

The Poetry in Blood

by GlassShard

Prologue: Screwing With Destiny

The night was warm and sticky and looking at the sky you would've been able to tell. A quarter moon hung crooked in the corner of heaven, just above the Mansion's western gable; yellow and splotched with brown, it seemed nauseated as it watched the sights below. Grayish clouds wiped sweat from its forehead and the droplets fell to the dirt, a warm rain that smelled strange and soured the air.

To sum it up, 11:35 pm wasn't shaping up to be very pretty.

The Shinra Mansion stuck out of Nibelheim like an abandoned movie prop. The smells of fresh paint and new lumber still permeated the air around the place, blew to the citizens of Nibelheim's noses on the swift mountain breezes from the North. But already the dampness of the town was blackening the boards and giving the building a real gothic feel. Extensive amounts of mako leaking from the tanks in the underground labs increased the growth of the surrounding greenery; vines and creepers were coating the outside walls of the buildings like varnish.

There were dozens of tall windows in the place, glass glaring like eyes from behind the ivy. On the second floor, near the far end of the eastern terrace, behind a scrim of dusty lace, a face was peering out onto Nibelheim's empty streets. Not much to see there... these picturesque light posts lit up cobblestones and brick walls and a dilapidated old well. All of it lifeless of course. The small town's hard workers had to be up early next morning to toil anew. No time to stay up all night and stare at the mansion. No time to wonder just what in the hell had been going on in there for the past seven months.

But that was all that was on Vincent's mind. He wished Jimmy would stop shouting and let him think about it straight for just a while.

"Don't stand there and ignore me!" Jimmy was demanding furiously, "Listen to me! This isn't worth it... d'you fuckin' understand?! This isn't worth losin' six years of your life over. Just leave it be, the situation doesn't like you, it hasn't from the start!"

"So I walk away?" Vincent whispered viciously, shrugging off the warm, friendly hand from his shoulder but not turning around. He was staring outside as if there was nothing more interesting in the world. His Turk friend Jimmy seemed almost hurt at the sting in his voice. "I can't walk away from this and leave her to die... I love her. Don't ya get that?"

"Love her? Try thinking with your brain and not your dick for once--"

"It isn't like that," he protested, staring firmly out onto Nibelheim, upon the same view he'd been hating for months. But he didn't really hate it, not anymore. With very little effort, he could associate those distant Nibel Mountains with evening walks with her, nights spent staring at the moon lighting up faraway crags, pointing out a beautiful sunset to Lucrecia who would act so delighted, as though seeing the sun's descent for the first time. Gorgeous red light reflecting from her hair, her hand in his and their eyes on the view and there wouldn't be anything to think upon but each other, not even thoughts of Hojo or the Turks or Shinra could break that luxurious peace.

He saw that looking out onto empty Nibelheim now. But how could Jimmy ever understand? How could anyone read his heart and know that what he was feeling now was the only real emotion he'd ever known? The only one besides pain? He knew pain so well that it hardly counted as a sensation anymore. This new feeling... complete devotion, it brushed twenty-seven years of pain away all with a glance and a touch. Couldn't he tell Jimmy that? Get his buddy to understand just why he couldn't leave the mansion with him tonight? With a desire that unsettled him, Vincent wished he could gash his rib cage open and reveal his heart, show what was aching and longing and slowly dying there. But all he could say was, "I love her, Jimmy..."

Jimmy shook his head.

"That means nothin'. You're stupid to think it does."

"Great advice coming from a guy whose greatest love is still his mother. Love means something, it has to, I don't care what you think."

"Damn my eyes, but Vincent Valentine's turned into a bag of romantic crap," Jimmy spat in disgust. Romantic he could stand, but romantic, spiteful, and delusional, he could not. "Doesn't make two shits worth of difference though, does it? You love the woman, right? But it don't matter 'cause when you flashed that ring in her face, she said no." Jimmy put his hand on his friend's shoulder again but it was more confrontational than comforting now.

"She said no," Vincent admitted somewhat bitterly, his right hand dropping into his pocket and stroking the warm velvet box still nestled there, "But it was because of Hojo that she did, she won't leave him. He... he won't let her."

"You're deluding yourself, you moron. She's too scared to leave what's safe behind, lose her career, her stability, her entire life, just to run off and have a fling with you."

It sounded so dirty and lowered rolling off Jimmy's tongue. Vincent bristled with disgust towards his friend, hands clenched at his sides.

"So ballsy of you though, flinging that proposal, that ring in her face when she already had her own ring and husband by her side..." Jimmy sounded pissed, hurt, sad. He was an unremarkable young man with a big heart and an obsessive nature. A lot like his friend Vincent only a much clearer thinker with a more realistic outlook on the world. There was no poetry in blood, he couldn't see any. If Vincent intruded in the Shinra Scientists' business over a stupid love affair, he might very well get himself fired. And President Shinra fired Turks in very specific ways: with bullets. There was no poetry in dying over unrequited love. To Jimmy, dying just meant dying. And that was what Vincent was setting himself up for.

"Professor Hojo's a freaking loony," he hissed through the gloom, trying to capture Vincent's eyes and attention. He wriggled his fingers near his forehead for emphasis. "He's so possessive of her he barely lets the chick leave here, you know that. And with that baby she's carryin', that experiment as far along as it is, there's no way in hell you'd both get out of here."

"We can try..."

"And you can die."

"That's absurd, they wouldn't touch me, I'm a Turk. We're Shinra's Turks, the President would come over here and personally slaughter anyone who so much as looked at us wrong." Vincent crossed his arms tight over his chest, gazing off towards a nearby doorway. Through it, a seldom used bedroom lay obscured by darkness, its rear stone wall glistening with the dispersed lantern light of the hall. That wall led to the crux of the whole situation, to the labs, the Library. She was down there. He was down there. And Vincent was just a Turk who could only stand by and hope the two of them wouldn't do anything stupid in his absence. He almost raised a hand out towards that hidden passageway to the labs, remembering this morning when he'd watched Lucrecia's back as she'd retreated downstairs, that cold stone wall slamming shut with a final sounding sort of thud. He'd let her go down there alone, he let her go every fucking morning alone, his disapproval revealing itself through nothing but a pair of narrowed brown eyes and a frown. She was down there even now, in that cold, sterile place with that Jenova monster, with those piddling Shinra science techs, with all of those people unaware that there was an angel in their midst.

But he drew that desirous hand away and stuck it back in his pocket, fingernails clunking against the black velvet box again. "I don't care that she said no..." he whispered softly to himself, forgetting Jimmy was there for a second, "I'd die for her."

"You god damned lunatic, I--!"

"But it doesn't mean I will!"

Vincent shoved his friend out of his way and marched into the bedroom, towards the passage, intentions clear in his face. He was going to go down there and settle this once and for all.

"Vincent--!"

Jimmy locked his hands around his friend's arm, tugging him back into the shadows. "Stop it! It's Professor Hojo!" he hissed, "I hear 'im coming!"

If this fact was supposed to scare Vincent into submission, it didn't work. The anger in his eyes only built with the name. And when that pointy-chinned, four-eyed, greasy-haired freak's face melted out of the darkness of the far hallway and began approaching the two men through the gloom, Jimmy had to grab his friend's right hand to keep it from going to his gun.

"You have the self-control of a two year old," the young Turk reprimanded. And it was true, Vincent could never control his anger, he was too used to harnessing his own fury as a sort of tool, using it to kill when it was necessary. But taking out that anger now was an impossibility. Hojo was just too strong.

Vincent scowled at Jimmy's words but they knocked a little sense back into him. He shoved his rage down and took a deep breath, straightening, running a hand through his cropped black hair. By the time Hojo reached them from the stairs, he looked almost nonchalant.

"Evening, James," the professor called, waving an absent hand in Jimmy's direction. The young Turk nodded curtly, wincing at the low growl he heard roll from Vincent's tongue. The growl became almost a roar as Hojo passed by them both and into the bedroom, never gracing Vincent with a single word. The usual sounds came then; the clunk of gothic gears grinding as the stone passageway leading downwards went through its cycle, finally slamming open with a creak. Footsteps next, and a tuneless hummed song. A wavering sound, they could hear Hojo singing catches of old ballads as he descended the stairs to the Library. Both Turks flinched when the wall closed itself again, leaving them in a stifling, short-lived silence.

"She'll do it..." Vincent muttered, and Jimmy whipped about to stare at him with eyes wide in disbelief, "She'll do it tonight, she has to. We fought last evening about it, fought for hours. And she knows now because I told her. Him or me. Him or me. It's decided tonight and I won't deal with the indecision any longer..."

Jimmy crossed his arms over his chest, tapping his fingers against his elbow. Vincent looked so desperate, sounded so hopeful right now that it nearly broke his heart. He couldn't believe he was able to ask, "But what if she chooses him?" His friend's jaw tensed at the question, teeth grinding behind pursed lips. He whispered his answer, turning back to the window and blankly staring at the mountains again.

"If she is happy, then I don't mind," he muttered to the glass.

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A spiral staircase. They didn't make a lot of sense. Not only did they manage to make you dizzy as hell on the climbs up and down, but poor Professor Hojo was cursed with a fear of heights. So in the journey to the basement from the second floor of the dusty Shinra mansion, Hojo found himself nauseous, dizzy, and unable to take a deep breath for the mold in the air.

Ah... but such was Shinra efficiency. It had looked good on paper, in the blueprints, so they'd gone with it. The gothic, gaudy architecture of the mansion itself had looked good, so they'd went with it. Forget the fact that a modern concrete and steel structure would have been a thousand times more appropriate for use as research facilities. Forget that the mansion's thin wooden walls let in every draft that blew down from the distant Nibel mountains, forget that there weren't even beds enough to accommodate all those on the research team. Ah, trivialities all. Practicalities rather that hadn't meshed with the grand "vision" of President Shinra's architects.

He did like the Shinra mansion an awful lot. On an aesthetic level, it was beautiful. Dark and gothic, full of dusty warm corners and nooks to settle down and read in. It was like a cottage from Hojo's childhood, and put him strangely at ease. Those purple mountains in the distance, each crag was sharp and hooked like crones' fingers, but when the mists of morning hid them, when a brilliant orange sun played off the granite during evening hours, those peaks became beautiful, a natural grandeur that rivaled the mansion's lines. Hojo liked them. Yes, despite the impracticality of the entire ordeal, Hojo was very fond of all of it.

Except for this blasted spiral staircase. However, Hojo suddenly found he barely minded the inconvenience now, he was just too damned pleased with himself. He'd just managed to snub Vincent Valentine, and snub him quite good. With no small amount of glee, he'd caught the fury just now in those eyes despite the shadows they'd tried to hide in. The prick could have his jollies with 'Cecia, there was little Hojo could do about that, but he wouldn't think of the adulterous snake like a human being. He wouldn't address him, please him with common courtesies... it was a lame sort of revenge, but better than nothing. If only...

If only he were more physically inclined... able to kick ass like those Turks. Maybe then he'd have something to say to Valentine. Something juicy. Heh.

But until then, simple snubbing would have to suffice.

The young Professor chuckled bitterly, then put a hand out to steady himself as he climbed downstairs, his spotted black loafers becoming spottier with the renegade mildew and dust that came off the stone with the smallest of breezes. He breathed shallowly, denying his allergies of the mold, his eyes tearing up behind his glasses, his nose tingling until he mashed at it with an impatient right hand. Seven months! This blasted building had been up for only seven months and already it was infected with this filth! The simple look of the place couldn't be completed until it had been coated with the black of time and a fair helping of cobwebs. This just couldn't be the 'Shinra Mansion' until it'd been properly aged. It was poetic. If not practical, it was poetic. And in the long-run, poetry tended to live longer. Hojo could admit to that much.

Poetry. Strange that a man with such a scientific mind should have such an appreciation for poetry. It extended to everything really, and so it should. Vincent and 'Cecia... he could see the poetry there. He could appreciate it, as he did with everything... everything... but these god damned spiral stairs!

His left foot scuffled clumsily on a loose board and Hojo would have flown forward towards a broken neck if he hadn't darted a bony arm out and grabbed at the railing. He gave a little cry and jumped over the last five or so steps, squinting his sensitive eyes at the sudden light streaming from the doorway before him. The soft glow of civilization amidst the poetic jungle of the manse. The Library. The Laboratory. Ah... his element. Where he could leave things like poetically spiraled staircases, romantic entanglements, and looming gothic architecture behind. Inside this refuge from it all was his life's work and his life's love; what was going to make him shine.

"Professor Gast!" he called, trotting down the short, immaculately scrubbed hallway leading to the library. "Sir, I have those papers for you, sir!"

"The Professor's retired for the day. His eyes were bothering him."

Hojo swung himself through the doorway and into the labs, smiling at the sound of his wife's voice, tired as it was, and bitter as he'd been. Lucrecia only looked up briefly at his entrance, her own eyes exhausted and strained behind her delicate glasses. She was scanning lines of notes on a clipboard and adding to the volumes of research with her own tiny penmanship. Hojo's eye lingered on her for a moment, but then the shine of glass and the warm gurgling of chemicals caught his attention. The doctor's enthusiastic smile faded to a frown as he approached the tank holding the Jenova specimen. Behind a scrim of murky chemicals, mako, and formaldehyde, a beautiful face hung suspended, features hard as marble it seemed, as cold and hard as the ice they'd pulled it from. He ran his eyes over the face as he always did and Lucrecia looked up to watch him, something like pain in her expression.

"Were you afraid it wouldn't be here, love?" she asked softly, trying to smile. Hojo flickered his attention her way for a moment and returned the pleasantries, though she could see it was strained. There was never good cheer in the lab. It was as though that thing in the tank pervaded the atmosphere and slayed any chance of happiness among those slaving over her. Lucrecia glared hard at the creature, looking past that ethereal beauty and seeing nothing but the pulsing bluish veins on the bloated skin, the wires jammed through the tissue, the marks of time, the damages from her imprisonment. Lucrecia thought she'd never seen something so ugly. If that Jenova thing truly was an Ancient, thank the gods they'd all died out.

It took some effort as it always did, but Hojo managed to turn his attention away from his specimen and towards his wife, breezing by and quickly brushing her lips with his, lingering for a moment on the smell of her perfume. Amidst all the sterile odors of the labs, that floral fragrance rang out clear and pure. He breathed it in for a while, lost in that one moment, then gave a start and moved towards the bookshelves. "If you're tired, luv, please turn in," he called, a twinge of guilt gnawing his heart, "I'm sure you've earned your paycheck for the day. And it isn't good for the baby or you to strain yourself. If rest furthers positive results, than that's just as important, if not more, than further work."

"I can't argue your logic," Lucrecia answered, her voice washed out to a whisper. Hojo turned with furrowed brows to watch her back and examine the halo of light thrown up by her softly auburn hair. Something cold in her voice, cold behind the weariness and pain. But that had been there a while. And there really wasn't anything to do about it. Still... so beautiful she was, sometimes he forgot. The poetry became lost in the science. He wagered that she and Valentine must look proper together, fitting, beautiful. He and Lucrecia had never managed that themselves. Maybe at first, but not anymore...

Hojo turned away, a strange emotion chewing at him, gnashing fangs against his rib cage, as though trying to affect a hard heart that was already safely locked away. So, so beautiful, he thought suddenly. If the baby looked anything like her, Hojo wondered if he'd be able to repress his conscience enough to carry through with the treatments, the tests, the studies. Better that it look like him. Better that it be a misshapen horror, that it be born a mutant, twisted creature that he could never possibly develop attachments for. Better that way for Lucrecia too.

"How are you feeling today, by the way?" he asked, pulling a thick tome from the bookshelf and beginning to thumb through it. Lucrecia glanced towards him, watching the reflected white of the pages flashing in his glasses. "You rushed out of bed so quickly this morning I didn't get a chance to ask. I wandered around for an hour earlier looking for you. I approached a few of the Turks, the soldiers, the assistants... no one had seen you. Did you go into town for breakfast?"

"I went shopping actually," she answered, getting up from her chair stiffly, laying her work aside. Lucrecia paced the room with slow steps. "I felt the need to indulge myself. And I wanted a bit of time alone. I know soon I'll be cooped up, not a moment of peace. It was nice to have a bit of breathing room for a while. Sorry to worry you, love."

"No, I wasn't worried," Hojo admonished with a dry laugh, "With all the security running around, there's no safer place in the world. I was just wondering, was all. But really, how are you? Any abnormalities?"

Lucrecia laughed herself, moving towards the door. She wouldn't tell him about the blood, about the pains. She was sure it all was normal. "I've never been pregnant before," she said softly, "I wouldn't know."

"Oh, come on now, don't play coy with me," Hojo said with forced cheer, finally glancing up from his book, "But I won't press, or insist we find complications. No news is good news."

"Yes..."

Somehow, she didn't want to tell him. She didn't want to tell Gast or her husband about the things she'd been going through these last weeks; about laying in bed at night and biting her lip to keep from crying out in pain. About the fevers at three am, or the constant dizziness that crouched behind her eyes. And why? Why did she want to keep these things secret? It was all important data, and they should all be told.

Lucrecia felt her husband's eyes upon her but she wouldn't turn her head to meet his gaze. Maybe she'd die and take this unfortunate, unborn child with her. Maybe. But she didn't want that. Perhaps months ago she wouldn't have minded, but not anymore. There was something else, someone else to keep living for now. Even standing there in the lab with the glow from the Jenova tanks, the cold atmosphere of the library, the harsh fluorescent lights overhead, despite all of this to block it out, Lucrecia still remembered a vision of Vincent from last night in the garden. He'd been so angry. So so terribly angry with her and Hojo and all of it; frustrated in a way that he hadn't been able to understand. Lucrecia had to stay her

hand from moving out to stroke a phantom as she recalled his face, his young face stacked with thoughts too old for his twenty-seven years. He was in the prime of his life but look what she'd burdened him with. She'd unloaded her woes, her difficulties upon him, and given poor Vincent enemies that not even a Turk could easily dispatch. And so he was frustrated in his helplessness. And frustrated because he'd never been angry with her before and didn't know how to deal with it.

Maybe he'll blame Hojo. Perhaps Gast, or one of his Turk friends. But he won't blame me, he doesn't know how. Lucrecia understood her poor, confused lover so well. Better than he'd ever be able to understand himself. She feared for him. So innocent. A naive little boy walking around with a gun. It made her laugh at the same time it nearly made her cry. So angry in the moonlight in the garden last night. So hurt, so frightened. So confused it hurt to remember.

"--Lucrecia? Lucrecia?"

"...what?"

Hojo had called her name five times already. "Go to bed. You look so wiped, I peer behind your eyes and it's like there's no one there. Go upstairs now, rest yourself and the baby. I'll be up later tonight."

"Maybe you're right," she answered listlessly, her mind still grappling with the other thoughts. Why did it have to be like this? Why had she let a silly eighteen year old fall in love? Why hadn't she said "no" when he'd asked? Patience... she'd never had it. Never. She still didn't. The urge to follow Vincent's crazy dream, to take what he'd offered out of that little velvet box, that desire was intense. Replace this tarnished ring of gold with something new, something that shone, something she could feel for and be honest with. She loved him so much it made her breathless. She loved what she'd discovered behind the mask, loved the little boy from Wutai whose life had been hell. She wanted to help him find heaven. Her eyes misted over with happy tears at the thought.

Like a reminder from God, the baby kicked in her stomach. And Lucrecia felt sick.

"Luv..." she began, addressing her husband in such a way out of habit, leaning up from the door frame she'd been resting against.

"Hmm?"

"It isn't too late..." she whispered, "We could abort it now, we could make it like it never happened."

"Crecia!" Hojo laughed in surprise, "I can't believe you! Cold feet, that's all it is. We made a pact. We both want the top, and we're both going to get it. This little creature will grab all we want for us. Quit worrying."

The top... he was doing this for more than 'the top', she was sure of it. That specimen... that ancient... sometimes... but no, that was a stupid thought. Jenova was not only dead, but had been so for two-thousand years. Hardly a threat to their marriage. Hardly a threat to her Hojo. Her Hojo. But he wasn't hers anymore. And she didn't want him, she didn't mind the rift that Jenova and science had made. If Vincent was there, she just didn't mind. She could have her lover, Hojo could have his. And this unborn child even now in her womb, swimming in a sea of chemicals, maybe it could find love some day too. Lucrecia prayed for that; prayed that they'd all find conclusions. The deceit couldn't continue, it had gone on for so long. If only there was something she could do. But her hands were tied and everything revolved around the Project now. It had stolen Hojo away. But it had given her Vincent.

In some ways she hated this baby in her stomach. In others, she loved it.

It just wasn't fair.

"But what if I said that I... that I insist that we abandon this."

Where had that come from? It took her a moment to realize she'd spoken the words aloud. Hojo looked up slowly from his reading, his expression blank.

"If you said such a foolish thing..." he began coldly, "I would have to be very upset, dear heart. Too much time has gone into this. Besides, Gast would never allow it."

"I think he might if I talked to him."

"Why this change of heart?" Hojo put the book down and advanced upon her. Lucrecia was amazed at how calm he was. Perhaps she'd underestimated his control and he'd listen to her fairly after all. She had imagined this confrontation all night, ever since she and Vincent had spoken in the garden and he'd left her with only bitter words as a reminder of his disapproval. "I'll do what I must to keep him," she'd thought passionately, looking after his retreating form, "I'll do whatever it takes to keep him from looking at me with those cold eyes, with that heart-rending disapproval."

"I think that Professor Gast would allow me to cancel the experiment before you would, love," she continued, leaving the doorway and moving towards the Jenova tank with determined footsteps, "And that fact bothers me. It's been bothering me for months. I can see it in your eyes, can see it when you look at me and then when you look at that frozen ... THING... in the tank there. You look at us the same way... It's unnerving, unsettling. I don't like it. I'm HUMAN... that thing is a monster. Quite a difference, dearest. I love you. That Jenova monstrosity does not."

"What are you talking about?" Hojo asked, laughing in the back of his throat, "You're tired is all, 'Crecia. It's making you hysterical. And you're nervous about the Project. It's perfectly understandable."

"I will not be analyzed," Lucrecia stated imperially. She was before the tank now, her blue eyes darting from it to her husband in agitation. "I'm not nervous, I just believe that my morals are starting to get to me. I've been talking with people--"

"People--!" Hojo spat, rushing forward and losing his cool without warning. His dark eyes were rimmed with red, his high cheekbones flushed in fury. He jerked to a halt before the woman and shouted his words into her face, "People?! Like whom? Like that quiet little snake Vincent Valentine? People like that, dear heart?"

"N-no," Lucrecia said timidly, shaking her head, "No, just the other assistants, Gast himself. I-- "

"Don't lie to me, 'Crecia, it demeans both of our intellects. What did the Turk prick tell you, eh? That you can't steal the future of an innocent fetus? You can't toy with nature? You're a scientist, the top of your field. Act like it. And remember, dear heart, that it takes two people to make a baby. And nine months ago, you had absolutely no qualms. Nine months ago, you came to me."

"Nine months ago I was deluded. I still thought you loved me I suppose."

Hojo frowned deeply at the words, his arms going out towards her before he could stop them. But he did stop them, managing to hold back his feelings even as the chemical-obscured face of Jenova glared down at him in something like reproach from inside the glass tube. Hojo crossed his arms over his chest and looked away from both his wife and the creature behind her. "I do love you," he said, attempting a half-hearted defense, "But you don't understand. This is... gods... this is the only way, 'Crecia."

"For you, if you think that, than fine. But not for me, not anymore. It's different now than it was five months ago. I don't want to be some tool of you and your monster's. You've forgotten who I am in your rush to make a murderer for President Shinra. I'm Lucrecia Hojo and do you see this?" She held her wedding ring up before his surprised face, wriggling her fingers slightly, "You gave this to me and along with it, you gave me yourself. You can't take either gift back. You can't go and give yourself to Jenova now, do you hear me?"

With the words, a horrible stillness descended over the library, a silence so thick that Lucrecia could feel it pressing against her skin, cramming into her eyes. Before her, embedded in that quiet, was Hojo's drawn, white face, his glittering, questioning dark eyes. But her eyes were clear. Despite it all, her expression was cool. Why so cool with the words she'd just spoken? How am I pulling this off? she wondered, even as she stepped backwards with tiny, trembling footsteps, How am I saying these things, doing these things, revealing these things to him after so long of just nodding my head and letting him have his way?

Vincent.

If he could be strong, she could be too. Vincent. She'd say that name like a prayer until the gods started to listen.

Lucrecia raised her right hand and laid it on the side of the cool glass of Jenova's tank, tapping it slightly with her fingernails, deep sonorous sounds pervading the basement Library like rapid little heartbeats.

"Get your hands off of that."

Hojo's voice was a hiss that nearly threw her off, but Lucrecia ignored his command. She turned to face him, her hand still on the tank, and gazed upon her husband sadly. "Why?" she asked simply, "Why? Is she more important than me now? When did this happen? And where was I when it did?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Hojo snapped darting forward to stand over her. The calm had parted to reveal the storm behind. His face was contorted in stifled rage, his bony fists clenched at his side so that small lines of blood dripped from his palms, where his fingernails had pierced his skin. "She's just an experiment, the remnant of a dead civilization. Means nothing to me. Did I marry Jenova? No, I married you. You're both my responsibilities, but in different ways. Can't you understand that?"

"Oh, so you're 'responsible' for me," Lucrecia laughed hollowly, "I don't need that. I don't need a doctor to keep me healthy and out of harm, I need a husband. Where did he go? What has this, this creature done with him?"

"You're hysterical," Hojo sighed bitterly, turning from her and pacing the length of the small library, "And you understand nothing."

"I understand enough. I understand that this thing's more important than me. What am I now but another part of this vast experiment you've concocted to prove her strength and your genius? Just a thing that carries the little monster you're making--"

"Not a monster," Hojo corrected with a shake of his head.

"Monster enough, if he's a son of yours."

The words were harsh and she regretted them the moment they left her tongue. She almost visibly saw Hojo reel back under the blow, his tired features looking past her and at the floor, face nothing but a frown. "I... I'm sorry..." Lucrecia whispered, placing a hand on his cheek, making him turn his face back up, making his brown eyes look upon her again, "I didn't mean that. But do you understand my frustration? For seven months we've slaved, you, Professor Gast, the assistants and I, we've slaved over this thing! And we're losing each other in the toils. And you... you're losing something even more important than me, though I couldn't label it. It's like... like you're becoming someone I don't know, with ideas

racing in your mind that I can't relate with, nor would want to. Why do you feel you have to prove yourself to the world? You don't have to outdo everyone, or outdo Professor Gast, no one cares. No one laughs, though I know you think they do. All of this competition, all of this fiery ambition is coming straight out of you. And it's not necessary to lose yourself or me over this. Over this!"

Again she put her hands on the cold glass of the Jenova tank. Only, it almost didn't feel cold. Hojo had his back to her, his eyes to the floor again, and she could feel the thoughts racing through his tired mind. They all were tired, exhausted after months of slave-like research and work.

Lucrecia looked into the tank with a spiteful expression. Jenova... she wished they'd never dug the bitch out of the ice. It was bringing nothing but heartache. Seven months ago their toils had finally born fruit, Gast's lifetime of studies paying off and paying big: an ancient. A preserved Ancient, a fossil but more so, more amazingly amazing than a mere fossil. This creature was alive. It slumbered still in its death-like sleep but it was alive and breathing and living and watching. Lucrecia could feel it watching even now, watching her and Hojo and the rest with a peaceful patience beyond anything she could imagine. The woman found her attention suddenly drawn to the creature, the hand she had resting on the glass feeling a small pull, the tug of a power greater than she was. Power... Jenova was full of power she couldn't name. And it was doing things, even in its apathetic patience, to her and those she cared for.

"I don't like it," she said suddenly, making Hojo jerk his glance up towards her.

"You never minded before," he said softly, voice tinged with bitterness, "The idea of making a creature with the strength of those beings of old intrigued you so short a while ago. Where did your enthusiasm go? Tired of the Project already? If only you had Jenova's patience..."

"Don't speak of this thing as though it's alive," Lucrecia rebuked nervously, "Because it isn't really."

Hojo smiled to himself, folding his arms and stepping towards his wife. The dim lighting of the library played around him, the soft yellow fog of the electric lights glowing off his hair like a halo. "You understand so little, dear heart, that it hurts me somehow. But maybe it's better you don't understand. Naivete has a certain charm. But of course Jenova is alive. She cannot die."

"Cannot die? But all things die, especially something that was frozen to death two thousand years ago. I don't care what you say, what the readouts say... that thing may be technically alive, but still, I say it's dead. How can you think otherwise?"

Hojo stepped forward without warning and roughly clamped his hand around Lucrecia's right wrist, flinging her arm away from the tank. He whipped about so that he stood with the glass to his back, his wife to his front, expression full of shock. The Library stretched cold and quiet around them both. "I know this because she told me," he said quickly, simply, "Dead things do not speak. But Jenova speaks to me. So she is alive."

"Let me help you," Lucrecia whispered, eyes wide, "Love, there's something wrong with you, something... come with me, come away from this monster, it's doing things to you."

"I don't need you, 'Crecia," he muttered, turning his eyes away, "I just need what's inside of you. After you give birth, you can divorce me, leave me, I know you haven't been happy for a long time. But I WILL NOT let you fuck up all of our hard work, our research, our pain just to gain the approval of some ignorant Turk!"

"This has nothing to do with Vincent!" she all but shouted, not even realizing that she was admitting her unfaithfulness, not even caring, "I just can't do this anymore! I can't go through with controlling this poor child's... my poor child's life! Yours too you know! Your son!"

"My specimen," Hojo corrected quietly.

"Your son! And mine! Not Jenova's, I don't care what you've injected us with, don't care about the cells, this is my child and I'm going to start taking responsibility for his well-being..."

"You lost your rights as a mother when you agreed to this, dearest heart. I'm sorry, but that is the case. Now go scurry back to Valentine and tell him why you're allowing a human baby to be turned into a monster. Tell him why and see if he still cares for you."

"Tell him why?" Lucrecia whispered, "No. You tell me why. I have no clue what you mean."

"I simply meant that you may desire to explain the truth to him. The truth that you freely participated, eagerly participated in the Project. And that you cannot go back. You're as "guilty" as any of us, 'Crecia. Your hands are just as dirty. Accept it."

"I'll never accept a monster!" she screamed, throwing her fists out to her sides, shouting at both Hojo and Jenova, a cold tear snaking from her eye. Hojo eyed her with blossoming contempt.

"Jenova is hardly a monster," he said. Lucrecia shook her head.

"I speak of you."

Hojo looked profoundly calm for a moment, his eyes narrowed in controlled disdain and pointed down at his wife. But then his right hand tensed, veins standing out blue through pale skin, and he reared his arm back, bringing it slamming

towards Lucrecia's unprotected face. There was a sound and a cry and she stumbled backwards, cheek flaming red, a dab of blood at the corner of her lips. Hojo advanced and shoved her to the ground, face still lacking expression.

"I can only stand so much," the scientist stated coldly as she struggled to push herself back to her feet, the tears coming freely now. "Give me the baby and then you're free. Then you're free and I won't try to stop you from leaving me, leaving the company. I don't want to work with you any longer, dear heart. You haven't lived up to my expectations--"

"And you haven't lived up to mine..."

Hojo smirked and Lucrecia noticed with a bit of a start that his hands were trembling. "Yes," he said, "Both of us come away disappointed."

Lucrecia crawled backwards a bit towards the door, Hojo not making a move to help her back to her feet, and then stood with some difficulty, leaning heavily against the wall. He kept his back to her, his entire frame trembling and she wasn't sure what to make of that. Was he grieving? Or furious? Part of her wanted to run to him, to protect him from others and from himself as she always had. But another part craved to run to Vincent, and to BE protected. But from what though? The results of her own egotism? Her own foolish unvaulted ambition? Hojo hadn't lied. She'd willingly agreed to participate in the Project. She'd wanted a super-Soldier too, a way to become a somebody over night, to get out from under Gast's shadow. But it was so different now. Vincent... nothing else seemed to matter when she thought of him. He was all that mattered, and the only thing she aspired for anymore. But still...

"You won't get this baby," she warned, leaning against the open doorway, wishing she could flee the place forever, "I don't care what I have to do. I'll slit my own throat before I let you get him. This is wrong, we have to stop. Gast will allow it, if I speak to him, he'll allow it if you'll only back me up..."

"That'll never happen and you know it."

"Then I'll find a way... you'll see. I'll find a way."

~*~

Hojo watched Lucrecia's departure with slits for eyes, his shaking arms crossed over his chest, pressed tight to him as though to protect the thundering heart raging behind. He'd struck her. He'd hurt his Lucrecia... how..? Gods, she'd just made him so angry, so full of despair with only a few words. And why?

Because she didn't understand.

The rest of the world didn't understand and he could deal with that. But Lucrecia, she'd always been there, always known exactly what his aims were. Why not now? He felt so horribly alone, so stranded in a place that no one else could get into. Alone with his ambitions and that desire that never left him; that desire to outrace the sun, to outdo all who'd come before him. If he succeeded, perhaps then he could find another, but... but could there ever be another Lucrecia? A woman so caring and selfless, his refuge from the world? Sometimes... sometimes he could swear that he kept sane solely for her. The rest of the world was worthless, but his Lucrecia made life worth living. Just a smile, a kind word, a kiss... just something so simple could turn his aims to trivialities. Science was blasted to hell and there was only her, the feel of warm arms around him, anchoring him, showing him just why the world was gorgeous.

She was so beautiful... how had someone so beautiful ever come to love him? It was easy to understand why she was drifting away now. Drifting away to show someone else, perhaps someone just as lost as he, why the world was gorgeous. Vincent Valentine, that dark haired, dark eyed Turk.... but no, he couldn't have her. He still needed her, needed that piece of sanity or it all would slip away and there'd be nothing to keep him from slipping away with it.

"Traitor..." he muttered half-heartedly beneath his breath, "Impatient as always, 'Crecia. Impatient." If she'd only waited, waited for this baby to be born, waited for the passion to leave so he could focus on her again, waited for the Project to be complete, waited for Shinra to get off their backs about results, waited for that day when they'd both be recognized and their son would be a god among men... Didn't she realize that science was patience?

"Patience..." he muttered, his voice raspy and loud in the still air of the library. He paced the room, teeth grinding. "You're patient though, aren't you?" he asked, standing before the Jenova tank now. The misshapen figure inside looked at him with eyes that saw nothing but still were alive. They'd proven it was alive these past weeks. "Two thousand years buried beneath the ice and you're still patient. Heh. A marvel, truly. Maybe I should have married you."

Hojo laughed to himself, turning from the tank and jabbing his hands in the pockets of his coat. "If not a wife to me, than a mother to my son," he whispered. "Lucrecia is too beautiful to really be mother to that thing we're creating. But you, you're hideous enough. And he'll be part of you, so yes. You'll be the creature's mother. And maybe he'll inherit a bit of your patience. But are there aspirations in you as well?" he wondered, approaching Jenova again. The professor laid a pale hand against the glass and peered through the murky chemicals inside with bright eyes. "Sometimes I wonder. But that's just me looking for poetry again."

What was this thing they'd pulled from the ice? An Ancient truly? Had they all looked like that? Those perfectly sculpted, almost Grecian features? Ifalna didn't look anything like this creature. She was beautiful too, but in her own way, in a way that was almost human. But an Ancient? Looking human? Didn't make much logical sense.

"I'm starting not to care for humans too much," the man admitted in a whisper, putting a fist to his mouth. His ring glared at him, just at the corner of his vision and he turned his head to be rid of the sight of it. She'd changed, not him. She'd become an impatient, selfish little bitch. Sneaking off like that? Sneaking off? Did she think she was eighteen years old again? Where had her maturity gone, her common sense, her logic? Those very things he'd always admired her for, loved her for? Sneaking off with that dark, soft-spoken Turk.

He could imagine the both of them together and laughing at him as everyone had always laughed. But Lucrecia had never done that to him. "She was always the exception," he whispered to himself, leaning with his back to the Jenova tank, his head in his hands, cold from the breezy AC of the library. "But now what is she? She's betrayed my trust. And there's nothing I can do. I have to keep working with her. I have to. But she's right, she'll never give up that baby. I know my 'Crecia and she's stubborn."

Hojo sighed deeply, rubbing at his eyes, rubbing at his throbbing temples. Valentine... the fucking Turk. This was all his fault. And he'd pay somehow, if Hojo had to sell his soul to make it happen.

There was a trembling beneath his back, a shaking from inside the tank. Hojo turned quickly about, breath catching in his throat. But Jenova was as she'd been, her purple-veined, crimson features relaxed and frozen and dead. Not dead though. Alive, he was sure of it.

But it didn't matter.

"Patient, patient, patient," he muttered, "If only the rest of the world could follow your example."

~*~

"Did he do that to you?!"

Lucrecia cried silently and tried to get away from those piercing brown eyes that seemed to see into her very heart and make out all the blackened bitterness there; corrupt things she preferred to hide from. But Vincent wouldn't have it. He clamped a strong hand on each shoulder and forced her face around to his.

"Answer me, Lucrecia! This has gone on long enough, I won't stand by while he beats you!"

"N-no, no, Vincent, you don't understand, he was just upset," she stammered, "He's always had a terrible temper and I pushed him too far..."

"How can you say that?" the young man pleaded, holding her shoulders tighter, features strained in frustration, "Defend him? You come to me bleeding and then you defend his actions? Who do you care more for? I need an answer."

"Don't make me..." she sobbed, falling forward and clutching at the front flaps of Vincent's blue blazer. She pressed her fists and face into his chest, wishing she could forever sink into him, never have to look at the disapproval on his face but still be able to cloak herself in his warmth, to feel his silent strength close by. He let her cry, wrapping his arms around her back, lowering his lips into her hair. But his eyes were hard and distant. He wanted to comfort her, but all that came to his mind were rebukes. He felt more like her father than her lover. Did she understand now? he wanted to ask, Did she understand now how crazy Hojo was, how wrong this entire Project really was? Couldn't she see it now? He saw, saw too well that this little experiment was eating away at her body. What Hojo regarded as unfortunate side effects, Vincent saw as sacrilege, desecrating a temple. How could he do that to her? How could she let him?

How could I let him?

But he was just a Turk, and protecting the people under this roof was his job. Whether one of them was Hojo or not. Could he blame that man entirely though? Lucrecia voiced nothing but half-hearted protests. If she'd only put her foot down, this all could have ended months ago. Why hadn't she seen?

But his scoldings didn't come. Hearing her sobs, Vincent realized she didn't need them. She understood how misguided she'd been and he was glad. So maybe it was finally the right time.

"Crecia..." he began softly, his breaths tickling her hair, "Do you want this now?"

She looked up and saw he had that velvet box in his hand again. The ring glittered in the dim light of the hallway they both stood in like a beacon on a shore of refuge. Perhaps Hojo wouldn't have any of them...

"We'll leave," Vincent whispered to her as she slowly drew the box from his hand, "I'll give Levy my resignation and we'll go south, settle somewhere. I won't let him hurt you again. He'd have to get through me first."

"And... and no one gets through Vincent Valentine... right?" she murmured with a weak smile. He chuckled.

"Right. So.... Lucrecia.... will you marry me? I can give you so much more, give you what you need. Say yes."

She took her face from his chest and looked upwards into his eyes. Big beautiful soft brown eyes with the longest lashes. Lucrecia smiled and stroked his cheek, blinking away tears to see him better. Those tears were annoyances and

quite trivial when it came to him. The things that had caused them seemed so far away. That Library... and Hojo... it all seemed distant now that she was wrapped in his arms and warm and safe.

"I'm so sorry that I... that I said no last night. I didn't know what I wanted, not really," she whispered, beginning to cry again, "Even now, I don't like the thought of leaving him unprotected from himself. He's falling apart and I barely even know why. But I have someone else, two other people I need to think about now... Vincent, can you forgive me and accept me? I... I know it's probably too late now but... because, now... I-I want to tell you yes with all my heart. Take me away and take my baby away too."

"I won't let him hurt either of you anymore," Vincent swore, steel in his voice. He held her tighter and made his vow. "I don't care what happens or what he tries, I'll always protect you, you're too precious not to have a protector."

"That would be nice," she choked, "To be protected for once. You won't ever change, will you? Please always be just as you are, Vincent. Because you're perfect this way, almost too perfect and that frightens me. Nothing gold can stay, that's the way of the world."

"Don't talk nonsense," he scolded gently, "I'm here and I'm not going anywhere. But the both of us are."

"Yes..." With some difficulty, Lucrecia pulled herself away from him, her hands still pressed against his shirtfront. He wiped the rest of the tears away from her eyes and she smiled at him warmly, a smile that lit up her whole face like a lantern. "Yes, we'll leave tonight, you and I. I'll go into the village and hire a driver, a truck. We'll get out of here and never look back."

"Sounds like a plan," he whispered with a smile, "Go get ready, there isn't time to lose. Careful going into Nibelheim, don't let any other guys catch your eye."

Lucrecia laughed and stood on tiptoe to brush a kiss across his lips, truly happy for the first time in months, a weight lifting from her heart. How did he do that? Manage to wipe all the wrongs of the world away with one simple decision? He made it sound so easy. And maybe it really was. She took a few steps towards the doorway leading out to the stairs, making great show of taking off Hojo's ring and donning his. The thin band of gold shimmered in the dim light, the single ruby sparkling like one red eye. But she was hesitant to leave, to step through that doorway even though she knew that doing so would trigger the beginning of a bit of real happiness in her life, true happiness for the first time in so long. They'd conquer the world together, she and Vincent.

But why couldn't she quite leave him? Something gnawed at her heart and she kept her bright eyes trained on his face, as though to memorize its lines, engrave it in her mind. She wanted to stand there forever, just like that, just looking at him and blessing her good fortune. It seemed it could never be like this again, that these brief minutes of decision were the crown on something that just couldn't last. Her hands shook as they fluttered over each other, fingers finding his ring and marveling at the warmth of the gold.

"Don't leave, Vincent," she murmured, nearly breaking into fresh tears, "Please please don't leave or change. I'll be back tonight, really soon, and we'll both leave together..."

"It's alright, it's alright," he comforted, expression soft, "I'll always be here for you, no matter what happens. He won't have you. I'm going to take care of you now."

She smiled crookedly, leaning in the doorway, weak with relief and just a little pain. But she wouldn't complain, not to him, not after what he was prepared to do for her. He'd just give up his life, his career, something he'd struggled and fought to become, he'd let it all go to hell just to take her away. "I love you so much," Lucrecia murmured before forcing herself to leave the hallway. He nodded and smiled, words unnecessary. What he felt for her was demeaned by the word "love". He wouldn't use the term, it didn't convey enough. He'd die for her in a heartbeat because he knew he could never live without her. She was his other half. The funny thing was, he'd never realized how dead he was, how imbalanced he was until he'd met her. Now he didn't think he could go back to being half a man.

He stood, taking deep, calming breaths after she'd left his sight. The sound of his own heartbeat hammered in his ears like a giant bashing on his skull or his thoughts bashing outwards from behind his eyes, dizzying him with a headache. It was repressed rage that longed to be released, he recognized it in an instant. Normally he killed things when he was this pissed. Normally he fucking killed whatever it was that was aggravating him. But this situation was different, it had to be disarmed like the Turk might disarm a bomb. Delicate, with finesse and skill...

But damn... Hojo. He mentally said those two evil syllables and his hands clenched into fists, his eyes smouldering with fire. Vincent stalked to the end of the hallway and pressed his forehead against the glass of the dusty cold window there. Lucrecia was leaving the mansion and heading into town, he could see her frail form far below, moving off like a white scarf blown by the wind. And so it seemed, the winds were picking up, roaring about his lover and screaming in the eaves of the already rotting old mansion. A million voices in that wind and none of them sounded friendly. They were bringing a storm, the Turk could see it in the distance, massed pillows of blacks and grays and greens blowing in from off the faraway mountains. A few spatters hit the window and Vincent stepped back, lightening flickering like a broken lantern in the heavens. Perfect time for a storm, he thought bitterly, It storms when we plan to leave tonight. Maybe God's against our whole plan. Maybe He'd rather we stay here and bow to Hojo so He's sent a storm. Terrific.

Or maybe Hojo's in league with a devil. Heh, maybe he is a devil.

Vincent chuckled darkly to himself, jamming his fists in his pockets and walking back to that doorway Lucrecia had fled from a few minutes ago. The increasing blasts of the thunder from outside added to the pounding of his heartbeat in his ears and golden dust motes flew about the Turk's tall form so that it seemed the hallway had its own little storm raging.

Down there laughing now? Vincent wondered, leaning inside the doorway of the darkened bedroom. The stone passageway leading to the Library caught the lightening and shimmered, almost an invitation. Down there scheming, playing with his specimens... wondering how he'll hurt her next. And all the while, Lucrecia just takes it, Gast just ignores it, and the assistants scrape and simper to his every whim. Levy and Jimmy... they just avoid the sniveling little bastard. And so have I. I've passed him a thousand times and kept my eyes straight ahead instead of boring into his and challenging him. It's sickening.

"Vincent... Vincent, don't."

Jimmy approached quickly from behind, looking up imploringly at his friend. Vincent hadn't even realized it, but he'd entered the bedroom and had one foot on the staircase. "Don't," the Turk said again, almost pleading, "I heard it all, all of your plans. And I don't give a damn, the both of you can just leave now, no mess, I won't say a word and Levy won't either. But just leave Hojo alone, you don't need to go down there... take what you want and leave..."

Vincent slowly shook his head and turned away.

"I'll see ya around, Jimmy, I have business to attend to. I have a little prick I need to beat into the ground."

Before he could think twice about it, Vincent felt his hand pushing on the cool stone of the rock wall opposite the bedroom's entrance. There was a click and the wall moved backwards, a gush of cold, sterile air blowing in his face, laced with dust and mildew. Vincent didn't like coming down here, he didn't like the smell. But she'd been bleeding. He'd struck her. And his trivial experiments were hurting her health.

Disrespect.

Hojo was disrespecting the most sacred creature in the world and that couldn't go unpunished. He'd take her from here, but he'd leave that bastard something to remember them by.

"Not that I'm concerned," he called as he thumped down the staircase, form disappearing into the gloom, "But if Levy asks, you never saw me come down here. And you don't know anything about where Lucrecia and I have disappeared to after tonight."

A crack of lightening and Jimmy bristled, fingers turning cold in unease. The sky was black with storm and the light had gone. He had to find someone soon before he began to panic, being on the second floor alone at night during a storm bothered even his tough as nails Turk courage. He watched Vincent's descent until his friend's unruly head of dark hair had disappeared into the dark and then he fled for the staircase, his heart in his throat.

~*~

"Does it have to be like this then? Do I have to do it all alone? Bah... I've always been alone."

Jenova didn't answer him but Hojo wasn't surprised, wasn't that insane just yet. The creature was nothing but a mass of frozen tissue, it could not answer him, could offer no comfort. But he wished it could, that he could lay a hand on that cold glass, and those icy features obscured by the chemicals would suddenly blossom into life, into a warm, living face full of compassion. But his words echoed hollow and empty back to his ears. The library was hollow and empty and for just a fraction of a second, Hojo lost his desire. He wondered just why he was so bound and determined to succeed, why he'd pushed her away, used her, sickened her, hurt her. How did Gast manage it? To be so benevolent and still so brilliant.

"I'll never be Gast..." he sighed to himself, resting his forehead on the glass of the tank. Frowning, hair hanging in his face, Hojo rubbed his fingers into his eyes, the stinging there surprising him. Would he cry because she didn't love him anymore? From the tear running down his cheek, it would appear so. He smeared the wet away and onto the glass, examining it mutely. He wondered briefly if Jenova had ever been able to cry two thousand years ago. But such a stupid thought. He always got caught up in the poetry. That was why he'd never be like Gast. One reason of many.

If only she'd stayed, he thought forlornly, if only that Vincent Valentine bastard hadn't tempted her, corrupting her thoughts with phantom dreams of morality. Morals were for other people, not for scientists attempting to create gods. He'd sucked the life right out of their happiness like some greedy vampire hungry for blood, swooping in as dark and quiet as the evening sky, snatching her from him, taking her heart away. He didn't deserve her, that thieving, ignorant sonuvabitch. Didn't deserve her love.

Hojo found himself tensing with his thoughts of that Turk. He'd hated him ever since he first saw him in Shinra's office; hated his face, his eyes, his silence. Hated the reproach that radiated from his gaze, hated the way the other Turks respected him while hating Hojo himself. No one respected Hojo. But everyone seemed to respect Valentine. And Lucrecia loved him. Why? Why didn't she love Hojo?! Why had she changed, abandoned him for an insignificant moron with a blue

suit and a gun? How could you ever love someone so meaningless? Yet it must truly be love... and Hojo envied that horribly.

Footsteps... on the blasted spiral staircase leading down from the second floor. Too heavy to be 'Crecia's, perhaps one of the assistants. But it was so late, they all should have retired. Whatever. Regardless of who, Hojo couldn't let anyone walk in here and see him kneeling before the Jenova tank like a fool, tears in his eyes. They already laughed at him enough, they didn't need more material for their jokes. Cursing softly, he got to his feet, back to the door, and half-heartedly began recording data from the computer readouts spewing from a terminal connected to the tanks. Maybe he could lose himself in work for a while, shove these too human problems from his mind.

But I am still human, he thought bitterly, and that's why this is a such a god damned hassle.

Footsteps down the hallway now, coming rapidly, heatedly closer. Someone was pissed, he thought absently. And from the rumble of thunder echoing down from above, so was the sky. The idea that it was going to storm struck him blankly and he welcomed it. Suiting that the weather should match his mood, maybe somebody was paying attention after all.

Just as an especially impressive peal of thunder crashed to his ears from above, the door to the Library blew open furiously, connecting with the opposite wall in a deafening crash.

"HOJO!!"

At the sudden intrusion, the scientist blinked hard and whipped about, wondering who the hell in the mansion besides perhaps Gast might address him so informally. They could laugh as they would behind his back, but by hell, he'd be respected as he deserved to his face, he'd enforce that with a vengeance. A rock-hard fist in his head knocked any other thoughts from his mind. Hojo went down in a heap. And the thunder laughed in his ears.

"You bullying bastard!" tore a voice through the air, through his mind, "How dare you treat her like that! I'll rip you in half, blow a hole in your heart if I find it in there somewhere!"

On the floor...? How'd he get there? Giving a little moan, Hojo pushed himself up on his elbows, smearing blood from his nose, ears ringing. He turned around and saw Valentine looming tall and dangerous with indignation. He absently noticed the bits of cobwebs, mildew, and rotten wood on the toes of the Turk's shiny black shoes. Why had Shinra built them this mansion? This was no civilized place.

"You arrived along with the storm, I see. That too is suiting, I suppose, you've always been as bleak and unwelcome as the rain." Hojo muttered curses and feebly struggled to stand. As an afterthought, he threw in, "I'll have your job for this."

Vincent kicked him savagely with those scuffed shoes, then jumped backwards, trembling in rage, trying not to draw his gun.

"I've already said to hell with the Turks, with Shinra, with you. I don't care anymore, it isn't important. Only she matters. And I'll take care of anything or anyone that threaten her."

"Ah, so you are fucking the little bitch," Hojo laughed, on his feet now and leaning against the tank. He tried to stop the world from spinning before his eyes but was met with little success. "I'd suspected it, but I wasn't sure. She's good, eh?"

A muffled roar and Vincent leapt for him like a cat, breaking through any kind of weak defense the scientist could attempt. His right fist hooked under Hojo's jaw and knocked him back hard against the tank, then a knee shot up and jammed into his stomach, an elbow to the base of his neck. Quick, sharp, accurate blows, the kinds only a trained Turk knew. Hojo was impressed even as he cried out. "Why so upset?" he insisted, crumpled on the ground and spitting out blood, "She loves you, so be satisfied! You two can have each other, there's nothing I can do. Love sucks that way. Lucrecia--"

"Don't say her name!" Vincent roared, ready to pound him again. By every God in heaven, when he said those three syllables they sounded like the dirtiest word in existence. How did he manage that? Vincent demanded silently, How did he do it?

Hojo laughed, cocking an ear up at the distant thunder.

"She's my wife."

"Not anymore. She's leaving you, she just told me. She's sick of your insanity, sick of your twisted face. She's mine, Hojo. You've lost her."

"Heh. Boo hoo."

Blood trickling ticklishly down the side of his forehead, Hojo pushed himself up off the tank, ignoring Vincent who stood with spread feet and bent knees, like a tiger just waiting to pounce again. He wanted to peel that smirk off his face, knock him back to the ground and grind his heels into his ribs. Hojo deserved pain, a thousand lifetimes of pain after hurting Lucrecia so badly, forcing her to give herself to the Project, to something so evil and unnatural. There was no fear or concern about what Jimmy had said. This skinny little scientist was as much a threat as a stray dog. He just needed to be put down was all, needed to be humbled.

"Why do you suppose she loves you so much?"

Hojo asked the question without malice or mockery. He honestly wanted to know. Vincent eyed him suspiciously, dark eyebrows arched, short black hair waving in the AC breeze. His tie was crooked and he straightened it before answering. "Don't you think I ask myself that question everyday? But I don't think I matter, I think to her, anyone would be better than you. Perhaps I was just lucky to be there at the time she was ready to end the charade she's been living with you. Perhaps it could have been anyone, I was just lucky."

"You don't give yourself much credit, do you?" Hojo asked, nursing his sore jaw and pacing the Library, "Your naivete and selflessness are almost sickening, you know that? Where do you get off acting the perfect gentleman, ya sadistic murdering psychopath? Act as you should, blow a hole in my head. Please, Mr. Turk, live up to your reputation."

"You know nothing of the Turks," Vincent said in disdain, pride in his voice, "Nothing of me. Do not make up a personality for me, Professor. Do not delude yourself into thinking she fell in love with anything less than what I am."

"And what are you? Ha... you're a pretty little bad boy with a heart of gold. A contradiction in a thousand and one ways. But hell, if I swung that way, I'd lay you."

Vincent shook his head in disgust as Hojo giggled. His hand was close to his gun but he dare not allow his fingertips to brush the steel. The feel of a cold gun in his hand would be too tempting, he'd never be able to stop himself if he started. "You're insane," he muttered, "You call me crazy but it's you. So you can rot in here with your monster, with this Jenova monstrosity you and Professor Gast seem to care for so dearly. But she and I are leaving now... I'm taking her from you, outta this god-forsaken mansion, and away from that monster!"

"You cannot escape Jenova, Valentine," Hojo said matter-of-fact, "You never can. Haven't you been paying attention? Don't you know?"

"Know what?"

Hojo turned and smiled at him sadly. His eyes were full of tears. But Vincent knew that crocodiles cried too. "She'll be dead soon."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Your new lover," Hojo replied in a flat tone, "She won't survive the birth. There's no way, not with how she's weakening. That child is sucking the life right out of her. She's going to die."

Vincent stared at the scientist for what seemed like forever, unblinking and solemn. The words didn't register with him, he wouldn't let such things sour his ears. A lie, a trick, something to distract him. "It's not true," he said softly, features amazingly cool, amazingly devoid of expression. It wasn't true because it couldn't be. The gods weren't that cruel.

"If it comforts you to be delusional, by all means continue," Hojo said mockingly, his tears remedied with a wipe from the sleeve of his coat, "But I've studied the results and both Professor Gast and I came to the same conclusion. It is unquestionably sad, frightfully unfair. Yet, I suppose you can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs."

Hojo couldn't believe he was able to be so cocky and cool about it. Oh well, better to feel nothing at all than to feel hurt. She deserved it now anyway for her impatience and unfaithfulness. Let her die, if freedom was what she desired. And let Valentine suffer alongside her, let him be as alone as Hojo was now.

He was stumbling back towards the door, eyes to the ground, horror in his face. "I'm taking her away from you," he muttered, "Away from all of this... you won't touch her again..."

"After the baby comes, you may do what you want with her remains," Hojo said coldly, resting both hands on the cool wood of his desk, "Bury them, burn them, scatter her ashes over your favourite make-out spot. But she cannot leave until she's concluded her donation to the 'Project'. Too much has been risked in the making of that creature she carries; enormous amounts of gil, time, and resources. The success of the venture may not be jeopardized."

"To hell with all of that garbage! To hell with you and Gast and Shinra! You can't use her like an animal, I won't allow it! We're leaving, and you can't stop us. Leaving right now. Take your science and shove it up your ass."

"She cannot leave."

"Heh. If it comforts you to be delusional, by all means continue." Vincent smirked to himself, then turned and headed for the way out, determined to go through with his plans. Hojo watched his retreating back with eyes clouded red from his worthless tears, his fingernails scratching at his desk absently. The sounds were loud in the still air but that Turk's footsteps were louder, louder than the shouting thunder even. 'Cecia couldn't leave. She couldn't leave him and take that baby, couldn't leave him alone. And she wouldn't leave if that dark, silent prince of hers wasn't around to escort her. Where was it? That weapon Gast had told him of, in case of emergencies or maddened specimens? Ah...

"Vincent..." Hojo called hesitantly, taking a step after him. The fleeing Turk turned roughly about, his face set like stone, determination in place. The very atmosphere of the room was starting to nauseate him. But was it the atmosphere or something else? Maybe just Hojo's presence. Maybe just this sense of dread in the pit of his stomach.

"I don't want to hear anymore. I don't speak with madmen, it's a waste of my time."

But Vincent halted anyway, as though something had grabbed a hold of his collar and jerked him back. He uneasily crossed his arms, some chill making him shiver, the air conditioning, or just a stray mountain draft. Something. Something was wrong. The dark of the hallway outside pressed against his back, and Hojo's leering, eager eyes darted into his own

like knives. The tank, test tubes, equipment; glass all over, sparkling in his vision, making him dizzy, yet it didn't really, he wouldn't allow it to. But all of it, this god-forsaken, looming place full of misguided ambition and monsters, hidden behind the walls of a beautiful mansion, hidden in the quiet of a nondescript village, hidden in the shadow of the mountains... it was all so strange and he suddenly couldn't understand how he'd allowed himself to get caught up in any of it. He didn't belong here and neither did Lucrecia; here in a mansion full of cruelty and monsters. This monster... Hojo... was the sickest of all, the most threatening.

"Please humor me though," the scientist insisted, taking another step forward, "Please tell me how much you love my Lucrecia... you won't leave her stranded ever, will you? Will you always be there for her, be there like I couldn't be? I'm sure the both of you made such promises to each other, exchanged oaths beneath the stars, but did you mean them? What would you do for her, Valentine? Anything in the world, right?"

The Jenova tank glittered in the shadows. Vincent found his eye wandering to that serene face in the chemicals, his mind racing. Veiny purple face surrounded by bubbles and mako, staring out through the glass at the two men. What was it thinking? he demanded in slight panic, What did it know? He was just a Turk, he didn't understand nor care to understand anything about it or what they were doing with it. Suddenly, Vincent wanted out of that laboratory, wanted to leave more than he'd ever wanted anything else in his life. It was like the walls, the boiling test tubes, the buzzing machines and the gurgling tanks were all shouting one word: Run.

But Turks didn't run, they stood their ground and dished it out.

Eyes narrowed, Hojo kept approaching, his hands buried in the pockets of his coat, his drawn pale face turned up to watch Vincent's. "Anything?" he asked again, expression almost sad, "Star-crossed lovers are so depressing. Unrequited love is interesting but painful. It's so sad. Maybe the both of you deserved it. My 'Crecia certainly did. But she cannot leave, not yet."

Vincent looked almost terrified, a controlled, half-hidden terror that was the worst kind to watch. He took a step backwards, darting his right hand inside the flap of his jacket, but Hojo beat him to it. A gun was suddenly between them, a barrel waving in the Turk's face, glinting in the florescent light the same way that the Jenova tank did. Glinting with potential Death. Buckets of rain plummeted from above, a muffled pebbly sound from far overhead, staccato to the thunder's bass. The far away noise only made the Library's silence even more deafening. Vincent held his breath.

"You shouldn't have gotten involved, you miserable cretin. You've brought this on yourself. She cannot leave. I won't allow it. And I'm sorry to say, Mr. Valentine, that you won't be leaving either. You think you can have her? That you can take her because you want her like a child wants his candy? Your looks can't get you everything, your eyes can't buy love and your skills are worthless here. Ha..."

"You're clueless..." Vincent growled, eyes glued on that gun, "You don't know what we have and you don't really know what I am."

"Why don't you fucking tell me then?! Tell me, Valentine, wow me with the depths of your soul, and make me into a believer!"

Hojo laughed crookedly and jammed the barrel of the gun into Vincent's neck, sweat beading out on his clammy brow, running down the sides of his face like hot oil. Vincent felt the wall at his back, the cold barrel at his neck, crushing into his windpipe. He wouldn't die in this place, Lucrecia was waiting for him to come back and keep his promise.

"I'm just a Turk," he said calmly, "Just a nobody."

"No... "Hojo shook his head, cocking the pistol in his hand. It was heavy, heavier than he thought a gun should be, but then, he'd never held one before, "That day in Shinra's office, I saw you as something else, something beyond the realm of reason... and my 'Crecia, she saw you too and I swear to God you made her love you, you swept her off her feet like any dashing monster might. And it wasn't her fault in the end, isn't her fault now. It's all you."

"No, it's you. It's all your fault," Vincent whispered, swallowing hard, throat knotting past the jammed barrel of the gun, "All your own. And you're the only monster here..."

"NO! No, I am the better one! I am the one who beat you to her, who loved her for years and gave her my life. You slunk in and took it all away. If only your handsome young face matched the devil that's inside, you wouldn't be such a contradiction, such a lie, such a danger to her..."

"You're god damned insane!" Vincent said in a raised voice, "There's nothing to me but what you see! A Turk that in the end was better than you!"

"Like hell... oh gods, like hell is that true. I'll never give into that, ever! I wonder if I can't figure you out, if I can't fix what God screwed up when He made you. I wonder if you'd be worth it. But you can have a purpose, have a use to me, I can make you have a use."

"I won't do shit for you..." Vincent growled, fingers curling into claws and digging into the wall at his back. Hojo stared at him for a moment, loosening the push of the muzzle into his neck just a fraction. His dark eyes were contemplative, his breathing fast and loud against the holler of distant rain. Sticky hot sweat ran down them both. Hojo broke the confrontation with a final sigh, whipping his gun around and taking a few quick steps away. Vincent almost fell to his

knees, Hojo'd had him pressed that tightly against the wall. He stumbled forward, rubbing his throat and trying to catch his breath. He straightened and adjusted his jacket.

"I knew you wouldn't," he said darkly, "You're not that stupid, you couldn't shoot me. A slow death in the gas chamber isn't your kinda thrill, huh? Idiot." Vincent looked up from his grooming, smearing sweat off his forehead, and saw that Hojo had the gun raised again. The Turk cocked a cool eyebrow his way. "You don't scare me," he said softly, "Just put the thing away, it's painful for me to watch an amateur with a gun."

Vincent glanced up when he didn't get an answer and saw Hojo's face looked odd, somewhat off. There was a gleam in his eyes that made the Turk want to choke. Gun wavering, Hojo chuckled dryly. He squinted one eye shut and aimed.

"Hojo, no--!"

Throwing off his attitude, Vincent darted forward and grabbed for the gun but Hojo wrenched to the side and fired. Instead of a shattering crack, a silencer muzzled the sound of the bullet that tore from the chamber and sent the two men stumbling apart. Vincent felt a fire roll through his arm and chest and collapsed to his knees, staring down dumbstruck at all the red. He tried to speak a curse but only chokes came out and he fell forward hard in a splash of blood.

Panting and trying not to throw up, Hojo looked down at the mess he'd made. He shakily put the gun away in his desk drawer and absently rubbed both hands on the front of his coat though there was nothing there. Ragged breaths from the bleeding Turk on the floor. Spreading blood on the tiles though that didn't bother him, he was a doctor after all. Then a gurgling voice, strained words. Hojo approached his victim hesitantly.

"...I c-can't believe you did that..." Vincent whispered, eyes closed and feverish cheek pressed hard to the cold floor, "...but I don't care, ya can have my life. Just leave her alone now... let her go now..."

"Heh," Hojo laughed nervously, "You have such a one track mind. I was aiming for your head so I wouldn't have to listen to your whining. Damn. But as you said, I am an amateur."

"...please..."

"Where'd your attitude go, Turk?" the scientist demanded, growing more confident, "You pathetic sonnuvabitch. Who's better now?"

Vincent couldn't answer, he could barely stay conscious. His icy fingers grappled at the tiles, blood in his lungs keeping him from breathing properly. When he forced his eyelids open, he saw that the bullet had ripped through his left forearm and ploughed a diagonal path through his torso and out his shoulder. The look of triumph on Hojo's face made him close his eyes again. He listened to the thunder and waited to die. He could swear he heard Lucrecia's voice somewhere, calling his name. He wished he could answer.

Grinning arrogantly, Hojo swung himself up on an examination table and sat with his hands in his lap, legs dangling off the edge. The air was quiet and empty, even the hum of the air conditioners had died away. Just thunder and the soft gurgling from the chemicals and filters supporting Jenova's tank. And the ragged gasps for air.

"Just die! Just give it up and die, you stubborn bastard."

Vincent was trembling and bleeding to death and Hojo just stared coldly at him, impatiently tapping his fingertips together. Gast could come in, or one of the assistants, or even 'Crecia. They couldn't see what he'd done or Vincent's words would wind up true. He'd be executed for murder, surely. "You won't beat me, Valentine," the scientist promised aloud, "I won't die over this, I'll never let them find your body. Ha! Think on that before you die, you bastard. They'll never find you, she'll never know what happened. Maybe you just left in the dead of night because you decided you didn't want her anymore, didn't want that bundle of chemicals she's going to give birth to. Precious Lucrecia will curse you as a liar and hate you with every bit of her soul. Think on that, Valentine."

"P-please... please don't..."

"What's that?"

Hojo hopped off the table, pushing his glasses back on his nose absently. He approached Vincent quickly, like a puppy whose just spotted a lizard he'd like to chew on for a while. He walked until he stood with his patent leather shoes in the puddle of blood surrounding Vincent's weakly thrashing form. He bent his face close to his rival's. "Few people have ever pleaded with me, begged me for something. Do it again, I like the sound of it."

But Vincent wouldn't. He turned his face away and lay his fevered cheek against the cold stone, knowing he didn't have long. He'd been shot a couple times in his career but he'd never felt like this before. Death was sitting heavy on his chest. But Lucrecia's face sat heavy in his heart, before his closed eyes. No... it had ended before it had begun. He couldn't die and leave her alone with Hojo, without a protector, cold and lonely and at the mercy of a lunatic. A fiery sharp pain in his arm made him cry out in agony, tears with a thousand different causes springing from his dimming brown eyes.

Hojo took his heel away from the bullet wound with a little sneer. "How could she love you?" he asked in complete and total mystification. "I don't understand."

"Let... her go. Don't keep her here."

"Shut up."

Hojo stared at him for a moment, his arms crossed, his expression thoughtful. His right hand nervously rubbed his left arm, fingers twitching in agitation. His eyes looked distant again, as they had before he'd pulled the trigger. "Do you see where it's all gotten you, Valentine?" he asked after a while, quietly. He wasn't even sure if Vincent could hear him anymore, but he spoke. "Maybe it wasn't your fault and this was just destined to happen. Let's keep screwing around with destiny, eh? Let's have some fun."

Vincent was somewhere between alive and dead, leaning towards the latter, but he was conscious enough to feel two hands pulling at his jacket, sliding him over the cruel hard floor. The blood soaked into his clothes helped in the journey and Vincent moaned at the way his taut shirt cut into the bullet wounds. He could feel a flap of skin from his forearm hanging off, blood gushing up and over the shattered bone and felt sick. But that was nothing. It was the wounds the bullet had made ricocheting around inside his chest that were killing him. He diagnosed himself with a detached, half-mocking attitude, groaning when those two arms dragging him found the strength to heft his slim form up onto something hard and cold and flat. He lay on his stomach until those hands flipped him clean onto his back, arranging his limp arms at his sides and cutting off his white shirt. The garment came off, heavy with blood, then was tossed away like a discarded toy.

Iceiness crept over him and he shivered violently, numb with pain. But at least it was getting harder to think. There was a pinprick in his neck suddenly, hardly noticeable amidst the rest of his agony and finally he began to slide away towards something dark.

Muffled blackness and muffled thunder and muffled rain. He wished he'd listened to Jimmy. Vincent wished he'd taken her away when he'd been able. Now who would protect her? Now who would keep her and her baby safe from Hojo?

The thoughts dissipated and there was only the faraway storm to concentrate on. And then finally there was nothing at all.

~*~

Jenova was staring at him.

Hojo could swear to God that she was. That veiny purple face behind the chemicals was eyeing him with some passionate intensity.

"What?!" he shouted out into the empty air, "You have a problem with something?"

No answer of course. The scientist manipulated his forehead around and swiped at some ticklish sweat with his shoulder. He always got all itchy when he operated and it was least convenient. He would inevitably wind up smearing blood on his face when his nose started itching and he couldn't stand it anymore. It already seemed like Valentine's blood was all over the place, he didn't need it on the tip of his nose too.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Hojo knew he was going to have to clean the gory mess up before morning, come in here with a bucket and get down on his hands and knees and SCRUB, but that was something to get aggravated about later. Right now, he needed to fulfill this burning desire in his heart and finish his operation. Then he could stash the results, burn his clothes, and it would be like Vincent Valentine and never walked into his life and fucked it up. The only reminder would be locked up where it could never bother anyone else again. Poetic justice will have been served, irony dished out in a heap, and Hojo could go back to the Project with a clean conscious.

But first he had to finish up on Vincent.

Damn.

An artery burst open under his trembling scalpel and Hojo sighed inaudibly, reaching for a suture. He was a wreck tonight, and damned lucky that Valentine hadn't died already under his clumsy surgeons work. Too much coffee, he supposed absently, watching his shaking hands. And the fact that Jenova was staring at him didn't help.

"Do you have a problem with this?" he asked again, looking belligerently towards the tank, "I mean seriously, if you do, speak up. This is something I have to do for me. Alright?"

He didn't really expect the thing to talk back but it was quiet in the Library and almost just nice to shout out and hear his own voice in his ears, strained as it was. Jenova moved not a muscle, but then she never did. Just floated there in the liquid with shadows for eyes and a million wires and monitors sticking out of her flesh. She frightened him sometimes. When he was up there working alone and all of the assistants had gone home for the night and it was quiet and still except for the creaks of the mansion and his own rapid heartbeat, Hojo could swear he heard her breathing. A deep, ponderous breath out of invisible lungs. But he just had an overactive imagination.

Setting down his blood-slicked scalpel, Hojo picked up his patient's mutated left arm and began fiddling with it, adjusting the newly soldered joints of the fingers. The damage to the human arm had been too severe, he hadn't been able to save it, so Hojo had replaced it, in the process proving a key theory of the Jenova Project: Jenova cells could indeed improve and even replace human tissue. He'd used them to grow Vincent a new arm, the results simply hadn't been very

pretty. A mass of twisted flesh and claw. He'd plated the monstrosity in bronze to strengthen it and fulfill his own aesthetic need. The claw was damned beautiful, he thought. Lethal too and essential to the other alterations he'd made on the man.

"I dare you to complain," he snapped aloud, "You're lucky to be alive at all, you poor bastard." Hojo frowned to himself, laying the claw back at Vincent's side and then moving away to work on the rest of him. He was getting tired and it was almost morning, time to wrap this unhappy nonsense up and then begin his string of lies to Lucrecia.

Thunder broke from overhead like a mountain crumbling and Hojo jerked his head up to look at Jenova again, impatience in his face.

"What?!"

But it seemed she wasn't looking at him now. The sightless monster had her gaze pointed past him and towards the door of the Library. Hojo gave in to his insanity and let his gaze follow hers, scoffing at himself. But indeed, there was something to see.

He thought his eyes were playing tricks on him at first, picking out phantom faces from the gloom, but no, there was someone standing in the doorway; a single pale face with his mouth opened wide into an O of surprise. His bare hand clutched the door frame to steady himself. Hojo dropped his tools and stepped away from his work, towards the new arrival. He could feel Jenova's burning eyes digging into his back.

"Jimmy, isn't it?" the scientist called, approaching the young Turk quickly. His arms and shirtfront were covered in gore but he forgot about it, absently scratching his nose and getting blood on his face. Jimmy eyed him like a mouse in front of a charging lawnmower, too overwhelmed to speak. He was going to say something, but there was really nothing to say. His friend and coworker was sprawled out dead on an operating table with his chest cut open and blood pooled about him. And the guy who was carving him up like a turkey had his hands out and a deathly expression on his face. Jimmy backed up and took off running, uttering every swear word he knew.

"Shit!"

Hojo was chasing after him before he could think about it. Jimmy thundered along the hallway in clumsy desperation, his blazer off and his shirt a fluttering white bird in the gloom. He had his eyes fixed on the spiral staircase and his flung himself towards it, wishing he could fly, blinking hard to rid his mind of the image he'd seen. He heard Hojo chasing him faster than he thought possible and his own feet seemed to weigh a thousand pounds.

"Where d'you think you're going, Jimmy?!" Hojo demanded tackling the Turk by the legs and the two men crashed into the bottom of the staircase, Jimmy face-first. Wood splintered and flew and cut into his head, a big spike going through his shoulder and making his scream out oaths.

"What're you doing to Vincent, ya fucking loony?!" he shouted, ignoring the wounds and trying to regain his feet, suddenly ashamed at his panic. Hojo was on his back but Jimmy reached a hand around to push him off, knowing he himself was stronger and a thousand times better trained to be in a situation like this. But training just didn't seem to be helping anyone that night. Hojo was too quick for all of it.

Mouth a trembling line of control, Hojo leapt off the Turk and launched a kick into his face while he was still heaped on the ground, then dug his right hand into his coat pocket, drawing out the gun he'd grabbed. The pistol was slick in his bloodied hand but he choked up his hold on it and aimed. Jimmy cried out as hot lead plowed a hole through his collarbone. He folded backwards and into the stairs again, fingers snaking upwards to staunch the flow of blood. "You miserable fuck!" he whispered in a high-pitched whine, blinking hard, "That's Vincent's gun! What're you doing to him?!"

"Dishing out justice," the scientist answered coldly, "What's it to you?" He took quick aim and fired. Jimmy sunk backwards with a bullet in his eye, a horrified expression on his face. Before he died, he could feel a hand at his side, going for his wallet, drawing it from his pocket indifferently. But then he didn't feel anything.

"Interfering prick," Hojo muttered, stashing the warm gun in the back of his slacks. He opened Jimmy's wallet up eagerly and looked through the credit cards and gil marks until he found what he was looking for. He held the little donor's card up to the hallway's dim lighting, squinted and smiled. "Blood type A. Perfecto. Thanks, Jimmy."

Hojo flung loose strands of black hair behind his ears, then grabbed a hold of the dead Turk's jacket and began the laborious process of hauling the corpse back to the labs. He wasn't sure if fortune was smiling on him or spitting on him. The mess at the foot of the stairs was going to be a royal pain to clean up... Oh well. Maybe he could get Lucrecia to do it.. Oops! Never mind, guess not.

He giggled to himself and threw a wink to Jenova when he was back in the Library.

"Thanks for the help," he said amiably, "I owe you one."

~*~

And now it was something like six in the morning.

Hojo looked at his wristwatch with blurry eyes, smearing blood off the face so he could see the numbers. He yawned and stretched and absently gazed upon the fruit of his labors. The scientist was crouched over him, one foot to either side of his stomach, his chin in his hands. Pale as death but alive. The adulterous Turk was alive, he'd saved him. "Wake up," he demanded softly but sternly. The quiet face below him didn't twitch. "Come on, wake up, Valentine, I know you can." Hojo stared at him viciously, sinking from his feet to his knees so that he was almost sitting on his victim's stomach. But he didn't dare put his weight on the stitches there. He leaned forward, a hand to either side of Vincent's head to support himself, then moved his face closer to the other's, so close that his hair hung in the young Turk's closed eyes. "I wonder if it worked," he mused, "I don't see why not, most of it all came from Professor Gast's speculation and research and we all know what a wonderful genius he is. Too bad I can't show him what I've done with his science. His science, ha! His science is a bore compared to the flair I have. Look at this claw! Could Gast have ever conceived anything so brilliant and appropriate? Gast is mundane, my science is what will have the real staying power. My science that even now is waiting to be born inside Lucrecia..."

That name seemed to stir something in the man beneath him. Hojo could see a slight twitching in the muscles around his eyes, as though even in darkness he was trying to search out the owner of that name. Hojo's hard expression softened for an instant. "It could have been very nice, I suppose," he said casually, swinging himself off of the examination table, almost slipping in the blood, "But it just wasn't meant to be, Valentine. She's mine. You almost had her, I almost let you die and you two could've been together eventually. But no, you don't deserve that. You deserve to live on as what you should have always been. A monster. But just wait. Just wait and watch. I'll let you be together eventually, you'll see. Even I am not that cruel."

Hojo paced the length of the library, hands clasped tight behind his back. It was so late. Or rather, so early. He could already hear movement from the floors above as the rest of the mansion awoke. What would he tell the Turk leader about his two missing men? Heh, he wouldn't say anything at all, that's what. He would certainly act as concerned as hell when he was told they couldn't be found though. Oh, yes, no one would contribute more to the search effort than Professor Hojo, he knew that already. He'd manage to get away with this yet, he was sure of it. He'd cleaned the hallway outside, he'd scrubbed the tiles of the lab and the tools he'd used, and he'd even cleaned what he could of the examination tables. Jimmy had been, ah... disposed of, now he need only do away with his friend. And he could call it a night.

"...sha...?..."

The faintest of sounds from behind his back. Hojo was infinitely surprised to turn around and see Vincent Valentine sitting up on the examination table, examining his new claw with a look on his face too exhausted to be horrified. The man immediately collapsed backwards onto the table, nearly rolling off and onto the floor. Hojo dashed to his side and pushed him back to safety. "You just have this adversity to cooperating, don't you?" he muttered, "Heh, those chemicals are slower than I'd thought they'd be. You shouldn't be able to think much less move. Come on now."

With Jenova wordlessly looking on, Hojo wheeled out a gurney and rolled Vincent onto it. The Turk hardly made a sound though his eyes were open. He stared at the scientist and Library as though he couldn't remember them. Everything, as a matter of fact, looked foreign and strange. It was all too clear, all too bright. Something was wrong with his vision, he was seeing things he'd never seen before, seeing everything as though through a magnifying glass, tinted in a haze of red. "Ah... so the optic nerves were affected!" Hojo said delightedly, noticing the expression on the man's face, the darting reddened eyes, "Interesting. I'll have to remember that. Jenova seems to improve everything she can in the human system. What about your--"

"...hear her..."

"Hmm?"

He could hear her, somewhere in the floors above, he could hear Lucrecia crying, he swore it. This wasn't just some delusion, he could hear her muffled sobs, wordless anguish coming from her bedroom and the sound was so vibrant, so near, Vincent could picture how she must look; leaning with her face pressed into the pillow on her bed, heart broken, shaking like a leaf and hiccuping in that way she had when she cried. She'd cried to him in the hallway when he'd promised to take her out of there, sending her into town to get the truck. And she must have come back in the night, expecting him to be ready to leave with her. And he'd been gone, been trapped down here. And now she was crying.

Vincent could hear it.

She was crying and what could he do to stop her tears?

"...she's crying, Hojo...?"

"What?" The scientist looked cranky and his voice backed up the observation. He shoved the gurney from the library and out into the dark hallway, the wheels finding every bump along the way and sending its occupant almost tumbling to the ground. Vincent groaned as pain evinced itself and his mind rolled over in confusion. Where the hell was he and what the hell had happened? He should be dead. But he wasn't and he was glad, maybe now he could get back to her and they could get on their way. Her soft eyes pleaded with him to hurry. But he couldn't move.

In typical Shinra fashion, the company mansion had been built atop an old, disused cemetery. Nibelheim's elders hadn't appreciated the fact at first but enough gil and even they'd forgotten their ancestor's and their graves, happy to sign anything the President had lain before them. Hojo said a little prayer of thanksgiving to the god of greed as he wrenched open a door in the wall of the hallway. The ancient portal creaked open, then flew against the wall in a shower of mold and filth and rotten wood. Oh gods...

"It's really gross in here..." the scientist muttered to himself, squinting his face up in disgust. The crypt had been discovered so near to the wall of the hallway when the crew had been at work digging that they'd been about to break through and cement the space in, block it off. But President Shinra had been convinced it would make a decent enough storeroom and save him that much more gil in construction expenses. So it had stayed. But no one had even thought to look in there till now.

Hojo kicked at skulls and bones as he walked inside, moving cobwebs apart with pale hands. So still, it was as though time had ceased to exist in the small space, yet the evidence of time showed itself everywhere. The ancient bricks and mortar, the rotting wooden caskets stuck haphazardly here and there, but especially in the skeletons. They lay exposed in the mildewed coffins, stick figures of white, each one leering and laughing at the sudden living humans who'd invaded the domain of the dead. Hojo crushed a skull beneath his shoe to dust and bleached fragments, silencing that laughter for the rest of eternity. "Hmph," he grunted in disgust, "I think this new home will suit you to a tee, Valentine."

Rolling up his sleeves, Hojo approached a coffin in the center of the room and flung the lid off. The skeleton inside had been a soldier, he could tell easily, the rotting remnants of a primitive musket lay in his hands, an old rusted rapier at his sides. The tarnished glint of gold at the tattered blue remnants of his collar told the scientist he'd been of some high ranking in his day, but not anymore. Hojo yanked the decorations off and flung them to the dirt. "What good did they do you?" he asked the corpse, "You're still here now, dead as you'd be if you'd been a beggar." The man sneered and grabbed a hold of the thing's neck, lifting the surprisingly heavy bones from the casket without the slightest sign of discomfort. Laughing triumphantly, he cleared out the musket and sword until the rotted red velvet of the coffin was clear and visible, if dirty and disgusting. Hojo took great joy in bashing the bones beneath his feet to shards of white. "Come on now, Valentine," he called, looking up, clothes dusty now and full of spiderwebs, "Let's see how you look in here, eh?"

Vincent could only see Lucrecia, his drug-dulled mind saw her still crying helplessly in her bedroom, still heard each gasp, each choking sob. He'd been supposed to save her. Why couldn't he save her now and still those tears?

"...no, don't you hear her..?"

"Yes, yes," Hojo said dismissively, maneuvering the gurney until it lay at the side of the coffin. "That's just the chemicals affecting your mind, Valentine. But they're necessary if this little experiment's going to work. Just rave quietly, all right?"

"...don't cry... I'll come..."

"Uh-huh."

With a little grunt, Hojo rolled Vincent from the steel gurney to the inside of the musty casket where he landed heavily, tears in his bright red eyes. Hojo adjusted him comfortably, crossing his hands over his stomach, wishing for a moment that he'd dressed him first, but then deciding he really didn't give a damn if the Turk caught cold down here.

"So there," he said finally, taking a step back, knowing that time was short. Vincent did look quite appropriate laying like a living corpse in that coffin. "I could've been an artist. I think so." He grinned and adjusted the claw again, brushing a few strands of hair out of the Turk's face. Vincent's red eyes snapped to attention suddenly, blinking quickly. He tried to sit up but couldn't.

"...what the hell..?"

"Ah.. a moment of clarity at last?" Hojo wondered, reaching his hand into his pocket and smiling. The light from the hall caught the rim of his glasses and they sparkled, so bright to Vincent, it seemed, that he squinted his sensitive eyes against them, "Just as well. But I can't chat, I have to go clean up the mess you've made."

"Where am I?"

Hojo pulled out a syringe and held the needle up to his eyes, checking the dosage. "That crypt they discovered beneath the building site," he answered matter-of-factly. The scientist smiled and moved closer, sweeping his bangs back behind his ears, "Shinra isn't a complete and total fool, I suppose, this old tomb certainly has come in handy. A storage room indeed. More like a place for me to keep my trash. Perhaps I'll stash your young Turk friend down here too."

Vincent suddenly felt the rough ruined velvet beneath his bare back. He smelled the bittersweet stench of decay and a realization hit him. But he couldn't move, he couldn't act with the thought that struck him. He writhed in silent terror and fury even as Hojo jabbed the needle into his neck. "Don't leave me down here!" he demanded between clenched teeth, "That's what you're planning, isn't it? I'll scream my head off, I swear to God! They'll find you out and you'll fry, d'you hear me?!"

"Those threats might have worried me before," Hojo replied calmly, withdrawing the needle, "But you made threats equally as vicious last night. And as you can see, they obviously amounted to little more than shit. I've won, Valentine. And I'm taking all the spoils for myself."

A wave of dizziness struck him and Hojo's face swam in circles before his eyes. Vincent turned away, suddenly so tired he thought he might fall asleep and never wake up again. His eyelids pulled like leaden curtains but he fought it for as long as he could, even as Hojo hefted the casket's great oaken top and settled it snugly over the coffin, sliding it into place and charmed by how it fit so perfectly, even after so long sitting down here and rotting.

"Don't leave me alone down here!" Vincent pleaded, a sob catching in his voice. Everything was black, that lid didn't let in even a crack of faint light. Just blackness everywhere, just the smell of death sitting in the coffin's limited atmosphere like a fog. "Please! Please don't leave me here! Let me out and let me go to her!"

Hojo went to work nailing the coffin shut. He made short work of it, each blow of the hammer making him wince, making him terrified that someone would hear the ruckus from above and come to investigate, as that Jimmy jerk had. But no one came. After fifty-three nails, no one had come, and Vincent's protests were so faint Hojo had to press his ear to the wood to hear them. "...tell me you'll leave her alone... if nothin' else, tell me that... please..."

"Would it make a difference?" Hojo asked coldly, pocketing the hammer and giving the crypt one last look. Not that he ever wanted to remember this God-awful place. He hoped he'd never have to come down here again. "You're just a ghost now, Valentine," he said softly, shoving the gurney out of the door ahead of him, "Just a ghost who doesn't make a difference anymore. Good bye."

Vincent heard the door close slowly, just as he'd heard the lid come down, the nails being hammered. But he was really too tired to be scared. He only heard her crying still. A little softer now, a little softer with these wooden walls to muffle the sound, but he heard it anyway. Far off... and she called his name, whispered it, and he could hear it though he didn't know why. He said her name too and for a moment, sealed there in the blackness, Vincent thought it was almost as though they were talking to each other. When she whispered his name back, his heart nearly melted. Her face there in the darkness, smiling at him through tears...

Never change... Please please don't leave or change. I'll be back tonight, and we'll both leave together...

And there was that ruby he'd given her, shining on her finger, shining through the casket's black beside her face.

In the distance, he heard Hojo's voice now too. He was comforting her, saying how he'd come from the Turk leader to tell her about Vincent's resignation, that he and his friend Jimmy had run off together. And she was hysterical now, calling him a liar, but his smooth words calmed her and she collapsed into his arms and Vincent heard it all. And with the words, his tired mind provided an image. Lucrecia wrapped in Hojo's arms, crying uncontrollably into his shoulder, chestnut hair streaming around her face like a shroud. He forgave her and she called herself a fool to have loved a traitor but still, she didn't tell Hojo she was sorry. She only stood and cried and cursed.

Vincent knew Hojo was smiling.

And he fell into sleep and nightmares with that smile burned into his thoughts.

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Phew! So what d'you think? It's almost a little stand-alone fic, isn't it? But no, this was just the set-up to something longer (and because I'd always wanted to try and write this part of the game, especially from Hojo's point of view) Cloud and Zack enter the story in chapter one and we'll get into some really dark stuff, gya ha ha haa. Poor Jimmy though, I guess I probably should have named him Wedge, heh heh ^_^ umm... email me and let me know if I should continue this thing, I don't wanna write something no one's gonna read... (though I probably will anyways, this is fun stuff and the story's gonna have a huge twist at the end)