

The Poetry in Blood

by GlassShard

Chapter 3: Leaps and Bounds

"Aren't you listening to me? How can ya just stand there and ignore me?"

Vincent didn't offer Zack an answer. He only continued to do just what he was being accused of.

"Leave him alone, Zack, he's only a psycho, helpless as us, thing is we got bars and prison as an excuse. What're you, ya freak? You gonna just stand there and let those guys barge in here and fill ya full of bullets? Good! I hope ya do and we'll watch ya die and curse you as the selfish bastard you are!"

"Let us out!" Zack demanded, pushing Cloud away so he could shove his face into the light and Vincent could see the man who was pleading with him. "I'm going to tell you now and you're going to listen! Four years, man! For four long, painful years we been prisoners and it's never gotten any easier, never gotten any more bearable! It's always been hell! Every day, every hour, every minute! You ever go to bed at night hoping you'd die in your sleep just so you didn't have to wake up the next morning?! Well that's the prayer I say every night. Every night for four years I've wished I'd never wake up... and I'm always denied. It's always all there the next day in glaring, full color; a million things to fuck me over and fuck Cloud over and hurt us both and make us less and less what we used to be, whatever that was. You think you got problems? Try living as one of us for twenty-four hours and then I wager you'd find your problems were a little less of whatever you thought they were. Just try it, you cold sonnuvabitch, you'd come back sniveling!"

Vincent turned to his left and took a step backwards. Zack glared at him, the sweat running hot into his snapping blue eyes. The Turk said quietly, "I have no time for you."

"Bastard--!"

Cloud barged his way back behind the door again, shoving Zack to the floor. He darted a pale arm outwards from in between two of the bars of their prison, fingers grappling at the air only inches before Vincent's nose and straining with the desire to make him pay for his indifference. Not fair... not fair! he screamed to himself. Zack's temper was a little more controlled than his friend's but the anger was still evident in his eyes. He stood at Cloud's side and stared at Vincent, silently cursing him a thousand times over. It was quiet in the Library office except for distant gunshots.

"They're coming to kill you, you son of a bitch," Zack said evenly. He could hear the scientists just outside the lab, milling around in the hallway. The noise the men made was brash and violent and it was obvious they didn't care that their prey knew they were on their way. Waters was firing that gun and getting off on it. He'd always carried the weapon with him but never before had he been able to use it so freely, to allow the thing to truly act as what it was: the only divider between strength and helplessness. Zack knew it was Dr. Waters, he recognized his voice. "What have you done?" the Soldier muttered, but he was smiling as he said the words. He was so angry that he allowed a bitter smile towards Vincent, towards the look of puzzlement on his face. "Cloud really did hear screams, didn't he? And you made them, didn't you? You're a criminal, pal, and it looks like the scientists are going to make sure you pay."

Vincent backed towards the rear of the small office. He upset a few books on the way and they clattered noisily to the floor with a rustling of musty pages. He shot his claw out to steady himself. It was hard for Zack to see, but there was panic in those red eyes, rather like the panic of a rabbit before the steel trap closes down on its neck. He noticed it almost gleefully and couldn't help but chuckle. A creature like this deserved the fear, deserved the sensation before it was sent back to hell. "It's terrible, isn't it?" he asked, "This feeling... staring death in the face. I did it four years ago but I backed out of the deal before the sickle swung. You though... they've got you trapped, pal. They're gonna kill you. Dr. Waters is good with a gun."

"I hope they lock you up like us and you'll see what it's like," Cloud raged, banging his fist on the door, "I hope you suffer for being such a bastard! Let us out!"

Soundless and still, Vincent watched the two men through the bars with narrowed eyes. They were sweating, the both of them. He wondered briefly who they truly were, how they'd come to be in Hojo's grasp and begging him now for their freedom. They both looked likely enough and they both were Soldiers, their brilliant blue mako eyes gave that away. Shinra pigs then... and were they truly worth his time? Ah, but he was Shinra too. Hypocrite. Hypocrite. Hypocrite.

"I'll laugh when they blow your head off," Cloud muttered, wiping his nose against his arm. His blonde hair stuck to his scalp with sweat and itched him, another aggravation adding negatively to his situation. He wished he could cut this bastard in half. "I don't even care, man, 'cause they're gonna kill ya."

Vincent cocked his head to one side and stared them both down. "You two are more vicious than you look, aren't you?"

"Four years will do that," Zack said softly. He crossed his arms and stepped away from the window. His eyes stayed on Vincent's and a sudden noise brought another bitter smile from him. "I'd tell ya more, but here they come."

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Sunlight had never struck the walls of the basement hallway. The passage had always curled snake-like in the blackness, even before it had been hollowed out and given shape by the Shinra work crews. Still now it wallowed in that dark, shunning the feeble attempts of the electric lights to illuminate any one part of it utterly. The shadows flickered as the electricity did, the great black shapes crouching just off the edges of the pools of light and then swallowing them as the only recently restarted generators struggled to chase the night away. You could hear them groaning close by, the great underground turbines whirring powerfully then stuttering weakly, laughing at their own weaknesses and racing to catch up to their former greatness again. The lights burned then died then burned again and the shadows were always gaining then losing their spoils.

The hallway was a constant battle between the light and the night and there couldn't be a resolution. The ground surrounding the outside of the violated crypt was a mess of loosened earth and hardened, blood-soaked clods of mud, stamped by footprints, then shoe prints, claw marks raking the stone walls. A few disturbed bats fluttered in the rafters, trying to settle back into their routines but invariably being disturbed again as the sound of gunshots ricocheted from down the hall. The flapping of leathery wings mixed with the dripping of distant, disused pipes and there were fewer more dismal sounds in the world. Zack and Cloud's voices were audible in the distance too but they were muffled by a closed door and thick stone walls and the listening scientists couldn't make out the words. Vincent's quiet voice was lost entirely.

But after leaving the crypt behind, the minds of the scientists had wandered and they really weren't interested in the rantings of the specimens in the lab. Other things occupied their thoughts, even though the lab and the monster they were so sure was inside of it, was their goal.

Waters fired off another round into the ground and there was a thud as the bullet embedded itself in the soft dirt beneath his feet. The hall smelled sharply of gunpowder and the echoes of the gunshots never really died away.

The older man Miller was confused.

"It doesn't make sense, it doesn't make any sense at all," he mumbled, walking closely behind Dr. Waters with a wrought-iron poker clenched in his fists. The other two men, Bier and Dr. Vanswith, followed right on his heels. "Why did Professor Hojo lie to us? He said the thing broke in from outside, he showed us the broken glass on the floor, yet we saw a coffin! And the lid was shattered and the evidence was obvious that Pepper was the one who let it out! Poor Pepper..."

"He should have ran," Waters said quietly, not turning around to meet Miller's eyes.

"But he didn't and he's dead and if what you said before is true, Doctor, Professor Hojo is to blame for it. If this creature is his and it has killed two of us... oh my... Hojo shall have to pay a heavy price for his carelessness. But why did he lie to us?"

"To save his own ass of course, you moron!" Waters whipped about and grabbed the older man by the collar, his gun waving dangerously close to his surprised face, "But it's too late for the both of them now. We saw... we all saw what was in that crypt and we'll report it to the President himself as soon as we dispose of this monster. This'll end the same night it's begun."

It had been like stepping into the mouth of hell to enter that crypt. The thick, carved, oaken door shattered into splinters, the room beyond as black as velvet curtains, the air inside just as stifling to the touch. A flashlight brought out then, a beam of yellow to slice the air and reveal the horrors to be found in the darkness. Pepper. Lying in a pool of congealing blood, with eyes wide open and imploring even after it was too late for anyone's help. The broken casket, the skittering rats, the flapping bats, and the bones underfoot, crunching beneath slipped feet. Miller hadn't stayed in there long. Watching the rats nibbling at Pepper's cold fingers had unnerved him completely.

It had only redoubled Dr. Waters' determination to kill the monstrous man with the claw though. He hadn't been scared to find the corpse. Truth be told, Miller was rather certain that the Doctor had been expecting it. And Miller himself had been too. After seeing the scientist killed in the hallway only a half an hour before, he'd known they'd probably wind up finding the missing intern dead. Death was heavy in the air and easily discovered in the mansion tonight.

But why O why were they seeking out the cause of it all on their own?

"This is insane, you know that?" Miller whispered, unable to keep the wavering note from his voice. His tired old eyes darted everywhere, seeing nothing but imagining everything. He was waiting for something to swoop out of the darkness and rip his head off and with each trembling footstep he made, he was even more amazed that he wasn't turning about and heading back upstairs to safety, "We're four totally unprepared scientists venturing into the darkness to meet death and armed with little save anger and--"

"I do have a gun--" Waters reminded.

"From what you told me, that peashooter of yours will be of little use against this creature. And since you seem so superstitious, according to your rule book little save sunlight or Holy Water will do us any good."

Dr. Waters grit his teeth, black eyes blazing in the darkness. He held the gun tighter. "Shut your mouth, you babbling fool, I don't need you to mock me. You saw that body lying in the crypt--"

"I saw many dead bodies in that crypt actually--"

"Quiet! Will you make a game of this? This isn't a game, there's a murderer in this mansion! Two men dead! Aaron and the intern and I won't see it happen again and you are all three cowards if you'd stand to let it."

"You will see it happen again," Miller replied viciously. He tucked his shaking hands in his pockets, "You'll see yourself and all the rest of us dead if you persist in hunting this thing alone."

Vanswith's ears perked up at the words. He was only twenty-five and a Shinra employee for a scant four months. "I don't have any intentions of dying down here," he protested faintly. He wasn't sure why he was there at all except that Bier had given him one of those, "Don't you dare abandon me" looks and so he'd known he'd have to come. He wasn't entirely sure what was going on. "If this thing's that dangerous, let's just turn back around, eh?"

"Feel free," Dr. Waters growled. He froze in his tracks and raised his gun out level before him, both thick hands wrapped about it. Another crack, a quick spark, and a bullet sunk into the door before him. He'd just marked their arrival at the Laboratory.

"Don't do that!" Vanswith yelped, jumping backwards. He took his hands away from his ears and smeared sweat off his forehead. He had no weapon. Just his fear.

"Yes, is that really necessary?" Bier asked, speaking for the first time. His arms were casually folded across his chest, right hand hanging on loosely to a small handgun he'd snagged from downstairs. His eyes were hidden in the shadows and looking at him now, Waters wasn't really sure why he'd come along. The belligerent scientist raised his gun, just to defy the two younger men, and fired it into the door again. Wood exploded from a perfectly round bullet hole just above the handle.

"To hell with the element of surprise I see, Dr. Waters," Miller sighed, readjusting his grip on the poker.

"I want this sonnuvabitch to know we're coming," Waters declared. He raised his voice. "I want him to be shivering in fear and anticipation in there and counting the moments he has left to live! You all didn't see! You didn't see what he did! This thing is of Hojo and of the Devil and I'll send it back to hell!"

"The Watch," Vanswith whimpered, looking from man to man and searching for a little common sense, "Soldiers. Police. Turks. Someone besides we four! This is illogical! I don't get hazard pay for this kind of nonsense!"

No one paid him any mind and he probably could have turned right about and gone back down the hallway without anyone trying to stop him. The young scientist even looked that way, a quick glance over his shoulder. But so dark. And there were skulls scattered from out of the tomb, Dr. Waters had blown a gasket back there when they'd found the intern, kicking bones every which way, swearing all the while. Vanswith didn't want to have to pass through all that again. His fingers trembled and his knees knocked together. He eyed Waters like a frightened kitten then tugged Bier's shirtsleeve until his friend turned around. "Can't we go back?" he whispered, "Come on, we're not prepared for this!"

Bier shrugged. "Go back if you want, I don't care."

Vanswith didn't need another word. He whipped about and took off running back the way they'd come. Dr. Waters snorted in disgust and kicked at the Library door before him until it rattled in its frame.

"Stop it," Miller demanded, nudging him hard in the shoulder, "Between your shouts and that damn gun, this monster's probably heard us coming a mile away. We don't need the obnoxious kicking."

"If you don't like it, you can turn yourself right back around and follow the coward! But anyone who's staying, here we go! All right." Waters drew his gun up close to his cheek and stared at the closed door before him. "All right. All right. Let me be in the lead. I'll blow a few holes in the son of a bitch, the rest of you stay behind and act accordingly if the thing gets past me. Not that that'll happen. We're going to put this creature in his coffin permanently. And then show Dr. Hojo the bloodied results."

"Are you sure about this?"

"I've never been more sure. Now stop questioning me. You asked to come, I didn't want you here. And you, Bier, you cover me if I need it."

Bier shrugged, arms still crossed. The faintest of smug smiles graced his lips. "Sure."

Waters thought this man's attitude was a little bizarre but he wouldn't allow himself a moment to ponder the observation. A quick glance towards his 9mm semiautomatic and then he had a hand resting on the bullet-riddled door, his breaths coming slow and quiet. Miller was right behind him, poker raised but trembling in his veiny, pale hands. Bier stayed in the rear. And he watched very very closely as the Doctor turned the handle and the Library door began to swing silently inward.

There was no sound as it opened and revealed the chamber beyond to the three. And what met their eyes was no surprise. Just the Library and Laboratory, they'd all been in there earlier that evening, only the atmosphere had been one

of annoyance, short-tempered snorts filling the musty air. But Hojo isn't here now, Waters thought as he put a careful foot forward into the room, Just the little monster's he's made to kill us all.

It was quiet. The scientists strained their hearing to catch some sound of the thing they were after. Neither Bier nor Miller had any idea what their prey looked like. Miller had some image of a red-eyed demon with bat wings and foot long fangs. The claw that Waters had spoke of, what could that look like? Some metal contraption that took up the creature's entire arm, from shoulder to fingers? Or just some hideous hand with twenty separate pointed fingers, dripping blood and marrow and thirsty for more? Thirsty... Miller froze, a cold sweat breaking out on his brow as this sudden thought hit him. He'd never really realized what a cold sweat was until now, but his skin was clammy and trembling, covered with a thin sheen of perspiration that ran into his eyes. Because... because it was a vampire they were chasing. A vampire who'd drank from that man's throat as though lapping from a spring. He shoved the thoughts away and decided there was some boring, scientific explanation to the creature. He was a scientist, of course he'd find an excuse. Professor Hojo's genius was simply shining through, that was all. His genius was evident in the perfect murderer he'd created. But why had he lied? Why had he let this creature run free to hunt them all?

Miller stayed close to Waters' back as they advanced into the silent laboratory. Everything was normal. He kept his watery old eyes moving from right to left, ceiling to floor, looking for anything glinting in the shadows, be it reddened eyes, a glistening claw or otherwise. The only evidence that anything was amiss at all were the footprints. Muddy footprints that didn't look quite right. Because it wasn't mud made with water and dirt, it was mud composed of dirt from the hallway outside and Pepper's wet red blood. The shoes that had made them were wickedly pointed and so the shapes they'd made had a certain viciousness to them that had Miller shaking more than he could control. They led from the doorway they'd just entered through, back into the office. And Waters was following the path with relentless precision.

"Dr. Waters!" Miller whispered, and a few drops of spit flew from his mouth and hit his lip. Waters shushed him violently but he wouldn't be silenced. "Dr. Waters, we can't do this! We can't face this thing alone!"

"Shut the hell up or run away," Waters snapped without turning around. Miller could see dark patches of sweat staining the underarms of the man's pale blue polo shirt, a V-shape of damp forming near the small of his back. He tightened his hold on his own weapon, the suddenly meager-looking little iron poker, and kept his pace steady. He wasn't going to run away. He wouldn't leave these two younger men alone down here, that was why he'd come along in the first place. But damn...

The lights were all on and really it seemed as though scientists should be bustling about this well-lit, well-stocked little laboratory. But the place was as empty as a midnight graveyard. Still some presence was in the room, the three men could feel it. It was haunted, as cheesy as it sounded to say. Nothing to see, but plenty to feel; old ghosts, old words, old deeds infested the air and invisible things wrapped about the scientists as though eager to tell them all that had happened in this tomb-like place of secrets. It was something more like a tomb than that room down the hall they'd just left. This place stank of death, Miller had noticed it before when he'd been down here at the meeting--

Atrocity. The word was fitting and it snapped suddenly into his skull. Atrocities had been committed in this place. And so it was haunted.

Waters led them past the meeting table and towards a short hallway connecting to the office. Books and papers crunched underfoot and he wouldn't lower his gun, keeping it close to his right cheek, the tip of the muzzle parallel with his eye. Bier was as silent as he'd been the entire trip and Miller took a moment to wonder about the young man. But the distraction didn't last.

"It must be in here," Waters informed in a whispered hush. Bier nodded and brought his handgun up, Miller gulped and readjusted his grip on the poker. They stood at the end of the book-lined hall and all that lay beyond was the Library office. It was quiet. Too quiet, Miller thought fearfully, Just like in the movies. But the lights were on and it was all so still, and how could there possibly be a monster in the room beyond? Waters tiptoed forward, keeping himself concealed behind the last bookshelf in the hall, both hands around the gun, eyes blinking away sweat. He pivoted his body slowly to the right, back to the books, and brought himself out into the open with a sudden cry, ready to fire.

But the room was empty. It was in its customary state of disorder, and it was empty. Waters lowered his pistol just an inch and let out a long breath of air.

"Well, where is it?" Miller demanded, stepping from the hallway and leaning heavily on the poker as if it were a cane. He waved a hand about, "Where's this big bad vampire, Dr. Waters, eh? I don't see anything."

Bier didn't say a word, he only looked at the bloody shoe prints at his feet. He followed the trail with his eyes, never letting down his guard. Waters tried to hide his relief and he swung about to face Miller.

"Shut up," he said simply, and began examining the room.

Lit as usual; big desk, scattered papers, walls lined with shelves overflowing with books and documents and equipment. High ceiling unlit by the weak fluorescent lamps, doors in the walls, hidden by the shelves. Waters shrugged his broad shoulders and looked defeated. "Damn it."

"Yo, Einstein!"

The scientist whipped about and immediately made out a barred window along with a pair of brightly glowing blue eyes behind it. Zack scowled at Dr Waters but continued. "If you're lookin' for the freak with the claw, he isn't here. He booked back the way he came."

"What do you mean?" the Doctor thundered, and he barged towards Zack and Cloud's cell with one beefy fist raised above his head. He had a hold of Zack's collar before the Soldier could dart backwards and to safety, "It was here then? And it left you alive?"

"Calm down, Doc," Cloud muttered from the shadows, "What's it to you? Let go of Zack, or Hojo will have your head for 'mishandling the specimens'. Heh heh."

"Don't get cocky with me, ya spiky headed little guinea pig!" Waters threw Zack backwards and he hit the rear wall of the cell with a sickening crunch, laying on the floor and swearing beneath his breath. "Speak t'me now, ya bastards or I'll blow you both to hell! Hojo isn't here to keep me from it!" Waters raised his gun again, sticking it between two of the bars in the door and making aim for Cloud's head.

"Have you completely lost it, man?" Zack pushed himself up from the floor painfully, "Put that frigging gun away! We haven't done anything!"

"But you said that monster was here! Where's he gone?!"

"He was here... and then, then he suddenly wasn't..."

Zack struggled to better explain what he'd seen just before the scientists had stepped into the office but even he wasn't really sure. He adjusted the collar of his shirt and stood up, brushing dirt from his pants. He exchanged looks with Cloud in the darkness and with so little light inside the room, Waters thought they both looked like the same man; same height, same unruly hair, same build, and the same dazzling blue eyes.

"I hope you find him and blow his brains out," Cloud muttered quietly. He crossed his arms and closed his eyes, refusing to contribute anything else to anyone.

"I don't see footprints leading out," Bier said suddenly. Waters turned around to the silent young scientist and glared.

"Then he's in here."

"But how?" Miller demanded. He swung around and around, looking everywhere, but the office wasn't that big. The huge desk... the experiments... the bookshelves...

"Heh heh heh..." Zack's quiet laughter tickled the air and the three scientists flinched. "You Shinra scientists... you're supposed to know everything there is to know. So where the hell is this guy, eh? This guy who told me he was a Turk named Valentine."

"That's a fucking good question..." Waters whispered. He looked around, then down to the ground. The footprints led up to almost exactly where he was standing in front of the door. But they didn't lead back. "Maybe he turned into a bat and fluttered away."

The lights went out.

There wasn't a sputter of sparks or the crackling of a blown fuse. The lights just suddenly went out.

"Oh, this is just terrific."

Waters heard Miller give a yelp but he ignored it, immediately finding a wall and putting his back against it, gun up again and pointing out at the empty black air. He held his breath, listening.

"The generators are still on," he whispered, "The power's not out..."

Zack was laughing again, an eerie sound floating through the darkness.

"You're really smart," he chuckled, "Oh my God, but you are a genius, Dr. Waters... you too, Dr. Miller, Dr. Bier. Regular fuckin' Shinra geniuses..."

"Shut the hell up!"

The office was customarily lit by a standard pair of fluorescent white lamps at either end of the room. Without them, it was pitch dark inside. A slightly yellow glow told where the exit towards the rest of the Library was, but other than that there was nothing but black. Waters inched his way closer to that glow, his heart hammering in his ears, his hands growing colder in the vicious chill of the air conditioner. But it wasn't the AC that made him tremble.

"Fuck me!" Miller exclaimed in a little squeak, the words sounding strange coming from the sixty year old's mouth. He wasn't one to normally swear but this was a special occasion, "Something just brushed past me!"

"That was me," Dr. Bier said quietly. He didn't sound disturbed at all. He also had his back to the bookshelves and he pushed Miller beside him rudely. "Come out!" he hollered into the darkness, surprising his comrades, "We know you're in here!"

"Zack! Where is he?" Waters roared, gun at eye level.

"Why the hell are you asking me? I have no idea. Go ask Hojo."

Zack laughed again and almost felt bad for doing it. He could feel the mounting panic in the scientists yet revenge always tasted so good whenever he could get a little on his tongue that he couldn't stop. He laughed as they shook in their cheap sneakers and then he ran up to Cloud in the darkness and elbowed his friend, trying to get him to enjoy their little

power trip. But Cloud was indifferent. He shoved Zack away and plopped down on the floor, resting his head atop his folded arms.

Miller had thrown his poker to the ground. He stared out at the darkness with wide, terror-filled eyes, swearing to God that he felt something tickling the top of his head. "You're mad!" he bellowed, "The lot of you! All of you!" Waters heard him push himself up from off the wall, then heard his heavy, clumsy footsteps against the floor, the scuffling of his penny loafers against the fallen stacks of papers. He began to walk quickly towards the hallway, fleeing the room of invisible terrors, desperate for the light of the Library.

He was halfway to the exit when he bellowed a savage cry. Both Waters and Bier heard him crash to the ground in a noisy clatter.

"Dr. Miller!"

Trembling violently, the aging scientist pushed himself up onto his elbows. He looked around and blinked and blinked but he could see nothing through the darkness. "S-s-something tripped me!" he hissed and was frantic to get on his feet again, clawing for something to use as support. Bier rushed forward to help but Miller tried to take off as soon as he was standing. The retreat didn't last. He fell flat on his face a second time.

"What the hell--?!"

Scrabbling about in a mess of flying limbs, he tried and tried to get away but every time he was on his feet, something invisible tangled itself in his weak and shaking legs and he wound up on his hands and knees again. "Who's out there?!" he cried, tears of panic winding down his cheeks. Bier was there suddenly, one helping hand on the old man's back but something struck at his shins and he too wound up on the floor, staring blankly into the darkness. Both men were silent then, as though it were their invisible enemy's turn to make a move. But nothing came.

"Will you play games with us then?" Waters asked as calmly as he could manage, shattering the quiet. The air was cold and his nose was freezing, his fingertips trembling against the cool steel of his weapon. His eyes ached from searching through the blackness. "Fight like a man, don't hide in the dark like a coward."

For a few moments, silence was the only response. But then--

"According to you, I'm not a man. So why should I follow one's rules?"

There was no tone to Vincent's voice. No mocking, no anger, nothing. It seemed to come from everywhere and then from nowhere all at once. In fact, Waters wasn't sure if he'd really heard it or imagined he had. He still saw nothing but black.

"Do you want me to turn the lights back on? Or shall I kill the three of you in the dark? It's your choice."

"NO!!" Miller was on the verge of panic, scrambling to get on his feet again and head for the exit. That nameless something was blocking the way again though and he crashed back to the floor, hitting it chin-first so that stars swam dizzily before his eyes. Bier kept still, his attention riveted on the unseen speaker. His fingers clutched at the handle of his weapon in the darkness. He thought he could see something though, something very very faint. It was in the rafters above him; two red pin pricks of light. They were like a pair of softly glowing coals left in a bed of burnt-out ashes. And they blinked.

"What are you?" Bier questioned fearlessly. It wasn't cockiness in his voice, it wasn't self-assurance. He respected this thing which he had not yet seen. He would continue to respect it, if for nothing else than its strength. But he would not fear it. He wasn't really the kind of man to become so easily afraid, he was too scientific for that. He would do nothing without proof. He wouldn't fear unless it was proven to him that whatever he faced was truly a specific threat to his well-being. He'd yet to even see his opponent yet. He wanted information.

Vincent had none to give.

Not really.

He was crouched like a panther on a ceiling rafter, one leg hanging idly off and swinging only inches above Dr. Water's head. As though it were his tail, he flicked his left foot back and forth, finding it funny that the scientist beneath him could feel the breeze it made but had no idea what was causing it. It was adding to the man's panic. With perfect ease, Vincent watched him sweating through the blackness and he marveled at how it was possible for him to see at all but was glad enough that it gave him such an advantage. He gazed at Waters with his big bad gun that trembled in his hands, and then he noticed Miller trying to run again and he swept down and tripped him up, sending him back to the floor. Bier only stared out at nothing with a perfect sort of patience and Vincent found himself wondering how he was so calm. He rather admired it. Well, not admired it, but he was the one man out of the scientists whom he didn't feel an overwhelming disgust towards. He honestly couldn't answer Bier's question though. He only knew one thing:

Death.

It wasn't a voice, it wasn't anything as specific or easily definable as that, but something inside of his head insisted that he kill something. It wasn't even the death itself that this thing found so important, it was blood.

But he wasn't Hojo's monster. He wasn't going to give in to that possibility.

"I just don't think he's scared of ya, Dr. Waters," Zack called from behind the prison door. He laughed again, enjoying himself, then hollered, "Heya! Valentine! you scared of these Shinra jerks? Rip their heads off already, do something productive."

Vincent scowled at the words but showed no interest in following Zack's advice. He wasn't sure what to do really. Lucrecia wasn't in this place after all, neither was Hojo. And now he was a wanted man and a murderer and quite possibly a vampire and-- and he had to get out of here before he killed again. If he let himself go, he'd kill everyone in this room, he was sure of it.

It would be so easy. He was so much stronger than any of them. He could kill any one that he chose with the simplest of actions. And why didn't he? He could clear this room and be on his way. What was there to make him stop the murderer inside? Ah... this question suddenly became very important. But the answer was simple and on the tip of his tongue before he could ever fear that it might not be there at all: he was not a murderer. He never had been. A Turk, a bastard, a psycho. Perhaps. But never a murderer without just cause for the lives he took.

At least, that's what he'd always told himself. As for Lucrecia, she'd simply never asked. Vincent had always been glad for that.

Bier couldn't take his eyes off the blinking pinpricks of red above his head. His fingers wrapped a bit tighter around the gun in his hand, darting his eyes over towards Miller for a second. The old man was still panicking but quieter now. And Waters was simply helpless and furious. Zack was still laughing. But those red eyes above his head never flinched.

"Shut the hell up, Zack!" Dr. Waters demanded.

"Why? Tell me why I should. This is all hilarious! Go for it, Valentine! And then go get Hojo, if you aren't gonna let us out! Why not? Ha!"

Bier raised his gun with deadly and surprising accuracy, making a target out of the red eyes above him. He let three bullets fly with little warning but Vincent saw them coming, he'd heard Bier's silence. Eyes widening, he rolled backwards off the rafter, heels flying above his head, somersaulting downwards and landing with a little stumble against the Office's eastern wall. His claw hit the stone behind him with a soft scrape of metal and Bier heard it, readjusting his aim, proving to be more of a threat than anyone had thought. Miller cried out in shock and leapt away from the gunman, too surprised to get back to his feet. The flash of red eyes was everywhere and no where all at once, just a dark and silent phantom as intangible as the air conditioning's freezing breeze as Vincent did his best to outmaneuver Dr. Bier and his eager little gun.

The urge to do something about the cause of those flying bullets was nearly overpowering but Vincent kept control. He was the Turk and he kept control, dodging the rain of death.

"Dr. Waters! Behind you!"

Synapses clacking, reaching for a plan, Vincent had been about to smack Waters with the blunt back of his metal hand but Bier heard his footsteps and called an immediate warning. The Shinra scientist heeded it, whipping about with an athlete's reflexes and bringing his 9mm into play. Vincent barely escaped the barrage of shots fired just past his temple. His ears rang with the noise and he leapt away, sweat standing out on his brow. The room was black and full of smoke. His own breathing seemed too loud.

Miller backed off, fearing the bullets and the flashes of light as the two guns emptied into the air. He catapulted to his feet and tried to find a wall, desiring something solid and real to put his back against. His grappling fingers found the rough wood of a door and he blindly tried to open it. But Zack's hand shot out first, through the bars and around Miller's neck and he pulled the aging scientist close as he flailed under him. The shots rang through the Office louder than thunder and Zack's mako-enhanced vision could see their target just a bit better than the gunmen. Vincent wasn't going to fight but he wasn't going to run away. Zack slowly strangled Miller as he shouted out.

"What's up with you?" he demanded, "Kill 'em or something, or they're gonna get you!"

One of Bier's bullets grazed Vincent's left ear and he grunted a curse to himself, flinching away from the shot. He huddled in a corner of the room and tried to staunch the blood with a shaking hand. Zack's face was across from him, through the bars, Miller's sagging countenance struggling around the Soldier's vice-like grip. But there was no time to stare at that, Bier made out the sound of Vincent's panting and was bringing the gun around in his direction again. Bier was acting more like a trained hit man than a damned scientist! Who the hell was this guy?

"You don't know what you're doing!" Vincent muttered before he could silence himself. Bier slowed his attack, eyes narrowing as he stared through the darkness. "What do you think you're fighting for? Hojo? Do you know what he is? No, no one ever suspected him until it was too late. And then... and then there was nothing anyone could do."

"You're a monster!" Dr. Waters roared, semi-automatic in his doubly-tensed right arm. He kept it raised as he stepped towards the sound of Vincent's voice, "What do you know about anything?"

"More than you obviously. I didn't kill your friend upstairs. Nor did I kill that young man in the... in the crypt."

"Liar!" Dr. Waters had that battle fury in his eyes, that same glow as was there when he'd be waiting in the locker room before the second half of the District Finals. When he'd have his helmet in his hands, and his cleats on, and his tongue pushing against the tooth protector in his mouth. Only the 9mm in his fist was his defense in this little game. The

monster with the claw was the opposition. "I saw you do it! Either you think I'm the stupidest sonuvabitch to ever take a breath or you're crazy! I saw you kill Aaron! And that man Pepper... you're a murdering vampiric monster, plain and simple!"

"It was a monster that did it, "Vincent relented quietly, fighting to speak through his heavy breaths, "You're right about that. But I'm not the monster." He took his hand away from his ear, and the feel of his own blood on his fingers nearly drove him from his skull. He shook his head and tried to concentrate. His eyes were on Waters and he didn't see Bier advancing on him from the far right.

The bullet struck him a vicious blow in the side and Vincent felt the pressure more than the pain. He rolled over on reflex, bullets striking the stone ground behind him in relentless pursuit and then he was running but he realized after only half a second that he was trapped. Trapped like a bear in its cave unless he killed these poor, clueless bastards and he wasn't going to do that. Although he wanted to. He really really wanted to.

Ah, but I'd be playing under Hojo's rules then, wouldn't I? If he's done this to me, he's done it with the intent of making me a killer. And so by God, I won't do it.

Without warning, the Office grew still. Vincent held his breath and closed his eyes, cloaking himself in the comforting darkness he'd made inside the room. He extended his hearing as he huddled behind the lone, massive oaken desk and he knew that Bier and Waters were waiting with guns ready to finish what they'd started with the bullet in his side. Stifling groans, Vincent reached a hand down to feel the stinging wound just above his right hip. Ach, it'd passed clean through. Good. It hurt like something else though and he grit his teeth to keep from swearing. He was quiet. He listened to the scientists' nervous pacings on the other side of his make-shift refuge.

"Maybe it's dead, "Waters whispered but he didn't really believe it. Bier was poised tighter than a spring. He was waiting for any indication, any sign to fire again. Neither knew that Zack was still holding onto Miller and no one gave the old man a thought.

"No, it's not, my shot wasn't that great, "Bier answered at length, "Come out now and let me finish this! One bullet between the eyes. I promise you won't feel a thing."

Dr. Waters blinked a few times in surprise at his co-worker's words. He was really starting to like this guy.

Vincent was starting to hate him. Where did a Shinra scientist get off being so damned good with a gun? And how was he following him so well in this darkness? He suppressed a growl and began inching his way around to the side of the desk, towards the Office's exit. Seemed a tactical retreat was his best option right now. He wouldn't be able to move very well with this hole in his side though. His two enemies were positioned at opposite ends of the desk, very near the walls and leaving a clear path to the door. Amateurs, he thought with a silent sneer. Vincent steadied himself in a crouch, claw against the ground for balance and prepared to sprint. He took off without a sound, moving like a shadow only he left a spatter of blood in his wake.

Bier turned at once.

"There he goes!!!"

And Dr. Waters wasn't really sure what to fire at but the urgency in his comrade's voice left no doubt in his mind that now was the time for decisive action. He swept about and raised his 9mm, discerning a very faint silhouette against the dim yellow rectangle of light signifying the exit of the Office. He flicked his head, sending brilliant sparkles of perspiration flying from his eyes. Bier fired at the same time.

Zack followed it all closely, his thick arm wrapped around the old man Miller's neck. Vincent was fleeing towards the exit and the two scientists had their guns raised towards him. He'd be shot down like a dog in half a second. Zack acted without thinking. Giving Miller's neck a violent jerk, he reared his arm back and sent the man hurling towards Vincent. Miller went without resistance, blind in the darkness and simply glad to be free of the Soldier's choking grip. He slammed into Vincent with a soft thud and the red-eyed man reeled back, falling towards the exit. The scientist gave a weak cry before both Bier's and Dr. Waters' bullet slammed into him. Vincent flew through the Office exit without looking back. Miller was hammered against the doorjamb with seven rounds pumped into his chest.

Half-sobbing, Waters recovered from the force of his weapon's vicious kickback and then shot forward like a bullet himself, chasing after that fleeting figure of black. He tripped over Miller though and fell to his hands and knees, hitting the side of his head on a bookshelf. "Bier!" he cried out, "Where the hell are you?!"

"Right here."

Bier's voice was as cool and collected as if he were giving a lecture on materia structures. He hauled Dr. Waters up by his shoulder and steadied him before going after Vincent. Not another word to his colleague, he simply flew through the door, leaving the Office, the scientist, the specimens, and Miller behind.

"Yo yo yo, "Zack was pushing himself nervously against his prison door, unconsciously trying to pass through it, "Heya, Dr. Waters, is that old guy all right?"

Waters barely heard the Soldier's words. He stood wavering and tall in the darkness, the noise of the recent shots still ringing in his ears. With trembling fingers, he holstered his gun, then knelt down to the figure at his feet.

Miller was dead. There was no pulse at his neck.

"God damned monster!!" he roared into the empty air. His fists closed in his rage, his teeth gnashed with a grief he couldn't express.

"But you fired the shots, Doc. You killed him."

"And you pushed him in front of me!" Waters ran toward the unblinking blue eyes behind the bars but Zack stepped backwards before that thick hand could snatch at him. He stood besides Cloud's silent form in the cramped little cell and he watched Waters curse and cry and scream in his rage, clawing at the bars like some animal denied his prey. "You both deserve what Professor Hojo puts you through!!" he stuttered, "You deserve it!"

Zack smirked, though his eyes were sad. He slumped against the back wall of the cell. "Go talk to Dr. Miller, Dr. Waters. He'll listen to you better than I will."

~*~

Dr. Martee Bier was twenty-nine years old. Average height, dark hair and dark green eyes, he was very plain looking. Most people didn't give him a second glance.

"Zack said your name was Valentine? Come out. Come out and let me end this, you know you can't run forever."

Bier was in the front of the Library. He kicked at the scattered books and papers beneath his feet, blinking hard to readjust his eyes to the light. He could hear Waters cursing in the Office behind him. He darted his eyes to the ground as he walked, following the spatters of blood at his feet. There wasn't as much there as he'd hoped though, his shot hadn't been the best. "There's a lot of rumors that float around Shinra, "he said conversationally to no one in particular. The Library around him seemed empty. Cluttered with equipment and books but silent and empty. Only Waters' and Zack's distant voices. "Valentine sounds familiar to me... seems... seems I've heard the name before. A Turk, right? Yeah... I've heard of you... thing is though, you're dead."

"Re-check your information. I think the error's obvious."

Vincent's voice echoed against the Library's high ceilings, cloaking the source. But Bier didn't need it. The trail of blood beneath his sneakers was map enough.

"Ah... "he breathed with a little laugh, "You are him though. The Turk who disappeared close to thirty years ago. But you don't know that, do you? Do you?"

"It couldn't have been thirty years. I'm... I'm the same as I always was..."

"Haven't looked in a mirror lately, have you?"

Bier laughed to himself again, quickly dropping the spent clip from his gun and reaching into the pocket of his slacks for a fresh one. He was tall and lanky, possessing a scientist's build, but he moved with a confidence claiming there was more behind him than it seemed. His right hand was sure and steady around his weapon, a beat up service pistol that'd seen better days. He reached the operating area, moving with muted footsteps. The line of blood droplets led back around behind a bookshelf. The light here was dimmed, the overhead lamp had a hard time reaching this far back and Bier moved slower, every gesture a lesson in caution. His words slid through the air like silk.

"It doesn't take a genius like Professor Hojo's to realize what you are, "he whispered, stepping slowly over the Library tiles, "You're no different from Zack and Cloud in there. Just another unfortunate little guinea pig. But you're messing with the wrong group of scientists, my friend."

"And why's that?"

Bier smiled darkly to himself, his left hand free and moving slowly forward to touch the wall for support. He pushed against it, ready to turn a corner he knew was a dead end. But he wasn't concerned, the blood trail led back behind this filth-covered, book-infested shelf. "You're messing with me, when you're messing with the rest of the men in this group. And you don't want to mess with me. What are you hoping to accomplish wandering around here and murdering Shinra employees? You're no idiot and you're no monster, despite what Dr. Waters says. You have a brain. You were a Turk for God's sake. So what are you going to do?"

Bier swiveled himself quickly around the corner, gun raised. But the dark and cobweb-filled cubby hole behind the shelf was empty. Just a pool of blood. The scientist whipped quickly about, just as Vincent descended from above, his two metal-shod shoes smacking the man square in his jaw. He landed from the attack clumsily, crying out at the pain in his side, then swore lustily when Bier shot back to his feet, gun blazing.

"Who the hell are you?!" he demanded, artfully avoiding the scientist's every round. He backed up, leaping instead of walking, swatting bullets away with his claw. But he could feel the metal of his arm crunching beneath the shots and he grit his teeth, dizzy with the pain of it.

"I'm someone you shouldn't take for granted, "was the only answer Bier would surrender. He jumped towards Vincent who scooted away, then doubled back and leapt, clawing the struggling scientist diagonally across his chest. Bier screamed out but wouldn't fall, one arm darting up to wrap around his wounds, his pale blue dress shirt dyed with a dark

and spreading crimson. The both of them were out in the most open part of the Library and Vincent eyed the exit to the place desperately. It had been a mistake to come down here, he'd made a stupid rookie mistake both times he'd ever allowed himself to step foot in this damned basement. He was gonna leave here of his own will this time though.

Bier's dark eyes crackled with a soundless fury and he deftly twirled his gun about, trying to pistol-whip Vincent upside the head. In a quick, clever maneuver though, the ex-Turk caught the scientist's arm and let the man's own momentum swing him around in a perfect flip, Vincent holding tight to his hand and letting his arm twist right out of the socket. Bier screamed in pain and rage but was too composed to let Vincent dart his claw into him. He squirmed out of his grip, slamming a foot into his gut and Vincent reeled backwards, hitting the shelf behind him hard. Bier was on him in a heartbeat, and his gun did meet the side of his head this time, so that blackness crept into the corner of his red eyes and blood trickled down his cheek.

Breaths tearing from his throat, Bier stood over Vincent and clutched at himself, bleeding from the jagged wounds across his chest, pain throbbing without mercy from his broken arm. He held his gun a little awkwardly in his left hand but Vincent was sure the inconvenience wouldn't affect his aim enough to be a disadvantage at such close range. Damn. He hurt unbearably and the world was reeling around too much for him to get to his feet. But at least it wasn't Hojo standing over him this time. At least he couldn't hear Lucrecia crying.

Bier took aim. He wasn't stupid. No grand final speeches for him. He fired. But Vincent hadn't given up yet. He shoved his claw-arm up before his face in time to take the bullet's fury and then screamed a curse as the lead broke through the metal and sunk into the flesh beneath. Bier fired again and again until his weapon clicked suddenly empty. Vincent shot to his feet then without a second thought to his injuries, claw hanging limp and useless at his side, dark blood gushing over the bronze and pooling at his feet. He charged the scientist with a barrage of kicks, finishing with a deadly blow to the side of the bastard's head with a rock-hard right fist. Bier crumpled to the ground, still holding onto his gun. Vincent collapsed right beside him. And he hadn't the strength to fight the craving now.

The world swam before Dr. Bier's eyes in dizzying colors, a swirl of rainbows and sparkles and things he might find pretty if he wasn't in so much pain. He put a hand up, grappling through the darkness, everything he'd been so concentrated on before, now dashed from his skull and replaced with thoughts of how hurt he was. Groaning a tuneless melody of pain, he rubbed at his concussion, releasing his gun from his other hand.

But there was a third hand, and it wasn't his. It was reaching for his collar and then for his throat and before Bier could even think to cry out, he felt a sharp and unidentifiable pain in his neck. He was too confused to fight back and he slid into unconsciousness with the word 'vampire' swimming through his head in random, unruly patterns.

~*~

"Light! Goddammit! Where's the light?"

With Bier gone and Miller dead, Dr. Waters was scared. The gun in his hand had lost its mythical power. It didn't seem capable of keeping him safe and superior any longer. A tall and lumbering man, he stretched shaking fingers over the Office's black walls, desperate to find something to cling to, or better yet, a light switch. It was too quiet, too unbearably still inside this Library Office now that the sound of the gunshots was gone. They lived on only in reverberations that wouldn't quit sounding off in Water's mind. He would have pushed his hands to his ears against the noise, noise the like of which had been so sweet so shortly before as he'd walked down the basement hallway with the semiautomatic in his hand, feeling like a king just setting out on a hunt. Not a king though, more like a hero out to avenge wrongful deaths, a knight journeying to slay a monster who'd wreaked havoc and spilled blood. Drank blood. But he wasn't so proud and brave anymore. No, that weapon had turned against him.

Or had he turned against it, too careless in his anger?

Waters could hear strange sounds outside; Bier talking, shouting, threatening, cursing, and he knew he should run out to assist his co-worker, yet Miller wasn't talking back to him, wasn't answering his pleas. He had to see Miller, even though there was no pulse beneath his middle and forefingers when he pressed them 'gainst the old man's neck.

"He's all right, isn't he? I-I didn't know you were going to frigging shoot him!"

"That's just great Zack..." Cloud's voice was soft and accusing. He didn't rise from his crouch on the dark floor of their prison, "You've killed one of the scientists, now you're really in for it."

"SHUT UP!! Shut up the both of you!" Waters ran blindly towards the door of their cell, his bulk slamming against the sturdy wood and causing the very walls to tremble. He rolled his back against it, arcing his arms out to the walls on either side, but they were only lined with bookshelves and he scraped his knuckles and the backs of his hands as he groped against them. Books fell to the floor, sending up clouds of dust that he couldn't see in the darkness. His flared nostrils only breathed them in and he choked and gagged through his words. "I'll have your head for this, Zack!" he raged, "You and Cloud! Why did you fling him out there? Why did you kill him?"

"Hey! Hey, shut up, you're the one who was too infatuated with the hunt to have the presence of mind to quit firing when he was suddenly in front of you! You missed the wolf and hit your chocobo, you jerk! Don't pin it on me!"

The words only sent Waters into a further rage, goaded on by his fear and panic and he shoved his right arm through the bars of the window and Zack skipped backwards to avoid being strangled again. He wanted to grab that fat arm and twist it around and rip it right offa Waters, but he kept himself in control, shooting a look to Cloud. The blonde-haired man shrugged and turned away, his blue eyes sober and questioning in the darkness. He didn't understand why Zack had helped a man who'd so unfeelingly left them here to rot. That bastard with the claw had deserved the Shinra scientists' bullets. Cloud almost felt betrayed.

Waters abruptly cut off his futile attack against Zack and went back to trying to find a switch. He was scared of the things that might swoop down on him from the dark, from the rafters that that monster had been hiding in when they'd entered the Office. Stupid! So stupid of them to come down here alone and he'd been so cocky, so sure that he could kill that thing himself. And Miller was laying dead on the floor right now! Because of that cockiness! He reached both hands out, stumbling forward, looking for another wall and then suddenly his left fingers found what he sought and he flicked the little light switch desperately. Harsh white flooded the room.

"Oh damn..." Zack sighed quietly, his conscience stinging him. "Man, I didn't mean it, I didn't think you two assholes would keep shooting. But hell, you're both just a couple of science goons, what do you know about guns or self-control?"

Miller lay in a crumpled heap near the door, eight small buds of red, each like a bright flower in bloom, covering his chest. His eyes were open and Dr. Waters was glad, thinking it meant he'd died instantly. "It was an accident," he whispered, looking towards the corpse with a strange expression on his face. Not exactly grief, more like fear that this could all be pinned on him and he'd no longer be the scientist that everyone in the Department feared. He'd just be this unlucky asshole who'd killed old Dr. Miller and ruined his own career. And Professor Hojo would laugh until that pale, sharply-featured face of his turned blue. "It was an accident!" Waters declared firmly and he shot Zack such a fierce look that the Soldier wouldn't dream of arguing with him.

"Whatever you say, Doc," was all he whispered. And Cloud was silent at his back, radiating disapproval but not saying a word.

Swallowing hard, Dr. Waters choked up his hold on the gun he still held, sliding his nearly spent clip out and then clicking in a new one, his last one, from a pocket in his slacks. He stepped away from the rear Office wall, away from the light switch, and then out into the room, straining his hearing and looking out towards the portal Bier had fled through. He could hear sounds outside, he could hear struggles and he knew he couldn't let the last comrade he had down in this hellish Library share poor Miller's fate. He walked over the tile floor, ignoring Zack's sudden questions, then stepped over the dead body barring the exit. There was very little blood about him. Another sign that his heart had stopped quickly. Oh gods, he couldn't let himself think about it...

His own excited heart thundered again, adrenaline rushing through his weary frame as he stepped into the hallway. Zack watched the scientist go, blue eyes uneasy, conscience screaming at him. Dead Miller stared and Zack wished he could go out and shut the old man's eyes, cross his still warm hands over his chest. It just seemed wrong for him to be laying all undignified and full of lead out there in the Office's unforgiving fluorescent lights. And Waters hadn't bothered with a passing glance. He was silhouetted now in the hall and his face was turned towards the front of the Library, his gun up and flashing a dull silver, eager to mend the mistake it had made. Bier shouted some half-formed words from out there. Zack could hear him cry something.

Waters heard it too. And he heard it better.

The Library's yellow light struck the scientist like a blow as he left the short hallway, crunching books beneath his feet like crackling leaves. The sound made him look down with a gasp, and he saw the bright blood smeared over the crumpled papers, a grisly trail that led from the silent Office at his back to the dim, yellow unknown before him. He tread it quickly, gun up.

"Bier! Dr. Bier!"

And there he was. Waters froze his advance coming upon the man's body, laid out on the Library floor as though on a death slab. But he was far from dead. Bier moaned and clutched his head, dark blood sticking his hair to his scalp, five claw marks across his chest, and blood trickling from some wound on his neck. Waters threw himself forward and gasped when he saw the wound was from the bite of fangs.

"Stay back!" Bier gasped, fighting to stay conscious. He laughed, and Waters was sure he was delirious, "I underestimated the prick, I did. Give me a few minutes, I'll be all right. But you, you be careful, he's still here."

"What?! Where?"

"I don't know! But he's here, keep your guard up! Bastard took my blood? I'll show him, I'll rip him apart!"

Bier flailed his arms, trying to push himself up from off the floor, but he slipped on the wet tile and crashed back down with a grunt. His efforts made him bleed more freely and Waters thought he should quit but this scientist seemed determined to rise again. Waters couldn't keep his attention on him though, not with a murderer on the prowl.

"Where is he?" he shouted again, and then he circled, pivoting on his right heel to take in the dimly lit Library all about, "Come out already, I'll blow yer head off your shoulders!"

He held his breath, listening past Bier's moans and trying to find any sign of the monster he hunted. He looked up this time, into the rafters, but he saw nothing there; no glimmer of red eyes or golden claw. A gunshot drew him out of his search and with a stifled cry, Vincent suddenly fell forward from behind a bookshelf. He lay still on the floor and Bier lowered his smoking gun. The wounded scientist plopped his head and arm back down, panting as though any breath might be his last. "You're hurt too, you sonnuvabitch," he laughed, "Ha, you're hurt too and I heard you. I heard where you were."

Vincent grit his teeth and grabbed at the bullet wound in his collarbone. The shot had shattered it to fragments and an intense pain sent waves of dizziness through him; he thought he'd never hurt so much. He twitched his equally shattered claw and nearly blacked out. This is it then, he thought bitterly, eyes shut, cheek pressed to the cold stone beneath his head, I'm gonna die in this Library after all. What a lot of waste. What a waste. Lucrecia...

Bier laughed, finally managing to push himself up to a sitting position, shove himself against a wall, and stare at Waters. "I heard him, he leapt offa me when he heard you coming and I knew he was over there, nursing himself in the dark... you're like a little rat, Valentine! Hiding in the shadows but chittering like an idiot. Hell, have to give you some credit though, you weren't chittering, you were only breathing a little too hard. Pain'll do that do you, won't it? Won't it?! You wanna stick your damned teeth in my neck again? Do you?!?"

Bier shot forward as though he might jump on and pummel Vincent's silent, crumpled form. But he only fell onto his side, laughing and holding on to his injuries. He looked to Waters, who was simply standing there, dumbfounded and confused, and snapped, "Well what are you waiting for, Doctor? Finish him off! I'm outta rounds, so you get the honors. Avenge your co-workers. Go ahead."

"Are you sure?" Waters couldn't believe he asked this. It had just seemed as though they could never kill this monster and now he was lying half-dead on the floor before him and the time had come. Hmph. Waters raised his 9mm and stepped forward, gun arm stiff and straight and taking aim for the mess of black hair and the head beneath it. Vincent could hear his footsteps, feel the vibrations of them against the floor through his whole body. He didn't look up though, he didn't care enough to. It was like all of these events were distant, on a screen, and he was just a man in the audience, watching the whole play unfold before his eyes. Because this was something he'd already seen, a rerun but the players were different. Now he was a monster and Hojo was this large man with the gun and he was gonna wind up dead again. So why bother looking up to see the bullet this time? He'd had to watch his death once before and he was convinced he shouldn't have to see it again.

Hell, but you can't give up that easily, his conscience snapped at him. Turks never say die!

Yeah, and what a pain in the ass.

He felt Waters' shoe because Waters kicked him in the ribs with it. He felt it a couple more times after that and then he got tired of feeling it.

"You moron!" Bier yelled, struggling to reload his own gun with trembling fingers, "Shoot him! Shoot him!"

And Waters listened to his comrade's wise words. He lowered the pistol and smirked, shaking his foot distastefully to rid it of the blood. Vincent didn't let him fire. With a dying man's desperation, he flipped from his side to his back, kicking his right foot up in a perfect angle and connecting his thick iron plated shoe with Waters' thick, idiotic jaw. The scientist flew back and away and the shock broke his forefingers' hold on his gun so that the semiautomatic arced into the shadows in a flash of silver and rubber. Unfortunately, Bier was in the shadows. With a little grin that broke through his anger, he caught the gun perfectly and opened fire on Vincent who barely had time to recover from his attack and spring away from the lethal leaden bullets that seemed to be everywhere at once. He used the blackness to his advantage, falling clumsily behind a shelf of chemicals, hiding in its cast shadow, then pushed the entire thing over and onto Bier. Acid hissed and poison burned and the scientist screamed beneath rapidly forming clouds of scalding, boiling smoke. Vincent put his good hand to his mouth and coughed, trying to find a breath through the fog of chemicals quickly filling the Library. His eyes stung and filled with tears and he was blinded, desperately searching out the exit which he could have sworn had been there only moments before. But now it was gone, only these rainbow colored flashes in this dense and curling steam.

"Valentine! Valentine! don't think you can run from this, I'll hunt you out! Gaaah! I'll have your head!" Bier was writhing beneath the shelf and the caustic chemicals dripping from the broken glass jars and Vincent could smell his flesh sizzling beneath the acid. The stench was foul and everywhere and he knew he had to get away before it, this acidic smoke, and his loss of blood stole his own consciousness away. The gaping gushing wounds throbbed in his collarbone and claw and he staggered to find the exit. Waters was yelling carelessly, as though just the sound of his own panicked voice was a comfort. Bier was screaming, adding to the song, and Vincent's altered hearing could make out Zack's voice far away, demanding to know what in the hell was going on. Vincent tried to answer but he hadn't even the strength to rise to his feet. Even though... even though he didn't know how he'd gotten on his knees as he was now. Now his face was against the floor again, now his eyes were slipping shut. Ach... there was nothing but smoke and screaming and pain.

Someone was calling his name.

"Vincent... Vincent... you have to find Hojo."

He knew that voice, didn't he? He opened his eyes but saw nothing save the chemical fog and the explosions of painful color as the acid burned his retinas. He knew that voice though and he knew the owner was near. Struggling to find a breath, he staggered to his feet, blood running from his shoulder, down his chest and snaking out of his pant leg like thick wine from a pitcher.

"Hojo, he's here. And you have to find him."

"But... but you didn't want me to go to him, don't you remember? You wanted us to leave him alone and get out of the mansion. Remember?"

"You have to find Hojo. Vincent, you have to find him."

He struggled with his stinging eyes, peering through this mist though it scolded him unmercifully and then he thought he saw who he so longed to see. She was there. She was far away but she was there and she was as comforting a sight as she'd ever been. But no, she was more now because he needed her so much more now! "Please!" he cried out, taking a feeble step towards her, ignoring Bier's dying screams and Water's cries of confusion and mockery, "Please! Lucrecia, what's happened? I don't understand any of it!"

She was barely there, just a figure in white with blazing, dark auburn hair, but Vincent knew what lay behind the facade of a woman. If she'd just turn around and let him look in her eyes, she'd be the hero, the stranger, the lover, the angel, the beauty that he knew her to be. It would all be there and he could rise above these petty hurts and he could be anything for her. "Lucrecia! Tell me what's happened! What have I done that you'd leave me now?!"

But she was leaving, surely she was. There was barely anything to see anymore, the chemical fog was closing down over his eyes like white tissue paper, muffling her shape and her beauty to him. But never her love, because he could still hear that in her voice, even though it was stern too, an order, a demand.

"Find Hojo. Find him."

Then she was gone. Vincent sunk down onto his knees again, barely able to keep from choking on tears. But he wasn't as grieved as he was confused. Lucrecia would never, never leave him if she could help it. Something had made her go. But he was too tired to contemplate what that could be now. He couldn't breathe and he couldn't think and he could barely keep conscious. He was flat on the ground again, and Bier had stopped screaming. He was probably dead. And what was wrong with that?

He closed his weary eyes and he imagined he was in that coffin again. He had no memories of it really. He couldn't remember being put in it, he couldn't remember coming out of it. Yet he knew with all of his being that he'd been inside of it for a long time. He imagined he was there again now, nestled in that faded satin, claw tearing at the cloth, eyes staring out at nothing but a world of black, everything in the world that could ever cause him pain on the outside of wooden walls that nothing could penetrate. And there'd be no hurt or suffering or agony because he'd be dead. Because they only put dead people in coffins. It was a coward's way out, dreaming he was dead, but it was easy. It wouldn't be a dream soon anyway, he'd lay in these chemicals and he'd bleed to death, with the taste of that scientist, Bier's, blood on his tongue.

"Heya! Hey, man, wake up! You want my help then you'd better wake the hell up and gimme a hand!"

Something was poking at his shoulder, the very touch sending waves of agony through him, centering in the shattered bone at his collar and he nearly growled with displeasure, hating that something was disturbing him in his last minutes alive. Something else to kill? Fine. He'd take someone else to hell with him.

Chet jumped backwards as Vincent's broken claw shot up and towards his face. The young actor from Wutai managed to escape the weak attack with only a cut across his chin.

"I'll leave you here if you're gonna be like that," he muttered, jumping to his feet. He pulled the collar of his sweater up over his nose and mouth, squinting through the acidic fog and down at the red-eyed man. He couldn't stay in here too long, this air was frigging toxic. Frowning, he prodded Vincent with his sneaker. "You gonna lay here and die, or you wanna go? C'mon already!"

With great difficulty, Vincent narrowed his burning eyes and made out the young man above him. Just some stranger, bleeding from his chin through the green fabric of his sweater. His dark eyes were rimmed with red from the caustic air, full of impatience and annoyance. "Who the hell are you?" Vincent's voice came out in an unintimidating croak.

"Chet Hadley. Now move your ass, vamp man!"

The young guy grabbed Vincent's arm and Vincent nearly tore his would-be rescuer in half.

"That hurts!!"

Chet flinched and backed away and Vincent pushed himself up, vision swimming as he sat with his legs before him, trying to catch his breath. The room was quiet around them both, only Zack's incessant shouts. The hiss of the burning acid.

"What's that guy want?" Chet asked, scared to try and help Vincent again.

"He doesn't know. He thinks it's better out here than in there. Ha. He's lucky. I wish I was in the cage."

"Whatever. C'mon, man, let's go, let's go, I can't breathe in here!"

"Yeah."

Vincent looked once again for Lucrecia but there was nothing. The white of the mist and this young man, Chet's, pale face only inches from his own, and that was all. He reached for the actor's shoulder and pushed himself to his feet. His shoes scraped against the stone floor and the sound was wretched in the silence. The sound of blood spattering to the ground with his every movement was worse. But Chet led him to the exit of the Library and out into the basement and after a moment, Vincent found he could breathe again. He collapsed against the stone wall outside, kicking away a few pale skulls. Chet backed off as the man filled his burning lungs with gulp after gulp of air, like a diver resurfacing.

"You okay?" Chet's voice was a lot more timid than it had been. Now that the mist wasn't here to obscure Vincent, he could see quite well the monster he'd just saved.

"Do I look okay? Who are you?"

Vincent spit a mouthful of bile and blood to the ground and ran a shaking hand through his hair. Being out of those chemicals was helping a lot. If he could just have a minute to himself to collect his thoughts, tend his wounds...

Chet leaned against the opposite wall, arms crossed. "I told ya, my name's Chet. I'm looking for my sister, I was told she'd been brought here. You haven't seen her, have you? Hmph, didn't think so. Haven't had much luck in finding her so far obviously."

Content enough to ignore his saviour for now, Vincent pulled apart his shirt and looked at the most serious of his injuries, the bullet in his chest. He blinked hard upon seeing it. "This... this looks like it was made three days ago..." he stuttered, "Th-this... it's already healing!"

"What?"

Chet pushed up off the wall, taking a careful step towards the man. His dark eyes were opened wide and he suddenly paused. He couldn't help it. He couldn't do anything else but stare at Vincent in obvious amazement. Never before had he seen anything like him and now that they were in the clear and there were no shadows, no concealing chemical mists to obscure him, Chet couldn't help but gawk. Glowing red eyes like two suns, burning as the sun does when it's setting over a misted sea. They were what really captured Chet's attention. The claw, the clothes, the blood, and even the miraculously healing wounds were really nothing in comparison with those eyes. Nothing else could have been more disturbing, more revealing of the things that had happened than those eyes were. "Heya," he began, speaking before he could stop himself, "You're not quite human, are ya?"

"I don't care who you are and I don't care what you've done for me," Vincent growled without looking up, "I'm going to tell you now that I won't put up with disrespect from you."

"Right, right!" Chet laughed nervously, raising both hands up in defense, "I didn't mean to be disrespectful, man, I was really just wondering. Sorry. Not that what you are isn't just fine with me... I mean, vampires are cool. I mean, sure. Just don't look at me in um, um, that way, ya know? I'm sure I'd taste terrible. I uh, didn't get a chance to shower tonight, I'm all covered in dry sweat and dust..."

Vincent ignored him, disgusted. Disgusted at himself for what he'd done that made this guy think these things. "I'm not a vampire."

"Oh?" Chet scratched his head, close enough to Vincent now to peer down at the horrible wound in his shoulder. He was right, it didn't look that bad, it did in fact look as though it were healing. The redness was gone around it, the skin was scarred at the edges instead of broken open and bleeding. It still was terrible looking, Chet got nauseous at the sight of it but it hardly looked life-threatening now. "You're not a vampire? Aw, but you can't fool me, I've seen you in the act, buddy."

Vincent shot Chet an obvious warning glance.

"Um, I mean, I saw you... upstairs. And I was hiding in the Library there when you sank your fangs into that other scientist, the guy you knocked the chemical shelf onto. You should just admit it to yourself. Come outta the closet, man, these are modern times. Accept what you are."

"I am not a vampire." Vincent's voice was dry and flat. He nursed his shoulder and Chet shrugged.

"Whatever. I'm not gonna argue with you, I know my own eyes. But you're somethin' else, whatever you are."

There was no use saying anything against it. Vincent wasn't sure what was going on anyways. His shoulder hardly hurt at all anymore. It was mending itself. He worked his left arm around, not moving his claw or the muscles of his forearm at all, and the stiffness was there along with a definite throb where the bullet was embedded in his muscle. Yet the entry-wound itself hardly bled at all.

"You're right..." he said to Chet after a few minutes, "I'm not quite human. Do you have a knife?"

Chet handed Vincent a penknife from his pocket and then watched in mute horror and fascination as he cut the wound in his shoulder open again and then quickly stuck in the forefinger of his right hand. He worked it around for a

while, face contorted in pain, and then popped a 9mm round out. The shiny bullet hit the ground and rolled around a bit, then lay still, glistening with blood.

"How do you do that?" Chet asked, barely breathing with fascination.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, how-- how-- I mean... aw, never mind. Heya... can I um... keep the bullet?"

Vincent looked up, less than amused. "I honestly don't care."

"Hey! Thanks." Chet dove on the thing, grabbing it up and wiping it clean on the flap of his windbreaker. Then he stuck it in his pocket and grinned. He had a soft spot for souvenirs. Sticking his hands in his pockets after the bullet, he walked to the wall again and leaned contentedly against it, giving his dubious companion time to take care of his wounds. Vincent didn't say anything but he appreciated it. Actually, this stranger could leave any time he wanted to and he knew he wouldn't speak a word to halt him. Yet it was nice having this friendly company, despite not having a clue who he was or why he'd decided to help him out of that room of Death. Vincent shook his head a bit, then turned down to the matter of his shattered claw. This was a mess. The bronze was dented and bent, twisted into his flesh under the impact of those bullets. He wouldn't be able to heal unless he pried the metal from his skin. But he would slice his fingers to ribbons on the razor-edged bronze if he even attempted it. Chet watched him staring furiously at the claw, his agitation plain on his bloodied features.

"Wish I had a pair of pliers to lend you too," he said with a shrug, "You gonna be okay?"

Vincent glanced up again and his anger made his eyes burn redder. But he wasn't angry at Chet of course. "Here's your knife." He flung the little blade before the guy could move aside and it landed, twanging, in the ground just inches from his left foot.

"Y-y-you're welcome."

"Now..." And Vincent straightened as he said the single word. He stared at Chet mercilessly. "Tell me why you helped me out of that room if you knew what I could do to you."

"Oh!" The young actor smiled softly and shrugged. Then he winked. "I'll tell you the truth, pal, for all your creepiness, the eyes, the claw, the fangs, the murderous tendencies, you're a helluva lot more friendly lookin' than those scientists. And I need help to find my sister. I've looked everywhere and I think it's gonna have to come to force. I think they have her hidden away and I'll bet they don't have any real intention of returning her. I can't fight these nutcases alone. It takes a nutcase to fight a nutcase, so that's why when I saw you... I mean... I...." Chet looked away, scratching the back of his head.

"You figured you'd found your 'nutcase'."

"Hey, you said it, not me."

"You want a nutcase?" Vincent's brows lowered dark and dangerous and he frowned, hurt. "You can go into that Library and there's two ex-Soldiers locked up in back. Take your merry pick outta them. They'll do anything you want if you let them out of their precious little prison. But I don't have time for you. I have some place I need to go. Someone I have to see."

Vincent walked slowly and painfully down the hall of the dark basement. Chet only stood blinking for a moment, unable to believe he'd so royally screwed up his own plans. "Hey!" he called out, jogging after him, "Hey! I'm sorry, I know you're not a nutcase, you're painfully sane, I'm sure of it! You think I woulda been stupid enough to save a madman--?"

"Probably."

The smell of the chemicals was starting to drift outside from the Library, they really hadn't gone far enough down the hall to escape it. Chet pushed the sleeve of his jacket to his nose, searching for air. Vincent wouldn't even turn around. He was walking and he was determined. "But don't you want some help with whatever you need to do? I mean, I'm not tough or anything, I can't pick bullets outta myself, but I can be supportive! And I can act! That's gotta count for something! I can act, I'll prove it! 'O, to be or not to be, that is the answer! Whether or not it's better to um, die, or live, or something..."

"It's 'To be or not to be, that is the question; Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing, end them.' Would you like to butcher any other tragic Shakespearean soliloquies for me? Or have you embarrassed yourself enough?"

Chet frowned and almost cried and hadn't the heart to chase after Vincent any further as he stumbled down the basement hallway. He was to the crypt now and he was purposefully ignoring the place, his claw hanging limp and useless at his side. Blood dripped down the curving, pointed fingers, leaving a grisly trail in his wake.

"I always.... preferred.... 'Is this a dagger which I see before me, the handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee. I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.'"

Chet froze upon hearing the words uttered in the low and broken voice at his back. Far ahead, Vincent quit his retreat. He turned about slowly.

Dr. Bier leaned in the Library doorway. The left side of his face with slick with blood, his flesh charred and dropping from him in flakes. The smell of his burnt skin rose up from him like radiation, a sickly, pale steam coming from his clothes

and what remained of his hair. His eyes were white, wild, and rolling in his skull. "I said I'd tear you apart, Valentine," he hissed in his broken voice, as burnt and hurt as his body appeared to be, "So here I am. Run away now. And I'll chase you."

"Run?" Vincent scoffed. He fearlessly walked a few paces back towards the horribly mangled scientist. Chet gulped audibly. "I don't see any weapon on you. You're threatening me with nothing in your hands and yourself mostly dead? You should be dead. And yet you're standing. What are you? You're no scientist, no piece of filth Shinra scientist can shoot like you do. And you followed me in the darkness of that Office as though you could see me, hear the most muted of my movements even though I know I was too silent for anyone to make out. You're more than what you seem." He paused, thoughtful and smiling a little crazily. "And your neck was filthy. I have grit in my teeth."

Vincent laughed a bit with an unhinged sort of mirth. It pissed Dr. Bier off. The scientist ran forward, only feet away from Chet, and then pulled the blackened remains of his shirt collar away from his throat. "You want another bite, you monster? I'll cut you open and let every drop of your blood drain away. I'll make one of Hojo's monsters lap it up before you, before you die. How do you like that?"

"Ah..." Vincent smiled harder, amazed at his own self-control. Yet he did feel superior to this scientist, he wasn't sure why. Maybe just the old Turk arrogance, "Ah, but you didn't answer my question. You're a monster too, aren't you?"

"I don't answer your question? You don't follow my advice. I told you to run."

Chet watched with wide eyes as the thing before him, the thing that had looked like a normal, dark-haired guy in his twenties only moments before, before Vincent had broken his arm, clawed his chest, drained half his blood, then doused him with acid and poison, Chet watched as he lifted his uninjured arm and pointed his forefinger at the man down the hall, who watched his actions with cool, detached eyes. There was a quick snap of energy and something flew from Bier's hand at unimaginable speed, barreling down the basement and throwing dim light on the walls. It whizzed by Vincent's cheek like a bullet and thudded into a stone projection behind him. He couldn't help but flinch, then reach his hand up to smear blood from a new cut on his face. He stared with loathing at Bier for just a moment, his eyes narrowing but there were questions there in addition to the anger. No time for them though. He was outclassed. Vincent ran.

"Heya! Wait up!"

Chet tossed a frightened look to Bier, who stood there quietly laughing, broken, blackened shoulders shaking with a violent mirth, and then took off after Vincent at breakneck speed. The scientist let him go. He stood in the quiet basement hallway for a long time after both men had disappeared from his sights. He just stared. He stared out at the dull purplish rock before him, stared at the broken skulls sitting in the dirt. Blood trickled off his chin as though he were a red candle, slowly melting from the heat of the chemical fog at his back.

He laughed again.

And then he followed.

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Four am.

Hojo gave the second floor hallway's imposing grandfather clock a little sniff as he read its face. So damned late. His past tonight was ruining his future in that most unpleasant way that pasts tended to ruin things. He needed to be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for the next morning's activities, that bloody hike up to that cursed reactor.

Bah...

He sighed bitterly to himself as he made his way through the inky blackness of the night-shrouded mansion, two fingers massaging his brow. If only he could get out of the trip tomorrow, if only Jenova would give him a break and let him put it off. It wasn't like it had been before, things had.... come up! Or rather, something had woken up. And it was causing a lot more trouble than Hojo had thought he'd ever have to expect from it again. He'd thought it, or rather he, was dead. He'd really honestly thought that Vincent would've died after the first few years down in that crypt, everything had been a venture, an experiment and experiments were expected to fail. "And don't I feel marvelously lucky that my little venture's succeeded in its first run..." Hojo laughed a bitter little laugh to match his bitter little sigh. Twenty-eight years, almost twenty-nine and what did that mean? It meant that the upstart Turk who'd stolen his wife's affections was now most likely more physically stronger than he cared to imagine. And the thing was it had all been a joke! The claw, that was a joke, a twisted last kick in the ribs that let Hojo sleep a little better at night knowing his rival was sleeping a little worse. A lot worse. But with all that time to fester and mutate, multiply and strengthen, those Jenova cells had probably enhanced their host's natural abilities a hundred-fold. He really was a monster now and usually, Hojo would have been thrilled to see the glorious results of a bit of his own dark science come to such bountiful, beautiful fruition. But not if the frigging monster was gonna come after him.

He sneezed suddenly, coming to a halt before the second floor's immense picture window, an affair of thick leaded glass and brilliantly coloured bits of crystal. An antique from somewhere, he couldn't place it. It had caught old man Shinra's eye and he'd had it brought in to enhance the Mansion's "atmosphere". When the sunlight shone through, it

blazed like a newly done oil painting in hues of red and green and sizzling yellows, casting rainbow patterns all over the walls and floor and staircases inside. The moon turned it into something somber though. The milky light faded the colors and tamed the magic and it became a thing of mystery instead, red dulling to the color of old blood, the blue the color of a midnight sky, and the green became the dark rot of mold on a tombstone.

The moon had already sunk for the night though and Hojo didn't give the glass a second glance as he paced past it, rubbing the dust from his nose and heaving sighs. The window was dark and almost black and its only point of interest was the noise of the bare trees outside scraping against it. They were the only sound now in the echoing mansion other than his silent footsteps against the carpet. The rest of his team had all retreated to their bedrooms as far as he knew. He'd heard Waters muttering something about going down in the basement after Vincent but Hojo was sure the great lumbering idiot wasn't stupid enough to do that. No, it would be best if all his little underlings stayed out of their superior's business.

Now Dr. Bier on the other hand. Well, if he wanted to go down there, that was his choice.

Hojo stepped over a damp bloodstain in the carpet and kept walking, leave the staircase and the view down into the foyer behind. He'd seen that blasted ghost down there earlier and he doubted that it was any coincidence that then, an hour later, he'd received news of the "vampire" let loose in the mansion. That was his Lucrecia's doing, he was sure of it. She'd freed him... the little minx. She just wasn't going to let her murderous husband get away.

Ah, he was almost proud. Almost, for just a second, he felt a kind of sick pride that she was haunting him. Pushing his glasses up on his narrow nose, Hojo came to a halt and leaned against a little stand set up near his left. There was a vase of brittle, dead and dusty thirty year old flowers atop it. "All right..." he whispered into the air, looking everywhere at once, down both ends of the hallway, the ceiling, glancing to his feet, "Where are you?" There wasn't any malice in his voice, just quiet wonder. He listened carefully for a response, for anything. "You know this is all a waste of time. If you truly loved him, you'd convince him to kill himself. I'm serious, dear heart. Then the two of you could go wherever it is that dead, requited lovers go and neither would have to bother with little old me. Why does it have to be a matter of vengeance? You're too smart for that, Lucrecia, I know you. You want vengeance? Against me? You know what happened was not my choice, it was hers. That monster's, as you so loved to call her. I'm just the poor little pawn in all of this, the unfortunate human she decided to dazzle with her power and make into her servant. I'm not a murderer. Would you have married a murderer? No, like I said, you're too smart for that. Too smart to blame me, or to go about wanting me to pay for what happened."

Hojo crossed his lanky arms over his chest, blowing a few strands of hair from his eyes. His words echoed back to him in the dusty, quiet hallway. He wasn't getting a response and it irritated him. "You were talking up a storm before," he said a little jealously, "Back when all you could say was 'Vincent, Vincent, Vincent'. What's happened? Am I just not entertaining enough for you unless you can talk to me only in threats or rebukes? Ach, why do I bother... you're just another name on that long long list of people hurt by Professor Hojo. Yours is just another name on that list of people out for my blood. Well, d'you want to take Sephiroth's place then? I always new that he'd find out sooner or later what he really was and then he'd come for me. I rather accepted it. It was just an unfortunate little side effect of the Jenova Project: the scientist in charge, me namely, was going to have to die at the end. Hell, I didn't care. If I had Sephiroth, man among men, I didn't care what happened to me, or what I had to sacrifice. But you knew that, right? You were one of those sacrifices. Ah, but what a waste. All those sacrifices were a waste because our son died. Is that why you're so angry? Maybe. Maybe you were satisfied enough with what happened since at least your little baby lived. But now that he's dead, you see the waste and decide to come after me. Well to hell with that. Go haunt Cloud Strife, leave me out of it. I didn't kill him."

Ah, but I drove him to do the things that led to his death, Hojo realized.

Well, he didn't really realize it then, it wasn't any kind of a revelation. But the thought kind of stuck in the foremost part of his brain and he couldn't immediately shove it away as he did most thoughts. Wasn't there something especially morally wrong about killing your own son? More- more wrong than it would be to kill most other people, right? Morals, hell, he wasn't going to let those start bothering him. Nope, not now after so long and after he was just starting to recover from the shock of Sephiroth's death. The past was a thorn in his side and he needed to pluck it out. Yes, definitely.

His resolution firm, Hojo pushed himself up off the dusty plaster and trudged down the hallway again. He went nearly to the end, passing door after door, but he only had eyes for one. He stood before it finally, fished a long, rusted key out of his pocket and unlocked the ancient slab of wood. It creaked open slowly and a musty smell whooshed out, a foul breeze ruffling Hojo's already mussed bangs. He straightened his glasses and stepped inside.

"Is that you? Are you back, you bastard? You just wait! I've never been so ill-treated in my life, I'm gonna make sure you lose your job, pal! You'll be out on the street and begging for bread!"

Hojo rolled his eyes and flicked a light switch on near the door. This new room was rather small, it was really just an old bedroom with all its furniture removed. Bare wooden floors, bare white stucco walls, no windows, low ceiling, exposed rafters. Ah, nice and cozy. And no one knew Hojo had claimed it years and years ago as his own. The empty walls were

lined with his own equipment, the kind no one in Shinra knew about (or would want to). His own designs, rather brilliant ones at that, if he did say so himself. This had been his office in the old days of the Jenova Project, not even Lucrecia had known about it. But every husband needed a little private place to get away, right? She would have understood. In fact, she could just now be discovering it, she could be right behind him--

Hojo whipped about in sudden fear but there was nothing at his back but the closed door. He breathed a sigh of relief then laughed at his own jittery nerves.

"Why don't you answer me? I know you're out there, I can hear you laughing! Laugh it up, four-eyes, I'm gonna get back at you!"

"Must you be so loud?" Hojo demanded to the aggravating voice. He stepped briskly towards a bookshelf in the back of the room and began pulling volumes down, cobwebs flying off the ancient books. Well, ancient but not useless, he thought to himself, flipping through pages and sneezing again at the dust. They were journals of his, full of notes, research, procedures. Not useless at all. In fact, some of the information in here was priceless, especially the things he'd stolen from others. Not that it was all stolen though, truth was most of it was his, he wasn't a genius for nothing. Unfortunately he wasn't the only genius in the world. Professor Gast had been a fountain of knowledge too and some of the things Hojo had confiscated from his labs before having the old man killed were even now nestled safely in these bookshelves.

"D'you even work for Shinra? Was this all just some prank? You're not really that little brat from down the street playing a joke on me, are ya? Benny Thompson, you little pipsqueak, I'm going to tell your mother and make sure you get one hell of a thrashing! You let me out this instant!"

Hojo sighed and looked up from his reading, the weight of the world on his face. "I'm not the brat from down the street," he said flatly, "Now be quiet, I'm trying to think."

He pressed his forefinger against a line of text, scanning his own cramped handwriting with his squinting sleep-deprived eyes. Just a matter of finding the proper sequence and the proper ratios--

"Be quiet? Be quiet?!?! I'll scream my head off right now! I'll scream so loud everyone in Nibelheim'll hear me!"

--coupled with acquiring just the right ingredients. Hojo looked up with half a grin. Rather like baking. Little more messy though--

"Helloooooo!!! Can anyone hear me?! This is Sara Hadley and there's some four-eyed freak holding me hostage in the Shinra Mansion!! Helloooooo!!!! Chet!! Teresa!! Spot!! Someone!!"

--but then making a mess was half the fun. He'd probably have to undergo a trip downstairs for a few things, but he knew a back way to the basement, it wouldn't be a problem. Jenova seemed to think this was all a really good idea too and that made Hojo grin. Well, if he had her approval, this must be what he should do--

"Anyone!!! This is Saaaaaaraaaaa!!! Heeeelp!! Chet, where are you?!?"

"Would you kindly shut the hell up?!" Hojo roared without warning, slamming his book shut. He flipped some hair back behind his ears and turned about to face a pair of closed and chained closet doors embedded in the wall to his right, just on the other side of the bookshelf. The doors were rattling almost as loudly as the voice booming out from behind them. "Your screaming like a monkey isn't going to help your situation at all. The walls of this room are padded a foot thick with insulation, I know because I did it myself. No one can hear you, my dear, so save it, will you please?"

Hojo's words made sense so Sara shut up. She wasn't stupid. The scientist knocked a bit on the closed closet door and asked, "You okay in there? I need you alive so don't go swallowing your tongue or anything."

"I wouldn't know how if I wanted to."

"Yes, well, good. You shouldn't be so disagreeable, you know. You're actually pretty lucky. I'm Professor Hojo of Shinra Inc. Have you heard of me?"

"No."

"Oh. Well, believe me when I tell you, I'm rather well known in scientific circles. And you're lucky as I said, you get to assist me with a little experiment of mine. Well, not an experiment really, I know perfectly well what I'm doing, I've done it before. But still, being altered by my hands is like getting your own personal autograph. Quite a privilege."

"WHAT?!?!?"

Hojo blinked twice at the fury of the word. He began stacking in his arms the books he'd pulled from the shelf. "I have to greet Vincent properly," he muttered, a strange, calm expression passing over his face, "Our last meeting was so spectacular that I can't allow our next one to be mundane. He'd be disappointed in me, I'm sure. You see, Lucrecia made her grand entrance. But she's dead, she doesn't have to follow the same rules, she gets all the drama and horror that being a ghost packs with it. And Vincent, well, he's running around and killing my employees right and left. That's impressive. I, on the other hand, have to create my own drama and horror. It's really not very fair but I'm used to having to try just a bit harder than everyone else. And I always come out on top, no matter the odds. Gast? Ha... Gast thought I'd never amount to anything but an assistant and I showed him, I toppled him! I toppled the king! Jenova wouldn't have

picked anyone less than a genius, a master, to talk to. I know what I am, there's no false modesty here." Hojo grinned a cocky little grin, laying his books on a desk in the corner. "But why am I talking to you? You don't even know me."

Sara muttered a quiet curse, deciding the wacko on the other side of the closet doors wasn't even worth arguing with. He wasn't going to let her out, she could plead till her face turned blue. Though she had no idea in the world what he wanted of her.

Hojo pulled off his sweater and put on a coat hanging from a peg on the wall. He brushed dust and cobwebs from it, the thing had been hanging in this room for years and years, then began unloading tools from a drawer in the desk. The room was quiet and Sara could hear him humming some tuneless song, just a collection of ups and downs that seemed to mirror the thoughts swirling in his head. After a moment of flipping through the books again, jotting a few notes down in a journal he pulled out, then fishing an old radio out from under the desk and finding a jazz station, Hojo straightened and approached the chained closet.

"Shall we begin?"

~\*~

He couldn't think about the pain. He couldn't think about the blood gushing from his shattered claw, bubbling over the broken flesh beneath the bronze. Nor the dizziness, he couldn't stop to consider that either. Most especially though, he couldn't think about the pain.

Vincent ran.

He'd left Chet behind a while ago, now he pounded through the Shinra Mansion's underground corridors, his feet soundless against the ground but his breath tearing so loudly from his throat that he wouldn't have been able to hear any sort of sounds they made anyway. Things blurred past him; tables and chairs and the painted portraits of dead men, dead Shinra executives lining these underground passages. Fancy but faded red plush carpeting was at his feet, the walls were plastered with a dull green paper, crumbling white moulding girding it at waist-level. Vincent swallowed hard, trying to keep from throwing up as he ran, and he ran harder. But he knew he wasn't just running from that scientist who'd proven himself to be more than he seemed. He wasn't running from Bier--

From myself, from all these things I don't understand. That's what I'm running from. Why didn't she stay, why did Lucrecia come and then go? She's teasing me! But that's not like her, that's not her way. Her way was love unconditionally, not torment. Just a word with her, just one answer to all this mess of confusion I've lived through tonight, that would have sufficed! But instead, she tells me to find Hojo! I don't understand it! She wanted me to leave him alone, she defended him, and now she'd have me seek him out?! She knows what I'll do to him when I see him! She knows what I'll do, because there's nothing else I would. He's done these things to me... he's done all of it, the cause and catalyst and, and I'll never forget that he hit her. Never. So he's a dead man. I'll tear him limb from limb, I swear to God!

But he ran and he ran and he ran as the turmoil of thoughts pounded his brain. The mansion flew by, he climbed and descended stairs at random, not caring where it took him.

It's not a nightmare, I can't think that anymore. This all hurts too much for it to be a nightmare. But gods, it feels like nothing else. It's my life yet it's all like the worst dream imaginable. Thirty years... thirty years! That boy in the Library office said it. That scientist, Dr. Bier, he said it too. But that's impossible! My hands! These are my hands! and there's not a strand of gray in my hair! I'm... I'm me... aren't I? I can't feel the push and pull of thirty years in my body... I'm just me... And Lucrecia, I couldn't see her well when she was there, but it was my Lucrecia, my Lucrecia of all time, young and gorgeous and mine and where does thirty years enter into the picture? In the mansion perhaps, in the decay and rot and ruin around me. You could believe thirty years had passed in this place since I went down in the basement after Hojo. But it's just a building, it isn't alive. I'm alive and more proof than this box of boards and hate. I'm the same man and thirty years means nothing to me. It's a lie.

Suddenly he couldn't run anymore.

Vincent collapsed to his knees, sure that his lungs would burst straight out through his mouth in a dripping crimson heap. He fell forward, only his hands to keep him from laying full on his stomach, and he heaved and gasped and pleaded for breath, eyes and teeth clamped tight. The red bandanna keeping his hair at bay fluttered away and it all came streaming past his face in thick raven-colored strands. He was glad for it, glad it hid the tears. With the somber Shinra hallway stretching past him, he forgot his dignity and he cried into the carpet beneath his knees, soaking it with blood and tears.

It had been okay before. He hadn't really been thinking too much of Lucrecia tonight, he hadn't allowed himself to. But seeing her in that Library and then watching her turn away from him... it was too much.

Somewhere amid a lot of broken thoughts, since thoughts are never whole when you're crying so hard you can't breathe, Vincent wondered what had happened. He'd been happier than he'd ever been in his entire deprived life that night Lucrecia had taken his ring and put it on her finger. Now... now he was on his hands and knees and crying

uncontrollably, afraid that his heart would break from loneliness. Fate, was that it? Was he meant to be miserable? Or maybe there wasn't any fate and this was all circumstance, or just chaos. Was that it? He'd fallen in love with someone who was unreachable. A million women and he'd fallen for the one that he just couldn't have. How he'd fought it, how he'd tried to keep away and remember that men like him were loners. For ever and always. But she hadn't let him go and he hadn't tried hard enough to escape because he'd wanted her to succeed. He'd wanted her to win and take him as the prize. She'd been so close to the finish line that night, so close before he'd ruined it all by going after Hojo. Maybe Hojo would never have let them leave anyway, maybe he'd had something planned that he would have gone through with, even if Vincent had never turned his steps towards the Laboratory. Ah, but it didn't matter. All that mattered was that as much as he kept telling himself he was the same man he remembered, Vincent knew it wasn't true. Something had happened to him and it was more than the claw or the fangs. Something was wrong with his soul, as though a part of his heart knew something that his brain just hadn't figured out yet. Maybe that was why he was crying, he was crying for something he'd lost and he didn't even know what it was yet.

He was on the floor for a few minutes until he let himself drop entirely down and roll over onto his side. He lay staring at the cobwebs across from him, stretching from the moulding to the wall, blowing clear and fragile in the drafts. He didn't blink and he didn't move and he wished that moment of pure sadness could have lasted. That he could lay there forever and ever and become just another part of the mansion. Let the dust settle over him and the spiders come, tie him down to these rotting boards with their fine threads and never make him face anything again. He knew he wasn't going to wake up though. He wasn't dreaming, he couldn't make himself think that anymore. Vincent knew he was lost in this strange new world and he was not the man he'd been when he'd left the other. So he had to face and conquer whatever new demons were here. Was Hojo here too? Was Lucrecia? His enemy and his love, the things that completed him, as strange as it was to admit that Hojo was just another puzzle piece to his personality.

Well, Lucrecia was certainly here but she was in trouble, otherwise she would have stayed when she'd come. He would have faith in her. She seemed to know that Hojo was here too. So yes, this was his world, but it had changed and he'd changed with it.

Vincent sat up shakily, putting his narrow back to the wall and taking deep breaths. Then he recovered his bandanna from the floor, wiped his eyes with it, and tied his hair back again. Maybe he'd keep it long, better to hide the tears of the weak man that he was. Weak. He felt suddenly and violently disgusted with himself for breaking down like an idiot. He kicked at the damp patches on the carpet before him and banged his fist on the wall at his back. At least Lucrecia wasn't here to see him looking so defeated. He'd have to straighten up before he found her, return to his love as the man she knew and not this sniveling, bleeding coward. Hmph. Still bleeding.

He knew he'd lost too much blood. He should by rights be dead. Yet he was quite alive. It probably had to do with the blood he'd er, borrowed from the scientists tonight. Perhaps it didn't feed him so much as heal him. Maybe it did both. He wasn't sure what these new vampiric habits meant exactly, just that they were rather uncontrollable. He'd broken down before and lunged for Bier because he'd been too weak to fight it anymore. He was always fighting it, he now realized, that craving was always there. Even now, especially now, it was a pain in his throat, a nagging in his mind, and some instinct he'd never possessed before knew what would take care of it. But he couldn't give in to it, whatever it meant. It was a curse from Hojo, so he would fight it until Hojo made it go away again. Until then, he had these pointy little fangs and the craving to remind him of the injustice done to him.

Of course, then there was this useless claw, covering a mangled arm full of bullets. Vincent lifted it up, and stared at the backside of it, blood snaking anew down the bronze. It wouldn't stop bleeding and it wasn't going to as long as the torn metal was scraping against the wounds with his every movement. It really, really hurt. More than the bullet wound in his collarbone that was already almost entirely healed. Vincent looked around quickly and saw he was lying next to a little crescent-shaped antique table, sitting to his left against the wall. There was a dusty old cloth on it and he ripped it off, shredding it in to pieces. Swearing and spitting and grinding his teeth, he stuffed pieces of it down into his wounded claw, until the blood stopped dripping out, and then he bound it all with a final strip of the cloth, tying it in the back with his right hand and teeth. He slowly got to his feet, still breathing hard, finishing just in time to realize that someone was coming.

There was a break in the hall ahead of him, and Vincent hurried around the corner, his face cold and calculating again, the remnants of his uncertain tears hidden away. He pressed himself flat against the wall, hiding in the gloom, and waited for the footsteps he heard to carry their owner his way.

He almost gave Chet a heart attack when he stepped out in front of him. As it was, he started back-peddling in mid-air and wound up on his ass.

"Hey! You trying to kill me?"

Panting and sweating, Chet hopped back up onto his feet, then immediately shot a frantic look behind. The hallway at his back was dark but clear. It didn't look as though Dr. Bier had given chase after all. "Man, it's a good thing you're still

bleeding like a stuck pig, or I wouldn't have been able to follow you," he muttered, sweeping a hand through his tangled brown hair and gesturing to the trail of wet red dots leading back behind him.

"Why did you follow me?" Vincent asked in annoyance, turning away from the young man and walking down the hall again. Chet jogged after him.

"Because that guy isn't someone I want to have to face again by myself. Did you see him? He shoulda been dead after what you did! His skin was flaking off and it was all black and gross and pussy and blegh..." Chet stuck his tongue out and gagged, "I mean, I would sucker punched him and finished him off for good with how he looked but it seemed like he still has a lotta fight left in him. And that little trick he did... that like... bullet came outta his hand and cut your face. What was up with that? Did he have a materia on him that I didn't see or what?"

"Wasn't a bullet..." Vincent murmured thoughtfully, "It wasn't anything as mundane as that. I don't know." Gah, he couldn't think straight. That feeling was in his head again, that scraping, dry feeling in the back of his throat. All he could see was red. How inconvenient, he needed to be able to concentrate, he had to plan what to do next, he had to find Hojo.

"You okay?" Chet asked anxiously, trying to see past Vincent's unruly hair and into his face, "You've gone all pale all of a sudden. You gonna pass out? You should do something about your arm, you aren't looking too hot."

"...yeah."

Vincent discreetly put his claw up to his face while Chet was looking back down the hall behind them. He licked at a bit of the blood oozing past his make-shift bandages. No. No, that wasn't what he needed. Damn it.

"Maybe he really wasn't as tough as he looked, maybe he isn't going to chase us after all. Fine by me, I think I can probably live the rest of my life without seeing that thingie again."

There really weren't very many options, Vincent mentally wrestled with himself. He couldn't function, he couldn't even focus with this horrible horrible feeling in his head. And he wouldn't be able to keep going with this wounded arm of his unless he did it... there were only two options actually. Do it or don't. Do it or starve.

"If I'd known this mansion was housing such freaks, er no offense, I wouldn't have come barging in here, believe me. I feel like a frigging Belmont lost in Castlevania or something."

How bad could it be? If he... drank blood to aid his efforts in finding Hojo, then, then it wasn't that bad, right? Vincent tugged at his collar, loosening a few buttons. A thin sheen of sweat stood out on his brow. Chet was still talking, babbling on about Bier but he couldn't pay attention to the words. And his claw hurt too much for him to have the strength to push whatever it was screaming at him in his brain away. Shit... he was going to black out and lose control if this kept up, and then someone was going to die. Maybe Chet. But he couldn't let this innocent man who'd saved him be hurt, he'd never be able to forgive himself.

"Hey, really, you wanna rest for a minute? You're looking terrible..."

Vincent turned his face up to meet Chet's and that was when Chet saw the look in his eyes. He tried to back away but there was no where to go. With a muttered apology, Vincent shot his right hand out and grabbed him by the collar, pulling him close. Before Chet could utter a single word of protest, there was a pain near his throat, right over his jugular and then he could feel something pulling at him. Pulling at whatever came of that pain, and pulling at his heart to keep it coming. It didn't last long, just long enough for the edges of his vision to start getting blurry and the room to spin around him in a dizzying pattern of green, brown and red. Then he heard a gurgled shout and he was shoved away into the wall. He lay on the carpet for a few minutes, frozen in fear.

When he could move again, he groggily opened his eyes and saw Vincent standing in the shadows across from him, face averted. Chet's penknife was in his hand again and he used it to pull and pry at the twisted metal of his shattered claw. Sweat slithered down his pale face as he worked to pick the bronze from his skin, and his arm bled fresh, dollops of crimson and bits of flesh puddling in the carpet at his feet. Finally, he threw the little blade to the floor and dropped to a sitting position, back to the wall, flinging his claw out to his side.

He clunked his head back and closed his eyes. "Sorry."

Chet blinked about fifty times in confusion, then pushed himself up. He felt his neck and his fingers came away wet with red. It wasn't two little pinpricks like in the movies though, he could feel a sizable gash there. He pressed his hand against it.

"Do you understand now why you shouldn't be following me?"

"I guess..." he said quietly, "But I'm not scared of you, man. You stopped. You could've killed me."

Vincent laughed weakly and rubbed his tired eyes. "True. True enough. I almost wish you'd give me a reason to kill you, that little session didn't do too much towards helping my arm. But I think it made me desperate enough to get the metal out. But I had to, I had to do it while I had some control so I'd be able to stop."

It was quiet between them for a moment. Vincent stuffed his claw with new bandages and absently listened for any signs of Bier. There still was nothing. Chet grinned.

"You gonna tell me now that you aren't a vampire?"

"Don't know what I am, to be honest with you."

"Well, 'vampire' works for me. You gotta get a cape though, vamps always are into the cape deal. Maybe slick your hair back."

"Are you up to moving?"

Chet felt his neck and shrugged. He put a hand to the wall behind him and got to his feet. "Least you could give me is a free t-shirt," he muttered. He felt a little weak in the knees, a little fuzzy behind the eyes but he stood straight and shrugged again. "Let's go before that guy catches up with us."

"Right."

Before it came, he shoved it away. Vincent shoved it away. He couldn't handle anything as mundane or as useless as guilt towards Chet right now for what he'd just done. What point would there be in it? Just managing that first "sorry" had been a strain, only possible because he'd been half-unconscious when it had rolled off his tongue. So now he'd ignore it before it even came, he'd detach himself from the act. Otherwise Vincent wasn't sure how he'd be able to keep company with this man at all after having his fangs in his throat.

"You're not going to do it again, right?"

"I don't know. Not to you, if I do."

"Good."

Vincent sighed and doubled his pace, wanting to put distance between himself and Chet but poor Chet was clueless and hurried to catch up. He examined their surroundings as they passed through the hallway, noticing the lack of windows and figuring they'd stumbled into some blocked-off subterranean portion of the mansion. It was nicely furnished though, the carpeting, paintings, wallpaper; pretty posh actually. They came to a crossroads with another passage suddenly, intersecting theirs at a perpendicular angle, and Chet followed Vincent who opted to head left towards a flight of broad, stone steps. They ascended and found themselves above ground again. A lone window set high in a rough brick wall showed the glimmer of a few stars, a patch of midnight blue. Vincent walked faster, as though the sight of outside inflamed some desire within him to get out of this place. Chet was breathing hard now, wishing the guy would slow his pace.

"Where we going?" he called to Vincent's back.

"Hojo's room."

"Oh. Well, remember about my sister? D'you... um, were you at all interested in helping me find her?"

Vincent shrugged and made his way down this new stone hallway, sticking close to the shadows and almost lost in them. His shoes clinked against the ground. "There's an excellent chance she's with him."

"With this Hojo guy?"

"Why not?"

"I guess. I guess you'd know, man, I won't argue with you, though I -- whoa. Whoa. D'you hear that?"

"Yes."

Vincent had already quit his walking and froze mid-step, head cocked up and listening. Chet mimicked his actions, drawing his windbreaker tighter around himself. There was the obvious noise of a rat scratching at the walls. The winds outside blowing leafless branches against the windows. A ticking clock chimed four times from down the hall.

What they heard was a wheezing sound, like breaths but louder and more broken. At first it'd seemed far away and coming closer but it cloaked its direction with the force of its reverberations and Vincent couldn't make out the source. He strained his hearing and closed his eyes while Chet watched his upturned face, wondering what was happening. It almost sounded like a machine, it had that kind of rhythm to it, but machines didn't breathe.

Suddenly it was very close by. Chet turned to the left and right, eyes narrowed but he saw nothing save the stone hallway. Something soft and small fell on his shoulder, a piece of dust or ceiling plaster and he flicked it off. "D'you think it's that guy?" he whispered. Vincent shrugged and motioned for quiet. Another piece of dust fell, this time in Chet's eye and he rubbed at it with his thumb.

It was there now, it seemed. The noise was there with them only it wasn't. There was nothing to see. Vincent grabbed Chet's arm and pulled them both a few steps backwards. More dust rained down and Chet thought it might be because this new noise was so strong it was shaking the whole hall. But then a bit fell atop his hand he saw it wasn't dust at all.

"What..?" Flakes of black, flakes of something burnt and sticky and stinking of sulfur. Chet wagged his hand and hair to get it off. Then he swallowed hard and glanced above his head. Nothing. Because Dr. Bier wasn't in the rafters, he was crouching in the high window in the wall.

Vincent threw Chet backwards to safety then darted out of the way himself when Bier lunged, half of his face hanging off. He landed gracefully in the middle of the hall, flakes of his burnt skin eddying about his form and dropping onto the stone at his feet. Vincent watched him with deadly suspicion.

"How about satisfying my curiosity and letting me know just what in the hell you are," he suggested quietly. Bier's disfigured face seemed to be having a hard time with expressions but he managed half a crooked smile. The chemicals had

burnt away most of his clothes, leaving him with half a pair of pants and half of a singed polo shirt. His brown hair was still smoking, the claw marks in his chest still glistening wetly. He dripped blood and flakes of charred flesh onto the floor.

"I'm a scientist for Shinra Inc," he answered with a careless shrug, "Assistant to Professor Hojo."

"Assistant..." Vincent muttered. But that could mean a thousand things. Apparently though, in this situation the meaning was obvious. This guy, or the madman he worked for, had tinkered with him. Bier should be dead but he wasn't. "Where is Hojo? Is he in the mansion?"

"Now why do you want to find him?" the scientist asked darkly. He took an unsteady step forward, causing more showers of black. Chet thought he might puke the guy stank so bad. "Aren't I interesting enough for you? Don't you want to keep my company? Find out all there is to know about you, Vincent Valentine of the Turks?"

He flinched to hear his name spoken so freely by this demonic man but Vincent didn't back down. He watched him with hooded red eyes, wondering how he'd fight against this thing with his claw disabled. If only he could get his hands on a gun... "You know my name," he whispered, "And I know yours. I think that's all that's required if we're to fight. Right? That way the other of us knows what to put on the loser's headstone."

"I like the way you think," Bier said with another face-cracking grin. His arms hung limp and lifeless at his sides and his right hand, a gnarled, burnt, blackened collection of bones encased in leathery flesh, nothing more than a shriveled claw in its own right, trembled with a hidden power. "But don't you think you should know what you really are? I've worked for Shinra for years, I know things a lot of the other scientists don't. I've seen things I shouldn't have seen, discovered things best left alone--"

"And turned yourself into a monster..." Vincent muttered.

"A monster?" Bier echoed in surprise. He shook his head. "No, your mangling me and dropping a shelf of noxious chemicals on my body is what's spoiled my good looks. Beforehand, I'd only improved my physical attributes. My vision, my hearing, my reflexes. Tracking you in that dark office was easy. Mainly because I long ago made myself a host for Jenova--"

"Jenova!"

"You know that name? Ah... I thought you might. It makes sense, you were a Turk assigned to work the Jenova Project a long time ago, when it was first begun, long long ago, before I was even born. Weren't you?"

"How long?" Vincent asked, barely having the breath to form the words. A drop of sweat stung his right eye.

"I told you, my friend. Almost twenty-nine years ago. A long long time. Do you know where you were between then and now?"

"The coffin."

"Right." Bier nodded in approval, shedding dead skin into the air like confetti, "Right, and I only wish I could take credit for the marvels done to you. But I can't. You are Hojo's, you belong entirely to him. A pity. Because I'm sure he only wants you dead now. Otherwise, why would he have left you here to rot for so long?"

Ah, so this sack of shit didn't know everything, Vincent thought viciously. "Explain to me then," he said, figuring he'd take as much information as he could from this bastard, "Explain to me how it's been almost thirty years yet I'm no different than I was? I should be... what, in my fifties? Old and gray and feeble? Right now I feel just the opposite, I'd have no problems ripping you into pieces."

"That's the genius of it all," Bier replied, spreading his arms in a sweeping, egotistical gesture. Vincent wanted to plant a bullet in his head. "The details aren't entirely clear to me, but I've read through Professor Hojo's notes. A kind of stasis, I suppose is what you might call it. Hojo hasn't discovered the fountain of youth or anything, but he knew how to slow a body's metabolism to the point of practical death, changing sleep into a kind of death. For all intents and practical purposes, Valentine, you've been dead for thirty years."

"No..." Vincent shook his head, a hollow, frightened feeling in his chest. Bier smiled at his fear and nodded. "No, I-- I dreamed. I don't remember it all, but I dreamed... n-nightmares and I had so many nightmares."

"The body was frozen, dead, slowed, stopped, whatever you want to call it, but your mind was very much alive. Hojo wanted it that way, I think. I read through his notes but the ink on many of the pages was smeared away or covered in blood, I'm not exactly sure what all of his intents were with you, I'll be one of the first to admit that the Professor isn't one of Shinra's sanest employees and then I'll tell you I'm quite certain not all of the effort he put into you was purely with scientific intent. It was personal, wasn't it?" Bier asked this as though it were a question he very much wanted answered. He'd discovered Hojo's journals years ago, locked up in confidential cabinets in the man's own office back in Midgar. They'd been these great volumes of secrets, most of them so horrible that Bier had been sure some were merely fantasies, ideas for procedures that Hojo would like to carry out but never would. The things he'd had entered under the name 'Valentine' had been some of the more insane of the findings there. A man, a specimen he'd stuck in stasis after injecting him with Jenova cells, repairing and enhancing an amputated arm, and then genetically re-configuring to evolve in his own lifetime. Evolve into what though...? Bier had never found out, those pages had been unreadable. Yet none of it really was

fiction as he'd thought, here was that same specimen, that hand-made monster, marked with Hojo's own signature. "It was personal," Bier confirmed. Vincent nodded in a daze.

"More than you'll ever know."

"And the evolutions, what are those? This vampirism..." And here Bier rubbed at his neck, the half-healed gash there stinging him viciously, "This vampirism, is that part of it? Or is it something else?"

"I don't know. I don't know, why don't you ask him?"

Bier snorted a laugh, then choked on his tongue. "If he knew I knew what I know, Hojo would make sure I shared the late Professor Gast's fate, I've no doubt about that. I have no ambitions though, and I don't believe in Hojo's precious Promised Land. I'm just a Shinra scientist and I have no goals for world domination. I simply find all of this very very interesting. But it can't last. You're out to kill us all for what was done to you. Aren't you?"

Vincent straightened, realizing he'd been half-slouching after hearing Bier's words. It all whirled in his head and he didn't know what among it was truth and what was lies, or misunderstandings. He took a deep gulp of air, having forgotten to breathe, then looked up at the twisted scientist in anguish. "I hadn't been planning to kill any of you," he choked, "But if what you say is true, then maybe I should. Maybe I'll work my way up to Hojo, walking a path of blood and bones. Maybe you lot of pigs deserve it."

"I thought as much," Bier said with a sniff. He shrugged, the crackling of his bones against his charred flesh like the crackling of dry leaves. "That's why I'm going to end you right now, as I tried to do in the basement. At least you got to find out what happened. At least you won't die ignorant."

"You didn't tell me anything that I really needed to know," Vincent growled. He took a step backwards, shooting a look to Chet to make sure he'd be out of the way. Chet had made damned certain he'd be out of the way, he was hiding back in the stairwell, looking out around the corner at Vincent and Bier's little confrontation. He was more enthralled than frightened.

"What do you really need to know? Where Professor Hojo is? He's probably locked up in some room, shivering and scared because he knows you're coming after him. But don't concern yourself with him. You have your hands... heh heh, I mean your hand and claw full with me, Valentine."

Vincent didn't really want to fight this creature, he wanted to find a chair, sit down, and figure out what everything meant. He also wanted away from the charred flesh smell that Dr. Bier gave off, his heightened senses were no advantage when it came to his nose. Not in this case anyway. "Is that supposed to be funny?" he asked belligerently, crouching and ready to spring the minute Bier tried anything.

"No. I find you fascinating and dangerous. Never funny."

"Heh. Thank you. I find you funny as hell though, I must admit."

"Thank you." Bier smiled again, this one so broad that his face really did crack. A long vertical fissure that split his upper lip away from beneath his nose. The black bit of flesh dropped unspectacularly to the ground. He shrugged. Then, smile still firm, he leapt.

Vincent was ready. He'd been ready since they'd first heard Bier's breathing.

Chet jumped backwards when the two figures crashed into the hard ground straight before him, Vincent on the bottom of the tussle and struggling viciously. For all his brittleness, Bier was stronger, a dark strength coursing through his shriveled muscles. He grabbed at Vincent's face and throat, gagging him with smells and the shed parts of his body, wrapping his hook-like little hands around his neck. But, as stated previously, Vincent was ready. He waited until Bier put a great lunge of strength forward in an effort to crush his windpipe, and then the deftly-skilled ex-Turk grabbed his wrists and flung him back, using that strength to his advantage. Bier was flipped off and into a wall, almost falling apart with the impact. Vincent hopped up and couldn't suppress a laugh.

"You may be strong," he said, "But you're coming apart. There's life in an egg, but drop it and it's gone. Want to go again?"

Bier gave his answer by twisting about on the ground and scuttling towards Vincent like a insect. His hands were pulsing with energy now and Vincent's wary eyes stayed on them. He feigned left, then dove right as Bier raced up, doubling back around and gliding into the stairwell, right beside Chet.

"You gonna be able to take this dude?" the young guy asked, pressing his back to the wall as he saw Bier approaching with deadly intentions. Vincent was feeling cocky as hell all of a sudden. He winked. Then, in a quick and graceful movement, he jumped from the stairwell again, standing in the muted starlight of the hall, just daring Bier to re-attack.

Bier took the dare.

"You think I'd confront you unarmed," he growled, back on his feet and looking somewhat human again. He laughed, a dark and arrogant laughter deep in his chest. "You've already healed quite well, why don't I keep your little healing ability busy, eh? And even up this fight?"

Bier focused his energy into his hands so that they fairly illuminated the hallway with their light. Vincent squinted his eyes against it and took a careful step backwards. Jenova cells... is that where this bastard was getting his power? Wasn't

that what Hojo had been doing to Lucrecia and her baby? Something with Jenova... well, if all this madness was true and it really had been thirty years, who the hell knew to what kind of level the experiments had advanced to? Vincent still wasn't sure he believed everything Bier had told him though, it all seemed god damned crazy, the ravings of a lunatic. Yet if he allowed himself to take it all as truth, it explained so much.

The energy flew with little warning, not in giant blasts but in bullets, just as it had in the basement. The first hit Vincent square in the shoulder, wedging itself mercilessly just under his collarbone. Another grazed the top of his head just as he leapt back and away, looking for some kind of cover. He ducked into the stairwell again.

"I see you're not winking anymore," Chet mumbled.

"Shut it."

Dr. Bier was in the hallway and laughing at his own success. Vincent peeped an eye around the corner and saw his decidedly formidable opponent seemed in no hurry to end this. Then with a little grimace, he looked down at his shoulder and realized there was no bullet in it. The energy that formed the shot dissipated upon impact, leaving the wound and nothing else. He clamped his good hand over the gushing hole, knowing if this kept up he'd have to do his little vampire trick again to keep alive. Shit.

"Man, you fixed up your claw, didn't you?" Chet hissed in his ear, not knowing that he could have been in the next room whispering and Vincent still would have heard, "Go for his throat, like you did with that scientist upstairs."

Vincent glared at him for half a second, then stepped into the hallway again, bumping into Bier who'd been about to spoil he and Chet's sanctuary. Bier reared his power-laden arm back and Vincent leapt away, hair flying forward in a sweep of black. His eyes crackled like shattered rubies in the sun. "Not very fair," he said casually, landing in a crouch.

"No?" Bier paused, lowering his right arm a bit. He shrugged and rummaged around in the remnants of his pants. He pulled his gun and three clips out, flinging them at Vincent's feet. Vincent barely had time to grab the weapon and ammo before the blackened scientist was firing at him again. He hazarded a look at the new gun and grimaced. .38 Quicksilver. Piece of crap. But beggars couldn't be choosers. He snapped a clip in and tucked the others in his pocket. With a little cry, maybe a cry of joy that he finally had a gun in his hand again, he twisted around in the air and opened fire on Dr. Bier.

Bier was pretty quick though and far from stupid. Plenty brave too. He rammed himself into Vincent's line of fire, diving low to avoid the shots, and aimed for the gunman's legs. He tackled him with a force that sent both men flying and Vincent struggled to keep from winding up under him again. "Maybe it's still not fair, eh Valentine?" Bier roared in his face, "Because I'm just plain fucking stronger than you!"

He reached his burnt and brittle right arm back, the entire limb glowing with lethal power, and sent it hurtling down, looking to smash Vincent's head into the ground. Cool and sure of the situation though, Vincent kicked out with his right leg, flipping the body atop him up closer. He batted Bier's arm away, then brought his claw into play, ignoring the shooting pain still coming from the bullet wounds inside. He embedded the fine fingers of his metallic hand right into the scientist's shoulder joint, submerging them up to the knuckles. And then with a raucous shout he used every bit of strength he had to rip Bier's right arm straight from the socket. The scientist screamed in agony, looking from the arm that Vincent held in his claw to his own gushing shoulder and then back again. He fell away in a splash of blood, clamping his hand to the wound.

Vincent got back to his feet. He flung the limb away, into the stairwell actually and Chet examined the arm in mute fascination. He poked it with his sneaker.

"So tell me," Vincent began, looking at Bier's crumpled and bleeding form, "Do your grand powers include regenerating lost limbs?"

"I'll kill you!!!"

The scientist charged awkwardly, tears of pain snaking down his brittle, blackened face and a thick line of blood trailing after him from the stump of his arm. He closed in like a dripping marionette and Vincent thought it might be fun to pull his strings a bit. He very neatly tripped him, then kicked him in the ribs as he lay sprawled on the ground. Bier pulled himself together after the fourth or so blow from the wickedly pointed shoes, then jumped up, grabbing a hold of Vincent's claw-arm with such tenacity that he couldn't break free. The two of them struggled, Bier all the while trying to work up enough energy to form something big enough to take his opponent's head off.

"Tell me where Hojo is!" Vincent growled, fighting to free himself. Bier had him in a head-lock, his free hand grabbing his claw. He tripped him up, entwining his blackened legs around Vincent's and soon they both tumbled to the ground again. "Tell me where he is! I'm getting sick of this!"

"So am I!!!"

Vincent felt something sharp and wide embed itself in the center of his back. He felt it deflected a bit to the right by his spine and then there was a sickening crunch as it shattered three ribs and came out through his stomach, exploding against the stone floor beneath him. In a split second, he knew that Bier had plunged his hand straight through him like a blade. He gasped as the scientist drew it out again, the blackened skin glistening with blood but crackling with the energy he'd used to rip it through Vincent's body. Maybe it was shock that made Vincent turn himself completely around beneath

Bier's force, maybe it was anger or just a reflex from the pain. Whatever it was, before the twisted scientist could make another move, Dr. Bier felt Quicksilver shoved so hard into his right eye that it blinded him. Vincent emptied the entire clip off.

When the smoke cleared, Vincent was lying on his back in a pool of red, catching in his wide-open mouth the blood that gushed from Bier's headless corpse. He stayed like that until he couldn't bear the thought of what he was doing any longer and he flung the body off of him.

"OH MY GOD!!! Are you all right?!?!"

Chet ran from the stairwell but cringed at the massive carnage in the hallway. "OH MY GOD!!!"

Vincent was covered in blood, both his own and Bier's. Chet had a hard time looking at him. There were pieces of the dead scientist's skull and brains sprinkled on the front of his black shirt, bits of his head were everywhere, and the severed arm still lay half-concealed in the shadows of the stairwell. The body itself was only a few feet away. Putting a hand to his nose and mouth, Chet approached it hesitantly, then immediately jumped backwards.

"It's twitchin'! Is it... ugh, it ain't still alive, is it?"

The headless, one-armed thing was trembling slightly, left arm reaching up then flopping back down in mindless, violent spasms. Black flakes of tissue still flew off it with the more extreme of its movements and blood oozed from the stump of its neck and arm, reddening the floor around it and discoloring the mortar in-between the stones. Chet watched it for a while, thinking it kind of looked like a doll thrown away by an ungrateful child after being tortured in that merciless way that kids had with their toys. Only this thing was disgusting.

"If it's pumped full of Jenova..." Vincent gasped through breaths, "I think that affects its metabolism... it's immune system, nervous system, and ability to heal itself. Something-- something like th-that..."

Vincent choked and rolled onto his side, both arms wrapped about the gaping hole through his center. It was healing already, healing ever so slowly and suddenly he wondered why that was. Bier, in his ravings, had said that Hojo's notes stated Vincent himself had been injected with Jenova cells. Was it those dark cells or was it the blood he lusted for that was helping him stay alive? Maybe both, maybe neither, maybe something else. But the power that Jenova had given Bier could do nothing for him now, Vincent had taken his head off with seven .38 caliber rounds. He wiped his mouth on the back of his arm to get the blood off, then laughed, realizing how pointless that was, there was more blood on his arm than his face.

Chet looked at Vincent nervously, not sure what to do, say, or think.

"I'm pretty scary, aren't I?" Vincent whispered. He lay there in complete agony, every muscle clenched, hoping it wouldn't last long, "D-don't worry, you don't... don't have to help me..."

He closed his eyes and maybe he blacked out then, he wasn't sure. When he opened them again, he had a feeling that a decent amount of time had passed, maybe a half an hour. The blood was dry on him, flaking off when he moved. Barely breathing, he brushed it away, swearing as it stuck to the hairs on his forearm. He cleaned his face with his hand, sneezing at the powdery dust, then ran his fingers through his hair. He didn't see Chet anywhere. He was glad, the guy'd finally gotten smart and bailed. Just as well.

He felt soldered to the ground, the blood that'd emptied from his back having congealed, sticking the fabric of his shirt to the cold stone beneath him. He knew he had to push himself up. He had to overcome this and get to his feet again, none of it could end until Hojo was dead and he was with Lucrecia again.

But it was nice to lay on the floor. He was feverish, he knew it, and the floor was cool and the lights were dim. Just the starlight from outside, a thousand pinpricks that he could make out through a sliver of window above his head. If he just kept looking up, he wouldn't have to see the mess all over the hallway. Or the wound through his middle that was hurting so badly. He could smell it though, the stench of Bier's burnt body, it was all over him. The body itself lay behind him and he thought he could still hear it scraping against the floor. Everything that Bier had said echoed in his mind and he stared emptily out at the black air, wondering just how true any of it was.

Thirty years ago... if indeed it had been thirty years, Jenova was thought to belong to an ancient race of beings long extinct from the Planet's surface. There'd been a gleam in Hojo's eyes whenever he'd discussed the thing with the other scientists and Vincent could remember his own suspicions, knowing that there was something more to that than enthusiasm or excitement. Hojo honestly worshiped that frozen monster, he'd thought it grander than any human he'd ever known, poor Lucrecia falling into that summation just as surely as everyone else. Vincent didn't really know too much about Jenova. He'd never had an interest in any of the Mansion's scientific affairs. He was a Turk and he never pretended to be anything else. He did know from Lucrecia though, that Hojo had great plans for the creature he and Gast had discovered, plans to prove certain theories of his and plans to carry them out. Yes, he could remember hearing her cells being discussed but it hadn't made any sense at the time. It still didn't, not really. All he knew now was that apparently, possession of her cells was an asset. It had turned Biers into one hell of a formidable opponent.

And... and if it's true, and only if it's true, he thought desperately, then it's done things to me too.

He laid a hand carefully atop his stomach and felt the wound from Bier's attack, but it was half the size it had been and the bleeding had stopped. It burned to the touch though, and his ribs ached. The bones were grafting back together, he didn't know how. His own body felt like a stranger to him.

"Hojo called me a monster," he said aloud, "And I suppose he had to make it true. Look at this though..." Vincent laughed bitterly to himself, shutting his eyes and he could picture the blood and bits of flesh about him, "Who says I'm not a monster anyway? Would a man rip another man apart like this? Hell... hell, I don't need the claw to be a monster."

"Are you insane?"

Chet's voice answered Vincent from the darkness. The young actor from Wutai was suddenly above him, aggravated and staring him in the face. "I didn't know anyone was here," Vincent said quietly. He closed his eyes and turned his head.

"I asked if you were insane, you jerk. You must be to think that you did anything wrong here. You were protecting yourself from the walking, talking barbecued pork platter that was attacking you."

"I don't need you."

"What?" Chet took a step backwards, confusion washing over his features.

"I don't need your advice or your company. I thought you'd left this Mansion and for a minute I thought maybe you weren't an idiot."

"I don't care if you need me or not, asshole, I need \*you\*. I need help and I'm not leaving your side until I get it."

Vincent laughed again, then sighed. "Don't make me kill you."

"Oh shut up. Monster or man, vampire or Turk, you're a nice guy and--"

Forgetting his injuries and moving quick as a cat, Vincent vaulted up and latched his right hand around the upper flaps of Chet's tattered windbreaker. He spit his words in the young man's face. "You've watched too many movies, my friend. I'm not a hero and I'm not a saint. I wouldn't take a bullet for you and I wouldn't go out of my way to keep you alive. I'm selfish. I want two people, one dead, the other safe in my arms and I'd tear your throat out if it got me closer to either of my aims."

The raging red eyes and the faint glint of bright white fangs behind his lips threw Chet off and the young man couldn't answer. Being so close to this murdering creature covered in blood, thick, red, everywhere, knocked his courage to the ground. Vincent gave a little sigh of disgust and dropped him. Then he found a wall to lean against and he bowed his head, wallowing in his pain as his bare fingers absently rubbed the rough stone. Chet looked at him for a moment, then plopped down on the floor and grumbled.

"So let's go find your buddy Hojo," he demanded, straightening his jacket and fixing his hair. Vincent sighed.

~\*~

Hmm... this fic's kinda like an rpg unto itself. Vincent's found his armour (clothes and shoes), his weapon (Quicksilver), learned a spell (er, sucking blood) and now Chet's joined his party as an um, Actor. And he just defeated the Boss Bier! Now if he could just kill some more scientists to gain experience, he could go rescue Lucrecia, slay Hojo, and finally sit back to watch the pretty ending fmv.

I'm going insane!! ^\_ ^\_ ^

Hojo and Vincent at last confront each other, er again, in the next chapter, and it oughta prove interesting. Hehehe, stay tuned--