



Chapter 4: Hojo and Vincent

"It got really, really quiet out there."

"Maybe they're all dead."

"A possibility," Zack replied in a throaty whisper, pressing his ear further against the bars. He closed his eyes and quieted his breathing, listening. "But I doubt it. If you'd get up off your ass and give a listen, we might know for sure, your hearing's better'n mine."

Cloud shrugged, face averted from the shaft of yellow light breaking into their cell from outside. He was still sitting in the shadows, as though he could hide in the dark from all the turmoil in his heart, the confusion and questions sounding off in his mind. There was a general aura of sadness about his hunched shoulders and a lack of glimmer to his blue eyes. Zack wondered where it had come from but he really wasn't too surprised. Cloud's moods swung as sharp and fast as a sickle, he could be cursing your name one moment and looking for a razor to swipe across his wrists the next. "You're frigging stupid," he muttered, "Sitting there and sulking... I don't get you. Aside from Dr. Miller's accident with Dr. Water and Dr. Bier's guns, this is all exciting as hell. Don't you remember training?" Zack squinted outside through the narrow bars, eyes going distant with memories. "It was dangerous, it hurt, it whipped the shit outta you, but it was fun! `Let ya know you were alive, let you know there was somethin' more to the world than waking up every morning and going t'sleep every night. I dunno, Cloud, I'm hoping something comes of this is all. I hope it doesn't disappear with the dawn like some half-assed dream."

"It probably all is a dream," Cloud muttered, his chin buried in his arms, "I'm surprised you don't think so, you're the king of nightmares. Hell, but most of the time, people don't know whether they're dreaming or not so if this was your dreams, you'd probably be the last to know."

"You're a prick sometimes, ya know that?"

Cloud shrugged again. He didn't care enough to defend himself.

The storage closet they'd been shut up inside was made of bare rock, empty shelves of rough, unfinished wood lining the back walls. The door was the same primitive material and Zack got splinters in his hair from pressing his cheek against it. His heart was still thumping too loud and too fast in his ears, a rattling, racing reminder of what had happened just a few moments before. And that body laying horizontal near the doorway, it was a reminder too.

"Heya!" the Soldier called suddenly, his lips brushing the rusty bars, "Heya, Dr. Waters! You alive out there, Doc? Valentine! Anyone!"

"I told ya, they're all dead."

"Shaddup, you're just morbid. I don't think that guy would have gotten himself offed so easily. And Dr. Bier... well, you know how tough he is. He broke your arm last year for trying to run, remember?"

"Yeah..." Cloud answered darkly, rubbing his forearm, "Yeah, I remember that."

"So there're some tough sonnuvabitches out there. I'm not giving up on any of them so easily."

Zack allowed a silence to descend then, letting it quench their conversation and open the way up to evidence of anything still in the Library outside. Cloud leaned back and sighed, too apathetic and uncaring to even bother listening. "Why'd you help him?" he finally demanded, "That guy had no qualms about letting us rot in here. But you helped him, you killed Dr. Miller to help him get outta here. D'you know how much trouble we're going to be in when Hojo finds out you killed one of his crew?"

Zack laughed, bitterly turning from the door to his friend. The outside light chiseled his features in sharp yellow shapes, and darker, bluer shadows. "What d'you mean 'how much trouble *we'll* get in'? They won't touch you, Cloud. You're too important."

"What the hell does that mean?" the younger man demanded, climbing to his feet, "I can't help the way things are. I can't help that I get the pain of the experiments, you get the pain of their failures."

"So what are we then?" Zack asked softly, "Brothers? Brothers in pain? No... no we're not. Just shut up, Cloud, I don't want to get into this with you."

"Why the hell not? Because you're afraid of me?"

Zack laughed again at that one. He looked his friend over from head to toe, crossing his arms and blinking away exhaustion. "I know you much too well to ever be afraid of you, Cloud. Don't lay awake at night being glad that at least your old pal Zack's scared of you. Nope. And don't go hoping I'll ever learn to be either. I'm not scared of you, no matter what Hojo does to you, or how strong you think you are. As for any trouble that comes about because of Miller, well, you

let me handle it. Maybe they'll beat the shit outta me, I wouldn't be surprised, it's happened before, but don't you worry your little blonde head about it. They won't lay a finger on you. Hojo would kill anyone who so much as looked at ya wrong. Only he's allowed to hurt you."

"Bastard..." Cloud muttered, sinking to the floor again.

"Who? Me? Or the good Professor?"

"Both of ya. I might as well be alone. Why? Why'd you help him?"

"Why d'you care so much? Have you become such a miserable jerk in here that you'd see that guy die when we could help him?"

"But he wouldn't help us!" Cloud raged, pounding his fist into the ground, "He didn't care! Another Shinra pig, he said it himself. A frigging Turk who wouldn't help. No different than Tseng or Reno or any of 'em. Why don't you just buy Hojo a birthday present while you're feeling so damned friendly towards him and alla his stooges?"

"Shut up..." Zack sighed and he turned away again, "Did it ever occur to you that maybe I helped Valentine 'cause I hoped he'd change his mind? 'Cause I hoped he'd see that after I saved his life, he'd owe us a favor and let us out? Man, sometimes I wonder if you got any brain left in there at all... or if it's all just mako now."

Cloud snorted derisively, ignoring the rather rude little comment. "Didn't do any good. He cut and run, he didn't even look back."

"Because he knew he didn't need to."

"Huh?"

Zack grinned huge and dug his hand in his pocket. He drew out a long and shiny silver key. It gleamed gorgeously, the key to something amazing, and Cloud's blue eyes followed it enviously as his friend weaved it through the air. "Where--? Where'd you get that?"

"While I was holding on to Dr. Miller." Suddenly Zack pulled a whole ring of keys from out of his pocket and they jangled loudly in the quiet air, "I'm pretty sure this silver one is to this door here and the rest... prolly to his car, his apartment, and the employee lounge back in the Shinra building. Guess he won't need 'em anymore. But hey! Cool, huh?"

"Zack, you bastard!" Cloud jumped to his feet and caught his friend up in a hug, crushing his broad shoulders ever so slightly. Zack grinned like a cocky kid and shoved him off. "Still doesn't gimme any reasons as t'why you helped that jerk with the claw but hell, I'll forgive ya. How ya gonna do it? How ya gonna open the door, the lock's on the outside!"

"Ah, mon ami, leave zat up to me. I just have to knock one of the bars outta the window then I'll be able to reach my arm out, down, around, and get to the lock. Don't you think I've been planning our escape for years and years? It's all in here--" Zack winked and poked his forehead with his finger, "--But I'm going to tell you now, Cloud, you're going to do everything that I say. We're going to get outta here alive and well and you're going to be like a shadow t'me, got it? Stay behind, stay quiet, follow my every movement to the letter."

Cloud nodded eagerly, his hands trembling in excitement. He crossed his arms and took a step backwards, Zack rubbing the top of his head affectionately and mussing his hair. Sometimes, Cloud wasn't any different than a really temperamental little brother, he thought in amusement. "I don't think anyone's out there anymore, that's why I was listening so closely," Zack explained in a whisper. His palms were getting sweaty in his excitement, "But if there is, we'll have to handle them. Are you feeling okay? Up to a fistfight, if it comes down to it? We're fighting for our freedom here."

"I know, and I'm ready for it. Wish I had a sword though."

"Yeah, me too, but oh well."

Zack approached the prison door and examined the bars carefully. Thirty years had taken its toll on the entire Mansion and the bars embedded in this unfinished oak door were no exception. The ends of them were covered in a rash-like rust that flaked beneath his fingertips and ran into the cracks of the not-so-solid wood. Zack flicked his finger against one and little red showers rained down.

Cloud watched his friend pry at the bars, wriggling each around till he found the loosest one, then going to work pushing and pulling the iron rod from the door. Nervous sweat ran down both men's faces though it was almost chilly down there in the basement. Cloud wiped at his eyes and under his nose, ready to explode from tension and anticipation. Yet there was fear in him too and he had to ask a question.

"Zack?"

"Mmm?"

"What if.... what if we run into Hojo?"

Zack thought for a moment, eyes narrowed towards the stubborn piece of iron in his capable hands. "Then we run really really fast," he answered with a shrug.

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The entire Library was washed out, bleached of colour, and as foul-smelling as a week old corpse. A fog had settled over the rooms; one of sulfuric acid, formaldehyde steam, and a million other chemicals that would take months to categorize fully. The mist coiled and twisted in the air, condensing against the cold stone walls and running down to pool in caustic, burning puddles on the floor. A hissing filled the room as the chemicals ate at the ground and chewed holes in the books, discolouring everything they touched while destroying anything else.

Dr. Waters lay on his side, wedged into the corner like a wadded piece of wet paper. The chemical fog licked at his bare skin, welts forming on his forearms and face, which he'd buried into his sleeves before passing out. His chest rose and fell with feeble breaths yet other than that there was no movement. Until he began to twitch that is, eyelids fluttering weakly, nonsense words rolling off his tongue. He lay against the floor, trembling with pain and exhaustion, then his right arm slid slowly, excruciatingly inwards, to rub at a dried line of blood on his forehead. His fingernails flicked the red away, making a dull scratching sound then his hand dropped again and he panted, looking for air.

"Dr. Bier--!" he croaked, the words barely escaping his cracked lips, "Dr. Miller--!"

Ah, that's right, Miller was dead, they'd accidentally shot him. Waters grimaced with the memory, becoming scared all over again of being blamed and fired for it. If only he hadn't brought them all down here! His eyes were shut and he tried opening them but he only tried once. The chemicals in the air were still too thick, they burned his eyes, threatening to blind him. He had to get out of here.

He moved his right arm again, feeling around a bit with his hand just in case his gun was nearby. It wasn't. He pulled his arm up close to his face again, then brought his other limb into play, pushing himself up from the ground slowly and painfully, like a big unruly drawbridge being raised. He sat and panted some more once he was up, then opened his left eye just a slit to see where the door lay. The mists caught the light from above and glowed in beautiful rainbow colors. He could see the bookshelf nearby, a gruesome sight; shattered wood and shattered glass, liquid still oozing out of jars and vials, burning the wood and bleaching the stone-lined ground. There was a sizable puddle of darkening blood beneath the shelf's remains and Waters remembered quite suddenly that Dr. Bier had been underneath when the monster with the claw had pushed it over. He'd screamed and screamed as the chemicals had washed forward with the unthinking mindlessness of insentient materials, and Waters could still make out the last traces of the smell his skin had made as it had burned away to nothing.

Yet, he knew it hadn't really burned to nothing, it couldn't have. So where was Bier?

And even more importantly, where was the monster?

The pool of blood beneath the bookcase was smeared, he suddenly saw. There were hand prints of bright red scattered on the floor and signs that Bier had dragged himself out from underneath the wreckage. The trail of blood led straight to the door and then Waters could see, through his squinted, tearing eyes, that Bier had managed to get to his feet again and walk right out of the Library.

Dr. Waters was pretty impressed.

Then he tried to impress himself.

Grunting and swearing and cursing his stinging eyes, Waters grabbed on to the lip of an operating table, the metal cool and slippery beneath his sweaty fingers, and then tried hauling himself up. His feet slid out from under him at first, but he forced the tread of his shoes into the mortar-grooves between the rocks, and pushed himself up steady until he stood, wavering slightly like a tree in the breeze, on his feet. He leaned back against the edge of the table, closing his eyes and taking a breath though the chemicals burned his lungs worse than the lack of oxygen did.

Then Zack came up and slammed his fist into his head.

"Heya! Dr. Waters! How ya doing?"

The Doctor slumped back down to the ground in an annoyed bundle of swinging limbs and curse words. Stars went off in front of his eyes and his hand went to the side of his head. He jerked his gaze up through the chemicals and saw Zack peering coolly down at him, teeth flashing in a cocky grin.

"...you?"

"Yeah, me," Zack answered, sticking his fists into his sides and letting his grin turn into a frown. His blue eyes narrowed. "Remember me? The guinea pig? Of course you remember me. Remember when ya did this to me last year after you broke up with your girlfriend?" Zack swung his left foot back and kicked it hard into Water's gut, knocking the wind out of him and nearly making the big man throw up his dinner. He made a little 'oomph' noise, clutching his stomach. "Yeah," Zack sighed, crossing his arms and looking off into the air, taking up an attitude of mock remembrance, "Yeah, I think I made a little noise like that too. Hurts like hell, eh? Well, probably doesn't hurt you as much as it did me, you have all this extra padding--" Zack nudged Waters' gut with the toe of his shoe, chuckling, "--while I don't get fed enough to develop such excellent defense."

"Fucking little jerk-off prick--!" Dr. Waters spat, eyes squeezed shut as he fought to catch his breath, "You do have a death wish, don't you? I'll ring your neck and stick you in a mako chamber till your brain rots out and you forget your name! How d'you like that?"

"Aw, hell, sounds like a blast," Zack laughed and he kicked Waters again, kneeling down and grabbing a hold of the scientist's mop of brown hair. He bent his head back, nearly snapping his neck, then whispered in his ear, "You wanna tell me where Dr. Bier went? And Valentine the Turk? Cloud and I, we'll be taking our leave tonight, and I wanna know where everyone is. No one's going to get in our way, d'you hear me?"

Waters choked out a wheezing laugh. "Ya won't get out of Nibelheim, ya crazy bastard. Professor Hojo won't let you."

"Hojo's just not an element," Zack replied, slamming the scientist's head back down to the ground, letting his forehead crunch against the floor, "I'm not worried 'cause we're staying far, far away from him. Right, Cloud?"

"Yeah..." Cloud was near the shattered bookshelf, looking down at the blood beneath the glass. His features paled and he swallowed hard, his eyes glowing brighter against his white cheeks. There was something feverish and frightened there, and the little boy that he still was peeked out from behind the Soldier's mask for just a second. "Zack. Zack man, I'm scared."

The dark-haired ex-Soldier turned from Waters a second and threw concern in Cloud's direction. "What of? You should be glad, this is all gonna be okay. Tell Cloud it's gonna be okay, Dr. Waters," he insisted, pushing his shoe roughly into the scientist's groin. Waters growled and spit, a ball of saliva landing on the cuff of Zack's pants. Zack kicked him in the face. Then he abruptly turned and approached his friend, leaving the man to whimper to himself and bleed from his nose all over the laboratory floor.

"It smells bad in here."

"Yeah." Zack put his arm to his nose and looked for the exit. He plucked at Cloud's shoulder and gestured towards the door, the rectangle of yellow light looking like an entrance to heaven, leading far away from the room of hell. The two men trudged towards it, their faces tense and tight. "Remember," Zack whispered, "You're my shadow. I want you behind me, I want you quiet. All right?"

"Sure."

Zack outranked him and Cloud would follow his orders, he was rather glad to do so. The taller, older man moved out into the hallway, willing enough to leave Dr. Waters slumped unconscious in the corner. He honestly would have liked to kill the bastard, he had too many memories of Waters beating upon him for no other reason than plain and simple pleasure, but Zack knew it would probably only make matters worse. Especially if the unthinkable happened; if they were caught again.

"Don't like this mansion," Zack muttered to himself, kicking skulls from their path as they walked, "Never have."

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A two inch wide hole through his stomach, an ounce of lead in his left arm and all Vincent could think about was how his hair kept getting in his eyes. But he was too tired to lift his head for too long so he let it slump as he walked along and Chet tried to peer past the tangled black locks to see his face. The light in the hall was too dim though.

"Heya," Chet whispered, keeping close to Vincent's side for fear the man might fall right over, "Why don't we chill for a minute. You're not looking too hot. That hole that that scientist put through ya isn't gonna get better if you don't give it some time."

Vincent didn't answer. He swallowed hard and kept advancing, paying no heed to the blood trickling down his back and shining on the stone in his wake in a glistening red trail. He almost laughed at Chet's words. Time... there wasn't any time now that Lucrecia had narrowed his purpose and given him a goal. He was to do away with Hojo and then she would come back to him to stay, that's how he interpreted his brief vision of her and then her few words to him. It seemed obvious enough. Vincent could taste victory in his mouth, he could smell the pain he was going to put that bastard scientist through. 'Just had to get to him, just had to find him. The wounds and his own pain were nothing as long as he kept that goal in focus...

"D'ya know where you're going?" Chet asked meekly, discreetly trying to slip his shoulder beneath Vincent's right elbow and provide him with someone to lean on. Vincent very indiscreetly shoved him away.

"I'm wondering if he'd be... be in his room--" he gasped softly, good hand going towards his stomach. The wound there was smaller than it had been and not bleeding nearly as profusely, yet when Chet bent his head around and looked at Vincent's back, he could see... through him. That is, the wound Dr. Bier had inflicted with his power-laden arm had gone right through the writhing ex-Turk beneath him, in his stomach and out his back and Chet could see the hallway before them by looking through it. Very very gross.

"Damn it..."

Vincent gave a little growl when his right foot got caught up in a wrinkle in the carpet and he crumpled to the ground before Chet could stop him. He lay collapsed on the floor, breathing hard.

"Doesn't look like you have any choice now, Mr. Macho," the guy said with a shrug and Vincent fought back the urge to jump up and punch him. But he also wanted to jump up and go after Hojo. Seemed he hadn't the strength for either. Chet tried to approach but Vincent waved him back.

"Now's not a good time," he mumbled, "You'll get hurt if you get too close to me now."

"Oh yeah..."

The young guy rubbed at his neck, the puncture wounds there still stinging like crazy and he decided it would probably be wise to keep his back to the wall. Vincent pushed himself towards the opposite one and they faced each other with only a darkened hallway between them.

Much to both of their annoyances, they wound up staying like that for a long time. Chet did his best to be patient as Vincent's horrible wounds healed enough for him to move again. It was a slow, agonizing process, despite all of the blood he'd been able to get from Bier. Chet took the down time to explore their immediate surroundings, peeking his head through the odd doorway, calling Sara's name softly, keeping his eyes moving constantly from the ceiling to the windows and shuddering every time anything brushed by a him. The ticklish touch of a spider web nearly sent him into cardiac arrest, he was sure it was more burned skin from that dead scientist. But no, just cobwebs. And another time it was just dust, and then a lazy, bumbling moth that decided to alight upon his shoulder and ride for a while until Chet screamed like a girl and jumped up and down, trying to work up the courage to scrape it off.

Chet wasn't a coward. He'd never thought of himself as a coward anyways. But then, he'd never been in a situation like this before. Things that wouldn't mind killing him seemed everywhere. This mansion was a lesson in anarchy; totally lawless, full of monsters and vampires and scientists that didn't seem to think they had to answer to anybody. And who am I? he asked himself meekly, To barge in here and order any of it around? Nah, I can only cross my fingers and hope none of it decides I look too much like an outsider. And like, rips me a new belly button or anything.

"It's really quiet," Chet remarked casually. He was sitting on the floor again, Vincent still across from him, slumped like a broken doll against the wall. His eyes were closed now and his head was bowed, but Chet knew he couldn't be asleep.

Even in their brief walk, they'd managed to move a great deal further down the hall, away from the scene of his fight with Bier. The blood and limbs scattered about that place had been too much for Chet to stomach and he'd practically begged that they move on, if only to find a cleaner place for Vincent to pass out in. They were still upstairs, Chet glanced outside a narrow window to his left and looked down on Nibelheim, the softly blowing shapes of trees swishing about. They looked like crawling green pillows and the sleeping village beyond glowed yellow with firelight to fight off the chill of the night, the distant Nibel mountains providing a menacing, craggy backdrop of sharp and cutting shapes. Those mountains had always given Chet the creeps but he didn't find them quite so intimidating after the things he'd seen tonight. The young actor slumped back down, stretching his long legs out before him, then yawned. Vincent hadn't moved a muscle or said a word since he'd collapsed.

"You're from Wutai, aren't ya?" Chet asked, feeling that he should make conversation. The quiet was too damned awkward. "You look like it. I'm originally from Midgar but I moved to Wutai 'cause my father was with Shinra and they wanted honest company men to set up an outpost out there. So I lived in Wutai for like, almost all of my life. Then this Turk from Shinra, he came and got me to move here. My dad had died a few years before and it was just me and my sister and my dog. She made enough as a barmaid that we could scrape by all right, but I could never find work. I was a drama major till dad died and I had to drop out so I guess I never learned enough to be any good. Couldn't find a job. Couldn't get work. Couldn't keep Sara from having to be on her feet all night and day. I'm a pretty shitty brother. I mean, Sara's older than me, but I'm her brother. It's like, my responsibility to take care of her. 'Cause um, I just don't see her as the type of chick that's going to find a husband any time soon."

Chet sighed a bit and played with his fingers. He took the bullet from the pocket of his beat-up windbreaker, then rolled it around in the palm of his hand, tickling himself with the cold metal. Vincent kept silent.

"I guess it's just as well I'm here in Nibelheim then," Chet sighed, clunking his head back against the wall and staring blankly at the dark ceiling. "That Reno guy spotted me right off. He was looking for a loser, he stumbled on Chet Hadley, and he musta been like, 'Whoa! Jackpot! It's the Master Tonberry of losers! I'm gonna cart him off to Nibelheim so he can get chomped on by a vampire and flaked on by a burnt-up scientist guy!' What a joke, man. But Sara... I have to find her. She's all I have. Besides ya know, my dog. Who hasn't been let out tonight and has probably pissed all over the rug. Maaaaan..." Chet clunked his head harder on the wall. "D'you think she's all right?" he asked the top of Vincent's bowed black head. Vincent of course, did not look up. "This Hojo guy you said she might be with... what's he like? Another scientist, right? I'm going to assume so. Is he nutty weird too? He doesn't shoot bullets outta his hand, does he? Or like, morph into things when you piss him off, right? Tell me he's a pencil-necked geek and I'll feel a lot better."

Chet banged his head against the wall again, swore viciously because he banged it too hard, then rubbed the bump he'd made. Vincent was quiet except for shallow breathing.

"I'm assuming I shouldn't hold my breath then, eh? Terrific. But at least I have you with me and you seem like a tough mutha'. You can suck my blood all you want if you just help me get Sara back. Really. You don't have to, mind you. But um,

if you want payment, that's about all I can give. I don't have enough gil on me to buy a hot dog. But yo, I'd really appreciate any help you could throw my way. I'm not... I'm not sure what else to do at this point but more or less sniff at your butt for help. I know you said you weren't a hero or anything, and I believe ya when ya say you don't give two shits about me, but... but... I'm really at a loss." Okay, he was gonna go out on a limb and just swallow his pride and say it. Chet itched irritably at his scalp and screwed his courage up. "I'm a wuss, man. I can't fight mutant scientists and um, stuff like that. I don't have it in me. I'm a shifty, slacker actor type. Can't fight for beans though. So I... I really really need your help, whatever it takes."

There. He'd said it. Chet waited for Vincent to laugh at him, or to make some insulting comment. At least an acknowledgment would be nice! But nothing came. He just continued to do exactly what he'd been doing: sitting slumped against the wall with his chin buried in his chest and his hair hanging in front of his face. Chet sighed. But then he lifted his head, some sudden sound catching his attention. He leaned forward and approached Vincent on his hands and knees, looking up into his face. Then he fell back onto his bottom.

"Sleeping like a baby," Chet sighed, not sure if he should be relieved or not that Vincent hadn't heard him admit what a wuss he was. He stared up at him and blew breath into his face, making strands of his black hair billow about like pennants in the breeze. "Ya know, you don't look so tough when you're sleepin'. You just look like another guy. Maybe just paler and a little bloodier than most but you're just another guy. Hmph." Chet almost wondered how he'd ever been so intimidated by this man, he didn't look at all threatening now. He looked like someone who'd played the games of the world too hard and now was suffering for it. A spent kid after too long chasing after friends in the sun, bloodied by battle and no longer a threat to anyone. "What'd you do to this Hojo jerk that made him screw ya over, eh? Ah well, doesn't matter. Whatever happened, happened."

Vincent opened his eyelids sleepily, letting his dulled red eyes bore straight into the young man seated before him. "Why do you care?" he muttered.

Chet scooted backwards and grinned. "Thought you were sleepin'."

"I was."

"Oh."

Like most people, Vincent got terribly cranky when he was tired. He shot Chet a vicious scowl, then tried to get more comfortable against the wall, his claw scraping upon the floor with a metallic screech. Chet felt the noise in the back of his teeth and grimaced. He shoved himself in the corner and sighed quietly, crossing his legs out before him and staring at nothing. Vincent buried his head in his arms and closed his eyes, trying to ignore all the little separate pains that amounted into one huge pain and was trying to evolve into a splitting migraine. Chet stared at him.

"Ya know, when you were sleeping, I asked if you were from Wutai," he said conversationally.

"And what did I say?"

"Er, nothing, you were sleeping, man."

"Ah."

Vincent rolled over and decided to see how soft the plaster wall would be against his head. After a few seconds he went back to his other position. His clothes crackled with dry blood.

"I'm from Wutai, anyways. Not born there, but my dad, he was--"

"Chet?"

"Um, yeah?"

"Shut up."

"Gotcha."

Vincent tried laying flat on his back then but he couldn't straighten out all the way, the remnants of his broken ribs protested it. He curled up on his side, face to the wall. Chet stared at his back.

"It still smells like burnt scientist," he commented at length.

"Yes."

"Makes me hungry. I didn't have dinner. You hungry?"

"Yes."

Chet blinked hard and backed a few inches further away. "For what?"

"Cheeseburger would be rather nice."

"Oh. So you're not on an all blood diet, huh? I guess that's good, a little variety never hurt anyone. Yeah, I'm hungry too. If we find Sara, I'll take y'all out to the tavern, they fry up a pretty good burger."

"Is..." Vincent's voice was hesitant and he didn't move as he spoke, "Is the tavern still owned by a woman named Theresa?"

"Theresa? Nah, never heard of her. Some guy with a stomach three times as big as I am runs it. Why?"

"No reason..." Vincent closed his eyes and sighed to himself, "It hasn't been thirty years," he whispered so softly that Chet couldn't hear, "It's impossible." There was no way that thirty years could have passed, he just didn't feel it. The night in the lab when he'd been shot seemed like only yesterday. "How old do I look?" he asked Chet suddenly.

"Er, I dunno. Don't ask me that. I had a girlfriend ask me that. After I answered, she wasn't my girlfriend anymore."

"Do I look like an old man?"

"What?" Chet shook his head and narrowed his eyes at Vincent's back, "No way. No older'n like, twenty-five maybe? Maybe younger. Am I close?"

No answer.

Chet shuffled uneasily, playing with the bullet again.

"Worried about the stuff that guy said, aren't ya? Well, I don't know much about it. But I'm not sure I'd trust something like that, he just did not strike me as the honest helpful friendly type." The hallway was quiet for a while. Chet could almost hear the thoughts whirring in the head of the man across from him and he felt very distanced from him suddenly, as though they were miles apart when they were really only a few footsteps. He wondered if he should even bother trying to start a conversation again. "So, you from Wutai?" he asked with little hope, not surprised when he didn't get an answer. The young actor sighed and turned his attention away, listening sharply for noises, wondering what time it was and how much longer it would be until the Mansion woke up. He guessed it was something like a quarter till five. Damn, no wonder he was so tired, he should be in--

"Originally, yes."

"What?"

"I grew up in Wutai, yes. Is it that obvious?"

Chet laughed with subtle delight and scratched the back of his head. "Well, I lived there for a long time, I can spot Wutaians right off usually. But you're a Turk, so you musta went to Midgar and to Shinra... how'd you manage that? The two have never gotten along, I mean, did you know they went to war?"

"Oh?" This was news to Vincent.

"Yeah. Wow, you really have been out of it. But yeah, a war between Wutai and Midgar, no one thought it would really happen but Domino got Shinra's backing and Shinra's troops and invaded the continent one night, from the air and from the ground. The sky was fulla bombs, I remember it though I was only twelve or so. The fighting only ended a couple years ago, but it was pretty intense for a while; airships always circling overhead and the damned Gelnika sitting in the harbor like, just daring anyone to do anything about it. And people kept dying and the city lost its polish and it started to stink and suddenly everyone in Wutai hated me because I wasn't one of them. That was okay though. Ya know, I dealt with that easy. But, heh... one night during the dog watch, my dad was blown apart by some Ninja's grenade. They raided the Shinra outpost where he was stationed at the edge of town and killed every Soldier inside." Chet smiled softly and shrugged his shoulders, "Funny ya know? When I found out, all I could think about was how I never thought ninja used grenades. Heh. You know why they never came after me or Sara, right?"

"Honor," Vincent answered listlessly. His voice was hollow, his face still to the wall. "You weren't a warrior, neither was your sister. The people of Wutai had no quarrel with you."

"Yeah, that was the bullshit that that Godo guy spat in my face. Honor. But fuck that, they killed my dad."

Chet balled his fists up and glared at the floor in remembrance. He'd tried not to think about it too much. The worst thing in the world was having someone you cared for die without having anyone to blame. He couldn't really blame Wutai. They'd been the good guys in the war against Midgar. His dad had just been on the wrong side. Yet Chet couldn't really hate Shinra either, since he'd only been doing his job. And Shinra had always been good to them. Pain in the ass.

"So you left Wutai for Midgar," Chet said, after he'd calmed down a bit. He sighed, trying to regain his composure, "I'll bet they all hate you for it."

"I wouldn't know."

"Really? Why not?"

"I haven't been back since I left it."

"No family there or anything?"

Vincent shrugged painfully, his right hand going to his stomach again. Healing, but slow as hell. He wanted to get up and away from this, he didn't care about this guy and this guy didn't care about him. Why were they stuck together like this? Why wouldn't he leave?

"Don't worry about it," Vincent snapped a little coldly and Chet flinched. Those four words froze the air.

"I'm... I'm not worried, ya prick," the younger man retorted, not admitting to himself how much that little snub had hurt. He kept it from his voice and came off highly irritated instead of upset. "I'm just trying to make conversation is all. We normal humans usually do that with one another, vampy--"

"I have a name."

"Yeah, Vinny right? Like I care..."

"Vincent. Vincent, not Vinny. You might call your pimp Vinny, or a fat old Italian uncle Vinny. My name, Chet Hadley, is Vincent."

"Damn, aren't you picky?"

"About some things."

Chet crossed his arms and pouted a little. "Well, I was just gonna say, Vincent, that if you really aren't a monster or whatever, maybe you should act a little more human and it'll seem a little more believable. Act like a cold sonnuvabitch and you're gonna get treated like a cold sonnuvabitch."

Vincent didn't bother answering. He was hovering between interested and pissed, he wasn't sure which to go with. And he really didn't care enough to sit around and figure it out. Something suddenly occurred to him though.

"Why don't you hate me? My city killed your father."

"No, some ninja from the house of Kisaragi killed my dad," Chet corrected softly. Then he laughed. "Actually, some stupid cheap hand grenade did it. Can't get revenge though, the little lucky bastard was a kamikaze fighter, it died with its victim."

The hallway was silent again and Chet didn't care enough to break it this time. He crossed his arms and closed his eyes, listening to the mansion's creaks and groans. He wasn't used to talking about his past, this was unsettling. It made him a little sad and he didn't like to be sad. It really made him want to find Sara though, since she was the only other person in the world who understood just what he was talking about. "You wanna keep moving now? You up to it?"

Vincent rolled over and stared at Chet for a moment, his red eyes bright in the gloom. They sparkled with curiosity but their owner said nothing. With a little groan, he pushed himself up, his stomach no longer bleeding, just glistening wetly as the torn flesh and muscle healed. He stifled a yelp when he twisted his torso wrong, but finally managed to find his feet again and leaned heavily against the hallway wall. Chet stood too, hopping up full of energy and Vincent cursed him quietly.

"You gonna be able to walk? You can lean on me, I don't mind as long as you keep the fangs locked up, vamps."

Chet grinned when he got the expected frown from his companion. Vincent sighed profoundly and started tramping down the hall, leaning heavily to his right and keeping an arm wrapped around his stomach. Chet walked close to his elbow in case he fell again. "You really are stubborn, you know that? Stubborn and overly independent, like ya think you're the only person in the world that matters."

"You looking to lose your head?" Vincent growled half-heartedly. His attention was preoccupied with walking and not veering off and hitting a wall.

"Can it. I've already told you, Vinny, I'm not scared of you."

"Call me Vinny again and I'll give you a reason to be."

"Ooh, I'm shakin'." Chet stuck his hands in his pockets and grinned huge, glad he'd gotten the guy to not leave him behind. He kept close by his side and nearly went into fits of hysteria when Vincent finally leaned on his shoulder a bit as they both trudged down the dirty, darkened Shinra Mansion hallway, lit only by starlight and the occasional electric lamp mounted at intervals upon the walls.

"Heh heh heh," he laughed delightedly, "I feel like I'm back in high school and making friends on the first day. Nothing worse'n sitting alone at lunch."

Vincent shook his head and closed his tired eyes. "You're pretty strange," he sighed.

"Yeah. And you're just your standard vampire."

~*~

Hojo let the scalpel drop from his hand and onto the tray. It landed with an ear-shattering clatter, a sound that echoed throughout the small room and would have jarred the senses of the strongest man if they'd been there to hear it.

But there were no such men like that there at the moment. Just Hojo and Sara. And a radio which Hojo simply could not find a decent station on. For what seemed the hundredth time in the past hour, he wiped his hands on his coat, turned about from his work, and fiddled with the thing's knobs, trying to find something that didn't sound like something either chocobo Billy or President Shinra might listen to. Nothing country, nothing classical. Not tonight.

Ah-ha.

He smiled triumphantly to himself, pushing his glasses up on his nose against his right shoulder. Lots of bass, lots of synth, lyrics that meant absolutely nothing to him, and a wailing guitar that had more emotion in it than the singer's voice ever would. He left it there, then went back to work.

"Good choice?" he asked the inert body beneath his slick red hands. Sara made a little gurgling noise, eyes rolled back in her head, and her captor shrugged. "This sounds like something you'd like, you're pretty young. I like a little bit of everything, music-wise, I mean, music is like clothes, ones desires for it should change with the seasons, or the situation. Black in mourning, light white on a summer day, beauty when in love..." Hojo sighed smally, his skilled hands delving about

in Sara's stomach, "Or obnoxious, ear-splitting noise pollution for when you're operating on someone as obnoxious and polluted as yourself, Miss Hadley. Sorry if you're not enjoying it, but I have to have something playing or I may just pass right out. I haven't slept in two days, doubly damned Project. You'd think Jenova would spare me just a little time to myself after all I do for her. But no, it's always push push push, have to get things done, have to set up the pins so she can knock them down. Not that I'm complaining, mind you. Well, maybe I am just a little bit."

The room was still aside from the radio, which was blasting so loud that it rattled the blood-dulled silver tools on the tray beside it. Syringes lay discarded on the floor, spilled chemicals splashed underfoot, and there was a small vial laying smashed on the ground but it had been emptied before it was broken. Jenova sample #45A was what the label had read before the puddle of C2 Bythanol Viranate it landed in had burned the letters away.

"Hey! You all right in there?" Hojo looked suddenly alarmed, sticking two fingers to the side of his patient's neck, looking for a pulse. Satisfied but frowning, he drew back. "Give me another fifteen minutes and then you can try to die as much as you want, all right? Damned impatient little wench. What I wouldn't give for a blasted heart monitor, I hate this archaic box of boards, there isn't a decent piece of equipment in the place. And if you die before I'm done, I'm going to be really really aggravated. So don't do it, all right?" Hojo poked her spleen accusingly, as though poking her in the shoulder. He got no response but another choked gurgle. "That's right, you'll behave. God dammit, it's five in the morning, I should be getting ready to head up to the reactor. Damn you, Lucrecia, of all the times for you to decide to haunt me, to get your precious revenge, it has to be now, on the eve of my first success in years. Jenova's waiting up there to see me and see the surrogate I made to replace Sephiroth and I may not even be able to get to her if I'm busy fighting off Valentine..." Hojo chuckled darkly to himself, flinging a spent needle to the floor. He was being a bit messier than usual, but he was in a hurry, no time to worry about how sterile any of this was. Sara was a short term specimen anyways, if she died after he was done with her, it didn't make a difference. "Stupid bastard," he mumbled, "Stupid stupid Turk. Why didn't he die down there? He has no business being alive, he doesn't belong in this world anymore. I made sure of that. He never deserved any of what he had. And you know what--?" Hojo looked around for a pair of scissors to cut off the end of a stitch, couldn't find any, and used his teeth instead, sniffing impatiently. "--you know what? He never deserved Lucrecia, any more than I did. He was always so damned high and mighty, never realizing he was always just the same as me. Just the same, my dear, you know that? You know how many people he killed simply because it was ordered of him? Probably more than I've killed in my rush for the top. Yet Lucrecia loved him for his innocence. Oh yes, she did, she raved of it while she lay dying. I learned too many things that night, when pain and death had stolen any reason she'd ever had away, and she just lay there letting it all spill past her lips... those lips that would be kissing me one minute, then whispering lies the next.

"Do you know what it's like to have to live with lies? To have her look at me with love but then know that the next minute I had my back turned she'd be slipping off with a Turk I could never compete with?" Hojo grit his teeth in fury, somewhat shocked that the hurt and anger were still there after so long. Sara had no comforting words for him. "Yes, well, that's all in the past, isn't it? Ah hell, but not really. Not when the ghost and demon of that fucking pair of traitorous lovers are prowling this Mansion tonight and after my blood as we speak. Or, as I speak rather, you're not saying much, are you? But, I know for a fact that you're verbal when you can be. "Four-eyes", you called me... hmph. Well, I like my glasses."

The radio at his back sputtered a bit, the faint signal it was picking up from Midgar crackling as clouds moved in the sky miles above. Distant distant thunder, mere murmurs from a far-away heaven, rattled through the walls. Hojo wiped sweat from his eyes, forgetting his messy hands and smearing blood all over his face. "Ah shit..." he muttered, then tried to wipe it on his shoulder, "Never fails. You know, Miss Hadley, he was always the same as me, and she never saw it. She thought I was obsessed with Jenova? Ha... her Turk was obsessed with her and dead to everything else. But she wanted him... for the challenge of bringing him to life, perhaps, I don't know. Maybe just because he had a pretty face... or she thought cold-hearted murderous bastards were romantic. Who the hell knows..? I could never figure it out. I could do complex trigonometry in my head but I could never figure that woman's heart out. Sephiroth was lucky he never got to know his mother, she would have driven him insane long before I did."

He could ask Vincent about her tonight, if he saw him. Go up to the man he'd altered before he had a chance to blow his head off, stand there, and demand to know why he hadn't been good enough for her and what Vincent had to offer that Hojo couldn't equal, or outmatch. And what would the Turk say? The same things he'd said thirty years ago, probably. The same humble, naive garbage he'd spat before Hojo had stuck him in the box. "He never knew," the scientist sighed, tired eyes intent on his operation, "Not even in the end, he still hadn't figured her out. Just as clueless as me. Ah, well. He's a monster now, and she's dead, so it doesn't matter anymore, eh?" Hojo felt suddenly lazy and bent beneath the operating table, pulling out a staple gun. To hell with stitches, they took too long. He was too glad he was finally done to bother with doing the end up right and the thought of manipulating a tiny needle around in the three hundred or so stitches it would require to sew up his newest project... blegh. The steady ka-chink of the staple gun bounced to his ears from the room's low ceiling. The radio at his back started spouting commercials and he flicked it off. Sara moaned something incomprehensible.

"You know, you're a terrible conversationalist, Miss Hadley," Hojo remarked, wiping his hands on his pants after he'd finished with the stapling, "But Jenova seems to like you, so you're hired." He chuckled to himself weakly, then leaned back against the edge of his desk and yawned. He stared ahead into the darkness sleepily. "Come and get me, Vincent."

~*~

By the time he and Chet reached the stairs, Vincent was walking on his own again, some of the confidence back in his stride. He looked upon the mansion with wide eyes full of wonder, seeing it again as though for the first time. The knowledge that nearly thirty years had taken its toll on the place made him curious to see what had changed. Yet nothing really had. It made sense, Zack had said it'd been abandoned after all, yet abandoned for all this time? After just being constructed at much trouble and expense to President Shinra? As strange as it seemed to be to him, it also seemed to be true. Everything was covered in dust, the varnish peeling from the furniture, mildew in the carpet and holes in the plaster, but everything was in its place, very nearly how he remembered it.

They reached the second floor over-look and Vincent paused, breath catching in his throat to see the place again, tinted blue by the light of the dying stars shining through the windows. It almost seemed as though the entire foyer were filled with fog, it all was smudged and indistinct to his eyes. The stairs snaked through it, down to the first level, crouching in the dark like a fat shark with a mouth full of prickling wooden teeth. Chet approached them slowly, sidestepping the dried puddle of blood on the carpet to their left. Vincent stared at the stain and crossed his arms. This was where he'd killed that hapless scientist who'd been with Dr. Waters, cutting his throat open and drinking his blood. Yet he couldn't remember doing it, just finally snapping back to consciousness and knowing it had been done.

After a moment, he was reminded of his claw and he looked towards it, slowly peeling the stiff red bandages away and letting them clump to the ground at his feet. The claw itself was damaged badly but the arm underneath, what mattered, was functioning a little better. He tried cleaning the dry blood from it with the hem of his shirt, letting the metal shine through. He twisted the limb about a little in the faint starlight, his altered eyes suddenly seeing through the bullet holes in the bronze. He froze and turned a whiter shade of pale. "Chet..." he whispered, "What do you see?" He shoved the metal arm in his face so that Chet nearly jumped out of his skin, afraid for a moment that he was about to be clawed. But then he calmed down and squinted his eyes at the thing. He ended up grabbing it in both hands and pressing his eye to the bullet holes in the top to see better.

"That's pretty fucked up," was his final verdict. He gingerly let it go.

"No kidding." Beneath the metal and through the gashes in the top, Chet could see that Vincent's true arm was a mass of twisted muscle and bone, horrid to look upon, even the little bits he could see through the bronze. It was like an arm without the skin, veins plainly visible as they wrapped around the purplish muscle, blue and red and pulsing with blood. Vincent's stomach rolled over and he thought he might be sick just knowing that a part of him looked like that.

"Ick, just like, put the bandages back on, man," Chet suggested, laying a hand on the banister, "And don't shove it in my face again or I'll have to be violently ill."

"I'm going to make him undo it," Vincent muttered, dropping the claw to his side, "Whatever-- whatever all of this is, he's going to fix it. I can't go on like this, it's like some unholy nightmare." Chet flinched when he brushed hurriedly by him, his shoulders trembling in anger or something else, then carefully descended the stairs, leaning heavily on the banister and ordering his legs to behave. Starlight poured in from the high, wide windows at their backs and Chet gave it a glance before jogging after Vincent.

"It's almost dawn!" he called, brushing his bangs away behind his ears, "I mean, don't you like, turn to dust when you get hit by sunlight?"

"You'd better hope not. You'd have a hard time facing Hojo by yourself."

"What makes you so sure he's down here?" Chet demanded, keeping close to his companion's elbow, his own head bobbing about like a bird's to take everything in. The foyer was little more than different coloured blobs in the greenish darkness. Dust was in the air and obscuring the space like a mist, the starlight filtering through the high windows doing little but lighting things enough to make them even eerier. Nothing was as Vincent remembered it, yet that was odd, since nothing was different. The years then, these mysterious thirty years that people kept insisting had passed. Everything was older that was all. Everything older but him.

"He and his wife's bedroom is on the first floor here, to the right of the front door. I would assume it still would be. And that he'd be inside."

"I guess... But ya really think he's just gonna be inside waitin' for ya? Not too bright."

"I don't know..."

Vincent remembered Hojo for a moment. Just a moment. He'd never thought much of him, but then Vincent had never thought too much of anyone who didn't immediately shove themselves unmistakably in his face. First impression... what had his first impression been?

A call into Shinra's office one night, which was of itself quite a rarity, an oddity, a privilege. At least, most Turks would have thought it a privilege, if you played your cards right with old man Shinra, it could mean a raise, a promotion, or a night in Honeybee Inn with a roomful of whores at the old man's expense. But to Vincent it had only meant hassle. It meant he actually had to wear a clean suit, iron his slacks, and take his shades off to look the President in his beady black eyes.

He'd known something was up the moment he hopped off the last step in the staircase. The music was gone and that was strange. Shinra never kept his office quiet, it was always blasting with a lot of fat Italian women singing about love and death, or thunderous symphonies, or piano sonatas, soft twinkling bits of song wafting among the potted plants and elaborate, ergo-dynamic chairs and desk. But that evening the office had been very, very quiet and Vincent's footsteps had echoed too loudly in his ears as he'd crossed the long way from the staircase to Shinra's desk, face taut with unease.

Four figures in the room other than himself, he noticed that right off but the lighting was bad and he really couldn't make the others out so well at first. President Shinra... that bulbous body of his cocooned behind his desk, uncomfortably fat and luxuriously puffing away on a thick, wet stogie. His eyes were on Vincent as he approached, as were the eyes of the seven foot tall, thickly assembled man at his side: Levy, the Turk leader when Vincent had first become a member of the organization. They didn't exactly get along well, he and his boss, yet Vincent had no reason to be uneasy around him. He nodded curtly and Levy nodded back, silently rolling his eyes.

The other two figures had their backs to him but Vincent didn't care enough to cock his head and get a glimpse of their faces in the light. He stood a bit away from the pair, across from Shinra's desk, and crossed his arms over his chest, looking as bored and unimpressed as he could. Levy shot him a glance but Vincent ignored it. He could see no reason in the world why he should care about pleasing the President or pretending that he was interested in whatever had caused him to be summoned to his office that night.

"Valentine, you're looking well," Shinra chuckled through thick blue cigar smoke and Vincent shrugged rudely. He was a Turk, not a god damned diplomat. Turks didn't need to have manners, just good aim.

"Valentine, straighten up," Levy snapped and his employee finally listened, heaving a sigh, arms still crossed but bright brown eyes firmly planted on his President's bloated pasty face. "You're second in command so you get to make a decision. Do you want to make it or do you want me to decide for you?"

"Let me hear what I'm to decide before I answer that," Vincent replied coolly. The two unnamed figures were watching him, he could barely make them out in his peripheral vision. But he didn't want them to have the satisfaction of knowing he was curious as to who they were, so he didn't turn his head. One of them made a little snort, Vincent wasn't sure if it was one of humor, disgust, or impatience.

Levy had paused and Vincent knew he was waiting for his employee's complete attention. Vincent begrudgingly gave it.

"Dr. Hojo here is representing Professor Gast in putting in a request for militaristic assistance with a venture he and the rest of the Science Department are about to attempt. Shinra is funding the Project but it was never agreed that we'd give up good men along with three billion gil." The Turk leader shot an accusing look to his President but Shinra only smiled smugly and shook his head.

"The financial concerns are none of your business, Levy," he said, "That gil is money well spent. You don't know what it's going towards, so you really can't make judgments."

"That's right," the man to Vincent's right snapped, "The money is not your concern, Mr. Levy, it's just as I told you before. Mr. President, sir, if that however is a concern of yours, Professor Gast has told me to tell you he'll gladly give up in gil the cost of these men he requests. He'll pay for them, if you'd rather he do so."

"Pay for them with my money..." Shinra said with half a laugh. He had a habit of falling into fits of silence, staring off at nothing while he puffed on a cigar. He did this now, staring right through Vincent, eyes distant with thought. Levy was glaring daggers, alternately aiming them at his President and then at the two scientists on the other side of the desk. Vincent finally turned his head slightly to see who these two were. The man closest to him and easiest to see was a thin and awkward looking young guy, younger than Vincent definitely but just as tall. There was something to his face that could almost be called handsome but it was as though he tried to hide it. He wore his hair loose and messy, long black strands snaking forward to cover his angular features, getting caught up in the corners of his wire-rimmed glasses. He wore a pale blue collared shirt and black slacks; common Shinra business attire, but Vincent knew he was a scientist even without a coat or badge, he smelled of the labs.

"So what's this decision I'm being allowed the privilege to make?" Vincent asked, tired of the awkward silence. Shinra flinched and blinked quickly, bringing himself out of his thoughts. He looked to Levy, a signal for him to answer.

"It would seem President Shinra is going to fulfill this request of Gast's," the Turk leader said with embittered viciousness. It was obvious he was less than pleased with this. He all but growled at the messy scientist before him, Hojo, that was his name, Vincent thought. "And I'm one of the men to be sent. Is that right, sir?"

Shinra nodded.

"And so do I take your place as leader until you come back?" Vincent asked casually. He was actually eager for the opportunity. Levy shrugged.

"You either stay here with the other five Turks or you accompany myself and James to Nibelheim. I'm leaving it up to you. I recommend you stay in Midgar however, Nibelheim is a back-water pit, I can't stand the thought of being cooped up there for a year, forced to--"

"Peace, Levy," the President soothed, raising a hand, and the Turk leader backed down. From the corner of his eye, Vincent saw Hojo smile in triumph. "So what'll it be, Valentine?"

The choice had seemed pretty obvious for a moment. Stay in Midgar, lead the Turks, prove to Shinra that he had what it took to be in charge. It was appealing but still, Vincent wasn't going to be rash, not about this. He looked up with crossed arms at Levy but his leader glanced away, too wrapped up in his own anger to help his employee out. The final choice seemed pretty obvious to him too.

Vincent sighed a bit, eyeing his shoes, his hair falling forward over his face. Then he looked up.

Even now thinking back on it, he couldn't be sure what it was that had made him turn his eyes from the ground, made him hunt out something he couldn't name but that he knew was there. But he had. He'd looked past the smug young scientist standing with his hands on his hips, looked past Shinra's circular, cage-like desk, past Levy's scowl, and his President's arrogance, and he'd seen that silent fourth person who'd been in the office all along, watching her companion's actions with soft and questioning eyes. Vincent knew her. He'd seen this quiet young woman in the hallways just as he'd seen Hojo before this evening. They were scientists, he'd run errands for them, disposed of dead specimens for them. He knew who they were, he probably even knew her name. Yes, he did. Lucrecia.

He'd seen her before the way he'd seen trees before. He'd known they existed outside of Midgar's squalor, he saw them in pictures, in gray and dying clumps in the patches of grass that passed as Midgar's excuses for parks. He knew there was something special about them, something that went beyond his powers of human perception yet being the busy, silent, distracted man that he was, he'd never bothered to look any harder to discover what that something was. They were rare, they were distant, but they were there.

Just like this woman. Lucrecia.

And suddenly, Vincent found himself really looking, the way he hadn't looked at anything or anyone in the longest time. She returned his attention with the most careful of smiles on her bright, bubble-gum pink lips and never once glanced away from his piercing brown eyes, though Vincent was very used to being able to stare people down. With Levy looking on and Shinra softly smiling, smiling as though he knew the biggest, fattest, most important secret a man had ever been told, Vincent watched that woman who wouldn't look away, and his lips parted in wonder.

Then Hojo stepped into his line of vision, three layers of frown painted over his features. He was going to say something but Vincent beat him to it.

"I'm going to Nibelheim."

~*~

Vincent wondered if Hojo had known right off, right from that first moment, that he'd lost Lucrecia to a Turk. He'd been so bitter in that office right after Vincent's decision, he'd insulted him flat out, tried to intimidate him just as he intimidated anyone in Shinra who stood in his way. And Lucrecia had watched it with a little smile, almost as though she was amused but there had been something else behind it too. Pleasure maybe, that this dark and handsome young Turk was going to take them to Nibelheim. He'd cursed himself when he'd seen the ring on her finger but then shrugged it off, not really realizing that she wouldn't be so easy to forget, never even guessing that in just a few months he wouldn't be able to live without her.

But Hojo... in his own way, Hojo had been just as marvelous to look upon as his wife. He was a rival, an enemy, and Vincent had always had a habit of developing a deep, begrudging respect for his enemies.

"It's too damned quiet!" Chet hissed in his ear suddenly and Vincent nearly smacked him. They were at the bottom of the staircase and he was breathing hard. He stuck a hand to his stomach to make sure his closing wound hadn't started bleeding again with all the exertion. "There's no way in hell that he doesn't know you're coming, he's not gonna be just sitting in his room twiddling his thumbs and waiting for you to come a-knocking! I'll bet this is a trap."

"I don't need your advice," Vincent replied coldly, his claw gliding along the banister as he set his left foot on the floor. Hojo's room was down here, and so was Hojo.

A giant chandelier swung and creaked and tossed about from thin wires above their heads, its candles dark, its once grand silver and crystal fixtures now blackened with grime and cobwebs. Vincent eyed it quickly, then turned his attention back to the foyer, checking the ammo in his gun. He only had two clips, twenty-four bullets total. He was going to have to make each one count. He stepped quietly out into the foyer, the tiles beneath his feet clacking coldly against his shoes. The side-galleries were dark, even to his eyes, but the main space glowed turquoise and blue, the tiles catching the light

and sparkling like crystal inlay, designs standing out with glorious colour. He crossed over them on muted feet, his dark and gore-stained clothes absorbing the starlight and shooting out an illumination all their own, a halo of light reflecting from his hair and making it seem more blue than black. His ruddy claw glowed a warm and subtle shade of gold, streaked with red blood and cool blue starlight.

He'd always had an eye for the beauty of the Mansion but he ignored it now. In the darkness it looked more like a graveyard. He headed quietly towards a small passageway hidden in the wall just to the immediate left of the front door, fighting an urge to say to hell with all of it and simply leave the place. But no. He instead slipped into an obscure hallway, moving like a shapeless shadow sliding along the wall. Chet followed, holding his breath and balling his fists up in his pockets.

Dust motes eddied in the dark air of this new place. Furry brown spiders crawled the floor, and Vincent was a little sad to see everything so reduced from its former grandeur. He'd been so impressed on his first day here. The power and money of Shinra Inc., something a Turk could be proud of and call his own. Now it was covered in dust and death and just the word Shinra put Vincent's nerves on edge.

That night in Shinra's office... what had he known? Why had he been smiling? Were Lucrecia and I, Hojo and Levy and Jimmy and all the scientists... were we all just pieces of a game to him? Players in a movie whom he thought were hilarious to watch? Probably. Probably. He thinks he's a God as he sits up in that office. And he laughs at his creations, helping only enough to fuel the chaos. Bastard.

Vincent took a deep breath and shoved his anger down, running a claw along the wall, over its peeling greenish-gray wallpaper, remembering that Lucrecia used to live in these rooms too. That made them a little more worthy in his eyes. Yet remembering that Hojo was the one who always got to watch her sleeping, who got to lay beside her yet didn't realize what a privilege that was... the old fury was there, a dull burning behind his eyes. He pushed it away as he always had.

The hallway glowed blue, boards creaking beneath his and Chet's feet. It was a short walk from the foyer to the back of it and only three doorways were there to break the monotony of the walls. The first proved nothing but an empty storage closet, door laying open and swinging a bit in the warm air blowing from a vent shoved in the ceiling. Vincent gave the space a once-over with this sparkling red eyes then moved on, Chet peeping his face around the doorway after he'd turned away, and shrugging.

"This place is so big," he whispered, "Why?"

"They had grand plans for the Mansion. It would seem nothing ever came of them."

The entrance to a small study lay on their right and Vincent quickly darted his eyes that way. No one was in the small dark room though, just old furniture and books, a rickety, long-dead ceiling fan. He crept silently forward, Chet so close behind he kept stepping on his heels, and then approached the last door in the short passageway, closed and quiet, looking for all the world as though it had never been opened. Yet Vincent could see the flakes of paint on the floor just beneath the doorknob; his eyes made out the gleam of fresh fingerprints on the wood and metal; his ears heard someone breathing as though asleep from inside. He bristled, teeth clenched, eyes narrowed into slits.

"Stay here," he growled and Chet was too intimidated to protest.

As Vincent moved his hand towards the door, her words rang in his head: Find Hojo. She'd told him just that. And so he believed with all his heart that that was the answer.

Are you in here? Are you in here waiting for me so you can finish what you started?

He wanted to scream the words out as his fingers brushed over the doorknob. A thousand times a day he'd wished he could come into this very room and slaughter Hojo, blow his brains out if only for Lucrecia's sake. Oh gods, the more he thought about it, the angrier he became, the tighter his hand closed around his gun. Same anger from before, the same dangerous rage that had started this nightmare.

The bedroom revealed itself to be musty smelling and practically pitch dark. Vincent held his breath and stepped inside, stretching his stealth to the limit while shoving away his anger and bringing caution into play. For all the world, he felt like a little boy sneaking into his father's bedroom. The space was maybe twenty feet deep, a lone window in the back spitting out only enough starlight to give the black shapes of the furniture bluish halos. Dust moved into the air with his every step and his ears amazed him as he made out the sounds of each piece sliding off of chairs and a dresser, a desk and an old, rotting chest. The movement of the dust motes sounded like thousands of whispering children and the hairs on Vincent's forearm and the back of his neck stood on end.

The bed was in back, tucked into the room's right corner just as he remembered it. He and Lucrecia had come in here a few times so he knew the place well. They'd come here when they both felt daring enough, when they'd felt it didn't matter what happened as long as they had each other. Maybe they'd been voicing silent dares to Hojo by doing it, he didn't know. But there'd been a thrill to lying in she and her husband's bed, just the two of them, Hojo in the basement with Gast and his monster.

"Hojo..."

He whispered the name, trying not to smile when something stirred in the bed. Oh, gods... finally. Here he was finally, someone he knew, someone who would have answers. And someone he could kill with a clear conscience. He was going to enjoy this.

A quick, sharp intake of breath from the person beneath those moth-eaten sheets. The soft sound was like thunder to his ears and his fingers tightened around the gun in his good hand, digging into the rubber grip. He took another step forward, something on the floor crunching beneath his shoe soles. "Hojo..." he said again, "Hojo, I just saw you it seems. Are you the same too?"

He stood in the darkness and stared ahead at the shapeless lump of the four-poster bed, three feet high and stacked with musty, foul-smelling sheets and blankets. Thirty years here too. It was everywhere but inside of him, where the anger and the indignation still blossomed fresh. He could hear Chet back behind in the hallway, hear his fingernails scratching nervously at the door frame as he tried to make out what was going on in this dark and deserted bedroom. Yet he seemed faraway now, he didn't matter. Just Hojo. Vincent took another step forward.

"I've taken a little tour of this new Mansion," he whispered, staring at the lump beneath the bed sheets, "Met a few of your new employees. Killed a few of your new employees... using... these things you've done to me. Isn't that a twist? Was it intentional? Self-punitive on your part?" He laughed darkly and held the claw up to the starlight, "Why? I can't even begin to imagine."

A bit further now, he was almost to the foot of the bed and the thing laying beneath the blankets shivered violently, he could hear it so well, skin scraping against cloth and then a pounding heartbeat. "Thanks. Thanks, Professor, thanks to you I can hear every little spasmodic beat of your terrified black heart. A mile a minute, isn't that how the saying goes? Scared? Should be. Thanks to you I can rip that heart right out of your chest and shove it in your mouth. But not yet. You know something that's going to buy you an extra thirty seconds of life."

He waited for the pleading, for the begging that always came before he took a life. As a Turk, he'd heard them all, been offered money, a cut of the profits whatever poor sonuvabitch he was about to kill was cheating out of Shinra. He wanted to hear Hojo beg and whimper and throw his weak little scientific self at his feet. But no, he was too scared, he thought with a smug smile. Of course.

"Where is she?" he asked, the smile dying on his lips. He raised his Quick Silver and aimed it where he thought Hojo's head should be, "What have you done with her? I remember it now, you put me in the coffin and I could hear her crying before the blackness came. Where is she?!"

No answer, just wheezing breaths and more trembling.

Footsteps at his back suddenly. Sneakers. Skater pants scuffling against the floor because they were too big and wouldn't stay up. Chet.

"Get the hell out of here," he growled without turning around. "Hojo, aren't you going to say something? Or will you just snivel under these bedclothes until I rip them off of you?" Gods, every second of silence made his finger more willing to pull the trigger... but he knew he had more important things to glean from Hojo than the beautiful, beautiful sight of a bullet between his eyes. He stalked forward, gun arm out stiff and straight as a baseball bat, his claw raised with each glistening curving finger extended outwards.

"Vincent!" Chet called and he could hear him taking another step forward. He was gonna kill that kid if he didn't start minding his own affairs! Vincent inched forward closer to the body in the bed, a familiar smell rising up to greet his nose. It was something he knew, but he couldn't quite place it. It certainly wasn't Hojo's cheap cologne. His claw went out, hovering over the sheets and the mass beneath them. His gun was raised and he was trembling though he didn't know why. It's anger, he told himself firmly, because I'm not scared of this prick.

Not scared, just so unspeakably furious that it's eating away at my heart!

"HOJO!!" he roared as his claw descended, "You ugly twisted son of a bitch! Sit up!!"

Chet had been kneeling, hand to the ground and picking up a flake of charred black skin, the same he'd seen outside the door and tried to warn Vincent about, when Dr. Bier shot up out of Hojo and Lucrecia's bed, both of his hands darting out and wrapping around Vincent's neck. His body was as burnt and blackened as when they'd left it in the hallway, covered in dark blood and stinking of sulfur and charred flesh. His arm was somehow restored, probably rejoined, but his head was little more than a ball of brains and skin. It looked as if he'd scooped the pieces of himself up from the floor and then dropped them back upon his neck. Which he pretty much had.

The creature had no mouth in his collapsed head and no tongue to form words so all he got out were moans and strangled shouts as he squeezed the air from Vincent's throat, knocking Quick Silver away and pushing them both back towards the bedroom door. Chet immediately panicked and tripped over his own two feet. He fell to his knees, only able to ogle the sight as Vincent stumbled past him, trying to push Bier off but failing miserably, pale lips turning blue as he gasped for air. Bier's shape was perfectly black in the darkness. He looked like the dryad of a gnarled and mangled tree blasted by lightening, sharing the fate of his home. Raging and spitting blood, he was stronger than he'd ever been before.

He forced the both of them from the bedroom and back into the hallway, slamming Vincent's head against the wall so hard, stars danced before his eyes.

After shaking them off, Vincent struggled to look upwards with his darkening vision, trying to find a face to glare at, yet his attacker didn't have one. Only half a head and an eyeball hanging out by the root. The eye still seemed to function. It rolled about and fixated its brown iris upon Vincent, slick with tears and blood.

"Gaah--! Is this--!? Is this what Jenova does to you?" Vincent sputtered, his claw wedged between his body and Bier's; he couldn't budge it. His other hand struggled in vain to pry the scientist's leathery fingers away from his neck. "It doesn't let you die-- it l-lets... no, makes you live as this thing! You've lost! You're d-dead--!"

The two of them smashed against the walls of the hallway in their struggles with each other and Chet followed their progress, looking for some opportunity to help without getting himself killed. He saw Quick Silver gleaming on the ground and gingerly picked it up, looking at it like it were a lizard with five heads and a pigtail. How would this help, he didn't know how to use a gun. Anymore than he knew how to act.

Gasping something between a snort and a shout, Bier shot his brittle knee up into Vincent's stomach, straight through the hole he'd made in their earlier fight. His victim spat blood and went limp for a moment, shuddering in agony before regaining himself and gouging his good hand into the stump of Bier's head. The mangled, maddened scientist roared like an animal and tightened his fingers' bony grip, white explosions of pain going off before Vincent's eyes when he did so. They rolled out of the hallway and back into the foyer, shattering the quiet blue peace of the space.

Vincent wanted to shout out but he couldn't find the breath. He knew he was suffocating. And what could he do about it? He couldn't see anything but the dripping head above him, the single brown eye that seemed to laugh as weakness made his head sink back, his struggles lessen, and his entire body inch closer to the cold tiled floor, Bier pushing down hard and eager to help him on his way to hell.

Snapping him back to his senses, Vincent suddenly felt a bit of cool steel in his feverish right hand. He heard Chet's sneakers screech against the floor as he ran back to safety. Without thinking, he raised the gun and fired, just once, into Bier's neck. It wasn't enough to hurt him, but it surprised him and the monster lost his grip. Spitting blood from his windpipe so that he could breathe again, Vincent dropped to the floor, quickly pushing himself up on one elbow. Bier was charging. He fired again and knocked him back, the scientist's light bulk giving him no anchoring power against a bullet's onslaught. One more round and Bier was right where Vincent wanted him.

"Get away, Chet!" he warned, before squinting an eye and letting a bullet fly through three of the four wires suspending the Mansion's rotting chandelier. There was a tremendous crack, like a car back-firing, and then the entire crystal and iron structure began to fall, wires tearing from the ceiling and sending dust and white shards of plaster raining to the tiles. Chet watched with wide eyes for a moment, then swore viciously to himself and darted back into the hallway, shooting a last look to Bier who was trying to find his eye, which had finally disconnected from the remnants of his head. It was rolling around near his left foot, a tiny, cold ball of shivering jelly. He picked it up and connected it with the optic nerve leading to his brain just in time to see the five hundred pounds of crystal and iron slam into him from three stories up.

He broke apart like scorched porcelain, sputtering once he tried to stand with the massive iron outcropping of chandelier embedded in his torso. The floor was cracked beneath him and he wallowed in the broken tiles, struggling to free himself as founts of blood gushed from his wounds. Vincent watched him soberly for a moment, rubbing his neck, then pushed himself to his feet and approached the Mansion's front door. Chet looked out at him from the hallway. He wondered if he was going to leave. Chet would have if he were him and didn't have a stupid lost sister to worry about. But no, Vincent leaned heavily against the door frame, clutched his stomach, then holstered his gun. There was a switch on the wall to his right and he flicked it on, eyeing Bier's thrashing black form.

Suddenly, the dim blue foyer was livid with light. Electricity coursed through the wires snaking from the ceiling down to the remains of the chandelier, crackling through the air with wet-sounding sparks and illuminating the farthest reaches of the room. Chet shot a hand to his eyes but he could still see what was happening to Bier. The sizzling white-hot electricity pumping up from the whirring turbines in the basement shot through his body without mercy and he screamed so loud it deafened the two men watching. His limbs convulsed with the power for a few seconds before bursting entirely into flames. He seemed little more than a shriveled marionette as he performed his dance of agony, silhouetted black and brittle against the bright orange fire, the rest of the foyer flickering with bizarre shadows. As though by sheer force of will alone, Bier mouthed two final words. "You.... win...."

Chet held his nose and ran from the hallway, approaching Vincent though his eyes stayed on the sight of the burning scientist. "Dude," he said solemnly, "That guy was on crack."

He didn't get a response. Vincent dropped to the ground, back to the wall and breathing hard. Chet was going to help him up but he was waved off with the same warning he'd gotten before.

"Right, right, the vampire thing. You okay?"

"Yeah, just give me a minute." He laid his head back against the soft plaster and watched Bier burn, trying to catch his breath. The fire reflected in his dazzling eyes so that they seemed more orange than red, more alive than anything else Chet had ever seen. They boiled about there in his head, twin fires themselves. The young guy plopped down a few feet away from him and watched the fire too. It roared as though living, blasting heat into their faces.

"I couldn't even see those tiny wires holding the chandelier up. And you hit 'em with a lil' bullet. Good job, Mr. Turk."

"No," Vincent shook his head and shut his eyes, "I'm not a Turk, not anymore. I won't work for something like Shinra any longer. Something that would create that thing burning right now, something that would have men like Hojo working for it. Or men like me. Never again, I won't be affiliated with them any longer." He ground his teeth together in fury, slamming a fist on the wall at his back. "Why goddammit?! Why wasn't he in there? Where's Hojo? I have to get a hold of him, kill him, or this'll never end. He has Lucrecia, I'm sure of it! Why else would she have run from me?" Vincent looked away, back into the darkness of the side galleries. He was starting to feel so helpless. "Maybe I did die, maybe I've gone to hell. Is that the scheme here? I'm to slosh my way through a mansion full of devils and that's my punishment for letting him hurt her? This is hell then." He said it in such an apathetic way, as though it were something he'd already known. He was just saying it aloud now, confirming the fact. "And Hojo's here mocking me every moment. He's the Satan here! Do you hear him?! Because I can! But do you?"

Vincent shot to his feet, claw darting out to keep him from falling. It clamped on Chet's shoulder, cold as ice and smelling strongly of blood. Chet could only shake his head in answer to the man's question. "No? No, of course not. That's because this is my hell. Not yours. My hell full of Shinra and science and blood. I've heard Hojo's voice since we came up from the basement yet I ignored it. It was too indistinct, too haunting, like a demon in my head. But I hear everything. I hear Nibelheim, mumblings of people in their sleep, the fear of the men in the room upstairs. I hear those two specimen from the Library walking about and whispering to each other. But mainly I hear Hojo. Somewhere here. He's the devil in this hell of mine..."

He collapsed backwards against the door, his good hand wrapped around his forehead as though to push out the sound of Hojo's voice. The heat from the fire pressed against his body, plastering him to the wall. "What is there to dispute it? You can't say anything to prove me wrong. I've condemned myself to hell... it all makes sense when I think of it like that, so much sense it's sickening. Heh, God outdid Himself with forging this for me. And to think, all that time, I figured He didn't care..."

"I don't think this is hell..." Chet protested meekly. Vincent looked at him as though he were the stupidest creature alive.

"Not for you," he said in a voice heavy with bitterness, "But for me, this existence becomes more and more like hell with each second I'm denied seeing her again. Each time that Hojo takes a breath, the flames of this hell burn hotter. I came out of a coffin... and into this. Oh Gods... sinners don't get Promised Lands... isn't that-- isn't that how the whole spiel goes?" He bowed his head and wallowed in silent misery for a few minutes, contemplating something he was just learning to accept. It was like acclimating himself to a knife through the heart. It burned like Bier's fire, worse than physical wounds. For those few minutes, Vincent was convinced he really was in hell. Chet watched his lowered black head and fought for something to say. But he didn't know this man well enough to be a comfort. And his reasons for still being with him at all were selfish ones. He just wanted his help was all. He hadn't cared about helping him in whatever mission of vengeance he was on before. Yet he couldn't say that now, seeing Vincent so agonized was uncomfortable, it ate at his conscience and made him wish he could knock whatever demons were haunting him away. Instead he sat and kept quiet, staring back and forth between him and the fire.

"Bier there, is he dead?" Vincent asked suddenly. He looked up, pale as death, features cold and harsh in the firelight. The pain was apparent in his eyes. Chet shrugged his shoulders. "Hojo was right," Vincent said at length.

"About what?"

"I was never a scientist," he answered, talking more to himself than the other man, "But I heard the things that went on. I would've had to have been deaf not to. I was here for almost a year and after a while they didn't care so much if the 'hired help' knew or not. They didn't think much of us Turks. We were the stooges, the brute force, lacking the intelligence between the three of us to figure out how to unscrew a light bulb." His voice was heavy with sarcasm, but still raw and flat from his outburst. "So why not let it out that they were going to use Jenova tissue to enhance human beings? Everyone knew. I never took it seriously though. Years before, they'd been trying to make plants for the slums that grew without sunlight. Before that, they wanted mako batteries for flashlights. Crackpots. A lot of idiots, everyone in the Science Department is. So now it was using alien cells to make a person stronger. Okay, fine. Let them have their fun, I'm getting paid to guard their precious secrets, their precious, worthless little lives. Whether they fail in their attempts or not is immaterial to me.

"Hojo... he was so vocal about Jenova. Lucrecia said it was because he loved her. I thought it was foolish for her to say so, to be jealous over something that wasn't even alive, some preserved broad in a tank of formaldehyde. But I watched Hojo when he didn't know I was watching. I listened. I heard how he spoke of this creature and after a while I decided my

Lucrecia was more perceptive than I'd given her credit for. Hojo was obsessed. I wouldn't call it love though. Obsession. Entirely different. He'd give everything he had for his precious specimen because I think... I think he wanted to prove himself worthy of it." Vincent shook his head and winced when he tried to sit up. He looked away from the fire and watched his feet. "Insane," he muttered, "Either he already was when he'd discovered it or it drove him to it. Because he wasn't always like he was here, Lucrecia told me so. I was so clueless as to what she'd ever seen in him, and I... I wanted her to tell me why she loved him. I didn't understand it, I think anyone in my position would have wanted to know the same. How could you ever love a man like Hojo?"

Vincent smiled weakly in remembrance. A night long ago that didn't seem like long ago. Thirty years was nothing to him. "She told me. She stayed up all night telling me how they'd met in school, how they'd fallen in love, how they'd both had dreams that at the time had seemed just on the other side of a hill somewhere. Then Shinra had started recruiting and lo and behold, there was that hill, they knew where they had to go. Then it was only a matter of working their ways up, of getting a foothold in scientific circles and making names for themselves. Hojo got a little more competitive, got a little more bitter as they were both constantly overlooked. Gast, she told me, it was always Gast that caught the President's eye and stole his admiration. His grants were approved, his Projects reviewed and accepted. After a while, working with him seemed the only way to get anywhere. And Hojo was becoming more and more obsessed with success. Lucrecia told me that was when things started to go wrong. That was when she began to realize she didn't know him as well as she thought. But she ignored it, for the longest time content to do her best to keep him safe from himself. There was love there, she insisted there was." Vincent wasn't bitter about the fact. He could accept it. He rubbed his fingers in his eyes and breathed a tired sigh. "But the love wasn't enough. Love's seldom enough. He wanted more than her and when the chance to work as one of Gast's assistants arose, he snapped it up. And then Jenova. Then Nibelheim. Then this blasted mansion. Lucrecia was always at his side and she loved him so much I could see it in her eyes when she looked at him. The pain in her face when he ignored her... I understand, to some extent, why she agreed to let him experiment on her. If she became a part of what he so loved, maybe she could receive a little of that new love. She didn't want to lose him and humoring him in his ambitions seemed the best way to her. She didn't know... she didn't know that by then... by then he only had eyes for his work. She was fodder, material for his studies. He didn't care. I don't think he cared."

Chet stayed quiet, sensing the turmoil in his friend. Yes, his friend. He was going to consider this guy a friend until something happened to prove otherwise. "This is some heavy stuff, huh?" he asked after a while, "I'm sorry I don't know about any of it."

"Be glad of that," Vincent sighed.

The stench of burning flesh was everywhere. Chet rose to his feet and ambled over to the blazing chandelier, hands in his pocket. He had thought he'd seen Bier still twitching in the midst of all this fire but he wasn't sure. He stared and stared, fascinated, as the bones melted and the skin curled up like paper, turning to ash in the drafts from the flames. "How...?" he whispered, not sure even what to ask. Just "How?" Then he turned around and scowled. "Ya know, you shoulda listened to me when I called your name before you went in that bedroom. I'm not entirely stupid, I saw signs that this happy sack of crap had crawled its way inside. You almost got yourself killed. Again."

Vincent was messing around with the reopened hole in his stomach, trying to shove the dark thoughts from his head. If he considered this all to be hell, it made sense, yes. But too much sense. He wouldn't accept it, his will was too strong to give up to the excuse of attributing this agony to a higher power. Someone on earth was to blame, Hojo namely. He ignored Chet's rebukes and prodded at his stomach, wincing, preferring to lose himself in that pain than the other, unnamed one. Chet sighed and kicked at the burning chandelier. The crystal was melting. It was just cheap glass actually. He put his sneaker out and let it drip on the end of it. "You said 'Hojo was right'..." he commented after a moment, "Right about what?"

"Jenova," Vincent answered immediately. He pushed himself up, sliding his back against the door frame. He took a stumbling step forward and Chet could see the streak of red he left behind on the wall behind him. "The little prick was right after all." He approached Chet and stood at his side, looking into the fire. "So I wonder..." he whispered, crossing his arms, and then said in a louder voice, "Bier! Can you hear me?"

Chet thought that idea was insane. The scientist was little more now than bones and burning skin, evil-smelling black smoke rising up from his organs as they burned, heart popping like a corn kernel in the flames. It was moving, yes, writhing, but that had to be from the force of the fire. It had to be. It was too terrible to think that it was something else. Not alive... "C'mon, man," Chet muttered, pulling at Vincent's sleeve, "You can't tell me that he still knows what's going on. He's on his way to crazy scientist heaven as we speak. Or crazy scientist hell."

Vincent raised his claw and gestured for quiet. He was listening hard, trying to hear past the crackling flames. And then it came, so loud that even Chet heard it. Wheezing, choking, agonized.... laughter. It poured out of Bier's remains just as foully as the smoke.

"Laughing..." Vincent whispered, smiling slightly in disbelief, "Laughing." He shook his head. "So Jenova holds your lifeline. I see. What about mine? And Lucrecia... the entire Project, that was the crux of it. You were the crux of it, your

cells... so do you control her too? Hojo put you in her. That must be the case. Unless of course, this is hell and there truly is no rhyme or reason to any of it. But I can't believe that."

Chet didn't know who he was talking to. Vincent spun around, frowning deeply, a single line across his forehead betraying his perplexion. "I can't kill him then," he muttered. Before... when he'd said he'd make Hojo change him back from this thing he'd made him into, he hadn't meant it, not really. That's why he'd been ready to kill him when he'd thought he was laying in that bed a few minutes ago. But if all of this Jenova business was true, he needed to be rid of it. He couldn't walk around as a host for that evil, letting the parasitic disease feed off of him. And he certainly couldn't let the same thing happen to Lucrecia. "That's it then," he muttered, "That's a goal."

"What is?"

But Vincent was already making his way towards the stairs again, gun in hand as a precaution. Chet rushed after him.

"You're doing it again! You're ignoring me!"

The two rushed up the winding staircase, leaving the fire and the smells behind.

Bier continued to burn.

And laugh.

~*~

"Zack! Zack, don't you hear that?!"

Cloud clamped his sweaty hand on his friend's shoulder, but Zack wouldn't turn around. He knew he had to get the both of them out of there as quickly as he could. They'd already made it out of the basement and past the sleeping quarters of the remaining scientists, none of whom were asleep, Zack had been able to hear them pacing about in the bedroom, saying their prayers and cursing their foul luck. Noises came from everywhere, all the time. Voices and... other things. Cloud could hear them better but Zack wasn't deaf. He'd heard the screams when they'd come. And ignored them. As he was going to do with whatever Cloud was hearing now.

"Unless it's footsteps coming our way--" he hissed, his back pressed close to the wall of the hallway the two of them crept down, "I don't want to hear about it, man."

Cloud kicked his friend in the shin and then shoved him so hard in the back his head clunked forward against the wall. "It is footsteps coming our way, ya asshole!" he whispered obnoxiously. Zack blinked stars away, turned around, and smashed his fist into Cloud's head, sick of being beat on like a teddy bear. The blow didn't phase Cloud, it only pissed him off so that he lunged and tackled his friend with an arm to the throat. They both tumbled through a door in the wall and into a darkened bedroom. Laying on the floor, Zack shut the door softly with his foot.

Tangled up and on the ground, they stayed in the darkness, perfectly still, Cloud on top of Zack and showing no signs of getting off. They both stared at the shut door and held their breaths, listening. Footsteps most definitely, after only a few seconds even Zack's less advanced hearing could make them out. Two pairs of steps actually, coming from the mansion's western hallways and doing so with determination, each stride like the echo of a gunshot. They approached quickly and then stopped, ten feet or so down from their doorway.

"Who d'you s'pose it is?" Cloud asked, whispering his words directly into Zack's ear. The other man shrugged, then gestured for quiet. He wasn't paid attention to of course. "That's weird. His shoes are metal."

"What?"

"Metal, I can hear 'em."

"And I can hear you."

Hinges creaking, the door swung quite suddenly open and there was Vincent, light from the hallway behind casting his features in shadow. His claw hung at his side, glinting dangerously and Zack quickly picked himself up from off the floor, ready to fight him off if need be. He hadn't expected to see him again. He didn't seem to want to fight though, he noticed, he just stood looking the both of them over, red eyes glowing slightly in the darkness, a less-than-impressed look on his face. He crossed his arms carefully and tried not to lean against the door frame. His stomach was still hurting like he couldn't believe.

"Come to turn us in?" Cloud demanded. Zack looked his way and noticed he was standing too, fists balled up and blue eyes snapping in fury, as he so often looked when he was getting ready to brawl. Vincent brushed him off.

"I don't care enough to bother," he answered with a shrug, "And my doing so would make little difference in the long run. The two of you are thundering through this Mansion like children. I heard you clearly from downstairs. Amateurs, you'll be caught in five minutes."

Cloud seethed. Vincent fancied he could see the steam rising up from his spiky blonde head. Zack stayed cool and silent, keeping himself in the shadows and surveying the situation with a first class Soldier's attention to detail. "We're doing our best," he said flatly. And then, with a little bitterness, "Thanks for the help."

Vincent smiled a bit and closed his eyes. A few thin strands of hair blew forward and licked over his features. "I knew you'd figure something out," he said casually, "When a man's left to fare for himself in this world, that's when he discovers just how much he's truly worth."

Zack shook his head. "A man's worth is measured by his friends."

They stared at each other for a moment, their two statements summing up their conflicting personalities. Zack looked away suddenly towards Cloud whose eyes were shooting daggers at Vincent. "What d'you want?" he growled at the man, temper taut as a bow-string.

"Do either of you know where Professor Hojo is? I've been through this pit from top to bottom. He isn't in the basement, the laboratories, his bedroom, anywhere. There's something... I keep hearing something coming from this floor, but..." He shook his head, the frustration apparent on his face.

"That was us then," Zack explained easily, "If we're as loud and amateurish as you say."

"No, no, I hear Hojo. I know it's him, I hear his voice, but he's far enough away, or isolated enough that I can't get a real reading. I don't understand it. I can hear... I know you won't believe me, but I can hear conversations going on in Nibelheim right now if I try. Yet I can't quite make Hojo out. Yet I know that he's in this mansion."

"Well, I don't know where--"

"I do." Cloud cut Zack off sharply and stepped forward, straight up into Vincent's face. The latter was half a foot taller but Cloud didn't care. He raised his right hand and poked him in between the eyes. "You're not very smart," he chuckled, "And you're calling us amateurs." Vincent growled an insult and shoved him hard in the chest, sending Cloud stumbling backwards a step. The young man caught himself and straightened, brushing mock dust from his clothes.

"Don't toy with me," Vincent warned in a deadly tone of voice. That blood-thirst was in his head again and he might not mind satisfying it with this cocky young punk. He rested his good hand on Quick Silver's grip, the gun tucked comfortably in the front of his pants, and stared at Cloud, a part of him wishing he'd give a reason to be killed.

"So when did he do it to you?" Cloud asked, ignoring the threat completely. When he didn't get an answer, he waved his fingers near his eyes. "Hojo, you idiot, when did he mess with you? Take away anything that made you human? I've been a favourite of his for years, anything I ever was is gone. But you..." Cloud laughed to himself, and suddenly there was something wise and old in his intensely blue eyes. "You're new at all of this. New at being a monster. You're god damned Frankenstein, aren't you? Abandoned the moment you were made. Why are you going after Hojo? Why isn't he going after you? You're a pet of his, aren't you? Doesn't he care anymore? He must not, man, and maybe you're pissed that that's the truth. So you're going after your maker to make him love you."

"You're so ignorant," Vincent growled, eyes narrowed into slits of red, "Go back to your cage before the rest of your brain rots away."

"No..." He shook his head, blonde bangs bobbing gently against his brow, "People would like to think I've lost it but it's there. I'm not crazy. I wish I was, because then I wouldn't care anymore. I'm not crazy, I see right through you, Mr. Turk. You're new to being a monster and you don't know how it works yet."

"What the hell are you tal--"

"Listen!" Cloud insisted and he approached him again. Before Vincent could stop him, he'd grabbed his face in both hands and cocked his head back, "Listen, you stubborn bastard. Yes, you hear Hojo. I hear him too. And yes, it's too soft, too distant to make out. Yet you know he's in this mansion, that much is obvious from the sound. So how could he be inside yet sound so far away?"

Vincent didn't give him another word of warning. Blinded by fury, he grabbed Cloud's right arm roughly, then clamped his mouth over the bright blue veins pulsing in his wrist. His fangs were only through the thin flesh for a moment. He got two full swallows before Zack pulled them apart, screaming, "Get away!" Vincent loosened his grip and flung Cloud to the ground. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve, then drew his gun. Cloud laughed quietly to himself and kept right on talking as though nothing had happened, his wrist bleeding freely.

"I'm trying to help you, ya stupid fuck. Now listen! How could he be close yet far? What makes a sound seem far away at all? Distance, space, a barrier. A barrier, genius. A block. Wherever he is is blocked against sound. Insulated Almost three feet of it from what I can make out. It's coming from the northeast--"

"The sealed rooms," Vincent mumbled.

"Riiiiiight. You're not totally stupid, are you?"

Before the blonde-headed young man could blink, a bullet zipped from Vincent's raised gun and thudded into the floor just an inch past his left ear. Cloud froze in his sprawled position on the ground, looking up as Zack tried to find his voice.

"And what do you hear now?" Vincent asked him coldly.

"What?" Cloud shook his head, his ears buzzing from the noise of the shot.

"Exactly. Now bind your wrist with something. Or let me finish you off. A shame to let all that blood go to waste."

He turned quickly around, holstering his gun in one fluid movement, then leaned inside the doorway, looking out into the hall. He didn't want them to see him panting. He heard Chet scuffling around in the hallway outside, eager to get moving again, but Vincent needed a moment to think first. A room barricaded by three foot walls... he hadn't come across anything like that. He'd seen the Mansion's blueprints, a copy had been issued to each Turk on the assignment and so he knew this place all too well. There wasn't any room like that. Hojo must have built it himself.

"Do you know where this mysterious place might be?" he asked the two men without turning around. He hated to ask them at all, he specifically disliked the both of them, but he'd swallow his pride and his anger for Lucrecia's sake. He'd swallow more blood too, if that was what it took. He wasn't going to be squeamish about it anymore. He'd reached his breaking point.

"Can't be too hard to find," Zack answered a little dazedly. He still hadn't recovered from the sight of Cloud being chewed on by a red-eyed vampire. "You know it's on this floor... I dunno, man. Hey, I hate to give you the brush-off but Cloud and I need to get moving again. Dawn's almost here and we'll be easier to track in the daylight. Gotta get outta this town, into the mountains maybe. If we lose ourselves in Mt. Nibel before sunrise, we might have a chance. But then Rocket Town could be better... I dunno. I'll figure it out."

Vincent turned just a fraction and shrugged. Then, with a little sigh, he stepped out of the doorway and into the hall, giving the two men room to leave. Cloud stumbled past him and tossed out a glare. He held his injured wrist close, his fingers pressed to the gashes. Vincent tried not to jump on him, the sight of blood was maddening. His attitude didn't help. "You smell like barbecue," Cloud remarked with a sniff.

Zack followed close on his heels and they both gave Chet a suspicious glance when the actor looked their way. He'd been checking out the doors nearby, calling out Sara's name again. No luck. With a little grimace, he saw Cloud's wrist and Vincent's red lips. "I can't take you anywhere," he said to the man with the claw, "I apologize for him, guys."

"Watch yourself around this Turk," Cloud warned, "The prick'll rip your lungs out for a gil mark."

Unable to think of a better way to defend Vincent, Chet stuck out his tongue. Cloud scoffed in disgust and continued walking, the soft soles of his worn boots utterly quiet against the floor. Zack kept at his side, not looking back as they made their way towards the staircase that would take them to the first level and the way out of four years of imprisonment. He was hopeful that they were going to make it. This seemed a night of miracles, if nothing else. He should have known it would be like this when he'd learned they were going back to the Shinra Mansion; this was where it had all begun after all, why shouldn't it be the place where it all ended? He had a plan of action in mind, ideas of where they'd hide and what they'd do to stay alive. It was all a matter of getting back to Midgar somehow. That was dangerous, it being so close to Shinra, yet he had friends in Midgar that owed him favors, and a girl there that'd do anything for him. Yeah, Soldier boy Zack was coming home to claim what was his again. And he wouldn't have stupid nightmares anymore while laying on the floors of cold and tiny cells.

Vincent watched their exit for a moment, then turned to Chet and gestured for him to follow. Time was running short for them too.

"So d'we know where we're goin' now?" Chet asked, tagging along close to Vincent's left elbow. He got no response. Only a sigh and a little shake of the head. Looked like it was back to searching, but at least their choices had been considerably narrowed. "Who were those guys? Were they who you were talking to back in the basement? Before the scientists came and all hell broke loose? They were Soldiers, weren't they? They looked like someone had left a flashlight on in their brains and it was coming out their eyes. Freaks. Shinra freaks me out, let me tell you. I never gave them much thought before tonight, but after meeting you and going through this mansion, I have to say I'm starting to share your frame of mind. Not sure if I wanna keep working for them after knowing the kinda stuff they have going on on the side."

"You work for them?"

"Yeah, sorta. It's hardly work though. I more or less get paid to occupy space. They wanted to re-people Nibelheim out there after it was rebuilt, so I get a check every two weeks just for living here. Pretty sweet deal."

Vincent shook his head, uneasy. "I don't get it."

"I don't either. Something happened a few years back and the town got decimated. I think maybe there was a fire with the reactor? I dunno, Shinra's pretty hush-hush about it. It was right about the same time that General--"

Chet's next words were drowned out by the ear-shattering blast of a shotgun. Both men whirled about and looked behind them, towards the direction of the sound. Someone was yelling from down the hall. It sounded like Zack.

Vincent squinted his eyes to see through the blackness but it was so dark it was almost tangible. He thought he could see flashes of light off metal but it was from so far down, almost to the stairs. Chet was about to rush forward in uncharacteristic bravery, but Vincent's hand held him back. The guy looked up into his face but his attention was elsewhere, his hearing extended, his concentration peaked. After a few seconds he said, "Get behind me."

He didn't have to tell Chet twice. The actor stepped quickly backwards, eyes still staring straight ahead. There was nothing to see but the dark hallway, glowing slightly greenish with dying starlight and then the very very faint signs of the rising sun wafting in from a high, wide window in the wall. Vincent stared unwavering into the blackness and frowned as

his features paled. Zack's shouting was audible now, he was shouting indistinct demands at someone or other. Without warning there began the heavy treads of someone tall and muscled and wearing tennis shoes, dragging something. A few seconds later, Chet and Vincent saw what was going on.

"If it isn't my favourite monster," Dr. Waters greeted, stepping forward from the gloom, shedding the darkness from his shoulders like a cloak. He looked ragged and tired but his steps were sure. Cloud was hanging from his left arm, unconscious and bleeding from his shoulder and forehead. Waters held a double-barreled shotgun in his other hand. He tapped the end of it against his knee as he walked. "You're not affiliated with these lab rats, are you?" he asked with a smirk, "They're a little low-class for you. You're a monster of horrific proportions. Not a simple mako-injected psychopath." Waters choked up his hold on Cloud, whose blonde head whipped about freely, features contorted in pain. Zack stepped forward then, his hands clenched into little balls of bone, knuckles white. His teeth ground together and made an audible sound of fury and helplessness. He couldn't do anything to the scientist. Not if he had Cloud.

"Get in front of me," Dr. Waters barked gruffly. Zack complied, shooting a look to Vincent who kept all emotion, whether it was surprise, anger, or concern, clear from his face.

"I didn't hear him," Zack said sadly, looking for sympathy, for help, anything he could get, "Cloud said he heard something but I ignored him. He's always hearing things, always! And I ignored him! And then this fucker shoots at us! Waters, let him go!"

"I could kill this man right now," Vincent offered casually, "But your friend would probably wind up dead too. How well d'you like him?"

"No! No, please don't!"

Vincent shrugged. "Don't say I didn't offer."

"Come on, Dr. Waters, let Cloud go, he's hurt! Please!"

"You're not in any position to be giving me orders," Waters growled, raising the gun and putting it in line with Vincent's stoic face. He held Cloud so that with one proper jerk of his thickly muscled, quarterback's arm, he'd snap the young man's neck. He made sure that Zack saw this. And then he turned his attention to Vincent. "What are your aims here tonight?" he asked, trying to stay calm and forget the pain that this monster had caused him.

Vincent didn't know the answer to that question. He thought quietly for a moment. "I want Lucrecia," he said simply, "And I want to kill Professor Hojo because he's wronged me."

"You're delusional and fucked in the head with that first one," Waters snapped, "But I highly approve of the second. Who's that punk behind you? You're trespassing on Shinra property, get the hell out of here."

Chet crossed his arms and sneered. He didn't come out from behind Vincent though.

"No," he said, "You guys stole my sister and I'm here to take her back. Tell me where Sara is and we'll leave. Until then, fuck off, ya no-necked jock."

"Shinra has made many casualties in its existence," Waters muttered, his forefinger stroking the shotgun's trigger, "And hiding them is one of the company's specialties. We go through at least five specimen a week in the labs back in Midgar. Punk, I'll kill you where you stand. I'm going to have to, you've seen too much."

Chet paled but he wouldn't look away from Waters' gaze.

"If you so much as touch him," Vincent threatened coldly, "I'll pull your liver out through your mouth."

Dr. Waters sniggered messily, tightening his arm around Cloud's neck. Zack kept his eyes on his friend, the fear and anxiety bright and obvious in his blue eyes. All of their plans... so easily ruined. He could almost cry. "So you're friends then?" the scientist laughed, "Ah, how cute. How old are you, punk?"

"Nineteen. My sister'll be twenty-two next week, she's supposed to--"

"Shut up," both Vincent and Waters commanded at the same time.

"Geez..."

"Well, the two of you make a cute couple," the scientist mocked. But then the smile left his face, flittering away like a raven in the night. What replaced it was quite cruel. "I should blow you to hell right here," he hissed, "You've killed my friends and I saw what's left of Bier downstairs. You are inhuman. You are... there aren't words to describe the evil in your heart. A monster, but that's such a tame word. You're like things that I've dreamt of..."

"You call me evil?" Vincent asked quietly, "After relating how you and Shinra kill countless to achieve your goals? I know that's all true, I was a part of it. Those men I killed... they were no better than you or I. As for Bier, you didn't know what he really was. More a monster than whatever this thing is I've become. I know that I'm evil. So are you. We're all devils and bastards in this mansion, no man better than another, and only one man worst of all."

"Hojo, right? Yes, I agree with you there. Which is why I want you to turn around and start walking."

"What?"

Waters took a step forward, Zack following his every movement. He was waiting for his chance to strike out. "Don't do what he says, Valentine," he advised, "He has something twisted in mind, I know it. This is Dr. Waters, asshole of assholes, I've known him for years."

"Shut up, Zack," the scientist snapped impatiently, jerking Cloud around roughly, "You'll be behind bars again shortly enough and you can get some rest. All this excitement is making you less coherent than usual." Zack muttered curses but said nothing more. "And don't look to this monster for help, he won't give it to you. He's good for one thing: killing. That was what Hojo must have had in mind when he made it. So why don't we give Hojo a lesson in your skills? Start walking, monster. Or I blow your little boyfriend into a bloody puddle."

Vincent's ruby red eyes darted from man to man, analyzing each player in the little drama, collecting information to form a plan of attack. Unfortunately, the odds were too against him and Chet's presence was a hindrance. He couldn't let him get hurt now, he'd saved his life too many times. In Wutai, if a man saved your life once, you were indebted to him until you could save his in turn. While Vincent wouldn't go to that extreme, he surely felt responsible for Chet. So he did the one thing he could. He turned around and started walking.

Feeling guilty and stupid, Chet stayed close to his side, shooting looks behind them at Waters who followed closely, just behind Zack. The four of them moved quickly down the dark hallway, Cloud's feet loudly scraping against the ground as he was dragged along.

"You left me in that basement to suffocate," Waters said accusingly as they made their way, "First you, then Zack and Cloud here. You have no regard for authority, for life, the lot of you. It's going to get you killed one day. One day very, very soon."

"Where are we going?" Zack demanded, then winced when he got shoved in the back with the shotgun's muzzle.

"Right where your vampire friend wants to go," Waters answered, "Right to the King Monster of the Mansion. Unless this supposed Turk turns to ash before we can get there. Do you follow the normal vampire rules? Will sunlight wipe you out? What about garlic? I had ravioli for dinner, you should be reeling, eh?"

"Don't be a fool," Vincent snapped impatiently. His heart was racing in his chest. He could hear Hojo clearer and clearer with each step they took. Waters pushed them down corridor after corridor, making twists and turns in the hallway, leading them through doors and passages and they steadily were descending all the while, the air growing colder with every step. The Mansion unfolded before them like a hornet's nest; full of hidden rooms and catacombs, cells and closets and galleries. Echoes of memories sounded off in Vincent's mind. He vaguely knew where they were headed, yet he'd never explored the mansion this thoroughly, he knew only of these places from the blueprints he'd studied before leaving Midgar. It was bigger than it had seemed on paper, like a whole other monstrous world. Bats fluttered their leathery wings in these deep cave-like rooms, settling down on the rafters and preparing for sleep, knowing the day was coming. Vincent was tired too and this amused him. Just like a bat. Vampire bat.

"So what are you going to do, Dr. Waters?" Zack asked. His arms were crossed, his head bowed. He couldn't accept that they'd lost, he wouldn't accept it until he was locked in a cage again and even then he was sure he'd scream his head off to protest the unfairness. A taste of freedom, then the cup was knocked away again. "What'll you do? Hojo will have your head when he sees you've hurt Cloud. And you shot Dr. Miller, don't forget about that. Your days are more numbered than mine."

Zack turned his head a bit and thought he saw anxiety in Waters' features, though he couldn't be sure. He didn't get an answer to his accusations. Chet looked too and then began to wonder how much a threat this guy was. He looked scared almost. If not for that gun, he knew his pal Vincent would probably be able to take him out no sweat. A shame they were being pushed around by such an unworthy creep.

After another ten minutes of walking and arguing with their captor, the group quite suddenly came to a set of ancient and hidden, steep wooden stairs. Waters gestured for Chet to start climbing and Vincent to follow. He, Cloud, and Zack ascended after them, a rag tag line of strange characters. The high stairwell was windowless, yet electric lights buzzed from the walls, emitting a harsh yellow illumination that made everything look dirty.

"I see..." Vincent said after a moment.

"What d'you see?" Waters asked derisively.

"I knew he was on the second floor, I could hear it. These are hidden stairs right? Accessible only by this roundabout underground passage? These weren't in the blueprints. I assume only Hojo knew of them..."

"I don't know what you're talking about..."

"Lucrecia, when she couldn't find him, this must have been why. He'd go off sometimes for hours, for two days even he disappeared once. She was sick with worry. But he was secreted away here, buried in his work. He only ever thought of himself."

Waters shook his head. "All I know is that this is where he said his office was if anyone needed him. It's no secret."

"Thirty years, remember?" Chet whispered in Vincent's ear.

"Shut up and keep climbing!" Waters barked and since Zack was closest, he was the one who got prodded with the shotgun. Cloud's boots clunked against the steps, loud and wooden and putting everyone's nerves on edge.

The hallway they found at the top of the stairs seemed like something from a horror movie. The boards of the place were blackened with mildew, dark grime dripping down the walls as though they were bleeding the stuff. Thirty years

worth of rain had darkened the ceiling to a putrid brown, splotted with mold wherever it wasn't crumbling down and lying in clumps on the ground. Chet was in the lead so he stepped into the hall first, his sneakers crunching against the bodies of roaches and rats picked clean by ants, tiny brittle bones shattering beneath his feet. Cobwebs hung from the rafters, fogging the air, save for a little path cleared from the stairs to a door far off to his right. There was an entire human skeleton dressed in a Shinra Soldier uniform pushed into one far corner. Exposed pipes dripped dirty water into the moldy carpet. Termites were chewing at the wooden walls and remains of the furniture. They were strange looking termites though, five times as big as normal ones, infused with the mako that Chet could see was leaking out of a clear crystal pipe running along the floor. They dripped with slime, their translucent white bodies glistening in the light from the hall's lone electric lamp. They looked up when he entered their space and watched him with their beady little black bug eyes. He stared at them for a moment, not breathing at all, then immediately turned around and ran back into the stairwell.

"Man! Screw you, Dr. Waters, you can shoot me if you wanna, but there ain't no way in hell I'm going in there!" He tried to force his way back downstairs but wound up knocking into Vincent, who grabbed the wall to keep from falling. With an impatient little growl, he shoved Chet into the hall again then stepped out after him. He looked around and had to agree that this place was horrific. He kicked a few of the mutated termites from the floor around them. They squished against his metal-shod shoes.

Zack walked forward from the stairs just after him and gulped when he saw the skeleton of the Shinra Soldier laying in pieces on the floor. "So that's what happened to the guard who fell from the bridge..." he whispered, "Hojo got him too. Poor guy."

"Don't feel too bad," Vincent said flatly, "He got out easy. You and your friend are the ones who suffer."

"I guess..."

Waters thundered into the hallway then, dragging Cloud like a doll. He shattered the morbid tranquility of the ghostly room with his overbearing presence. "Did I tell you girls you could quit marching? Walk! To the end of the hall!"

Vincent poked Chet in the shoulder and after much muttering and cursing, the young actor started walking, taking tiny, squishy footsteps. "Bugbugsbugsbugsbugsbugsicksyickyickyickyickybugsbugsbugsbugs.... Vincent, just kill me, I can't do this! Oh my God!! Did you see the size of that spider?!"

Vincent didn't really like crawly things much either but for some reason they weren't bothering him tonight. Maybe it was waking up in that crypt full of rats and roaches that did it. He speared the spider Chet was talking about on his claw, then flung the foot long creature away, its legs curled up close to its body.

"It's more scared of you than you of it," he said with a shrug.

"Wanna frigging bet?!"

Shuddering, Chet pushed his way through the stray cobwebs lining their path, though most had been swept aside by whomever had passed this way before them. Things he didn't want to think about scurried out from under his sneakers. A termite half as long as his arm watched from the shadows, chewing almost thoughtfully on a piece of the wall.

"Professor Hojo's such a slob," Waters muttered as they went, "He leaves mako out like a child keeps his toys scattered on the bedroom floor. Doesn't he realize how dangerous these creatures are?"

"He realizes it," Zack said darkly, "And I'm sure he thinks it's hilarious."

Cloud suddenly began to stir, mumbling incomprehensible things, weak from loss of blood. Between his wrist and his shoulder, he was in bad shape. Waters tightened his grip and Zack flinched to hear his friend cry out before slipping back into unconsciousness. He was going to get this scientist back, he thought viciously, he was going to beat his face into a bloody pulp. "You're such a damned bully," he snarled, not condescending to turn around, "You always have been. I should have killed you back in the Library but no, I had to be the nice guy, the good guy, the fair guy. I left you to fate and as usual, fate kicked me in the ribs. One day, Dr. Waters, I'm going to give you what you deserve."

"Blah blah."

In the lead and keeping one ear on the conversation at his back, Chet jumped gingerly over a puddle of sludge, landing on a bit of red worn carpet. He swung his arms out and almost fell into a pile of decomposing rat bodies, but Vincent caught his shoulder and straightened him. Chet thanked him profusely. Then he turned and tramped the few remaining steps towards the last door in the hallway. It was a simple enough thing, a slab of unfinished wood with a tarnished brass knob and lock and like everything else in this ancient, decrepit, tomb-like space, it was streaked with mildew and black mold. The termites hadn't touched it though. Probably because, as Chet got closer to it, he smelled large amounts of bug spray upon it. Okay, that made sense. This Hojo guy wasn't totally dumb. He was totally twisted however, as Chet decided when he saw the streaks of fresh blood all over the doorknob. There was a single red hand print too, right in the middle of the slab of wood.

"This is just insanely gross..." he muttered in protest, standing before the door with crossed arms.

"Knock," Waters commanded.

"Hey no! Er, I don't know this guy, why doesn't Vincent knock? They're old pals, right?"

Dr. Waters raised his gun out level to his eye, fixing Chet's head in his sights.

"No," Vincent growled, whipping about and staring the bullying scientist down, "This is my business. Move aside, Chet." The Doctor thought this was funny. He guffawed loudly, shoulders shaking with laughter. His mental state was a little worse for wear thanks to what he'd gone through that night. Vincent shut him from his sight, sick of these devilish scientists. For too long he'd had to deal with them. As a Turk, he could shove it away, put his job first, tell himself it was just monkey work he was doing in order to earn that check every week. But now he saw how perverse they were; monsters with degrees was all. Intelligent demons who killed without compassion or distinction. He wanted himself and those he cared for out from under Shinra's shadow, just as he had before he'd gone into the basement with his glorious indignant rage.

Yet his rebellions always failed. He'd wound up stuck in a coffin last time, changed so that he hardly recognized himself. He had to find the courage to tell himself it wouldn't be like that this time. He'd become a monster, been turned into a monster by a monster so that now if nothing else, he and Hojo would face on common ground. He couldn't help but wonder if Lucrecia would love him anymore, would be able to see past this horrific prison that her husband had bound him in. If he was able to save her, truly save her this time from whatever evil Hojo had concocted, surely she'd see he was the same man he'd always been. The Turk who'd sacrifice his life to give her what she wanted. Just Vincent. Vincent who put her happiness above anything else. His heart hammered in his chest as he thought these things, a sheen of sweat stood out on his brow. Without waiting for a word from Waters, he put his good hand up to the doorknob and grabbed a hold of the slippery metal, ignoring the cold and congealing blood on its surface. Chet was just at his back, holding his breath. Zack and Waters' eyes were upon him.

The door opened without protest, sliding along on well-oiled hinges. The room beyond was a little dimmer than the hallway they stood in and it took their eyes a few seconds to adjust. Vincent entered almost immediately, trembling imperceptively and trying with all his strength to stifle his fear. His hand went to his gun and he remembered he had exactly twenty bullets left. They all would hit their mark, he'd be sure of it. He'd leave nothing of Hojo but a bloody mess, a body he'd let stay in this precious Mansion of his to rot to bones, just like that dead Soldier outside.

His footsteps echoed loudly as he stepped forward into the room. He distractedly heard Chet's worn sneakers follow, then Waters pushed ahead of Zack and shoved his way inside. The scientist was in a cold sweat, Cloud's blood all over the front of his shirt and snaking coldly down his arm. He pressed his back to the wall and looked everywhere, eyes wide open and darting in fear. Yet he immediately pushed it away, remembering how much he truly hated Professor Hojo. He wouldn't let the man see him afraid.

Compared to the hallway outside, this room wasn't at all as Vincent had expected it to be.

There were no insects, no terrible signs of decay. The ceiling had been swept clear of cobwebs and the air had a disinfectant-like odor to it, minty and medicinal. It was all rather clean and recently so. Strangely enough there were no sprawling complexes of machinery, no twittering robots, or rapidly blinking lights as Vincent had expected to see in a workroom of Hojo's. No scattered specimen or pools of blood either. The control panels were missing, the wires were hidden, the walls were bare and clean and bright. Even the signature operating tables, the only real scientific equipment in the place, were sparkling clean and glinting in the yellow light of a lone lamp, an aging fixture mounted in the center of the ceiling. It gave them all dark and stunted shadows. A few book-littered shelves were stuck against the walls, ancient, dust-covered things, and then there was a closet in the back, chained shut with huge, almost comical iron bindings, and a few padlocks. Chet was eyeing it intensely, his lips half-parted with a question he couldn't quite get out. Without another word, Vincent left him behind, taking a few more steps into the warmly-lit, pleasant little room. His red eyes burned with his desires and he scanned the place with them, claw clacking beside his hip, Quick Silver twirling in his right hand. The gun glinted gold and silver, the play of light from its surface a beautiful distraction. Hojo's bright brown eyes were trained upon it from behind his specs. Without warning, Vincent turned his head slowly about, towards the wall to the left of the entrance way, a bit behind him. He was suddenly face to face with the Professor, seated nonchalantly at his desk. Vincent found he couldn't breathe.

They just stared at each other for a moment, Hojo seated with his legs propped up, his long and elegant forefingers steepled together and flexing in and out. His glasses caught the light and you couldn't see his eyes. Just the round white twin pools of his specs. His hair was a mess, he hadn't combed it in days, just pulled it all back into a ponytail slung carelessly over his shoulder. He let the shadows of the room fall over him. But Vincent saw him fine.

"Dr. Waters," Hojo said suddenly, flicking his eyes towards the larger man, "My thanks. Now get out."

This took the scientist by surprise and he nearly dropped Cloud. But he got a hold of himself and readjusted his grips on both the unconscious Shinra guard and his weighty shotgun. "Th-this is the monster you were told about, "he sputtered, "The thing that broke out from down below, killed the intern, killed three of our men. Dr. Bier, Dr. Miller..."

"Bier?" Hojo asked, cocking his head up. He looked a little surprised. But then he shrugged and sighed, and sunk his head down between his shoulders again. "I'm impressed, Valentine."

"And I caught these two assholes on their way out the door. I don't know how they escaped but if not for me years of work would have been lost. It would have been Nibelheim all over again, only you, Professor Hojo, would be the one to

blame. This monster is yours, he's most likely the reason they got out. I demand compensation for the perils I've been put in tonight because of it. I demand that--"

"You're boring me, Doctor," Hojo sighed, unsteeping his fingers and crossing his arms. Vincent narrowed his eyes, unable to think straight. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. He blinked and blinked but he still couldn't believe nor shake off the feeling that this was all a dream. "Take Cloud and Zack back to the labs. Wake Dr. Ghrerd, he's an MD, have him look Cloud over. We'll discuss your mishandling of the specimen in the morning on the way to the reactor--"

"The mako reactor?!"

"None other. Now I suggest you head back to your rooms. You only have an hour before we meet at the front gates and begin the journey. Today's important. You shouldn't have spent all night gallivanting around the Mansion, you'll be exhausted and useless now. Well, more useless than usual."

Dr. Waters shook his head in disbelief, Zack and Chet watching closely as he seemingly broke down before them. "You aren't serious."

"I am always serious."

"But-- but you'd expect to continue with the Project as scheduled after this night of murders? We have to call Midgar, report the crimes. You, Professor, have things to answer for. Something has to be done about this vampire you've made. You can't brush this under the rug!!"

"It's no longer your concern," Hojo muttered darkly, "None of it ever was. Now get out of here and take Cloud and Zack away. I want you all out of my sight. You Zack... I'll have to teach you another lesson about running away. The lessons never seem to stick in your spiky black head. Maybe they gave you too much mako as a Soldier recruit and it's dulled your intellect. Who knows."

Zack was going to snap something back, something quick and clever and cutting to prove just how smart he was, but suddenly he didn't care. He'd lost. He'd lost and Cloud was hurt and they were back at the beginning, only tomorrow... the worst was yet to come. Four years and he knew that the worst had yet to come. He bowed his head and wrapped his cold hand 'round his eyes, trying to be strong. But he didn't know who in the hell he was being strong for anymore nor why it even mattered. Chet watched him and frowned, rubbing nervously at his nose.

"I'm calling the President first thing in the morning," Waters threatened brashly, "Your days are finished! Through! Take us to the reactor, that's just fine. It'll be your last day of procedures in the Shinra Science Department. You'll never give another order, I'll see to it!"

"Get out," Hojo said flatly. He didn't look angry, only disgusted. Waters stared at him for a moment, then flung Cloud over his shoulder and grabbed Zack roughly by the hair, throwing him out into the hallway. The door shut with a crash in his wake and Hojo heaved a tremendous sigh. Then he turned to Vincent.

"What are you staring at, Rip van Winkle?"

Vincent took a tiny step backwards, feeling very small in the new and complete quiet of Hojo's office. His red eyes were wide and unblinking as he stared straight ahead at the frowning man behind the desk. His hand was trembling as it rested on the gun tucked in his pants, strands of his raven-coloured hair escaping the slash of red holding it back and cascading over his pale features, making prison-bar lines of black in front of his face. He opened his mouth as though he might speak, then shut it and shook his head. Finally, he muttered something incomprehensible and turned away. Chet looked on from the doorway, pressed into the shadows and hoping he wouldn't be noticed. He was waiting for Vincent to go into murderer mode and became more and more worried every second he just stood there.

"What is it?" Hojo asked, and for a moment, just a fraction of time, Chet thought he sounded really concerned. Vincent's voice answered soft and gruff.

"It has been thirty years."

"Ah, and what makes you believe this now? I imagine, in your travels through the Mansion tonight, that you've been told this by quite a few people. Why believe it now?"

Vincent looked up, sobs held back in his red eyes so that the tears looked like blood glistening against his irises. "You're old. You're thirty years older," he answered in a whisper, "And now, seeing you, I can believe that the rest of this Mansion is too. Where is she, Hojo?" He was so suddenly scared that yet again, he couldn't breathe. He slowly raised a hand to his throat, feeling as though Bier's blackened fingers were around his neck again. "You have to tell me where she is. I... I don't care about anything else but that. Let me have her and we'll leave. It won't be like last time where I insist that you pay. We'll get out of your life and leave you alone, I swear it. Just tell me where Lucrecia is after these thirty years I was away. That's... such a long long time."

Vincent looked to his tormentor with his mouth stretched into a single frown of pain. His chest felt cold and hollow, his eyes stinging from repressed tears. He didn't care enough to be the cool and confident Turk at the moment, something far more important had his attention. Hojo watched him and marveled, indifferent to all the emotion. Valentine was just as he remembered him; dark, over-reactive, full of pain.

"It really worked," he said dully, leaning forward in his chair, swinging his legs off his desk, and propping his chin in his hands. He cocked his head to one side and stared. "God, you look different. Yet you don't. It's all there, even in your eyes, behind the red. A work of art, you know. A flower pressed between two pages, yet you didn't wither and you didn't die. And why did I do it? I can't even remember now. *Ars Gratia Artis*, I suppose. My creid."

"Don't. Just don't. Tell me where Lucrecia is. She can't be of use to you anymore. I saw her earlier, she spoke to me, but then she ran away. Are you hurting her again?" Some of his agony parted for a moment and anger shone in Vincent's eyes. But he was still pleading. "She's here, but where. Tell me, Hojo."

Hojo stared and stared and then a thin sad smile graced his lips.

"Downstairs," he answered.

"Is she all right? Is she hurt?"

"I suppose you'll find that out for yourself soon enough."

"I saw her but something was strange about her. And she wouldn't stay, she told me to find you and then she left and she'd never do that!"

"You saw her too then, eh?" Hojo fiddled with a pencil on the desktop, see-sawing it back and forth over his middle finger, "Well, I should have known I wouldn't get exclusive rights to that privilege."

Vincent shook his head and bent over double. He stood and trembled for a moment, then dropped to his knees. He didn't know what to do anymore. He felt so alone and so out of it. He wanted to go insane and rip everything apart yet he knew that would solve nothing. A part of him wanted to run downstairs and find Lucrecia but he was too scared, frightened of what he might find after thirty long years. He looked up slowly from the floor to see Hojo staring down at him from behind the desk. He loomed over him so tall and Vincent felt so inferior, like a child to his father. That could be the case now, he distractedly realized. With his black hair, his brown eyes, his Wutain features plus the touch of thirty years, Hojo looked like he could be his father. These insane notions swam in his head and he ground his teeth together to get rid of them, gouging his fingers into his forehead as though to push them out. He tried to ask something, the only question he could think of, the only word right now that made any sense in his agonized mind. His voice wouldn't work though. He tried three more times and on the third attempt, Hojo understood.

"'Why' you ask?" he echoed, still watching Vincent through half-closed eyes. That was a question he'd never had to answer. He never answered to anyone else. Yet... maybe Vincent deserved to hear it before he died. Hojo watched him break down all over the floor and he thought that killing this man now would be an act of mercy. He was a stranger to the world. He'd been asleep in that coffin for too long to ever successfully rejoin life again, Hojo was sure this was a fact. The Professor sat back in his chair, rolling it out from behind his desk so that he sat only a few feet away from his creation. He crossed his legs and closed his eyes. Chet stared at the back of his head.

"I never meant for it to be like this," he began neutrally, "I meant for you to die when I picked up that gun. You were screaming at me with the passion that only a lover ever has. The rest of the world, its people, its aspirations, its sights... all were immaterial to you. I'm like that often with what I'm in love with. The object of the love is all that matters. Some people... they call that obsession. Ha. No, it's focus. It's narrowing the chaos of your existence into a small but intense goal, putting something else ahead of your own welfare and letting all else fall to ruin in the name of that love. I've heard it said that this is unhealthy, that obsessions are unhealthy, but tell me what can be healthier than giving your life meaning? Nothing I can think of. I wager you shared my opinion that night. You were obsessed with my darling wife, Valentine. I was obsessed with her too at one point. Years and years and years ago, so long ago that I barely remember it, but I think we shared what you and she learned to create. I loved her very dearly and so did you.

"Which was fine. There was a little natural jealousy on my part but by then I'd moved on to bigger and better things and I was of the frame of mind that it wasn't Lucrecia's fault that I'd lost interest in her. I mean, she still deserved to be happy. So the two of you could have each other, "be each other's other wing" as a colleague of mine once said. I was upset when I learned what the results of her pregnancy would be, I hadn't wanted that when I'd begun. It's true, Jenova's importance and the importance of the Project both outweighed Lucrecia's worth, but I still loved her and I didn't want her to die. Unfortunately, fate works out like that, you don't always get what you want, and you take whatever you can get. I hated telling you the truth of the matter that night in the basement. I saw how much you cared for her, and I truly truly deserved your anger. I had struck her, against my better judgment and in a moment of rage, I'd slammed my hand into her face. That was wrong of me for a lot of reasons and when you punched me... hell, I had it coming. Granted, I would fire you and make sure you were out of my sight before the next day, but at least I wouldn't feel as guilty about what I'd done, I would have had your wrath laid down upon my head and been redeemed. Yet you wouldn't stop at that one blow. You began spouting nonsense about the two of you leaving. I remember it well. You were both going to flee big bad Hojo and go somewhere safe, start a new life, like in the movies. Couldn't have that. Even if I wanted it. Because my new love, my Jenova, she needed Lucrecia more than you needed her and I cared for Jenova more than my wife. She was more important. Plain simple fact of the matter. I couldn't let you take Lucrecia away anymore than you could let her stay. That night, Valentine, we were both fighting each other for our loves. Yours was a very beautiful woman, mine was a very

powerful, very talented Ancient. Neither of us was any more right than the other. We were both obsessed and both out of our minds with love. We were the same man essentially.

"Like I said before, I meant to kill you when I picked up that gun. I'd had the location of it in the back of my head from the moment you barged your way into the Library. Gast kept it there in case a specimen broke free, rabid and bloodthirsty. It was always loaded, always ready to serve. I tried talking you out of your inane little plans, I honestly did. I didn't want to have to use that gun, murder is a hassle, a real pain in the ass and simply having you leave defeated with words instead of bullets would have been a treat, made my life a little easier. I'm not a violent man at all. I detest it really, scientists like order and sense. War and killing are just the opposite of those. Unfortunately, Turks are in love with war and killing. Go figure. I think that's why we clashed so dreadfully perhaps? I don't know. Anyway, d'you remember what happened next? You tried to leave, the threat that you were taking Lucrecia away falling off your lips, and then I called you back. I shot you. D'you remember? It's a moment I'm rather proud of. Skinny little me overpowering Vincent Valentine, second in command of Shinra's illustrious Turks. You were so surprised, I remember the little gasp you made before you hit the ground." Hojo chuckled to himself quietly, eyes hazy with remembrance. "I'd been aiming for your forehead but I was no Turk, I'd never even held a gun before, so my intentions didn't exactly follow through. Well, despite my lack of skill, you would have died anyway, a bullet had burst one of your lungs and practically severed your left arm, you would have bled to death or suffocated in a scant ten minutes or so. I know this sort of thing, I'm a doctor after all. I was content to watch you and think about what your death meant. I was a little mad. Crazy, you understand. Afire with jealousy because I was young and stupid and I'd found out for certain that night that you were screwing my pregnant wife. Ooh, I was mad, I remember that so well. Not because I still loved her but because you'd stolen something that belonged to me, just like so many other people had stolen from me before. Also I think, because I was jealous. I can admit to that, I'm a big boy now. Yes, there were a couple of reasons I hopped up from my chair and proceeded to haul you onto the operating table. Insanity, jealousy, anger. A potent mixture. You fascinated me too, the way you were like an animal yet ever so human. A killer, the best of the Turks by far whether you were leader or no. I wanted you to suffer and at the same time I wanted you to die so that you'd burn in hell and dwell on your crimes for an eternity. I wanted to be God and cast my judgment upon you, condemn you to torture. You'd stolen, you'd murdered, you'd lied. You, Mr. Valentine, were a monster. I was sick of seeing people as evil as you get everything they wanted while I suffered in the shadows; a slave to Gast, a pawn of the President. You looked like a dark angel, yet you had the soul of the most damned of devils. Lucrecia loved both aspects of you, she told me so afterwards, and I hated, hated, hated both aspects. I hated everything about you and I wanted you to pay for fucking up the order of my life, for putting those very sweet, yet very impractical notions into her head. So I thought for a moment about how I'd make you pay, thinking quickly since I knew you were speedily bleeding to death, and suddenly I knew I could stop thinking, the answer was obvious. I'd become God, if only for a minute, and do right by the world, fix something He so often screwed up. And it would be fitting torture to you at the same time. And a perfect opportunity to test Jenova's power and my own ambition.

"The claw was obvious. I examined your injured arm after putting you to sleep and I saw that it was worthless now. I'd broken a piece of you, in my attempt to kill you. So I needed a new piece. Jenova suggested I use a bit of her and I thought it sounded like a good idea. She always has good ideas, even now. Her cells sent your own human cells into a state of hyperactivity and they multiplied at stupendous rates, just as hers did. Heh heh, fertilizer, for lack of a better word. They grew you a replacement arm. I watched, fascinated beyond belief, as it grew into existence before my eyes. I think I felt more love for Jenova right then than I ever have. She was real godly power in this godless world. She restored your limb and restored your life and made you forever a part of her. The arm wasn't pretty though and I have aesthetic standards to uphold. The bronze was sitting in a cabinet, already cut and shaped and waiting for another doctor who was going to hook up circuits inside of it, create a mechanical hand he was going to use in his research. I borrowed it, rather convenient I say, and welded it to your arm. Much prettier than what Jenova gave you, bless her. She went to town making you all hers, as I'm sure you've discovered tonight. The eyes, the skin, the enhanced senses. The little vixen likes ya. But I hated you. Still do, for the record.

"We'd done a lot of research on how Jenova affects genetics, all in preparation for what we were doing with Lucrecia's child, and knew for certain that she affected evolutionary progress. Strength, intelligence, standard human stats, she heightened them to the next level and beyond. But what I wanted to know was could she replace human evolution with the evolution of another creature, a different animal, a monster, a beast. I'm not sure if what I did to you that night was successful, I've only now just seen you again, but since everything else has worked so well, I'm optimistic. Doesn't matter though, unfortunately you won't live to find out. I wager you've only seen the first of your "evolutions". This one is more primitive than the others, you can't switch back to human form, but still from what I hear, it was a success.

"I always saw you as a vampire. You came into our marriage and sucked it dry, sweeping away with the damsel who fell in love with your dark charm, your evil demeanor, and lack of soul. She wanted to join you in your sinner's world because all the time you looked as innocent as a little boy. That was what angered me, the angel hid the devil. I wanted it

all out in the open where you could see it, feel what you were and suffer with the knowledge. I made you into the physical embodiment of what you spiritually were; just another fucking monster of the Shinra Mansion.

"If only Lucrecia had been able to see what her precious lover really was before I locked you away with the demons inside of you. She would have learned what my words were never able to explain precisely. I could never show her though."

Hojo looked bitter, pressing his knuckles to his lips and glancing away. Remembering all this nonsense was painful for reasons he couldn't really understand. Maybe it was because he had to admit weaknesses in himself and he didn't like doing that. He sighed quietly, then pushed his glasses back up on his nose with this thumb. "I thought a year, maybe two, five at the most. I had no idea that Gast's chemicals would keep you alive for almost twenty-nine years. If I'd even suspected it for a moment, I would have rushed over here and set that coffin on fire. Not because I didn't want you suffering, but because you were a liability, a threat to me. Jenova made you strong, my genetic alterations made you stronger. If you ever got out it'd be a pain in the ass for me and everyone involved. I realized this the day after I'd done the deed, when the elation that I'd made you pay wore off and I started to worry that I'd be found out. But it was too late to do anything about it so I just tried to forget. I managed to do a good job of forgetting for almost thirty years. Then... then, because of Jenova, I was forced to come back to this blasted mansion and it seems our nightmares have started all over again. Not convenient at all."

By this point, Vincent had recovered himself somewhat. The explanation, as crazy, as god damned stupid as it had been, went a little way towards restoring some of his common sense. Unless he meant it in a metaphorical sense, this wasn't hell, it wasn't a dream, and he wasn't out of his head. He was Vincent Valentine, formerly of the Turks, and he'd been shot, scientifically altered, pumped full of Jenova cells, and suspended in time for thirty years. He closed his eyes and slowed his breathing but the facts wouldn't sink in. Looking at Hojo's aged face was driving him from his skull. Glancing away from it, he asked quietly, "Why haven't I aged?"

Hojo rolled his eyes and slouched back in his desk chair, kicking out and making it roll a few feet away on creaky wheels. "Geez, why look a gift chocobo in the mouth? Your metabolism was slowed to nearly the point of death, and Jenova cells habitually shift senescence from inevitability to a reduced, or even abolished progression. In stupid Turk terms, that means lovely Jenova and my own ingenious chemicals halted your natural aging. A side-effect of what I was attempting. I only wanted you to stay alive as long as you could, suffering in nightmares as real as life, suffering for a lifetime of evil and lies, then suffering for making Lucrecia's life more painful than it had to be. Suffering for making me do what I did to you at all. But in my attempts it seemed I accomplished even more. I preserved a little piece of my past, all wrapped up in a wooden box. You're the same man, aren't you? Do you remember it all as though it were yesterday and not almost thirty years? How fresh is it? How clear in your mind now that the drugs have worn off?"

Vincent's eyes burned red and bloody. He was on his feet again, though he wavered a bit, metal shoes thudding against the floor. "It rained that night. She'd gone into town. I argued briefly with Jimmy before I couldn't take it anymore, I came downstairs after you, I--" Vincent froze mid-sentence, his eyes widening, and he clenched his hand into a fist. "Jimmy really is dead then. You killed him! Why? He'd never done anything to you!"

Vincent shot forward and grabbed a very surprised Hojo up by the collar. The scientist paled and started to sweat, feet kicking out at the empty air. "He was a complication, he interfered and Jenova had me kill him. I never th--"

"Jenova! Is she always going to be your excuse?!" Vincent demanded, and he threw Hojo across the room. He slammed hard against the wall, sending dust fluttering down from the rafters. Giving a groan, he pushed himself up on two elbows and glared at his attacker.

"All that you've killed tonight," Hojo accused quietly, "Will Lucrecia always be your excuse?"

"That's different, something else entirely! I'm not the same as you! There's a difference between obsession and love. You are obsessed with something that can never return your devotion! It doesn't care for you! Lucrecia and I love each other unconditionally. No strings, no proving our feelings, it's just there, as natural as anything under the sun."

"Jenova doesn't have to love me, I don't care if she does and you know what? I'd never want her to. I love enough for the both of us, and I've given my life and the lives of countless others to her cause. She wants me to be successful and even Lucrecia never cared about that. She was always saying she'd be content if I just stayed an assistant, a low-level doctor, as long as I was there for her. But she didn't understand that a man is only worth what he can leave behind. Love dies with the people who loved! But accomplishments, power, those live on behind you. Jenova can grant me immortality in a way and that's why I love her. She cared enough to make an offer to me that no one ever had before."

"You're insane," Vincent growled, grinding his teeth and fighting for self-control. Hojo shrugged and picked himself up from off the ground.

"That's irrelevant. Sanity is all relative anyway. To me, you're the insane one, sacrificing your life for Lucrecia. She was beautiful, talented, intelligent, and kind, but she wasn't worth any man's life. No human is."

"I used to think like you."

"And then you were visited by the three Christmas ghosts of past, present, and future, right? Ha... Valentine, I don't need a lecture from you."

Vincent stood in the darkness of the room, straight and tall and perfectly still, like a black marble pillar. Chet was watching him from the doorway and he could easily see behind that façade was a boiling rage just waiting to froth over. He'd seen the rage and its consequences a couple of times tonight and was sure he had a pretty good idea of what was coming.

Hojo was quiet for a moment, catching his breath. He walked cautiously back to his desk chair and slowly seated himself, his eyes staying on Vincent, watching him like you might a lion you were closed into a cage with. Seeing him was like being lost in time, reliving those months again. It made him uneasy and he sighed profoundly, his black bangs billowing out before his breath. "She was very upset when you didn't come back, you know..." he mumbled, resting his forehead in his hand. The mention of Lucrecia abated Vincent's anger enough that he paused to listen. Chet listened too. The pieces of the puzzle he'd known nothing about were coming together before his eyes. He'd told Vincent about Wutai and the war and his dead father. Now here was his turn to learn about his friend's past. He was horrified and interested all at the same time, pressing his back against the wall as Hojo continued.

"She cried for hours, like a little girl, just sitting in the bedroom and twisting your ring around on her finger. You were supposed to meet somewhere, right? She'd gone into town for transportation? I don't know, she never told me the details. I had to have Levy break the door down. She stayed in there for hours, refusing to let me in, refusing to tell me what was wrong (though I knew of course). Just sobs and rantings and more sobs, increasing each hour that saw you still gone. At first she insisted that I'd done something, yelling at me through the door until I had to leave the hall, I couldn't stand it. Then she was simply worried. She wanted to talk to Levy, that Turk leader, and he told her he strongly suspected that you'd run off with your friend Jimmy, neither of you could be found. That did it for her. She let me in then, only because I think she was scared of what she might do to herself if left alone. I kept a pistol in the nightstand and she knew it.

"She looked like hell when I came in. The room was a mess, her hair was down and in her face which was red and wet, contorted with pain. She breathed in hiccups from all her useless crying, and I insisted that she stop it, she was going to hurt the baby. That worked. I sat her down on the bed and insisted she tell me everything that had happened.

"He promised we'd leave today and yet he's disappeared. It doesn't make sense, it's like the sun not rising, or the stars not fading, when Vincent doesn't keep a promise to me."

"Then she burst into her obligatory tears again and I comforted her, ignoring what she was saying. This was her confession and she wasn't even realizing it. She just had to pour her weak little heart out to someone and if it had to be me, oh well. She didn't care, not then. I stayed with her all through the day and she kept insisting you'd return, that something had come up and you'd had to leave but you'd be back. She looked at that ruby ring you gave her so often I swear I'm surprised her eyes didn't turn as red as yours are now. It was the only remembrance she had of you and she wore it as brashly as a tee-shirt saying, 'fuck off, sweetheart, I don't love you no more'. With myself being the sweetheart of course. The scientists loved it, Levy and Gast were in hysterics that we were broken up. It was out in the open that she didn't love me anymore, that she wanted a divorce. No one had ever been able to believe in the first place that I'd managed to hook a woman as beautiful as Lucrecia, now it was just funny that reality had finally caught up with me and I'd lost her. Those last months in the mansion were hell. The rumors flew thick as rain. And every day, every fucking day, I had to look at her accusing eyes.

"She knew. A part of her knew right from the start that I was the one who'd taken you out of the picture. She probably thought I'd killed you, but she was too frightened to ask me. She figured it better to go on thinking you were alive somewhere, with something unavoidable and unfightable keeping you from returning. And if she asked me, if I had to tell her, there'd be no way she'd be able to keep company with me any longer. It was bad enough as it was. The suspicion was terrible. She never talked to me, she never talked to anyone. We all were monsters in her eyes, even Gast, who'd been an idol to her. We were all keeping some secret from her. A conspiracy. In those final months here, my Lucrecia grew quite paranoid.

"A lot of it was Jenova. She was soaked with her cells and they affected her mind. She wanted to die, if only to stop the voices. Whenever she did talk to me, it was only to tell me that. But I couldn't let her leave until I had what I needed from her." Hojo paused, his voice cracking. The office was silent around him, and he felt both the room's atmosphere and Vincent's eyes pressing into his body. Why this guilt suddenly? He hadn't felt it in years, if he'd ever felt it at all. He wanted to leave Vincent's accusing eyes and the anger in his heart; anger towards himself for not finding a way to save her. If he'd been more of a genius perhaps, if he'd tried harder, paid more attention, begged and pleaded with Jenova for his wife's life... maybe then she would have been all right. "A time came... you'd been in the coffin for almost three and a half months. I wouldn't go too close to the crypt door and I didn't like to spend too much time in the basement anymore. I spent many of my days hiding up here from Lucrecia, or from the others who never gave a damn for me. She was so frail looking, so pale... she turned into a female version of you. It was just the baby sapping at her strength though, Jenova

redirecting Lucrecia's own vitality towards the tiny fetus in her womb. Because... because that baby was more important than the mother, Jenova was strong and knew this. I didn't protest it, it would have been useless. Jenova knew what had to be done and I allowed her to do it. I watched as the skin tightened around 'Crecia's eyes and she died, a little more each day. You'll be very happy to hear though, Valentine, that after you never came back for her, she'd already died inside. She died along with your humanity, along with you. She didn't care for me anymore and only lived the rest of her life in the conventional sense, thinking now that perhaps you actually were dead and that the sooner she could join you and shrug off her painful routine of needles and drugs, the sooner she'd be happy again.

"Gast, he didn't know what the hell was going on. He played his little genetic games, neither realizing mine and Lucrecia's pain nor the true majesty of Jenova. He was a puppet from the moment the Project began. That was the beginning of the end for him. My respect for Professor Gast died after I saw his indifference to us. After that he was just a stone in my path.

"I had dreams about you, Valentine. You'd rise up out of your coffin and descend upon me, just as you did in the basement when I shot you down. You'd descend upon me and tear my throat out with fangs that I grew for you! I slept in here, my office, alone. I'd wake up sweating, looking for Lucrecia beside me... gone. Back in our bedroom, sleeping alone, dreaming of you too no doubt, only smiling instead of screaming. There's nothing in the world worse than being absolutely alone. Nothing worse."

"You contradict yourself, Professor Hojo, "Vincent said softly. He stood in the shadows with crossed arms, staring the scientist down. "You said all you needed was Jenova. You should never feel alone, not with your grand ambitions to keep you warm."

Hojo either didn't sense his sarcasm or he ignored it. "I was alone and still am, but I won't pour my heart out to you, vicious bastard. You'd only glance its way then give it up for dead.

"Lucrecia had already given everything up for dead. I was no longer someone she knew nor cared to know. I was a face who gave her injections every day and took her blood pressure, monitored her stats.

"It was raining outside for the first time since I put you in the coffin, when she went into labor.

"It didn't last long. I wasn't even there when it started. I only knew to come down from here because I heard her screaming. It was... the worst sound I've ever heard in my long life. She was screaming, truly screaming. Gast had her in the lab and I rushed in. I didn't even have my clothes on, shoeless, just a pair of slacks. Her pulse was dropping and rising, falling and rising again. Jenova was playing with her body like you might with a doll, making her son stronger before it was born, taking every bit of life she could from Lucrecia and infusing it into the unborn child. I didn't know what to do. I approached her and started an IV but I knew before I could even get the needle in that it was unnecessary. She only had minutes—"

Vincent smeared tears from his eyes. He didn't know why he was crying. "What are you saying?" he demanded quietly, smiling in disbelief.

"Minutes. And that was if Jenova was kind. Or should I say cruel? There was no life left for her but pain, she was in so much pain that she couldn't reason, I doubt she knew who I was, who she was, who any of the white-coated, sleepy-eyed young men and women bustling about her body were. Oblivious to all but two things: the pain and you.

"Her hand was cold when I felt for a vein to stick the IV needle in. She was cold everywhere and shining with sweat. I'll never forget the way she looked. She was a living corpse with a stomach full of life. Her eyes were no where yet everywhere, seeing nothing and everything. You know her eyes. Gorgeous, blue flecked with sparks of sea-green. In her madness and in her pain though, they were horrible, like two spheres of materia rolling around in her head. I couldn't look her in the eyes. And I couldn't put the needle in, I couldn't hurt her anymore. I threw it away and for the first time since I'd discovered Jenova, I ignored her voice in my head. I stayed at her side and I held her hand, whispered her name, told her it would be over soon and everything would be okay, there'd be no more pain, only peace and you and.... Well, you know the kinds of things we say to those who are suffering. We'll spout anything to get them to shut up, to make them forget their torment. I laid everything on her, anything I could think of. Her screaming was driving me mad.

"By this point, they'd already cut her open and the baby was out. I never even looked towards it. It was Jenova's, not ours. Lucrecia was still screaming, only it was weaker now, I could barely hear it. Silent screams, I guess one might call them that. There were words behind them though, something she was trying to say. Like an idiot... like a stupid idiot I fancied she might be saying my name. But no, she was saying yours, in a whisper so soft I had to lower my ear to her lips to make it out. Even then it almost wasn't there..."

"Don't tell me anymore," Vincent pleaded. He stepped quickly backwards in a panic and clutched at his head.

"But isn't this what you've been longing to know? She was calling your name, Valentine. She was flailing her dying arms out trying to find you, only you weren't there. You were sleeping in the room down the hall, oblivious to her pain and suffering, lost in nightmares and dead to the world. I wanted to tell her that as she lay there screaming for you, there was a very small, very guilty part of me that wanted her to know she hadn't been abandoned after all. Jenova and my own will quashed that bit of conscience though. The words never came.

"Jenova was feeling cruel. I wonder if she was jealous.

"It took Lucrecia three days. She screamed and bled and went insane with pain for three days. The baby never stopped crying, that's what I remember most clearly. Everything else is a haze, obscured by time and repression." Hojo shook his head and winced, the images in his head disturbingly vivid. "I recall that after she gave birth, I didn't go into the lab again. I didn't go again for weeks, not even to see the baby, a stunning little bundle of silver hair and mako green eyes, I couldn't, not even to take samples from Jenova. Nightmares, cold sweats, stabbing guilt, oh I tell you it all was a pretty package the two of you left me with, thank you very much. I could hear her from every corner of the mansion, even from my office up here. She'd scream your name until Gast got off his ass and drugged her. Then she'd mutter of you in her sleep and I could hear that too. I wouldn't flatter yourself too much though, Valentine. She was so delirious with fever and agony I don't think she was conscious of what she was saying. You were just a pleasant name that rolled off her tongue. So she would say it for hours. And hours and hours. By the end... everyone in the Mansion was fully aware of who she'd been seeing behind my back. She let them all know.

"And then one night, four thirty-eight in the morning, her screaming stopped. Just like that.

"The quiet that followed was the quiet of hell after the flames have burnt themselves out.

"Everyone was too frightened to go into the laboratory and see why she'd quieted. So nothing was done with her until the next morning. I wouldn't leave my office. I remember I slept in here huddled beneath that desk, listening to the quiet roaring in my ears, then listening to the baby when it started crying as though it knew all that had happened. Such a tiny creature, exquisite and perfect, full of opportunity. His eyes glowed with the mako Jenova had extracted from his mother's body. His skin was perfect and smooth, almost too perfect to belong to a newborn baby, and his features seemed as though carved from ivory, each delicate fold of skin was precious, each finger and toe." Hojo's eyes were misted and he folded his arms over his chest. He shrugged, then said almost thoughtfully, "But such a shame Lucrecia never got to see."

Hojo let quiet trail after the last of his words. He was staring intently at the ground, shaking off his stupor of memories. He pushed his glasses further up the bridge of his nose, afraid to look towards the Turk. Vincent didn't know where to look. Every time he shut his eyes, he saw her. Hojo's explanation had triggered within his mind the memories of every nightmare he'd had inside that coffin, all the ones he hadn't been able to remember, and now there shone in his mind the faintest glimmer of TIME. He could feel, if he marked the passing of time by the dreams he could recall now, he could feel years. They weighed upon him. The nightmares weighed upon him. He clutched at his head desperately, feeling as though he were dying, or aging so quickly it took his breath away. Nightmare after nightmare, image after image, too much for him to handle. "I'm going insane," he gasped, eyes squeezed shut as he fought for breath, "I can't handle this, can't handle it goddammit!!"

"No, you probably can't," Hojo answered listlessly. He leaned back in his chair. He fell out of it when Vincent jumped on him, fangs bared.

"Where is she?!" he roared, grabbing the scientist up by the collar, "I'm tired of these games, these attempts to make me suffer because YOU kept us apart! Don't cast your guilt on me, you stupid son of a bitch! Tell me where she is before I rip out your lungs!"

Hojo didn't look disturbed at all. "She's in the mansion," he answered, "Downstairs."

"You'll take me to her!"

"No, Valentine. No, you don't want to see her. You don't want to."

Vincent slammed Hojo's head into the ground, then punched him hard across the cheek with the sharp end of his knuckles. "You don't know how much I want to see her, to know that she's here with me again! Make this stop! These damned nightmare pictures flashing in my head! I don't want to remember what happened to my mind in the coffin, it makes thirty years into thirty years! It distances me from where I belong!"

"You don't belong anywhere anymore. I told you when I left you in that crypt. You're just a ghost now. You're dead to the world."

Vincent could help himself anymore. His claw shot above his head then arched downwards in a frightening sweep of gold, aiming for Hojo's chest. He wanted to see if this bastard had a heart at all.

"Ah ah ah, Valentine," the scientist rebuked, "You'll never find her if you kill me. Let me up."

"I can't! I can't listen to myself or you I just know you have to die!" His roar turned into a sob and he collapsed to the side, rolling off of Hojo despite his words. He lay on the cool wooden boards of the quiet office and clutched his head in his hand and claw, not caring that his metallic fingers were gouging into his scalp. The scientist didn't move after Vincent let him go. He lay on his back, staring up at the dark ceiling, his expression calm.

"That woman ruined us, Valentine," he said matter-of-factly, "I loved her very very much."

"No!" Vincent insisted, his voice muffled, his arms wrapped around his face, "No, you love precious Jenova, remember?"

"Ah..." A tear splattered against the edge of Hojo's glasses, "That's right, I forgot. Never mind then."

Half an hour passed.

Hojo was behind his desk again, sitting back heavily in his chair. He'd been thinking about things, about the past, which he didn't do usually. Vincent's appearance had shattered that habitual silence. He couldn't believe he'd said all of those things to him, and said them without being asked or goaded. He'd just opened up his heart and let it all come out.

Jenova was going to be furious. She probably already was. She wanted her little Hojo to hurry and wrap up all of this nonsense, get ready to head to the reactor and see her and get her orders. A million things to do and he'd have to do them, despite how weary and hurt his stupid human soul was. If only he could be as cold and heartless as that thing he worshiped then he wouldn't have these annoying, trivial problems. He cursed himself and then plunked his chin in his hands, leaning forward onto his desk, staring down at Valentine.

He was still collapsed on the floor, eyes squeezed shut. Hojo knew what his problem was, that influx of memories had wiped him out. All of those nightmares that he hadn't remembered... thirty years of nightmares didn't come lightly upon one's mind. Maybe he was insane with them. Or maybe his brain was fried, Hojo didn't know. Maybe he was toying with the idea of 'Cecia being dead. He had to know in his heart that it was true, but the scientist was sure that the stubborn Turk wasn't going to accept reality. He'd left her alive and well and then woken up to the news that she was dead? Most people wouldn't accept that so easily, especially about someone they'd loved beyond reason.

Vincent was finally moving around a bit though. Hojo watched his right hand close into a fist and draw close to his body, listened to the dried blood on his clothes crackle as he shifted positions. The sudden sound of footsteps nearly gave the scientist a heart attack. He whipped about and saw Chet approaching the man crumpled on the floor. He'd seen the young guy before and shrugged him off, he hadn't cared enough to ask and he'd stayed quiet there against the front wall as he and Vincent had talked. He was probably just some clueless kid from the village, wandered into the wrong place at the wrong time. A miracle really, that he hadn't gotten himself killed tonight. He stepped up to his friend with the utmost caution and respect, then stood a foot or two away, simply gazing down.

"...get away," Vincent mumbled without looking up. "I know what I am now, what's inside of me. I'm not human anymore."

Chet wasn't sure what to say. So he just stood there. After a moment, Vincent sat up, drawing his knees close and wrapping his arms loosely around his legs. He looked more frightening than Chet had ever seen him. His ebony hair was wild, hanging in his face and down his back like vines. Like marble, like porcelain that breathed, his skin was stark white and streaked with dried tears. Mouth hanging slack and half-open, his fangs were obvious and his eyes were terrible. They looked hot to the touch, on fire, bloody crimson misted with orange patches of flame. All in all, he seemed very changed from the man Chet had met before. His appearance backed up the words he'd spoken.

"So what will you do, Vincent?" Hojo asked. He kept his keen eyes trained upon him, his arms crossed over his narrow chest.

Vincent stood, very slowly and stiffly. He was trembling yet he was taut with control, fighting off panic and rage while trying to stay sane. "Take me downstairs to her," he said softly.

"That's a foolish request," Hojo replied.

"If it was a request... perhaps. But it's not a request. It's an order. I'm a monster, that's what you made me. And so theoretically, I no longer have to listen to reason, listen to logic or common sense. I get to rip you apart solely out of the desire for your blood and your life. I'm not what I was and I have no place. Those were your words. I want to hear them again. Tell me they're true."

Hojo looked upon the man with a strange expression on his face. After a moment he said, "Yes, that about sums it up."

"There's no way you can make these creatures inside of me leave, is there? A way you can take this Jenova out of me?"

The scientist shook his head. The tension in the air was maddening. "You're mentally inferior but not totally stupid. You must realize that Jenova would never separate willingly from human flesh. And the alteration of your cells and DNA cannot be undone."

"When will these other evolutions begin?"

"Whenever the conditions are right. I cannot say. Listen, Valentine, I've had fun chatting with you, tearing old gashes open just so you'd be in the know, but I have an appointment to keep. I have to lead the remaining five scientists of my research group up the side of Mt. Nibel and to Jenova. We have work to do, a God to make. A shame that that God has to be Cloud Strife but as I said before, we take what we can get in this world."

"You're not leaving here." Vincent took a step forward. The yellow light from above cast his features in deep shadow. He was frightening to look upon but Hojo kept his cool. He placed his two white hands on the desktop and slowly pushed

himself to his feet. He walked out from behind the desk and towards the door. Vincent followed him with his eyes, waiting for the proper moment to spring. Chet stepped backwards.

Something rattled at their backs, a bellowing noise from the locked closet. The chains binding it shut rattled against the wood. Chet looked over his shoulder towards it, a cold feeling seeping into the back of his throat as the noise echoed against the office's low ceiling, off the scrubbed walls, and cool board floor.

Vincent heard nothing but the thundering beat of Hojo's heart. Now was the moment he'd been searching for all night. The voices of the monster screaming in his head, the blood lust in his mouth, the nightmares of death and guilt... none of it mattered if he could lose himself in justified murder. He'd finish what he'd started thirty years ago.

Hojo saw differently though. Hojo always saw differently.

He shouted Jenova's name like a summon, then pressed his back against the wall. The thing behind the bound closet doors was screaming and roaring all at once, almost like two separate creatures. The chains began to snap. The wood broke apart at the hinges, flying into the air, great gaps forming in the double closet doors. Chet didn't know what to do. Vincent didn't seem to care about the thing behind them, his mindless, bloodthirsty eyes were fixed only upon Hojo but Chet knew with an instinct he couldn't name that something very deadly was going to be approaching them shortly. He grabbed Vincent's arm, trying to get his attention, trying to keep him from approaching Hojo as he was doing, gun in his hand, claw grasping the air at his side. He tried anything and everything because he was scared out of his mind and confused as hell. But Vincent wouldn't be deterred. He didn't even look at Chet when he suddenly grabbed a hold of the young actor by the neck and threw him against the wall, moving so quickly that he never knew what happened. Chet pulled himself into a fetal position, blinking the explosions of pain from before his eyes and wondering if he'd die today. He listened to the screaming of the creature in the closet as it grew louder and louder. Once it broke free, the wood and chains exploding from the prison in a shower of deadly shrapnel, he recognized what he'd been listening to.

"...Sara..?"

~*~

Oh my. Parts of this chapter made me laugh my ass off while other parts made me cry ;_ ; And I'm the psycho who wrote the stupid thing. Go fig. Anyways, I was glad this turned out pretty much like I wanted it to, I was afraid I'd have problems writing Lucrecia's decline from Hojo's POV. I mean, I wanted it to be obvious that there was some regret there but I didn't want him turning into a blubbing wussie. As for the rest of it, I think it's so-so, but the last quarter I'm really proud of, I think it's some of my best fic work (Glass complimented herself! Phone the press!) ^_^ next chapter is a big shift from all that's come before, and it'll probably be some of the most graphic stuff yet. Er, not that the rest of it hasn't been graphic... never mind--