

The Poetry in Blood

by GlassShard

Chapter 1: Nibelheim

After a while, Zack forced himself to speak, if only to break the silence.

"So. What's it look like out there?" His voice was almost lost in the roar of the airship's engines. The voice that answered him was even quieter.

"...looks just as he said it would."

"So he wasn't bluffing then? Bastard... but no surprise really, I suppose I had the feeling he wasn't all along. You can more or less tell when ole Hojo's talking out of his ass and when there's real truth to back up his threats. He was sneering enough t'let me know he was for real. He was sneering so hard I was surprised his face didn't cave in."

Zack laughed darkly to himself, then stretched his lanky but muscled arms straight out in front of him, popping his elbows and cracking his knuckles. Ugh... too long cramped up in this damned airship in this dusty little room. He could feel a vicious wind blowing at his back, knocking invisible fists against the airship's outside bulkheads. He would've let them in if only for some excitement. Zack wished for a moment that he did in fact have his sword and could gash a hole in the wall, just for the hell of it. Gash both their ways to freedom and let the wind in all at once. Heh... stupid. He hadn't even touched the handle of a sword in four years... he didn't even like to consider how out of practice he must be.

Gods... I'll bet even Aeris could beat me in a spar now, he chuckled to himself, glancing down at his pale hands. He bent his fingers around and examined old scars on his knuckles. Learning to fence... his old instructor had given him half of these gashes. I doubt I'll ever see him again though. I doubt anyone even remembers me anymore.

"Zack?"

The blue-eyed Soldier glanced up when his friend called his name, setting morbid thoughts aside. "Yeah?"

Another pair of blue eyes to meet his, only Cloud's were misted with fear and unshed tears. "C'mere, you have to see..." he whispered, turning away again towards their prison's lone window, "Look at it, look what they've done..." He was leaning heavily against the window frame, gaze re-affixed to a sight far below, barely visible beneath the cloud cover they flew above. Ignoring the knot of dread in his stomach, Zack pushed himself to his feet and looked over his friend's shoulder, already having some idea of what he'd see. Hojo had been mocking them both with the fact for weeks, ever since his assistants had accidentally let it slip to the 'specimens' that they'd all be returning to the mansion today. "To take use of the facilities and the mako reactor there," they'd said. Still, knowing what he'd see outside the window didn't keep the actual sight from gouging a hole in Zack's heart.

"S'funny," he whispered, looking down, and Cloud glanced at him strangely, "It's only disturbing because it isn't a stretch of bodies and ashes. If it was still smokin', I don't think I'd mind seeing Nibelheim again at all really. But not like this. This is like looking at a cemetery..."

The tiny mountain village had been restored. The entire god damnable place had been rebuilt. And even though the airship was still so high above it all, both men could see how thorough the job had been... the old well, the homes, the cobblestone streets, even the wear and tear of hundreds of years had all be simulated. A bloody dusk sun showed it all with a tangible glee, the rays of a setting sun sending fires into the streets again. Too accurate, too true. A marvelous job, without a doubt. Zack ground his molars together and cursed to himself, the smell of blood and mako from that long-ago night in his nostrils again.

"Pretty damn low of 'em, ya know," he muttered, "Pretty damn low."

For just a moment, fire flashed in Zack's mind, memories of a sword and pain and a night that seemed like a dream now. Even more a dream since it seemed the evidence of it all had been so neatly disposed of. Nibelheim had been nothing but blackened boards and lines of smoke last time he'd seen it... that'd been, what, four years ago? Almost five? He barely bothered keeping track of the days anymore. Strange, when at first it had seemed so damned important to keep a grip on that, to mark his birthday and Christmas and holidays. It'd been a link to reality.

"Ya know though, this is just proof positive. We don't have a place in reality anymore. Ya know that, Cloud?"

"Nah..." Cloud answered softly, blue eyes piercing the mist as the airship drew closer to the town, the homes and businesses growing bigger, coming closer and shutting out the countryside. They'd rebuilt Tifa's house. He couldn't tear his attention away from it. "Our realities have just changed is all. Our reality is just different now."

Zack grunted noncommittally and leaned back heavily against the bulkhead. The room they were kept in onboard was small and dark and cold as hell, just another cage. Over the length of four years they just went from cage to cage to cage. "How well d'you remember the mansion?"

Cloud shifted weight from his right foot to his left, leaning heavily on the window frame, looking fixedly on the small village. "I remember it from when I was a kid but... I... I can't remember ever going inside. I don't know. I remember your stories though, it's a real pit, eh?"

"Yeah," Zack sighed, "A pit."

Engines were wheezing nearby, shifting modes as the airship began its laborious landing procedures. Cloud watched Nibelheim grow huge in his sight, the mansion and the mountains looming over the tiny houses throwing huge shadows; intense black shapes caused by the distant setting sun. Orange light on the cobblestones, orange light turning the water in the well to gold. It all looked perfect and peaceful, just as it had so long ago. The corpses were gone, the blood had been hosed away. Cloud wondered if they'd bothered to bury the bodies. Zack just tried not to think about it.

"Hojo's here, right?"

Zack looked up, crossing his arms. "Yup. As always."

"Haven't seen him in a while," Cloud mumbled, trying to keep his hands from shaking, "Haven't minded it really."

The two laughed nervously, airship lurching as its ponderous landing gear creaked into position and met the ground unsteadily. There was a jolt that nearly sent them both to their knees and then things began to quiet. The engines roared a few protests at first, not ready to give out just yet, but the Shinra pilots had their priorities and ignored the cries. The machinery gave out then faded away into an intense buzzing silence immediately broken by the shouts of the work crew as they jumped from their places and threw open the doors. Clamorous crashing as the rear cargo holds were pulled apart; immense steel slabs gouging into the ground and plowing up dirt and grass, then the pounding of boots as men ran down their lengths, cargo in hand.

"Careful, gentlemen. The contents of those crates are worth more than your lives."

Tseng was expressionless as he watched the orange-clad workers unloading the dozens of wooden crates from the Highwind's hold, carting them through the deserted village streets and towards that blackened structure at the far end of town. Frigid air whipped his hair into his face and he discreetly spit out strands of it. There were a thousand and one reasons he didn't want to be here right now. Shit. Here came Reason #1.

"We're late," was Professor Hojo's greeting upon approaching the stony-faced Turk. The scientist clamped one hand down on top of his head, keeping his unruly hair from blowing as it would in the winds. His ponytail lashed his back like a wiry scourge. "For someone with such a highly spoken of reputation, you surely managed to screw this simple venture up. Remind me, Tseng, to respect your skills a bit less after this." The Turk leader pointed his black eyes towards the little man and frowned.

"Late by fifteen minutes, Professor," he said calmly, "And that is only because the winds off the peaks grew momentarily too severe to navigate. It has nothing to do with myself, the pilots, or the crew. Calm down."

"Calm down..." Hojo muttered, kicking smally at the dirt, "You wouldn't be so at ease if you were the one in charge. It's easy enough to take orders and leave the responsibility to me, isn't it? It's sundown, nearly evening. Dangerous to be unloading millions of gil in equipment in the dark, don't you agree? Especially with this pit's reputation. I'd feel safer in Zozo."

"Yes, Professor," Tseng relented with a mental sigh. He wouldn't bother saying that fifteen minutes wouldn't have made any sort of difference with this situation, sunset had started half an hour ago anyways. Nah, why bother? But he couldn't hold his tongue on everything. "I must remind you though," he said a bit coldly, "That I am leader of the Turks and I *do* know very well what it's like to have responsibility thrust upon oneself. Don't demean me."

"Pssshhh," Hojo snapped, waving him off then clapping his chilly hands together and blowing on his fingers, "I'm not going to stand here and argue who's the more miserable son of a bitch with you, eh? Tell the stooges to be careful with the equipment. The facilities in this dump are ancient and dysfunctional, the team and I need all the help we can get if we're to accomplish anything these next few months." Hojo stalked off in a hissy-fit before Tseng could answer, two of his proteges dashing forward from the airship to walk at his heels and yip questions in his ears. Flipping his collar up against the chill, Tseng rolled his eyes and allowed himself a small "idiot" muttered beneath his breath before turning back to the airship and taking a few steps towards it, crossing his arms, tucking his fingers inside his elbows. For a moment, he tried to figure out why he was there at all, how Rude and Reno had both managed to get out of such a distasteful assignment. But screw that. Despite the fact that Tseng himself was in charge, those two always seemed to worm their way out of jobs. Something to do with their relationship with Scarlet, perhaps. And her relationship with old man Shinra. Maybe if he slipped her a little something sometime he could avoid these chauffeur duties. Ach, but that was hardly worth it. Besides, did he really want to be with someone Reno had been with? What a disgusting thought.

"Hey! Watch it there!"

The sound of a crate hitting the earth, splitting apart, and its contents smashing into thousands of unidentifiable fragments, brought Tseng out of his thoughts. A workman who'd been carting the now shattered box around looked at it for a moment, blinked, then glanced to his superior.

"Oops."

"Yeah... "the Turk leader sighed, massaging his brow, "Go tell Hojo 'Oops' and see where it gets you. Get out of my way."

Tseng shoved the meek little nobody aside and clomped up the airship's ramp into the cold darkness of the hold. Idly looking at his white misty breath as it rose from his mouth and froze in the air, he fumbled with some keys and stuck one in a door near the back of the compartment, knocking a bit with the toe of his dress shoe before pushing it open.

Zack heard the sudden sound and jumped to his feet though he'd been expecting the intrusion. Cloud turned and tensed at the same time he did. Both men watched Tseng enter with narrowed eyes and cold expressions, yet neither attempted anything. Despising their captors of four years was just routine. They hated them but it was expected and didn't achieve anything. Hate was all they had to keep going for and so they did it with gusto.

"Heya, Tseng," Zack greeted bitterly, backing up with crossed arms against the rear wall of the tiny room, "They got you playing Igor to Dr. Hojo again? Better quit hanging around him so much, you'll grow a hump on yer back."

"Ha ha. Glad to see the long flight hasn't dulled your wit."

"Hasn't made you any more the master of comebacks either, has it, Turkey boy? So, I take it we're here, eh?"

Tseng frowned and nodded, leaning in the doorway. He looked to Cloud and saw the guy had a look on his face like a wounded animal's, eyes wide, full of fear and dark thoughts. The Turk leader put a hand out towards his shoulder but Cloud shrank back. He didn't like to be touched. After so long under Hojo's experimentation, he'd learned to associate touch with pain; Shinra with pain. And so he backed off from Tseng's attempt at comfort and shrank into himself. Only an occasional threatening glance towards his captor showed that he was paying attention to the situation at all. Cloud's bright blue eyes fixated on the bulge of the gun he could see tucked inside Tseng's jacket. If not for that gun... there'd be nothing keeping him there. But they all had guns, they all had control, he and Hojo and the guards and the Turks and all of them... and Cloud was helpless. But even after being at their mercy for so long, he still couldn't accept it. He doubted he ever would and that was fine with him.

"What's the matter with you?" Tseng snapped, dark brows lowering. He gestured for the both of them to step through the doorway and outside. Cloud skipped out ahead gingerly but Zack took his time, shrugging in response to Tseng's question.

"Pretty obvious it should be, even for a brain-dead stooge like yourself," he answered with a sniff, "How would you like to see the graves of the ones you loved desecrated like this? I don't know how Cloud is managing to do anything but kick you and Hojo's sorry asses."

Tseng laughed aloud at the venom in his prisoner's voice and slowly shook his head, following Zack out of the closet-like space. He popped the young man in the back of his head roughly and said, "As though he could. Ha... as though either of you unfortunate little guinea pigs have ever been able to do anything. You're lucky I've always pitied you too much to bother doing anything about your insults and your hollow threats. Otherwise, punk... well, I won't even go into 'otherwise'. Just know how lucky you are."

Zack answered with an impatient huff, squinting his eyes against the light as he clomped down the airship's ramp. Evening had come but even the glow of dusk, the setting sun, still was painful to his sensitive eyes. He wasn't used to outside light after five years in a cage or in a lab. Practically blinded, he smacked into Cloud as the young man came to an abrupt halt ahead of him.

"What's wrong?"

Cloud wrapped his arms tight around himself and shook his head. His shoulders trembled as he quickly took in the gloomy Nibelheim streets they now stood in. His old home, the inn, the shops and houses of his friends. Zack saw him look at his home for a long time before turning away, sorrow haunting his eyes just as prominently as the mako. He began to take a few steps towards it. He could almost hear her calling... hear his mother's voice, a scolding, a laugh, a joke, a cry of pain. So fresh, as though it was really there, as though she was truly behind those walls as she always had been. No one had ever cared for him as she had. She'd been a good mother, hadn't she? Hadn't she..?

He missed her. As he missed so much of his old life.

"She's not in there, Cloud," Zack said, clamping a caring hand on his friend's shoulder and halting him. He had to keep the guy from going over the edge. It didn't take a lot to set him off.

"But maybe... look, maybe it was never burnt..." he whispered delusionally, half-heartedly trying to break free of Zack's hold, "Look, Zack, look, maybe it never happened and we both dreamed that night! Look! The town looks fine!"

"You know that's not true, c'mon. This is all Shinra's doing, they just rebuilt the place."

Cloud whipped about and threw Zack's arm away, then took a few more jerky steps towards his old home. His eyes were wild. "But the lights behind the windows! Th-they... they couldn't do all this, that's nuts!"

"Cloud, you know they can. And it seems they have."

"Control your friend, Zack." Tseng's words were a warning. He just didn't have the patience to deal with a rash of shit this evening. Zack glared at him, then turned back to Cloud.

"Think her body's still in there?" the younger man screamed out, "Think they just built the house back up around it? Do you, Zack? Or maybe they built me a new mother too! Why the hell not?!"

"Stop it, Cloud!"

But he was ready to run inside and see if his speculation was true. Why not? Why couldn't she be inside? And Tifa too and all the old faces from his childhood? Sephiroth had been a nightmare, none of it had been real, he'd been remembering a lie for four years. Yeah... yeah, she was in there and waiting. Something hummed in his skull and told him it was true.

Tseng was already sick of the delay. With an impatient snort, the Turk leader gestured two of the guards to grab Cloud by the arms and haul him off through the streets and to the mansion. Cloud saw them coming and stiffened, eyes narrowing to fight off the threat. He threw away their grappling arms furiously and three more guards ran forward to keep him from scrabbling towards his home. But he had to get there, he knew she was inside, just as she'd been when he'd come home four years before. But this time his face wasn't hidden behind a mask, this time he'd tell her the truth before Sephiroth came and burned her alive. She wouldn't die thinking he was something he wasn't. She'd know. She'd know, he'd tell her.

"Cloud!" Zack called, wincing as the guards beat savagely on his delusional friend. He tried to interfere but a look from Tseng quenched that idea. Cloud looked up with a bloody nose from amidst the sea of arms trying to apprehend him and gave Zack a look that broke his heart. Tears dropped from his dazzling eyes.

"She's in there!" he cried, "They're just keeping her from me! They don't want me to know! Why we back here, Tseng? Where's Hojo?? I want to see Hojo!!" Screaming in rage and bellowing his commands, Cloud took the head of one of the attacking guards and twisted it about, throwing the man to the ground. Two others jumped him, pinning his arms but he kicked out hard with his right foot into one of their faces and heard something crunch, then a scream of agony and Cloud broke free. He sprinted towards his home in desperation, two very pissed guards on his heels, both swearing and wiping blood from their noses. Zack saw it all and decided to hell with Tseng. He bolted after his friend, fearing what he might do when he saw that his mother wasn't really there. Cloud's rages came and went without warning these days but they were always violent, always drastic.

Violent and drastic were just what Cloud felt right then, running towards a reunion that in his mind was just on the other side of a closed door. So perfect... that worn wooden door, that house, his own old home, all of it just as he remembered it and *not* reduced to rubble and ash and bones. Where other memories were dim, he could so clearly recall running from mean little brats in the rain, blood in his eyes, looking for sanctuary and this house had always been that to him. This house and the warm arms of his mother inside. When Tifa had been too busy with the other boys, Mother was there to explain why none of that mattered because she loved him more than anyone else ever could. Wasn't she in there now? That shriveled, blackened body he'd briefly seen curled into a ball that fiery night had to have been an illusion because a woman with so much love in her heart, such a firm grip on life... such a woman could never die. It was impossible and ridiculous to think of. Sephiroth had known nothing of her. Fires couldn't hurt her, nothing could. She'd be inside now, standing over the fire and making his favourites, just waiting for him to come to her, run into her arms again.

Cloud shakily reached a hand out towards the doorknob, the mountain chill in the air blowing against his bare sweaty arms. His fingers found a grip and turned it and the rattling old door swung slowly open, the hinges catching momentarily half-way through as they always did. The same smell. The same sound of creaky, oft-used hinges. He was home.

"What's your problem, boy?"

There was a woman standing on the other side of the door, a woman with stringy hair, dressed in dirty jeans and a t-shirt. She eyed Cloud impatiently, one hand poised in front of her as though she'd been about to step outside and see what the commotion was all about. Her squinty black eyes ran over the young man now facing her and there was nothing maternal in her stare.

"What are you doing in my house?" Cloud choked, taking a trembling step backwards. He couldn't even hear the approach of the guards. His hands clenched into fists. "You're in the wrong place. Who the hell are you?"

"What're you on?" the woman mocked, eyes narrowed. She looked over Cloud's shoulder and raised an eyebrow at Tseng and Zack. "You Shinra lose one of your charges?" she called, "It's a little late for me to have to be hassled by this nonsense, thanks much."

Cloud almost sank to the ground, unshed tears standing out bright in his mako blue eyes. Horror turned his face to an ugly whitish shade, splotches of red on his cheeks. But then anger replaced it all.

The woman gave a strangled cry when Cloud leapt at her, arms outstretched as though to snap her neck. He tackled her like an animal and his knee made contact with her sternum as they both tumbled backwards into the house, Cloud on top and wrapping his fingers around her throat. "You're one of them, aren't you?!" he demanded, sobs choking his words. The woman turned blue and gagged, clawing at his fingers and drawing blood as her legs thrashed the air. She tried to shake her head and mouth some answer but all she could do was gasp. Cloud shoved his knee further into her stomach and tightened his grip, sweat dripping off his chin and into her panicking face.

"Cloud! Cloud, snap out of it!" Zack roughly grabbed his friend from behind and tried to wrench him away but Cloud was three times too strong for him and his sanity seemed to be hiding off somewhere behind a rock, "Let her go! You don't even know her! Listen to me, she hasn't done anything to you!"

Looking somewhat amused, Tseng approached the little confrontation silently, a black nightstick in his hand. He watched the struggles just inside the house with mute fascination, somewhat impressed by the speed at which Cloud had tackled the helpless woman. Crazy or not, he was damned formidable. But still...

Without a sound, Tseng brought the nightstick back and slammed it dead center into Cloud's skull, the jolt of the impact sending shivers up his own arm. The attacker's grip slackened and the woman immediately slipped out from under him. Zack caught Cloud before he could slump to the ground, cradling him by the shoulders and gritting his teeth in repressed rage.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" Tseng questioned, helping the lady to her feet and shooting a look at the two men on the floor. The woman choked and wheezed but managed to stand, one arm wrapped around her stomach, the other, rubbing her bruised throat. "Get this woman to the clinic!"

Tseng shouted his words at the guards who'd finally arrived and they escorted her away, two more showing up to grab a firm hold of Cloud. The blow from the nightstick hadn't knocked him out but the rage had left of him, disappearing just as quickly as it had come. Zack backed away, eyeing his friend in concern but not bothering to try and be near him. It wouldn't have been allowed anyway. Tseng ditched his nightstick, approached Cloud, and grabbed his chin in his hands as the guards held him roughly by the arms. "You going to behave now?" he asked, "Now that you've had a bit of sense knocked back into your mako-ridden brain?"

Cloud's only response were the two lines of tears that ran quickly down from his half-closed eyes. They slid off his chin and splattered into the worn carpet of the house's hallway, the only honest things in the entire place. Tseng glared at his bowed blonde head in disgust. "C'mon," he snapped to Zack and the guards, "It's getting dark."

Cloud was dragged from the house without further incident, defeated and grieving, then Tseng gave the interior a quick glance and followed, knowing Zack would need no escort since they had Cloud. There'd be no rebellion from him as long as Cloud was concerned. He shuffled after Tseng, politely closing the door to his friend's old home behind him. Nothing inside but memories and lies. Nothing in this entire rebuilt town but the same. Only that mansion at the end of the street was the same as it had been five years before; the one constant, the one survivor. As were he and Cloud.

Another half an hour of work and the airship's hold was cleaned of the research team's supplies. A snaking line of cargo-toting workers had stretched from it to the mansion for what seemed like forever but now the line dwindled and the pilots were ordered to begin the long journey back to Midgar and leave the scientists to their work. Tseng left with them and was glad as hell to go. This town had always creeped him out and that mansion wasn't exactly the Gold Saucer when it came to cheeriness. He stood on the bridge and peered out a side window for a while, watching the false town grow smaller and finally sink into the blackening horizon as the airship soared off. Hojo was in his element, he thought wryly, Hell, he could have it. Tseng would take the Shinra building any day of the week as opposed to this creepy-ass mountain pit. Good-bye Nibelheim and good riddance.

Forehead pressed to the cool glass of the second story window, Professor Hojo watched the airship get smaller and smaller and smaller, a glittering silver lump in the blackness of the seven o'clock sky.

"Sir?" a timid voice called from behind and Hojo gave an inaudible sigh. Just five minutes to himself to readjust to being back here would have been nice. But no, just too damn much to ask.

"What is it?" he snapped without turning around. He could feel the nervousness of the assistant behind him and he grinned. Hojo scared everyone. Good. Unapproachable was a good way to be.

"Dr. Waters was wondering if you wouldn't like to supervise some of the clean-up in the laboratory. He knows how particular you are..."

"Is the man so incompetent that he can't handle some redecorating?" Hojo laughed meanly, "I'll be there in a few minutes. Until then, just tell him to remember he is a member of the human species. He does indeed have a brain."

"Yes, sir. And sir, it seems there was a woman injured in town by one of the specimen this evening and there is no resident doctor. Mr. Tseng had her brought here, she's in a room upstairs. He was wondering if you might have someone look her over sometime tonight."

"I love Tseng, "Hojo spat sarcastically, smacking his forehead back and forth softly on the window pane, "Ten years in medical school, ten years interning, and he expects me to play medic to some Nibelheim slut. Ah, well, we must never forget our roots, eh, Pepper?"

"Please don't call me Pepper, sir."

"But I thought that was your name. It's what I've observed the young doctors call you."

Pepper frowned a bit, scratching at his gray and black goatee. "But my name is actually Wuppingham, sir."

Hojo smiled, finally turning from the window and then leaning back against it. "I prefer Pepper, Pepper. It's endearing. I used to have a test chimp named Pepper."

The young assistant wasn't sure how to respond, so he didn't. Hojo nearly burst out laughing. "Tell Dr. Waters I'll be downstairs shortly. And inform the group that there'll be a meeting in the Library at nine pm. Off with you now and watch out for ghosts, this place is full of them."

"Ghosts?" Pepper asked, face draining of color. Hojo sighed and rolled his eyes.

"The metaphorical kind, son. Although the actors peopling this false village say they see real ghosts. Pale faces behind the windows at three in the morning, chains rattling, phantoms popping from the ground and saying 'boo' whenever anyone gets too close to the gate. But there's only one monster in this town and he won't be bothering anyone, trust me."

"And who would that be, sir?" Pepper asked, brow furrowed. Hojo grinned and shrugged his shoulders.

"No one of any concern to anyone," he finally answered, "Now go tell Dr. Waters what I said."

"Yes, sir."

Pepper popped off down the hall but his steps were hesitant and his eyes fearful of the things that Hojo had talked about so casually. There could be real ghosts here. He was a man of science but not so narrow-minded that he didn't believe those things were possible. This entire creepy mansion, this entire creepy town could be peopled with spirits. Lots of experiments had been performed here years before, a lot of specimens lost their lives in the name of something greater. Even Hojo's own wife had given her life to produce the great warrior Sephiroth and the story of her actions was something like a legend in the Shinra Science Department. Lucrecia Hojo had sacrificed her life for science, you just couldn't give anymore than that. Too bad that the young General had gotten himself killed four years before by the guy with the nutty blonde hair. Pepper shrugged as he rounded a corner in the hall and made for the labs. Lucrecia was dead anyways, it's not like she knew her sacrifice had wound up being such a waste. And so, Pepper wondered, what the hell was the point of ever sacrificing your life for anything? Dead was dead was dead, no matter the crap you left in your wake. That Lucrecia had been an idiot.

Hojo dropped his hands into the pockets of his khakis as the young assistant disappeared into the evening gloom of the hallway. There was so much work to do and suddenly he just didn't feel like doing it. He felt like standing there and reminiscing actually. Everything about this mansion was assaulting him with memories he hadn't slogged through in years. There really were ghosts here. He could practically smell them. But no time. No time for regret or wondering, there was much work to do, many tragedies to repair.

As though strolling down a city sidewalk, Hojo strolled through the mansion hallway, admiring the blue light of evening that soaked the inner atmosphere. He hadn't thought about her in so long. It was more comfortable that way. And he didn't miss her, Jenova was there to fill that longing for love. And Costa Del Sol existed to satisfy any physical insufficiencies. So he didn't miss Lucrecia at all. But he always wore his ring. Too lazy to take it off now, he supposed, idly twirling the golden band around and around his finger. His hands had swollen over the years and when he tried to take it off now, he suddenly found he couldn't.

"Son of a bitch..."

He tugged and pulled and swore at the bastard ring but it wouldn't come off his finger. The gold glittered and mocked him. Fine then, he thought venomously, screw you and stay there. Your mate's quite dead and buried but you stay there. Fine.

Buried and dead along with her son. Their son...

Four years dead.

As far as Hojo knew, Sephiroth had been dead for four years, a smear of soot somewhere in the bottom of the mako reactor on Mt. Nibel. He'd had to make that assumption. A body had never been found but Hojo had to assume his Soldier was dead or he'd go mad with speculation. How couldn't he be dead? Cloud Strife had pushed him off the catwalk to certain death, mako energy had fried him like a drop of grease on a hot sidewalk. Twenty-five years of work was dead.

It had taken a long time for him to accept that. Hojo had always had a hard time accepting failure. But it wasn't his fault, he chalked it all up to bad luck. At least fortune had seen fit to deliver Cloud and Zack into his hands, he could at least console himself with that. And Gast was dead, Lucrecia was gone, there was no one to interfere with his work this time around. He could alter Cloud Strife just as he wanted and no one gave a damn except perhaps for Zack and he was helpless as a baby himself. But still... the replacements were nice, they were adequate, but they just weren't Sephiroth. Being back in this mansion made that absence in his life stand out more than it had during all the past four years since his death. Hojo probably could have cried if he'd allowed himself the luxury. He did miss him. He wasn't sure why, but he did. He hadn't loved him though. No, not for the shortest moment had he ever loved his son. Not once.

Jenova missed Sephiroth. Hojo was sure she'd wept when he'd told her the news. She never spoke to him except for maybe the smallest of whispers in the back of his mind but he was sure that she'd understood their loss. Jenova managed to communicate so much to him, to get her point across without words or sound. It impressed the hell out of Hojo. She was a clever little minx of an Ancient, there was no doubting that. And because she so dearly missed their son, perhaps that was why Hojo knew he had to make her another. He couldn't bear to see her so upset. Cloud would do. He wasn't Sephiroth, but he would do until the other clones were completed.

Hojo nearly jumped out of his skin when something bumped into him in the hallway. He'd been ambling along with his head down and his hands behind his back, lost in his ponderings, and now he looked up to see some greasy-looking woman standing in the dim lighting and looking at Hojo as though he had three heads. "Who are you?" he asked, "You're not with the company. You're trespassing."

"I er..." the woman crossed her arms and took a step backwards, looking around nervously, "That guy in the blue suit, ya know, with the dot between his eyes, said I should wait up here for a doctor. I been up here a while though and no one's come. Shinra treat all its employees so wonderfully? Hot damn... some spiky-haired fruit-loop tries to take my head off and I'm nice enough not to haul my happy ass to an attorney and sue and this is how I'm treated. If no one's going to look at my throat, I'll just leave, thanks."

She gave Hojo a last look, something like a sneer on her lips and was about to take a step towards the stairs but he clamped a cold hand on her arm to halt her.

"Do you mind, four-eyes?" she snapped.

Hojo blinked hard at the comment, taking his hand away and shoving it in his pocket. "What's wrong with your throat?" he asked, giving a meek little cough.

"I told you, that high-strung guy tried to strangle me."

"You merely said he tried to take your head off. But I would use a chainsaw if I were going to do such a thing, not my bare hands."

Hojo grinned wickedly and the woman began to look really nervous.

"Yeah," she murmured, trying to head towards the stairs again. This mousey little guy was creeping her out, looking at her as though he wanted to snatch her up and plop her in the pocket of that ratty looking lab coat, "Well, I'm going to go, it's getting late. Nibelheim isn't exactly the safest place to be out in at night."

"No kidding. But you know, I'm a doctor."

"Oh? I guess that would explain the coat."

"A professor actually."

The woman crossed her arms and looked skeptical. She wondered if he was trying to impress her with that fact. Oh god, he wasn't flirting with her, was he?! "Um.. what field?" she asked, trying to sound friendly.

"I have doctorates in both medical and planetary sciences. But to be honest, I like to try a little bit of everything. For kicks, you understand. I know more than enough to look at your throat though. I can see from here it's bruised, a little swollen. How's your breathing?"

"I-i-it's okay. Hey, m-maybe I just over-reacted. That guy in the suit just wanted to make sure I wasn't hurt. Probably just wanted to keep me from taking legal actions against you all. And hey, I can't blame him. Though you guys should keep a tighter handle on the loonies that you lead around, that kid was whacked. He had them nutty eyes that all the army guys have. Creeped me out. Well, his eyes creeped me out in addition to the fact that he was tryin' to kill me."

"Cloud goes a little nuts sometimes," Hojo laughed, taking a step towards her. She took a step back. "But we all do occasionally. If you step into that room there, the light's much better and I'll have a look at your throat. The lighting in this hallway is terrible. Old building, half the bulbs are dead."

"Yeah... kind of a weird place for you scientist types to be. This is more like some schtick prop from a horror movie than a lab. You guys makin' Frankenstein in here or what?"

She laughed and Hojo laughed with her. He hustled her through a nearby doorway but the woman hooked her hand around the passage. "Really," she said, "I think I'm okay, I'll just head out now. You can tell the guy in the suit that it all worked out okay, he seemed concerned."

"But you can't take these things too lightly. You could be hurt. Best to let me have a look at it."

"But I really think--"

"No, no, I insist. Tseng thought you should be examined and I'll oblige."

Jenova told Hojo many things without ever using words at all. She seemed to know a lot, or so Hojo had noticed. And her advice, at times, was uncannily good. He almost always did as she suggested and now, in her soundless way, she was suggesting things again, her voice nothing more than a ticklish feather of sound in his ear. Yet with no difficulty, he made out every word. The advice was good. Good as it always was. So the scientist put a firm hand on the woman's shoulder, trying his best to keep his demeanor friendly, a smile on his face, innocence about his person. She was hesitant but he was persistent. Because Jenova said it was a good idea. Because she said so.

"This room right here," he murmured, guiding the woman through the dark, coaxing her through an unlit doorway, "Right here."

The door closed behind them both.

The false creation of Shinra that was Nibelheim housed approximately two hundred and fifty or so citizens. Some were actors, hired hands there to play the part of townsfolk and fool those passing through into believing a madman had never torched the place years before. Others were simple people looking for cheap housing. Shinra had sent advertisements to Corel, posted fliers in the slums of Midgar, trying their damndest to attract citizens to their city. Free housing, free homes. The poor had flocked to snatch it all up and as a result, the newly rebuilt town wound up populated with thieves and destitute lowlifes. You just didn't walk the streets alone after dark, it just wasn't healthy. A knife to your throat, a whispered threat under the glow of a streetlight and you'd find yourself suddenly missing your wallet.

The cobblestone road glistened beneath the moon. Clacking shoes made their way over the pavement, their owner's eyes pointed towards the upper floors of the towering structure perched at the end of the street. He was nervous, he knew how stupid it was to be out this late. He could feel things watching from the alleys, things even more heartless than the rats gnawing each other in the garbage cans. But he couldn't very well go and let his sister stay out all night. He'd come home that evening to find her gone and one of the neighbors had had a little story to spin about an airship and a freaked out kid with weird hair and weirder eyes. Something about Shinra too. And that was bizarre. All this guy knew of Shinra was that it was their seal imprinted at the top of his paycheck every two weeks. He worked for them but he never saw a face outta that company. He'd never even been to Midgar, he was a penniless stage actor from Wutai, lured to Nibelheim by a very enthusiastic guy with bright red hair and a blue suit who'd wandered into town one day. Reno'd been his name, a recruiter... the Turk had treated him at Turtle's Paradise one night and poor Chet, the actor's name was Chet, poor Chet had gotten drunk outta his head. Next thing he knew, he'd woken up in a plane on its way to Nibelheim, his sister, his dog, and all his earthly possessions stacked around him. A note tucked into his pocket had read:

Yo Chet, you're working for Shinra now, pal. Be good-- Reno

And Chet didn't mind, honestly. He hadn't had anything going on back in Wutai except a few dog food commercials he'd gotten to be an extra in. His agent had even abandoned him. His girlfriend had called him a loser and abruptly started going out with his dad. Yeah, Chet had been going nowhere fast back in Wutai.

Hell, he still was. But at least now a company named Shinra was paying him to do it.

Stupid Sara, he thought vehemently, his footsteps alarmingly loud on the street. Stupid Sara, where are you? Why did some freaky blonde kid attack you? And what the hell are a bunch of Shinra jerks doing here? Months without a word from anyone and now a giant airship arrives full of them... they better not be going to shut this whole operation they got going on down. Man, the money's too good, I wanna keep this job.

The moon was a white smile up in the corner of the sky, sickly yellow and razor sharp against the clouds. The streets were dark as hell, coated with the palest of milky-white light. It didn't do anything more than make the shadows that much blacker. A foul breeze was blowing off the mountain, bitterly cold but wet too, a storm behind it. All it ever bloody did in Nibelheim was rain. The place was always wet and grimy and nasty. The cheap lumber in the houses had begun to rot almost immediately after the company had finished building. A dismal situation all in all.

Chet pushed the mansion's rotted gate open without a thought to how intimidating the place was. He'd been living in the damned town long enough, he was used to this creep-fest of a building. It was so scary it was almost funny. And that was how Chet thought of it, whenever the thunder of a storm might wake him up at three in the morning and he'd wander out of his bedroom, look casually out of his home's front window, and see the mansion down the street, silhouetted by lightening. It was frigging funny. It was corny! He couldn't be afraid of the mansion if he was too busy laughing at it.

He'd never actually gone up to it though.

It got harder to laugh the closer he came.

Dead grass and thriving weeds crunched under his feet as he traversed the overgrown path leading up to the rotting front door. This entire place was just rotting away, wasn't it? he mused. Peeling paint, sagging eaves, that gate had been rusted almost to ruin. Chet wondered how old the dump was and who'd built it. They called it the Shinra mansion but what did that mean? Did they mean to tell him that the Shinra Company had built this pile of crap? Ha, that was just crazy. Some old guy musta knocked off so Shinra bought the place. And now they were peopling it with a bunch of whacked scientists. And for some really really insane reason, his sister Sara was inside! Why?

Chet cursed and swore to himself, the cuffs of his jeans getting caught up in the sharp spikes of the weeds. He clomped forward through the untended lawn until he noticed how quiet the whole place was. Awfully quiet if there were all those people in there, eh? The young guy took a step backwards, craning his neck up to try and see all the way to the top windows. It was harder now that he was so close, harder to see.

No lights on.

Only around 8:30 and no lights on. They couldn't all be asleep, eh? Nobody home then? Well then where in God's name was Sara?!

"I'm gonna ring her neck when I find her..." he muttered to himself, shivering in the chill breeze, "I'm gonna ship her back to Wutai, I swear it! She couldn't have left a note, she couldn't have told someone! Is she really inside there? How the hell do I find her?!"

The winds let up quite suddenly. Chet paused in his rant, thinking he heard something. He took a step backwards, still looking up, crying out as he tripped over an uneven spot in the path and fell backwards onto his ass. Yeah... he heard something. He heard something that made his heart pound blood in his ears. He heard something coming from the top of this god-forsaken mansion. Screams. And they sounded sorta like Sara.

~*~

Hojo wiped his hands on his pants after softly shutting the door behind him. He took off towards the labs with a smile on his face.

~*~

"Shit... Z-zack... where are we, man?"

"Ssh."

Zack moved a finger to his lips and Cloud nodded, not understanding why he needed to be quiet but knowing to obey without question. He blinked hard and shook his head a bit, having just awoken from a batch of rather potent sedatives. Stupid drugs laid a blanket over his brain, he hated them more than almost any other aspect of his imprisonment. Movements slow and trembling, he pushed himself to a sitting position, found a wall, and scooted towards it, laying his back against cool concrete. Wherever they were, it was dark, almost pitch, and cold and wet and nasty. This was a squarish concrete cell he finally observed, roughly seven feet by seven feet. Ick, nothing more than another cramped cage.

"The Shinra mansion," Zack explained in a soft whisper to his friend, "We're in the basement, the library. They knocked you out after you jumped that lady. You okay?"

"I guess... what lady?"

"Do you remember this place at all?"

"This place? The mansion's library? I never went into the library, I don't think."

"Maybe not..." Sometimes Zack wondered why he bothered asking Cloud anything, he never remembered. That whole trip to Nibelheim four years ago was a blank to him. Repression or mako or possibly both were the cause, Zack had no real idea. He touched his friend lightly on the shoulder and gestured to a single square of dim light embedded in the opposite wall. Cloud looked confused for a moment, then climbed to his feet and made his way towards it.

"We're in a cell in the lab. I think they're having a meeting out there."

"They?"

Cloud gripped the rim of the window with his fingertips and hung heavily from it, peering outside and trying to wake himself up. So dim out there, hard to make out anything really. Lots of books... the glint of equipment, the usual tanks, tubes and machines... needles... all those things that he was so used to after so long yet they could still, sometimes, make him shiver. They weren't what was interesting though, nor what Zack was talking about. Way off in the dimly-lit room outside lay a four-sided table and nine or so scientists seated about it. Papers littered the scratched wood, white squares of light amidst all that gloom. It was really dark out there, they had the lights dimmed, sitting around like a lotta little plotting vampires, soft yellow lantern light streaming about their heads. Cloud wondered if they knew that he was watching them. They probably did. But they probably didn't care.

"What're we doing here, Zack?" Cloud whispered, not turning from the view of the gathered scientists, "Shinra building's bad enough but bein' back here in the mansion? What's up?"

"I don't know, man," Zack answered, stretching his arms back behind his head and trying to find some sort of comfortable position. He failed. "Listen up and see if you can pick up on anything. Just behave though, all right? I hate watching them beat on you when you start getting all violent. You get into fights at the drop of a hat, you know that?"

"Can't help it," Cloud said softly, "Can't help it."

He rested his chin on the edge of the window and tried to follow Zack's advice. He could see through the dark easily. And he could hear them all even better. He stayed quiet and tried to learn what he could.

"It's really only a matter of time, sir..."

Nine scientists, a regular little ball team of freaks, he'd already counted. The shortest of them all sat at the table's head and Cloud couldn't make out his features or see anything of the little man except for his silhouette and a few sharply defined shadows across his chest. But he still knew it was Hojo. His nervous little hand gestures and his constantly turning head, taking in the expressions of all the lower ranking scientists seated about him, gave him away. Cloud was frightened

of Hojo as he was of few others. Hojo made it all happen, he was the source of suffering and the God of Cloud's small, dark, pain-filled world. A spiteful, cruel God. But his little angels held the potential to be just as bad.

The one who was speaking was a youngish sort, Cloud didn't know his name. Typical young scientist full of dreams though, the sort that pandered to Hojo and licked his shoe soles for attention. "A matter of time, sir," he was saying, straightening a stack of papers in his hands, "That's what it was at the beginning. Myself and the rest of the JP staff just wanted to congratulate you on how that matter of time has finally blossomed into 'the time is now'. Waiting is over, preparation is over, and President Shinra's about to be very much rewarded for his patience and generous funding."

"Yes, yes," Hojo said dismissively, weary body splayed in a high-backed leather office chair. He waved the young scientist away as though swatting a fly, "Thank you for the congratulations, Watts, but speeches are a waste of our time. Just as the last four years have been a waste of our time. We had what we desired... and then it was taken away. What we're about to recreate can never be as perfect as that original copy. Not a clone... an imperfect "second try". That's all we have. Don't piss in your pants over it, Watts."

The young scientist looked decidedly uncomfortable and sheepish. He sat back in his seat and frowned. Hojo eyeballed him and continued.

"I would prefer a few more practical reports, gentlemen. Have the tanks been prepped? Equipment unpacked and reconstructed? Waters, did you sterilize the tank we'll be using for Jenova?"

"What? What tank? Professor Hojo, why would we need a tank?"

That voice was a familiar one. Cloud knew well of Dr. Waters, he disputed Hojo on everything, it was common practice in the labs for the two of them to snap at each other's throats. Even now, each word he spoke dripped defiance.

Hojo stared at his younger rival in undisguised disgust. "Dr. Waters..." he began as condescendingly as possible, resting his two pale hands on the tabletop, "Despite the delusions of leadership that revolve in your pathetically minute intellect, I am in charge of this project. We need a tank. We'll be relocating Jenova to the facilities here, the reactor atop the mountain has become too unstable. So, I want a holding tank prepared. And I want all necessary actions taken to ensure it is up to par and ready to receive so important a specimen. Understood?"

Waters looked more like a professional wrestler than a scientist. Six and half feet tall, sinewy and thick like a lion, you could see the power rippling beneath his ridiculously ill-fitting lab coat. When he wasn't disputing Hojo or carrying out experiments, he was on the Shinra Company football team. Waters carried that competitive attitude with him off the field. The attitude and the build. "It's too dangerous a venture and a waste of effort," he said stiffly, looking his superior dead in the eye, the muscles around his thickly shaped lips trembling with repressed annoyance, "The tanks in the reactor are infinitely better tuned to perform as we need. Anything we manage to duplicate here, in the laboratory, is going to be inferior to the sort of performance we could achieve within the reactor. The Jenova creature is better synchronized with that equipment. We should conduct the final phase there."

Hojo grinned, sat forward, and slapped his chin in his hand. "Dr. Waters, it seems you were under the mistaken impression that I asked for your advice. Hello! I never did! The equipment in the Nibelheim reactor is in a horrible state of disrepair, it hasn't been used, really used, for nearly thirty years. And Sephiroth partially destroyed half the facilities looking for his mother. President Shinra paid only to restore Jenova's life support mechanisms, he honestly didn't give a damn about the analysis devices. So, dear Doctor, keep your mouth shut and do as I say. Don't question me. We bring the creature here, we conduct the injections here. All right?"

"I still disagree..." Waters mumbled, crossing his thick arms over his broad chest, "The results will be substandard..."

"Of course you disagree," Hojo snapped, tapping his fingers on the table and running his eyes over the pages of a report just handed to him, "It's in your nature to disagree, I expect no less from you."

"Sir, do we head towards the reactor tomorrow?" another Doctor asked quite suddenly, quite meekly. Hojo half-shut his eyes and nodded.

"The sooner the better, so yes, tomorrow morning, nine-thirty am, I want the team assembled at the front gates. Boots and warm clothes. The hike is a bit treacherous."

"I don't see why we have to carry out such unpleasant business ourselves," Waters mumbled beneath his breath, "That's what Turks and Soldiers are for. Shinra does not pay us to hike up the sides of mountains."

"It's true," another scientist said at his side, "It does seem a bit ridiculous, I mean..."

"You'll see, each and every one of you shall see..." Hojo got stiffly to his feet and gestured grandly with his words, "You'll see the price of failure and you'll see the greatness of that thing we've failed. You'll see Jenova as Sephiroth saw her and you'll understand, perhaps, why he felt so inclined to serve her."

And why I feel so inclined

"It would be undignified for us to leave the task of moving her to common Soldiers or Turks. They'd haul the specimen through the ice like some common hunk of flesh. Respect and care are just as important in this project as results. So we handle our own business and our own responsibilities ourselves. Do you hear me? Does every one of you understand me?"

Hojo's voice had raised to a holler near the end and the scientists looked at him like a lunatic. But it wasn't the first time they'd heard him speak with such insanity in his tone, they all were quite well aware how nuts their leader was.

"You sound as though you're in love with this creature," Waters sneered, garnering a few laughs from his co-workers, "You sure you don't want to go up there by yourself tomorrow, Professor Hojo? Have some time alone?"

The scientists laughed, each one of them, as much release of tension in their chuckles as there was real humor. Hojo was still on his feet and he watched them all with an amazingly calm expression on his face. They always laughed. But fuck, why not? He was damned funny, glad to be a joke for them. But they wouldn't be laughing after tomorrow, not after they saw what they were about to do to Cloud Strife. True, in many ways he'd be nothing compared to what Sephiroth was, but in another way, he'd be a lot more.

"Thank you for the offer, Dr. Waters," Hojo said softly, barely heard through the laughter. He could compose himself so well if he really put forth the effort. And why should he get upset over what these cretins thought? They just didn't know, was all. Jenova didn't speak to them. They weren't as lucky. "Yes, thank you, but you all should see. A shame we can't conduct the actual procedures there, but we'll manage, I'm sure of it."

Hojo took his seat again, sitting back and folding his arms over his chest, letting the rest of the team discuss a few of the more mundane aspects of the Project among themselves. Already, they were content to forget the Professor and how fervently he thought of the Jenova specimen as a living, thinking entity. They all "knew" the monster was dead, alive only in a technical sense. No real sentience there, no real consciousness. And let them think that, Hojo thought viciously, let them delude themselves for as long as they will, but not I. I know!

"...yes, and we've had a somewhat difficult time finding space for all the equipment. This facility is hardly adequate to our needs, more like a tomb than a laboratory."

Hojo looked up from his wild thoughts and raised an eyebrow towards the young man speaking. "That was President Shinra," he muttered, "The concept of the place tickled his fancy thirty years ago so he went with it. He didn't care."

"I saw a few rooms in the hallway outside that seemed vacant," Pepper piped in suddenly. Hojo blinked a few times, not having realized the squirrely little assistant was in attendance. "Perhaps we could set up a viewing room in one, another might do as a storage space for the cultures and samples after a thorough sterilization--"

"There's nothing of interest in those rooms," Hojo said a little too quickly. He sat forward and shook his head. "Nothing, so leave them be. They were ah... contaminated years ago, and are hazardous to enter. Leave them be."

"Contaminated?" Waters questioned. He swept a thick hand back through his mop of brown hair, "By what?"

"Does it matter? Do not question me, Waters! I'm already getting tired of your belligerence! Do you want me to have you shipped back to Midgar?!"

Waters grit his teeth but said nothing more. He was probably one of the only scientists who dared look Hojo in the eyes when he spoke to him. And because of this, he frightened Hojo as much as he angered him. The Professor shot to his feet and marched over to Waters, beginning to shout threats in his face. Inside the darkened cell, Zack sat up with a start. He'd been starting to doze.

"..eh? That Waters and Hojo going at each other's throats again?" he asked with a yawn, "Man oh man, does that ever get old."

"I think it's kinda funny," Cloud said softly, leaning heavily on the door, still looking out. His spiky blonde head blocked the light from the window, beams of white breaking from around his hair. Zack squinted as he looked up at him. "It's nice to see *someone* telling Hojo off. Even if Waters always backs down. Man, I don't back down. I curse Hojo till my throat's sore, I never back down. Neither do you."

"Well... we don't have to worry about Hojo firing us," Zack said with half a grin, "Hell, I wish he would fire us, what a great thought. Useless stupid thought though. C'mon, Cloud, they're just gonna babble all night, why don't you get some sleep? I'd love to stay up all night and jabber but all the traveling today wore me out."

"Sleep?" Cloud said the word as though it were new to him, not turning around. He listened to the softening voices outside, watching Hojo finally move away from his rival and plop back down in his chair. The meeting picked up again, boring talk of procedures and equipment. "I don't want to go to sleep, Zack. The sooner I do, the sooner I wake up and it's morning. I... I'm rather scared of what they're going to do tomorrow."

"But you don't even know. They haven't told us shit."

Cloud put his back to the door, crossing his arms, and heaved a sigh. "Yeah, and that's why I'm scared."

"Hey, after the crap we've put up with for four years, what worse can they do? Can anything be worse than the injections? The tanks? The endurance exams? Fuck me, but nothing's worse than those. Tomorrow, whatever they're gonna do, will be a piece of cake. I ain't concerned. Not relishing the thought of the hike to the reactor though."

"Me neither. I don't like the mountains. Bad memories there."

"Yeah... for me too. Watch my back for me, eh?"

"You watch mine."

"Deal."

Zack gave a sleepy salute and rolled over onto his side, facing the wall. Not too shabby for a storage closet, there were some blankets in here, he wadded one up under his head and tried to clear his mind. Cloud stared at his back for a while and watched him fall asleep, all the time trying to keep his own eyelids from growing too heavy. The voices of the scientists droned at his back. Hojo's menacing tone occasionally broke through and startled him but other than that it was peaceful, almost nice. Nicer than their rooms in the Shinra building, where the air conditioning roared to life every half an hour, and the screams of patients pierced through even the foot and a half of insulation in every wall. Cold and sterile and loud, loud even when it was quiet in those labs. But here, Cloud had that old warm feeling of home again. He was home, in Nibelheim, even in this concrete cell with his mother dead and the town false and all the people strangers. He was still home, standing in the shadows of the mountains. If he closed his eyes and strained his hearing, he could make out the breath of the sky blowing in the eaves of the mansion, just as it used to blow in the eaves of his house. Mountain winds... a romantic phrase. And they sounded romantic, the way they whistled songs to his eager ears, real songs with melodies and rises and falls. If he closed his eyes and concentrated on those winds, he could imagine that he was a kid again, standing at his window, his mother's hand on his shoulder and his eyes pointed towards the stars.

Something like a smile on his face, Cloud slumped down against the door, knowing he shouldn't fall asleep but he couldn't help it anymore. Maybe he'd be able to have a few nice dreams before the nightmare began the next day.

~*~

"Eleven-fifteen, sir," Pepper reported, glancing at his worn wristwatch, "Cloud and Zack are asleep, I just checked on them."

Hojo grunted, a sign that he didn't give a damn, and Pepper shrugged, getting up from his seat and gathering his reports into a neat stack of papers. With a deadly look on his face, Hojo gestured for his team to leave, flinging a pale hand out at them like a scourge. The scientists all eagerly obeyed, only too glad to get out of there after exerting so much energy just to put up with a madman for two hours. One lagged behind, Dr. Waters, his two beefy hands clamped on the back of his chair while both beady eyes bored into Hojo's averted face as though he'd very much like to go up to him and introduce his head to a brick. Hojo could feel the staring and he grinned, moving a fist up to his mouth to hide it his unexplainable amusement.

"Have a problem, Dr. Waters?"

The well-built man hadn't been expecting his superior to actually speak and Hojo was rather thrilled to see he'd unnerved him. The professor grinned even harder, leaning back in his chair. Nice chair this, he thought distractedly, Shinra could do luxury right on occasion.

"Nothing, sir," Waters finally answered. He moved his hands over the chair now, distractedly poking at the armrest and picking lint off the cushions, half turned as though to leave. But there was something in his face that said his response was a lie. Hojo examined him without hiding the fact; rebellion was there. Rebellion. But that was no surprise. Hojo giggled to himself.

"Will you be that much of a problem on this trip, young man?" he asked, unnerving Waters further. The Doctor shook his head.

"No, sir. If I do give voice to my opinions I simply cannot help it. I do not like wastes... wastes of money, time or effort. Some of the things we'll be doing here are just that though. And I feel I should let my opinion be known."

"Even if your opinions are stupid?" Hojo asked, smiling.

"No such thing as a bad opinion, sir."

"Ha! The man who coined that phrase obviously had many bad opinions, had to find something to say to people who told him so. Well, Waters! Well, we'll see how you work out, won't we? But remember, as I said before, a snap of my fingers and you'll be back counting tissue samples in Midgar, remember that. I know you don't like me, hell, I don't like you enough to spit on you, but I am your superior. And the Jenova Project and everything associated with it belong to me. I have the final word on all of it. You punks aren't going to snatch my Project from my hands after thirty years just as Strife snatched Sephiroth from me! Jenova will not die with that man, she will not die at all, we won't let her!!"

Waters crossed his arms and shuffled his feet uneasily. Great, he thought, the lunatic was ranting again.

Breathing heavy, Hojo suddenly remembered to compose himself, wiping sweat from his forehead and gritting his teeth. He was just so unexplainably aggravated. "Get out of my sight, Waters," he growled, "I'll see you all by the gates in the morning. Don't be late. Don't let tardiness be an addition to your long, long list of faults."

Waters was ready to knock the little bastard out but he held his anger in and did as told, sweeping from the gloom of the library like a white-coated titan. He left the place cold and empty behind him. Hojo sat at the table for a while, staring through the darkness at the old equipment. If he held his own breath, he could hear the breathing of his little patients, Zack and Cloud, lost in blissful slumber in one of the back storage rooms. A rather inappropriate cage but all they'd had to work with. Ah, well, he hadn't heard them complain. They were too scared to complain.

Trying to shove the recent confrontation with Waters from his mind, the Professor stood from the table stiffly, his backbone cracking like a whip and he winced when the loud sound popped off in the empty air. This whole place seemed spun of glass, he was afraid that too loud a whisper might shatter it all. The barrier of thirty years was almost tangible within the Library. A coating of dust, a layer of cobwebs, the scrim of time was nothing more than a little dirt laying over the equipment and books. If he brushed it all away, Hojo wondered if maybe he'd find Lucrecia somewhere here, scribbling notes, waiting for him to turn in for the day. But he knew he wouldn't really find her. He'd only dig up more dust. The past was dead and the players buried, all that mattered now was Jenova.

~*~

Night grew blacker over Nibelheim. Hojo finally trudged off to his bed when both hands on the old hallway clock had settled comfortably over the twelve. Things creaked about him in the old mansion as he walked, the worm hem of his coat swishing softly against his pant legs and he noticed it made a rather deadened noise, like windblown leaves in autumn. There were winds outside to match the sound, he could hear them through the walls, see the things it blew into the air silhouetted black against that pale yellow moon visible through the large picture window above the stairs. Like great buzzing insects, leaves blew black against it and Hojo couldn't help but shiver. But he was just cold, that was all. This mountain town, despite a history of fire and hell, really was amazingly cold. He wrapped his arms around himself and stepped carefully down the stairs, eyes distant with thought. So quiet though, all he could hear were those thoughts.

Hojo looked up.

A sudden sound, down there in the foyer, in the darkness. Some scientist probably, some stooge of his not taking his advice and turning in for the night but instead scuffling around in the darkness, maybe huddled in a corner with his hot little lips pressed against a cellphone, talking pretty to a girlfriend back in Midgar. Hojo couldn't help but smile to himself. None of his scientists were bad sorts really. The Professor himself was the bastard, the others had just fallen in with the wrong leader.

Bringing his chilly white hands up to his mouth, blowing hot breath over his icy fingertips, Hojo left the staircase and stepped out into the broad foyer, the space green and dusty in the moonlight. He paused and turned about, then turned about again, just staring at it all. The furniture and the art and the silent grace of the old building, perfectly lit by the light of a grinning yellow moon. He was struck by it suddenly and couldn't make himself continue on to his bedroom. He wished he could take a picture of this place, just as it was, just now. But even if he could, that photograph would have been empty. Photographs and remembrances were always empty. The image was there but not the warmth, the comfort. He could have a picture of this magical mansion lit by night but the feeling wouldn't be there; not this dizzy precious wave of nostalgia. The past was so thick in Hojo's mind that he grew breathless with it.

Here! he thought to himself, quickly laying a hand on the banister of the staircase, Here she would walk, down from the second floor, papers in hand, those wispy strands of brown in her face and I'd always rush to greet her and take the burden, and push that hair from her eyes, say hello with a kiss.

Yes...

Incensed now, Hojo whipped about and approached the front door, hand going out as though he'd fling it open. Instead it rested on the knob, trembling.

Here the Turks would come in and they'd stand just in the doorway, whispering. And they'd talk and they'd laugh and they'd do all they could to keep from coming inside for as long as they were able. Because they hated it in here, they hated us, they hated me. I remember.

Hojo moved to a room off to the side of the foyer, the doorway drenched in black shadows. His eyes were feverish, rimmed with tears and red.

I'd see him and her go in here a lot, never really thinking much of it. Towards the end, those last few months, he never minded coming inside as much as the others. And why? Why..? Because he knew she was waiting for him.

"Vincent..."

Two shaking hands clutching at his face, Hojo turned around, turning his gaze from the shadows of the darkened room and back towards the winding dusty staircase. There was a figure there, standing like a statue at the foot of the stairs. The yellow moon smiled from behind her, a crooked arch with one end seeming to pierce her shoulder.

"Who's there?" Hojo demanded. He rewrapped his arms about himself, shivering in the cold, blinking hard to see through the dim greenish light. Dust motes circled his head in unrelenting swarms, catching the light then dying away. The figure was silent.

Hojo took a slow step forward, eyes narrowing, trying to see past the strange veil this person seemed cloaked in. A woman obviously, her white garments wrapped tight about her shapely figure like a gorgeous shimmering shroud. Waves of soft brown hair, so reflective it was almost transparent, flowed over her shoulders and with a desire he didn't

understand, Hojo wanted to run forward and stroke those luscious brown locks, embrace those shoulders, plant a kiss on that obscured pale face.

"Lucrecia?"

Stupid to say. Stupid to say. Stupid to say...

She was dead.

"A j-joke..." he stammered, not daring to go forward anymore. "A delusion. Damned mansion puts ideas into my head."

He said the words aloud so the thing wouldn't be able to mistake his opinions on it but much to Hojo's dismay, the apparition didn't leave, it didn't fade or even move. It stood instead and stared at the front door, perhaps expecting the return of the Turks that would never come. The Professor felt a knot in the pit of his stomach. Fear or grief or both, he wasn't sure.

"Dead," he whispered, "It's all dead. You're dead, dear heart. Dead for almost thirty years. Don't pull this shit on me."

Not another word from her. Hojo tried to get away, he began walking with slow, careful steps to his bedroom on the opposite side of the foyer but he knew he'd have to pass the foot of the stairs to get there, he'd have to pass by her gaze. If he could only see this thing's face, know what expression was there...

"You're not real," he insisted to himself, stepping hesitantly past her. She didn't so much as blink when he moved between her and the doorway. She remained staring forlornly ahead, a spectre of white and anguish. "Not real. Get away from me."

"Vincent..."

She whispered that one name and it tore a hole through Hojo's heart. He halted, only a few feet from her, fear turning into heated hatred. He almost ran forward to grab her shoulders, give her a good shake and take out his frustration.

"Don't say that name to me."

As though to mock him, defy him, she said the word again.

"Vincent."

"He's as d-dead as you are. Uncooperative bitch..."

"Vincent..."

Vincent. Terrible for him to hear it now. She'd screamed that name for hours as she'd lain dying. For hours and hours until the word became a continuous wail that rang in his ears more ferociously than thunder, but more piercing than a sparrow's song. It was a knife in his head to hear it again now because never, never, not once on that horrible night those long years ago, had she called for him. Never, not a single utterance, not a thought had turned to her husband as she'd lain and looked mortality in the face. Only thoughts of that Turk who already lay buried. She'd only cried for him.

"He was gone then, gone trying to get you away and you never knew. You tried to hate him, you tried to believe what I told you but you never did. You always thought he'd be coming back."

"Vincent--"

"But he never did!"

Hojo wanted to reach out and strangle this stupid creature. He approached it quickly, eyes wide and breathing laboured, spitting in that obscured face. The features were clouded by white though, he couldn't make them out. But it was her. This was her voice, her body.

"You aren't going to haunt me after thirty years, do you hear me? I shoved thoughts of you away a long time ago and this mansion isn't going to bring them back! Crawl away! Return to that lover you left in hell, he can't still be alive here, he died in his box years before, I've no doubt of it. And if I did doubt it, I'd have returned here long before now to finish the job, end the torture I put him through." The wind picked up. Hojo distractedly knew that there were no windows open in the mansion, it was far too cold outside for there to be, yet a bitter wind kicked up in the foyer, blowing his thinning black hair in his eyes, whipping the sides of his dirty coat through the greenish light without a care. Yet the winds didn't touch the phantom before him. No. She stared through the disturbance and to the door, her clouded face a blank, her entire figure unmoving as stone. Her hair was still and straight and shining. Her white clothes seemed as though carved from marble.

"To bed. . ." Hojo muttered, flinging hair from his face. He turned in disgust from the thing and with a firm resolution sought the door to his room out, white hand shooting out to embrace the doorknob through the dark. The tarnished brass gleamed at him like an eye and for a moment, Hojo was afraid to touch it. It seemed like it might burn him, or grow teeth and take his fingers off. But ha. He was seeing a dead woman and fearing a doorknob. He really was crazy. "Fine then, I'll be crazy," he told the thing. Hojo didn't turn but he knew the phantom must still be at the foot of the stairs, must still be staring at that door, must still be wearing a blurry mask instead of a face. He didn't need to see for himself to know that. But he had to get away from it. It was too powerful a reminder of his sins.

"Vincent. . ."

"He's not going to come!"

Fuck the scary doorknob!

Hojo flung himself against the slab of wood and the door swung open. The darkness of the bedroom inside was almost as intimidating as the white figure of the ghost in the foyer. Terror that he knew or terror that he didn't know. . . which was worse?

He stood there, poised between two frights and suddenly the figure at the foot of the stairs turned about, turned so so slowly that Hojo wasn't even sure she was moving at all. But eventually, to his unspeakable horror, he realized she was looking at him, straight at him. Those blue eyes pierced his soul with merciless ice and his heart pounded in his ears.

"Don't look at me like that. . . " he whispered, but she didn't turn away nor lessen her stare. The Professor took a step backwards into the bedroom as the figure burned brighter before him. Such reproach there, such anger.. . but worst of all that, such hurt. Hojo had betrayed her. Hojo had killed her.

"I did not! You weren't important!"

She watched him through the torrent of wind beyond his bedroom door and he felt paralyzed.

"Jenova, she's all that matters and because you were human that made you insignificant, no matter how much I loved you. . . don't you see? Jenova said you weren't important. . . I didn't want to do any of those things. . . "

He was almost sobbing now, breaking down into his sleeve. And she wouldn't speak anything but that one name to him. Couldn't she say his own name? Couldn't she comfort him? Didn't she realize that by dying she'd gotten off so much easier than he? No, she didn't know. She was dead and didn't know how Hojo had to keep on living, putting up with remembrances of his sins every waking hour. And reliving every murder in his dreams at night.

"Vincent."

No, she had to keep reminding him of how he'd killed his wife and killed her lover. She had to keep up with that damned name.

"Vincent."

Only now it wasn't a call or a plea. There was neither pain nor weakness in her voice as she whispered the word. Hojo turned up to see her, tears streaking down his cheeks, catching the yellow moonlight. That word was a threat now.

"Vincent."

The word was a promise.

"I don't understand, "Hojo muttered, completely in his bedroom now. His hand strayed to the edge of the door, wondering if she would stay on the other side if he were to close it. Or would she simply walk through the wood and face him while trapped with no where to run and hide from her reproach? Face him here alone and continue saying that name only he'd be cornered in a room behind a shut door alone, alone, alone with a dead woman.

"Vincent."

"Means nothing to me, "he choked, "He's as dead as you are."

"Vincent will come."

"He didn't come thirty years ago, you little bitch, he won't be coming now! Leave me the hell alone!"

His hand itched, begged to be allowed to close the door. But he was so god-awful frightened that it wouldn't be able to keep her away. He was indescribably glad when without warning, without another word or silent threat, the figure began to fade away. As though it had been nothing more than a beam of moonlight, it was now as though a cloud moved forward to cover it and send her back to the sky. Hojo was left alone in the doorway to his room, staring at an empty foyer. Sobbing brokenly but scared out of his wits, he fell inside, slamming the door shut. He hid beneath his bed sheets and prayed to Jenova rather than God. He figured she had a tighter hold of his soul.

~*~

Zack thought he heard something crying.

Grimacing at the stiffness that came with sleeping on a concrete floor, he pushed himself up onto his elbows and tried to remember where he was. Cage, of course. A library, a lab. The mansion. Nibelheim. Cripes.

The cage was almost pitch black and it hurt Zack's tired eyes to try and make anything out through it all. The only thing really, was the lit up top of Cloud's spiky head. He was leaning on the door again, looking out through the window and blocking the scant light from outside. "Cloud..." Zack called softly, running a hand over his face, rubbing at his bright blue eyes, "Cloud, why are you crying? Are you all right?"

His friend turned from the window and his features were drawn and pale, but trembling all over with excitement. "It's not me, "he hissed, barely able to control himself. He waved Zack over with an eager hand. "The lady outside, she was here, then left, went out into the hall. I swear to God, Zack, she was a ghost. I swear to you!"

"Ghost?" Zack whispered dubiously, "Man, you had a dream is all, go back to sleep..."

"She seemed so sad," Cloud mumbled to himself, ignoring his friend and turning back to the window. Zack rolled over onto his side, fitfully pulling a dirty sheet over his bare chilly arms. The cold rose up from the concrete floors, it was like sleeping atop a refrigerator. Damned Shinra, damned Hojo, damned cage.

Cloud stared intently outside, at the spot where he'd briefly seen that phantom figure of white. His blue eyes were unblinking.

"She's looking for someone," he decided.

~*~

Pepper was sharing a bed with a guy who it seemed hadn't brushed his teeth or taken a shower since he was eleven. Curled up and sighing every so often, the young assistant was perched at the very end of the bed like a little frightened puppy, his master's bare feet occasionally kicking out at him in his sleep. The massive snorings erupting from his chest carried the putrid odor of his breath to Pepper's waiting nostrils with little mercy or infrequency. And the feet that kicked him had sock gunk all in between the toes. It was getting on Pepper's pajama top. And grossing him out.

12:15

Ugh. With a little sigh of disgust and self-pity, Pepper rolled back over away from the blocky red numbers of the alarm clock staring out at him through the blackened bedroom. Around him slept four other loudly snoring scientists, their breathing even more deafening in the room's stillness. He had to get up in seven hours. For a guy who usually got ten hours a night, that was a sobering thought.

His bed mate gave an especially loud snort and Pepper roughly elbowed his foot, getting a kick in the nose as reward. The blow sent him rolling clean out of the bed and he landed on the floor chin-first, the impact sending a jolt of aggravating pain through his body. He was embarrassed for a moment but then he remembered everyone else in the room was asleep so he climbed painfully to his feet and cursed as loud as he could, trying to wake the load of fatheads up and make them just as miserable and tired as he was.

"No good, freaking fat lazy snoring bastards! Bed hogging, inconsiderate smelly-ass jerks!"

Not a single reaction.

Pepper indignantly dusted off his pinstripe blue and white pajamas, scratching at his goatee, pushing black hair from his bloodshot eyes. He stood half-crippled and decided to look pitiful for a moment. Keeping his arms straight at his sides, he stared down at his small spot on the bed as the other scientist invaded the tiny space with his right foot, giving a snore that made the walls rattle. Pepper whimpered. Then he swore a little more. Then he stomped his foot. He topped it all off by standing there for a while longer and looking even more pitiful. Still, not a peep from the other men in the room or from the fat bastard who'd just commandeered his space in the bed.

The mansion creaked a lot.

The sounds drew Pepper's short, sleepy attention away from his problems and he stood there and tried to distinguish the different soft sounds floating to his ears. Generators humming and the house settling and all sorts of bizarre groaning, as though the place had been built atop the back of a giant, and they could hear the creature's noises as it slept. Pepper held his breath and was as still as he could make himself, trying to see if the floors rose and fell with the giant's breaths.

Nope.

Oh, well.

Giving the foot of the bed an irritated little kick, the young assistant wandered slowly away from it and towards a window, glancing out at the moon in its position all the way at the top of the sky, almost directly above the mansion's gables. Just a slit, a crescent of yellow, and so the town outside the window was almost completely shadowless. It was like looking at a dim blue image of afternoon. Kinda eerie. Pepper put his fingers to the glass and peered closer, trying to make things out in the small, sleeping village. A few lights on, scattered here and there, but most were asleep. Very few sounds came in from outside, just the wark of a few chocobos tied before a home down the street, a woman's raucous laugh from a pub, a far-away television blasting out of a kid's bedroom window. But it all seemed very distant, with the action down there, and Pepper up here on the second floor of the looming mansion, engulfed in the snores of his coworkers.

A flit of white near Nibelheim's inn caught the man's unfocused attention. It was a very very blurry vertical strip of shimmering light hanging around the doorway of the silent building, hovering almost and strangely enough casting no shadow. Pepper narrowed his eyes to make it out better but it got blurrier instead of clearer so he pressed his nose to the glass and stared. But the moment he moved his head closer to the window, the white disappeared.

Strange.

Pepper moved back again, and the white reappeared. It was bigger now, not necessarily moving closer to the mansion from the Inn, but simply staying where it was and just growing larger. Maybe ten feet tall? the assistant mused. But then maybe just a trick of the light. Pepper moved forward again and it disappeared again. Stepping away from the window the

white was there once more. Huge now, almost taking up half the pane and not really seeming like it was outside at all anymore.

"What the hell..?"

Oh! It was a reflection! Duh.

Pepper nearly smacked himself for a fool as he realized the white was just a reflection on the glass from something already in the room. Just a reflection of light or something and his head blocked it by blocking the source. Nibelheim was hardly even visible through the window anymore, the reflection of light from inside was too strong now. The young assistant shrugged his narrow shoulders and stepped away, guessing maybe it was a sign that he should try again to get some sleep. Kinda weird that it was suddenly so light in the bedroom though. Kinda weird there was something bright enough to cast such a huge reflection of white on the glass like that.

Pepper froze in his tracks when he turned from the window.

The source of the reflection was standing right behind him.

A woman. Or rather, the spectre of what had been a woman. Gorgeous, sad, clad in white, her hair contrasting with the blazing purity of her clothes and streaming over her breasts like rich dark chocolate. It caught her own light and shone brilliantly, shone and framed a face that wasn't there. It was as though some bastard had taken and smudged his thumb over her features, blurring them all away. Just the suggestions of bright pink lips, brilliant blue eyes, dark arching brows; she was a ruined painting, marred by indelicate hands.

With little movement save for the occasional stray strand of her hair blowing in an invisible breeze, she stood without care there in the middle of the bedroom. All of her was concealed by her white garments save her face and hands. The latter were clasped at her waist, as pale and fragile as the porcelain hands of a doll. Pepper stared from them to her expressionless, unfocused eyes.

"B-b-but the Professor said there weren't any ghosts..." he stuttered, brows furrowing. He backed away from her, terrified and curious at the same time. "Just the m-metaphorical kind. That's what he said."

No response. Pepper pressed himself against the wooden wall and stared forward with fish-eyes, wishing to God someone else in the room would wake up. No one was gonna believe him in the morning. A photo... maybe if he got a photo... hell! That'd be a good idea if he actually had a camera with him... unable to think of any other viable options, he decided to stand there and let this thing make its move. Did it want something of him? Or was it gonna stare at him all night, all pretty and shimmering in the darkness? She almost looked familiar... he couldn't quite place her bearing, the shape of her obscured face, but there was something there...

"Who are you?" Pepper asked, daring to put a hand forth. It shook too much though so he withdrew and dropped it in his pajama pants pocket. "Is this your mansion? Do you haunt this place? Are we intruders?"

It sounded like the plot of a bad movie, but maybe such was the case. Pepper nudged a bit to the thing's side, trying to see all the way around her. She paid him no mind. In fact, it was as though she were pointedly ignoring him. Without making a sound, not even allowing her clothing to rustle or her breaths (if she breathed at all) to be heard, the woman slowly turned away from him. After a moment of stillness and silence, she began drifting back towards the door of the silent bedroom, her head slightly bowed, her hands still clasped at her waist. Pepper took a few steps after her, his lips parted in fascination.

"Wait," he whispered, "What do you want?"

She did not seem evil or threatening or dangerous. In fact, just being near her, the young assistant could feel her sadness, the weight of an agony almost visibly piled on her shoulders. To be able to lift that agony away and see relief in her white-obscured face, that seemed very appealing to him suddenly. "Please," he called softly to her back, "What do you want?"

She soundlessly moved from the bedroom and into the hall without turning, without any extraneous gestures. Pepper followed like a humbled little acolyte in the presence of his mistress, waiting for an answer to his question.

"Vincent," she finally said and the young man behind her blinked twice. He didn't know anyone with that name. But he wasn't going to ask for particulars, he was surprised enough she'd given him one word.

They moved down the hallway in a slow, silent procession and the floor creaked hideously under Pepper's feet though it made no sound beneath the weight of the creature he followed. The only noises were those things he'd noticed before: creaks and generators and the muffled sounds of the village outside. And the snores of the scientists, those horrible groans were as clear as ever. They became a little less obnoxious as he made a sharp left turn and followed the woman into a pitch black room loaded with rotting furniture and smelling of mildew and disuse. He recognized it immediately from earlier that evening. The hidden entrance to the labs and Library were in here. There was a switch on the wall or something, something weird and impractical and gothic like that, that led downstairs. She didn't wait for a sign or a word from him. She passed through the wall inside without a sound and left him in the blackness of the room.

"Agh! Wait for me!"

He threw himself against the cold rock, knowing there was a way in. You had to press one of the stupid stones that made up the wall, and there was a pressure-sensitive switch behind it and then the hidden door would swing open. Yeah, something like that. His hands moved feverishly over the chilly rock and he chafed his knuckles, swearing viciously at the sting. He didn't know why but he had to find out who that woman was and what she wanted. He was a scientist, an aspiring one anyway, and he had to see what this creature was that was so blatantly going against everything he believed in. Was she a ghost really? How freaking weird...

Ah-ha!

There was a muted click and then a stone beneath his eager hands slipped back and into the wall. A grinding of gears and Pepper jumped backwards, the hidden doorway revealing itself, then sliding into the rock and away. The dark spiral staircase then, the smell of mildew and sewage. Rickety wooden stairs leading down into that dank abyss.

But Pepper gave the smell and damp hardly a thought. He saw a glimmer of white at the far-away bottom of the passage so he immediately gave chase, ignoring the glint of cobwebs, the thick slime that coated the walls as he put a hand out to steady himself on the climb down.

These stairs were just as creepy, no, even creepier than they'd been earlier that evening when he'd been in the presence of his colleagues, tramping downstairs to meet with Professor Hojo. There was no one else now, just him alone in the passageway; all wet and dripping, sorta like climbing down the throat of a monster. Pepper wiped slick mold off his hands, staining his pajamas and trying not to think about what was crawling about in the darkness. He could hear the chirp of bats, chittering to each other in the rafters, kept at bay by something he couldn't name but was very grateful to nonetheless. That thing he was following maybe. Maybe she kept them away.

Another careful step forward, and Pepper began wishing he'd slipped on a pair of shoes before running after that woman, as an unfortunate two-inch long roach made an unpleasant squish beneath his heel. He scraped his foot against the edge of the wooden stair and skipped further downwards, knowing he had to hurry before his courage failed him. Already his heart was banging around in his chest, berating its owner for putting it through so much unnecessary stress. Another cockroach crunched underfoot and Pepper had to fight off a panic attack. He catapulted down the remaining stairs until he stood bent over double at the bottom, hands on his knees and panting into his chest. Cold sweat stood out on his forehead and he shakily wiped it away. Where was he now?

He lifted his head and fell backwards against the nearest wall. Ick, bad idea. Swearing loudly, he catapulted forward again, noticing something wet on the stones behind him seeping through his pajama top. And he could feel loose dirt beneath his toes; the bitterly cold draft of AC from a room down the hall; yellow light from there too and Pepper remembered that the Library lay closely. He was in the hall leading up to it, that scary hall that looked as though it had been carved right from the living rock. His vision adjusted a bit and he could see the stairs behind him, a dim blue rectangle hundreds of feet above revealing the doorway he'd come through. He wiped a hand over his face, flinging sweat away, then straightened, trying to regain his composure. Soft noises in the dark. Something warm and furry scampered over his bare left foot and Pepper nearly fell backwards in a dead faint.

"Just a rat..." he mumbled, squeezing his eyes shut and regaining his balance, "Just a rat."

That glimmer of white was before him again, he could see it through his shut eyelids. The young assistant dropped his hands in his pockets and stepped forward, breathing shallow to avoid inhaling any cobwebs. The buzzing of the distant mako generator filled his ears. And the stupid creaking of the house. And his damned obnoxious heartbeat.

The woman glowed from the darkness like a white feather set against the blackest of velvet and Pepper was almost instantly drawn forward by the grief emanating from her featureless face.

"What's the matter?" he asked, shivering in the chilly air of the hallway, trying to ignore the unnamed slimy things he couldn't see underfoot. She did not answer, only moved forward further, as soundless as before. No footsteps, no breathing, no rustling of clothes. Like a passing breeze she moved through the hall, lighting up the way just enough for Pepper to follow. When that whispering breeze finally abated, it was before a very small, very beat up door embedded in the gray rock. The door was ancient, older than the mansion could possibly be, wood rotted and stained with dampness yet carved all over with hellenistic vines; ivy that crept around the handle, curled and bent in on itself in strange, intriguing patterns. Pepper ran his fingers over the carving, admiring the intricacy. He'd heard something about Nibelheim having a history of fine artisans, old men must have sat together around a fire hundreds of years ago and made these beautiful vines, modeled each of these tiny leaves. Vines... to hide what? he wondered. They seemed rather like the sorts of creepers that you'd see grown over tombstones or the same as grew up the sides of the mansion itself. The beautiful plants were certainly out of place in this hellish hallway, that was for sure. Perhaps they were there as a gift to those unfortunate enough to be buried beneath the earth in this crypt. Crypt. That word came to Pepper's mind out of nowhere but if he didn't know better, he'd have sworn that there was a tomb to be found beyond this door. Latin letters carved upon it read: "To sleep in the earth and to live in the sky". Well, something like that anyway, his Latin wasn't the best.

The mysterious woman stood before this newly discovered doorway expectantly and Pepper watched her, eyes moving from the door to her face. What she wanted seemed obvious enough. "I'll try," he sighed and moved forward. The

doorknob was rusted shut and he cut his hand trying to wrench it around. It was locked too, he could hear the catch clicking in the hold as he yanked. He messed with it for a full five minutes before shrugging his shoulders and backing off, smearing away red rust and redder blood on his pants.

"Sorry. It's locked."

But she didn't let him off that easily. She stood at his side piteously, moving her deathly white hands up to her throat, and then clasped them there in what seemed like desperate supplication. The portrait of longing nearly broke poor Pepper's tired heart and he redoubled his efforts on the stubborn doorknob, filling the dark hallway with a flood of curses as it refused to budge. "Nothing's cooperating tonight," he muttered, backing off again. He surveyed the thick slab of wood, quick black eyes forgetting how sleepy they were and running over the carving, the knob, the hinges a-- the hinges... hmm...

Pepper stooped in the dirt and peered closer at the hinges. Yup. Solid, Nibelheim craftsmanship, sturdier now than they'd been when first cast. He reached a hand out and neatly plucked a five inch long iron rod from the bottom hinge. Then he repeated the action with the middle and top ones, flinging the little pieces of metal to the dirt. "Stuff was built sturdier years ago," he said conversationally to his silent companion, "But the builders were stupider."

She didn't answer, nor did she make any sign that she was glad he'd managed to get the door open. Pepper shrugged and ignored the creature. He actually didn't care what she thought, he'd been curious to see what was behind this door since he'd first noticed it that evening. If she wanted to see too, that was fine, but he'd go in either way. The curious little scientist in him insisted.

Holding his breath, every inch of his body trembling in excited fear, Pepper pushed with both hands on the door. It was stuck to the wall, glued there by mold and time, but he threw his full weight against it and with a deafening crack it split away from the frame, swinging forward and coming away completely as the lock on the other side shattered and split. Splinters, chips of rust and a deluge of dust choked the air, making the young assistant dart an arm up to cover his mouth and nose.

After it had cleared a degree, Pepper uncovered his eyes and stared forward, trying to make out the newly revealed space beyond. But he'd never seen such an all-consuming darkness as what faced him now. Groping around in the hallway outside, he found an overhead light and switched it on. Enough of the yellow illumination drifted into the room for the man to get a vague idea of what lay inside. Light glinted off of oblong shapes in the dimness and other strange objects scattered on the floor. He stepped inside and sharp, hard shards of something crunched underfoot or cut into the soft flesh of his toes and heels. He forgot all about the thing that had led him downstairs and instead moved further into the silent room. The atmosphere inside was pristine and cold, like a mountaintop at night, yet this room was hundreds of feet underground.

Bones. That's what these crunching things were. Shaking violently, covered in cold sweat, Pepper knelt and hefted half a shattered skull up in his hands. It grinned at him in the dim yellow light from the hallway and he flung it away spasmodically, unable to bear that musty smell, or the feel of dry bone against his fingers. Bones everywhere, old bones and whole skeletons piled against the walls. And coffins. Coffins laying sealed, coffins laying open, contents spilling out, laying in the dirt. This was a tomb, he realized, eyes opened wider than they'd ever been in his life, this was a tomb and those vines carved into the door were reminders. A bit of life captured in rotted wood, sealed here to torture the unseeing eyes of the dead with what they could no longer have. Dozens of skulls looked upon the living intruder as he stared back at them, dozens of glinting eyes from the shadows; rats and bats and crawling things. Roaches tickled his bare feet and Pepper stood stock still in wordless horror, wondering how in the hell he'd wound up down here. An insect looking something like a very long-legged spider crawled halfway up his leg before he found the self-control enough to kick it away with his other foot. He wanted to turn around and leave this terrible place but there were things here so intriguing that they overwhelmed his fear with curiosity and Pepper stepped forward into the gloom.

The room was full of coffins, they'd been flung about as though nothing at all, sitting in the darkness like horrible promises. Pepper didn't dare go too close, he'd seen his share of horror movies where hands shot out of coffins and pulled unsuspecting young guys like him to their deaths. No, he gave them a wide berth as he tramped deeper into the room, wondering how he was managing to keep calm considering where he was and what was with him. The woman seemed unperturbed. She stood in the doorway, not daring to enter. She was frightened. Pepper noticed with a little start that she was as frightened as he of the skulls and the coffins and the reek of death and time permeating this place. She was a damned ghost and she was scared. Pepper found that amazingly funny.

There were old bones falling out of cavities in the walls and he could hear the rats fearlessly digging about in them. Moving past the grisly spectacle, shuffling through the debris, he came to what he roughly figured was the center of the room. A couple more coffins there, all of them sealed, not desecrated and robbed as the others had been. Before he could stop himself, Pepper laid a hand on one of the caskets, a massive oaken box stained black and purple with the passage of time. The carving on this one was almost as ornate as what had been on the door. Skulls this time though, skulls and bones to match those laying all over the rest of the room. Pepper guessed they probably stood for all the men the soldier

entombed within had slain before death had claimed him. Quite a warrior he'd been, there were many inscribed here. A new addition though. Someone had scrawled 'Ars Gratia Artis' atop the casket's lid in permanent black marker. Ars Gratia Artis.... Pepper quickly translated it in his head. 'Art for Art's sake.' Hmph. Sounded like the kinda crap that Professor Hojo went around muttering.

The other caskets weren't nearly as interesting as this one, they were plain wood or stone with elaborate inscriptions in Latin so complex that he couldn't hope to translate. This central one though was quite intriguing, some of the archaeology goons back in Midgar would have had a field day with it.

For no particular reason at all, the wind began to pick up in the small quiet tomb. This alarmed Pepper just a bit as he knew there was no where it could possibly be coming from. He turned about, the lone bulb in the hallway that provided the scant light being caught by the wind and throwing shadows all over. Light danced in erratic patterns on the walls, danced in the empty eye sockets of the skulls. Dust and dirt got caught up in it and blew in his face.

The woman was unaffected by the sudden violent blasts. She stood in the doorway and watched Pepper try to shield his eyes from the flying grit, her hands together over her breasts, fingers entwined in the soft white silk bunched just over her collarbones as though trying to find warmth, shivering as though cold. "Cut it out!" he begged, unable to open his eyes, but seeing her illumination through his eyelids anyway. He knew she was watching him. "Please, I didn't do anything, cut it out with the wind!"

She was listening apparently for the storm subsided a bit and then died away to little more than random chilly gusts. Pepper looked to the woman for an explanation but she only lifted one of her small, pale hands and pointed towards the casket at his side.

"What?"

She kept her finger pointed, her expression vacant. And then she vanished.

She simply disappeared. Now, he'd seen those specials on TV where magicians made things vanish and known that what he was watching was an illusion. They always put a curtain or something up so you couldn't see how they were tricking you. But Pepper knew they were tricks nonetheless. This though... there'd been no curtain. She'd been there, standing in the doorway, and now she was gone. He was utterly alone in this bone-studded room. And the skulls drawn into the coffin at his side seemed to look up at him, ask what the skinny little man was going to do next. So quiet suddenly, he could almost hear the echoes of their hollow laughter. So quiet he fancied he could hear things from the distant Library, the specimens' low voices as they whined in their uneasy sleeps. He took a step backwards and tripped on something that rolled beneath his heels and threw him off balance. The assistant landed sprawled in the dirt, decomposed flesh from nearby corpses leaving discoloured flakes on his already dirty pajamas. He brushed it off in a panic, then reached for what he'd tripped over, suddenly desiring a weapon, whatever it was.

A hammer.

Pepper shot to his feet, hefting the heavy hammer in both hands but of course there was nothing to fight off. Just the same dark, empty tomb. He lowered his weapon, rather glad that no one was there to see him looking like such a complete and total idiot, and then turned about in place, making sure it was safe.

The bats resumed their chirping, the rats resumed their digging, and he approached the coffin again, head cocked to one side to take the whole thing in. Unlike the others, this one was nailed shut. Strange though, you never nailed a coffin shut in a tomb, it was pointless. You just set the heavy lid down over the casket and sealed it up. Pepper didn't know much about the funerary business, but he was pretty sure of this. Kinda weird... Just for kicks, he dug his fingernail up under the edge of the lid and gave a little pull. Yeah... the wood was pretty rotted, it flaked away with just a minimal amount of pressure. If he really wanted to, he could probably pry this sucker open with this hammer.

Something suddenly occurred to Pepper.

This tomb and these coffins were at least a hundred, probably two-hundred years old. Yet the nails in this coffin he stood beside now were modern. This hammer in his hand... this was something he could pop down to the hardware store and pick up for a couple gil. What the hell? Apparently, he wasn't the only one who'd been in this crypt since it had been sealed. Someone had come down here at some point, done something unknown, then locked the door behind him and gone on his way, leaving something nailed up inside this coffin; leaving this hammer in the dirt. Suddenly he was very scared.

"Uh... hey..." he whispered, hesitantly tapping his right forefinger on the coffin lid, "Heya, anyone inside there?"

There wasn't any answer. Of course not! he scolded himself, Whether the body inside here was newer or not, it was still a body in a coffin. And bodies put in coffins, 99.9% of the time, were dead bodies. Dead bodies didn't answer back unless the person speaking was really drunk. And Pepper had never felt more sober in his life. Still, there was a mystery here, he could feel it in the back of his teeth. Someone had hidden something down here and they hadn't wanted it to be found. Heh heh, but it looked like Pepper had spoiled their plan.

The young man danced in place for a moment, unexplainably excited, like a little kid who'd just found a pirate treasure in his backyard. He hefted the hammer and made up his mind almost instantly. He was gonna pop this sucker

open and see what the big secret was. Maybe it had something to do with Professor Hojo, he'd seemed really eager at the meeting tonight to keep people away from these hallway rooms. Perhaps there was some dark secret or wonderful prize entombed here. Yes, definitely something though...

The more he looked around, the more true his suspicion seemed. The remains of an ancient skeleton lay bleached white at his feet and the markings showed it had fallen from this very coffin. The corpse had been evicted from his own final rest and something else had stolen in to take his place. Yeah... something was amiss, something was inside here that shouldn't be. Gritting his teeth, eyes wild with the thrilling nature of his actions, Pepper wedged the back end of his hammer dead into the gap between the lid and the casket. It plunked inside perfectly, the soft decomposing wood giving way with a few moans, breaking into splinters beneath the intruding iron. Once it was wedged inside as far as it would go, he braced himself against the new lever and pushed his weight forward against it. He could feel the shock of each nail as it was slowly drawn from the wood, the entire lid parting from the coffin slowly but surely. He'd been prepared to smell the stench of decay as he opened this prize but instead the rather sterile smell of chemicals came to his nostrils. This intrigued him further and he was desperate to know what this secret was. He ignored the scurrying rats crawling over his bare feet, stopping at his ankles to gnaw on the hem of his sweat soaked pajamas. The bats beginning to take interest in his activities were of no concern. A few twittered about him and he promptly ignored them. The roaches and insects were unimportant too. Just getting this coffin open, unearthing this tremendous secret.

The casket was half open now but it was still so dark, he'd started prying the side of the lid opposite the tomb's entrance so that the newly upturned slab of wood now blocked the light from the hallway, leaving the interior obscured by shadows. But these shadows were so rich and dark and almost beautiful in a strange way. Panting with exertion, Pepper redoubled his grip on the hammer, already feeling the blisters he'd have the next morning on the palms of his hands. Something bright and sharp was glinting at him from inside, shining out through all that layered blackness... there was light enough to catch it but he couldn't reach down and pluck whatever it was out. If he let up on the lid now, it would come crashing down again, the wickedly pointed nails eager to pierce through his forearms. So he kept the hammer wedged into the wood, eyes glued on the glint of gold, yeah, it seemed like gold, that was becoming more and more visible with each inch he raised the lid.

A body yeah, he could tell it was a body inside but that was all. A body and then that golden shine, something metal... unyielding and cruelly pointed in places, all of it hidden in those luxurious shadows. Just a bit more and he'd reach down and take it out and it would be his and something marvelous would come of this discovery, he was sure. Just a bit more.

Suddenly there were three glints in the coffin below him. The shine of gold... and then the shine of two open eyes.

On instinct and in a panic, Pepper cried out and tried to step back, distractedly thinking that those eyes inside were red as blood. His hammer drew away from the lid and it began to crash back down but then something shot up from inside and shattered the entire slab of wood. Pieces of moldy oak flew against the walls and cut into Pepper's face and hands. He hefted the hammer up in defense of himself but it was too late. He couldn't get away fast enough.

That glint of gold revealed itself to be a massive five-fingered claw and it was bronze, not gold. And it was murderous, not wonderful as he'd hoped. The young assistant screamed out in terror, praying someone would hear, praying something would happen.

Shadows still hiding him, the casket's occupant lunged out of his prison like a demon, faster than Pepper could follow with his eyes, and that claw was all he could see beyond the black shape of an otherwise human form. The bright claw and the bright eyes. And the eyes were fixed right on him. He screamed again, and tried to fall backwards, but the claw wouldn't let him fall. As he watched, unbelieving, it swooped down without pause and hooked through his pajama top into his stomach. For just the space of a thought, the metal felt cold against his flesh. But then there was only the merciless burning of pure pain and Pepper's hands shot out to wrap around the freezing bronze arm attached to the cruel claw, his grip slipping as blood ran from his wounds and coated the metal.

"...help..!" he gasped, and the claw twisted within his stomach as a response, twisting the inside of his gut into an unsalvageable mess of blood and tissue. But then it all withdrew in a flash of warmth and Pepper slumped to the dirt, landing on his side. He opened his eyes, barely conscious from the pain, the world swimming in dizzying circles before him. Shadows and blackness and skulls grinning at him from the base of the opened coffin. His hands went down to his stomach but he couldn't really register the things he felt there. His trembling arms dropped and he stared ahead, trying to speak and call for help again only he couldn't find the words. Then the blood-slicked claw was in his face again and he saw a pair of feet as naked as his own standing there in the dirt. He turned his head up feebly, prepared to plead for his life, to offer whatever this monster was with whatever it wanted in return for mercy. But just a look into those red eyes and he knew his words would be wasted. The claw came down and neatly tore through his throat, ripping out his windpipe in a flash of red and pain lasting but a few seconds. Pepper didn't have any last thoughts coherent enough to mention. Warmth, then cold, then nothing.

His body lay in the dirt, and the blood quickly pooling about it was the most colorful thing in the crypt. The attacker crouched beside him panting hard for a moment, snarling with his breaths, stumbling backwards, staring at what he'd

done. And then he fell into the coffin again, his claw hanging limp over the side, catching the yellow light from the hallway, the gore dripping from it looking more like molten gold than blood as it splattered onto the ground.

~*~

Gya ha! See ya later, Pepper!

>:)

If Jimmy was Wedge, then I suppose Pepper was probably Vicks, poor guy. Sorry to end the chapter here, it's kinda awkward but it seemed best. ^_^ In chapter two we'll learn a little more about what happens when you stick a bunch of crazies in a mansion together. Email me with your thoughts if ya like, otherwise, stay tuned ^_^