's welfare above his own. Who was there to look after him? To care for him? When the depression and weary pain became overwhelming, to whom could he turn? She would be there for him. When he needed it, she would be a shoulder to cry on. It was the right thing to do. It was her purpose her. Not to examine Cloud every morning, noon, and night, but to take care of Zack. Why did this have to be this way?

What forces of fate had cursed her into loving her enemy?

Gently, she edged out from under Zack and laid him down upon his bed. She pulled the blankets out from under him and gently covered his sleeping form. Then she leaned over and kissed his lips gingerly. She rose, grabbed her back, and checked on Cloud one last time. Then she walked to the door. Flipping the lights out and opening the door, she stood in the portal, the lights from the hall outside slicing through the black within the room. She could no longer see him but could somehow feel his presence. Her skin still tingled where he had touched her. "Rest well, Zack," she said softly. Then she closed the door and walked out into the hall. Rest well, my love.