



Chapter 5: A Trail of Blood

Dr. Waters proved a professional at causing pain. Zack had been huffily stumbling ahead of him down the dark, uncharted hallway of the hidden basement level when he'd tried to double back around and introduce his fist to the scientist's seemingly unsuspecting face. Seeing it all coming a mile away, Waters had proceeded to not only avoid the attack but actually shoot one of his own beefy arms up to grab at Zack's hair, right at the spot at the nape of his neck where the hairs were finer, thinner, and would hurt a hell of a lot more when pulled. He'd only been able to maintain the hold for a moment before the Soldier broke free, but Zack wound up stumbling to his knees, unable to see straight through the waves of pain throbbing in his head.

"No!" he protested, clutching his hair now and trying to stand again, distractedly listening to Waters' heavy panting, "No! I'll kill him now! I'll tear him apart!"

"Who, Hojo?" the agitated scientist roared, stepping up and grabbing his young charge by the scruff of his shirt, "Even I can't do that," he continued darkly, "What makes a worthless lab rat such as yourself ever even dream you could touch him?! He'll get away with this as he gets away with everything, I know he will..."

"Why do you let him?" Zack demanded, "You just stand by as he grows in power back in Midgar! Everyone knows he killed your old boss, Gast, but no one does anything about it! No one tries to stop him! Why, Dr. Waters? But fuck it, why am I asking you? You'd be Hojo if you had the balls, if there wasn't someone smarter and more talented than you. You'd be striving for the top too, crushing whoever you had to under your heels on the way. You're all the same, all of you bastards! I'm sick and tired of all of you!"

Zack made as though he'd lunge for Waters again, but instead he fell backwards against the hallway wall, defeated. He glanced up through lowered lashes and saw the looming scientist looking down on him, still holding tight to Cloud and his massive shotgun. He showed no signs of giving up either. "There have to be cats," he began with a sneer, "And there have to be mice. Don't be such a bitter little boy, Zack, just because you were cast as a mouse."

"I'll kill you."

"Will you?" Waters asked, and he smiled though there was no humor in it. "You've been saying that for years. And what's come of it? A brief taste of freedom tonight and now you're on your way back to your cage. Your hero Valentine turned out to be nothing but a broken toy, another unfortunate victim of that man we both hate so dearly."

"What are they going to do?" Zack asked, true curiosity brightening his anguished blue eyes. They'd left Vincent, Chet, and Hojo so suddenly back in that office, the air crackling with a potential confrontation between the Turk and the scientist. Something was happening, happening in there right now, and Zack felt unspeakably bitter that he wasn't there to see or to help.

"What will Hojo do?" Waters clarified, picking Zack up and setting him roughly on his feet again. The strength in his arms was formidable, even after the long and wearying night. Cloud's weight seemed nothing to him. "Hojo will kill him. And to think I'd hoped that that monster might do away with the Professor if I brought them together... it was a foolish, foolish idea. No. I just brought about that creature's death is all. Nothing can stand up to Hojo. He's terrifying like that. If that monster hadn't been such a murdering, heartless fuck, I might almost feel sorry for it now. Hojo does horrible, horrible things to toys he's tired of, or creations he's decided are failures."

Zack wasn't listening to the ominous words. He had a sudden idea, a desperate hope. He shot forward to the scientist and laid two neutral hands upon his forearm. "Why don't we go back and help then?" he pleaded, "You hate Hojo, I hate him, Valentine hates him! We band together and we could get rid of him now, rid the world of something that never should have been brought about! Why not, Dr. Waters? You babble on about hating him because he puts you down and treats you like a fool, but you never do anything about it! Now's your chance! Professor Hojo might be a vicious, heartless... thing... but he'd die with a shotgun shell in his chest just like anyone else! I'll help you! And afterwards you let Cloud and I go and you can make yourself undisputed king of the Shinra science department! You wouldn't need either of us anyway, we're not projects of yours... imagine it, Dr. Waters... you'd be in charge! Bier is dead, he would have been your only rival! As it stands now, man, you're like, the second biggest honcho in the department, Shinra wouldn't dispute it if ya said you were taking over after Hojo's death!"

"Shut up," Waters commanded brusquely, but the words had little feeling behind them. Zack pressed on.

"Nah, nah, you know you want this! You gotta fight in this world to get ahead and ya gotta be sneaky and underhanded sometimes. If you think you deserve it, you'll fight for it! Thing is though, Dr. Waters, killing Hojo is like

killing... like killing Valentine! They're both murderers who need to die anyways. You'd be doing the world a favor and exterminating a rat."

Zack gulped in air, his arguments leaving him breathless. He laid both sweaty hands flat against the wall behind him, looking back the way they'd come, fearful of anyone's approach. They'd been walking away from that hidden office for what seemed like forever and he didn't know what was coming nor what that punishment Hojo had spoken of would be. He didn't much want to find out either.

A clock in the distance struck out 6am with half a dozen doleful peals. The sound echoed down the hallway, ping-ponging off the ceiling and walls, hitting their ears like six vicious hammers. "Shit..." Dr. Waters growled, "I have to meet him outside."

"What?!" Zack's head jerked up, his teeth grinding together with an audible grating scrape, "You're just gonna give in to him again?! Has it occurred to you, ya fat bastard, that this was your one chance?! Your one night to do something about how ya live your life like an inconsequential worm? You're so blasted content to fall back into stooge-mode that, that the entire concept of rebelling against Hojo fails you! What the hell is your problem!?"

"What the hell is yours?!" All in one swift movement, Waters dropped Cloud to the floor then lunged for Zack with both arms out to wrap around the young man's neck, "Stop it!" he commanded, "Just stop it now! I don't need this from you, ya little piss ant! Walk! Just start walking back to your cage, Zack! You're too stupid to ever understand, I can never never never win out against Professor Hojo!"

"...that's... only... only 'cause you tell yourself you can't..."

Both Zack and Waters flinched at the sound of this new voice. It was so weak it was almost laughable. But what happened next belied that weakness. Dr. Waters felt his arms practically ripped away from around Zack's throat, and then two strong, unyielding hands grabbed him up by his collar and the waist of his pants, flinging him face-first into the floor. He hit the concrete with his teeth and they chiseled right through his upper lip, breaking clean out of his mouth in a splash of saliva and blood. A boot struck him in the back of his head, knocking the last bit of fight straight out of him.

Cloud gave the scientist a final disgusted glare, then collapsed back to the floor, his shoulders trembling.

"Cloud! I-- I-- a-are you okay?" Zack rubbed at his bruised neck then raced to his friend's side, not even glancing to Waters and the puddle of blood spreading out around his head, seeping into the cracks of the floor. He'd been feeling the life being choked right out of him one moment, and then watched as his tormentor was tossed away like a doll the next. By Cloud. Who now looked like death warmed over as he fought for life in the middle of the hallway. Zack winced and drew back, not sure what to do.

"I'm okay, man," the spiky-headed kid assured, though he didn't look it. He was grabbing at the hole in his shoulder, the result of what Waters had done with his shotgun when he'd first discovered their escape attempt. Blood bubbled up past his grasping fingers, rolling down his arm. "We have to get out of here," he said quickly.

"Yeah..." Zack looked around, then down, and abruptly peeled off Waters' lab coat, ignoring the guy's protests and muffled, half-conscious curses. He quickly tore the garment into strips and knelt down to his friend, binding his wrist where Vincent had sank his fangs in, then turning to the more serious wound in Cloud's shoulder.

"No!" the young man insisted, shrinking back. His face was tight with pain, horizontal lines wrinkling across his smooth brow as he squeezed his eyes shut against it. It seemed he'd slip back into unconsciousness if given the chance. He clutched his shoulder and shook his head.

"C'mon, Cloud," Zack whispered, impatience and compassion fighting for dominance in his gruff voice, "You've had worse than this. Remember Masamune? Remember General Sephiroth? Remember the pain you've been living your life in for the past four years?"

"I know, I know..." Cloud said in exhaustion, burying his head in his good hand. He seemed fighting for control and Zack didn't know why it was necessary for him to fight at all. Didn't he feel how desperate their situation was? How tight things were?

"Come on!" he insisted, moving forward with the scraps of Waters' coat again, "If we don't get out of this Mansion, we're dead men! Get to your feet! If you can't, I'll frigging carry you! But I'd rather be caught running than caught sitting here! I'd rather die fighting than laying down! You hear that Dr. Waters?!" he hollered, turning suddenly about to the grounded scientist, "I'm not like you! I'd fight Hojo, I'll fight you all with every breath in my body! Cloud! Cloud, please, come on!"

Cloud made no further protest when his friend bound his shoulder tightly with strip after strip of dirty fabric, tying it off into a messy knot with his teeth. Zack grabbed a hold of his good arm, then threw it around his own shoulders, hauling the man to his feet. The determination was so thick in his eyes it was almost terrible to look upon. He wasn't going to be caught again. This was he and Cloud's second chance. It had to be! With desperate intensity, he began half-leading, half-carrying Cloud down the Mansion hallway. They were hopelessly lost without Waters, too underground and too off the beaten path to possibly find their way back up to the second floor and the staircase leading down to the exit, but Zack wouldn't be deterred. He pulled the both of them onward as though some all-forgiving heaven lay just around the bend, a

saviour who might lead them through the Nibel Mountains, over the sea and back to Midgar. They only had to have the strength to continue on and find it.

"This'll be easy, Cloud," he murmured to his semi-conscious friend. The bandages had quickly reddened over, blood beading up over the fabric and dribbling down Cloud's arm. His blonde head lolled to the side as he fought to stay awake, vision dark, the world spinning about him, sweat stinging his eyes. "This'll be easy, yeah. We'll get back to Midgar and go find Aeris. Elmyra wouldn't have a problem letting us crash there till you feel better. She's the nicest lady, she really is. Helluva of a cook, great housekeeper. And Aeris, she's a good time, a good girl. You'll like her, she has a thing for guys in Shinra uniforms. Just don't be swiping my girl, okay?" Zack chuckled weakly, shaking Cloud to keep him awake. "You hear me? Yeah, you hear me, you want outta this nightmare just as bad as me. What you did to Dr. Waters, that was terrific. What we always talked of doing. And you did it! You smashed him good, just like he had coming to him! Man, that's something I'll never forget... yeah, Cloud. You and me, all the way. You and me to Midgar and to Aeris. Four years ain't nothing. I know she waited for me. Aeris... she's the kinda girl who'd wait as long as it took."

He was just talking to hear himself now. Dragging Cloud's dead weight was excruciating, but Zack ignored the new burning pain in the muscles of his arms and concentrated simply on putting one foot in front of the other, letting more and more of the hallway fall away behind him, letting more and more darkness loom before his anxious eyes. He didn't know where in the hell he was going. A sudden fork in the hall. Right was just as good as left. He plunged blindly into it.

"Maybe we-- should go back-- and help that Turk," he panted. He hardly had the breath now to speak but he had to say something. This oppressive silence was unbearable. "But no, no, it's like-- you said, man. He didn't help us when we-- needed it. He can rot. He can rot back there with Hojo."

"...ya think?" Cloud asked weakly. He was hot and flustered against Zack's shoulder. The Soldier could feel the fever warming his skin. Cloud gave a little cry and grit his teeth.

"C'mon, man!" Zack insisted in a panic, re-doubling his pace though he was ready to collapse under his friend's weight, "Don't die on me, Cloud! It would really piss Hojo off, you're supposed to be a super warrior, remember? Better'n Sephiroth, remember? C'mon, one stupid shotgun shell isn't going to kill you!"

A voice erupted out of the darkness ahead of the two men, curious but self-assured. "But what about you, Zack? Wouldn't it kill you?"

The dark-haired Soldier froze in his tracks, blue eyes widening into sweat-stung saucers. But it was too dark, no windows, not a glimmer of starlight. Nothing to see. No way to see. There was only the illumination from a single yellow light bulb sitting high on the right wall like a slug. It lit up the immediate surrounding five feet of the hallway, but all else faded into pitch darkness. Zack backed up against the wall, losing his grip on Cloud just a fraction and propping him up against a piece of upraised moulding, easing the strain in his arms just a bit. He immediately refocused his attention forward, fighting for composure.

"Pur-professor Hojo," he stuttered between pants, "Finished so s-soon?"

Hojo stepped out of the shadows and into the small circle of yellow light. He looked preoccupied, Zack thought, but decidedly deadly anyway, since he had Waters' shotgun in his pale hands. The scientist pushed his glasses further up the bridge of his nose, then gave a little shrug.

"It didn't take long," he muttered.

Turning to the floor as though in supplication, Zack shook his head, let his eyes slip shut. "So you killed Valentine then..."

"Of course. Now it's just you, Cloud, and I, Zack. As it's always been. No interferences. Why are you trying to escape again? Don't you ever learn? Until I'm through with you, my boy, your life is mine and so is your liberty. Four years and you still haven't accepted that fact. But look at Cloud. I think he gave in long ago."

"You're wrong," Zack growled, pushing his shoulder closer to his friend's, giving him something solid to lean against. He couldn't think of too much else to say. Hojo was just wrong, about everything, and that was that. "He needs a doctor," Zack said quietly, gesturing to Cloud with a flick of his head, "He's hurt. I wish... I wish he'd die, just to spite you."

"No you don't," Hojo contradicted with a cruel and mirthless smile, "Because then you'd be truly alone, Zack. I know your type. Loneliness would drive you insane. But enough of this. Your night of fun is over, it's time to get back to reality. Did you know you've been running back towards the Laboratory this whole time though? D'you realize that? The exit's the other way." Hojo laughed softly, raising his weapon. Thirty years ago he hadn't known how to hold a gun much less fire it. Since then, he'd remedied that. He nodded his head to the side, an obvious gesture for Zack to start moving.

"But he's hurt," Zack insisted, trying to keep Cloud from slumping to the floor.

"He'll live," Hojo assured unpassionately, "But I have to warn you, Zack, your usefulness to me and this Project is drawing to a close. The better you behave, the longer you may live. As it stands now, very soon you'll be quite disposable."

"Everyone's disposable to you," Zack muttered bitterly, "Did you kill Dr. Waters too? For his gun there? Is there nothing you won't do?"

"Shut up," the scientist sighed, following the fuming young man as he led himself and Cloud down the darkened, dirty hallway, "I'm really not in the mood at the moment. I'm having a bad night."

~*~

Chet was still blinking.

It seemed he'd been sitting wedged into the corner of Hojo's concealed office for hours, for days, just blinking his eyes and trying to make himself believe everything that had happened. His knees were drawn up under his chin, his arms wrapped about his legs, his back pressed so hard to the wall behind him that he could feel the wood grain of the boards through the fabric of his jacket. There was a little blood on his forehead, a shallow claw mark raked diagonal across his chest, but he considered himself lucky. After everything he'd gone through tonight, these wounds were hardly anything.

Chet blinked again, shaking his head a little. He decided to go over what had happened in the last few minutes, hoping it would make what was happening now seem a little more sane.

Only minutes ago, he'd been standing beside Vincent, he remembered that. Vincent had lain on the floor, still as though dead, muttering things that didn't make any sense to Chet's ignorant ears. It'd been obvious that something was bugging him so Chet had stepped forward to see what was up. He'd spent the entire time, all throughout the Turk and the scientist's conversation, hiding like a coward in the shadows and he'd suddenly grown sick of it. If Vincent needed help, well then that was that.

But Vincent had shoved him off. He'd told him to get away, just told him, just like that! Kinda rude. But Chet had listened, he still remembered what had happened to Cloud when he'd gotten too close; he'd wound up being snacked on. Not fun. So Chet had done the wise thing and backed off, watching intently until his friend finally pulled himself up to his feet, looking like... like, well like hell. Chet was uneasy to remember it now. He'd looked so... murderous maybe? Was that a good word? Conscienceless, maybe that was better. Well, whatever the word, Vincent had looked frigging scary and Chet couldn't blame that Hojo guy for backing off towards the door like he'd done. The guy with the claw meant business, that was obvious enough. He'd heard enough of four-eyes' babbling and dissing his girl, now Vincent was going to tear him a new bellybutton. And that was all fine and good, Chet hadn't been going to question that, he trusted that his friend knew who needed to die and who didn't. And besides, this Hojo guy did not seem like an ally. He was little more than another simpering scientist, just like Bier or Miller, or Waters were and Chet was eager to see him get what was coming to him, especially since Hojo seemed to be king freak of the castle. This was the climax, right? The part of the movie where you were rooting for the bad guy to finally get what he deserved, chewing on your popcorn, leaning forward in your seat, anticipating that big, climactic final duel to the death, trying to pick out the actors from the stunt doubles, ogling the million gil special effects....

But something had been wrong with the whole deal from the start, Chet had noticed. Something was wrong with the hero. His heart just wasn't in it. He hadn't gotten the girl and so he couldn't really kill the villain yet. That was just how it worked, or so it seemed to Chet. His entire concept of adventure and action was pretty much based off of comic books and movies so that was the only thing he could measure any of what he'd seen against. And Vincent just wasn't a proper hero. Anti-hero maybe, but even that was iffy. He wasn't right in the head. He was nuts. Chet had backed away in fear even as Hojo had, towards the door leading out into the hall.

The tension had been tight. A confrontation had seemed imminent. Hojo and Vincent exchanged some more words, talking about things that Chet just had absolutely no idea about, and finally that awful screeching had started. Chet had noticed the double-doored closet in the back of the office the moment they'd entered. It had been shut and chained, quiet and bloody. But when Vincent was about at his limit, ready to wash his claw in a bit more Shinra scientist blood, that was when those doors had started shaking, and the god-awful screeching had begun. Chet knew right off that something was on its way outta that closet. He tried to tell Vincent, warn him, since that's what comrades were for and the actor had figured that if nothing else, he and the vamp were comrades. But, thinking back on it now, he winced in spite of himself. He knew now that he shouldn't have tried that. Vincent just wasn't right in the head.

The man had turned on Chet, all recognition torn from his fiery red eyes, grabbed him up by the shirt and flung him into the wall. The actor'd hit hard and slumped down to its base, cursing the dazzling, swirling stars dancing in his vision. Pausing for just a moment, Hojo had watched the brief actions in interest, expression full of thought or wonder or maybe even awe. But when Chet had looked up from the ground to see what was going on, shaking off his pain and aggravation, he'd seen the scientist pull a gun. Yeah, who would have thought the little guy'd have a derringer tucked away at his hip? Well, he did and Chet saw, much to his dismay, that Vincent didn't give two shits for the gun. He'd roared like a possessed man and thrown himself on the skinny old guy just like, just like it didn't matter anymore if he got killed so long as he got to take Hojo down to hell with him. But Chet had been surprised to see that the scientist was damned remarkably brave. Or stupid. He didn't panic or try to run. He just stood his ground, raised that black derringer, and let loose. It was one of those tiny COP pistols; four barreled, a .357 Magnum caliber round in each chamber. Chet was pretty knowledgeable

about guns, it had been the only thing he and his dad had ever really talked about together. Hojo wasn't any kinda chump with guns either it seemed. He'd emptied that COP off straight into Vincent's chest, blam blam blam blam, just like that, in rapid succession, so loud that it hurt Chet's ears as he lay there watching from the floor. The force of the shots had knocked Vincent back in mid-air just like one big punch to the torso, and Hojo hadn't wasted a second. He'd turned and bolted straight out of the office, slamming the door behind him. Chet realized this musta been his plan since the beginning. Stupid sneaky jerk.

The screeching from the closet had just been deafening by then. The double-doors had been smashed into sharp little splinters and the chains rattled unbearably loud. The screeching was the worst though. It sounded all animalistic but human too, all at once. Almost familiar. Chet had spoken aloud who it reminded him of without even thinking. He knew that the minute that thing got free, he was dead meat. And so, still on the floor, Chet had crawled over to Vincent, pretty much expecting to find him dead. Surprisingly, he hadn't been. He'd just been more or less insane.

Chet had tried reasoning with him, talking to him, being nice to him, then yelling at him, but nothing had worked. And the screeching was getting louder and the wood splinters were flying from the closet doors fifteen feet through the air, jabbing Chet in the eyes. It was so loud Chet knew Vincent had to be able to hear it but the man didn't care! He was bleeding again, clenching his hands and pounding them against the floor, splashing blood everywhere, and hollering Hojo's name quite madly. It had scared the shit out of Chet. Yet that thing screeching from the closet had scared him just a little bit more.

"Vincent!" he'd pleaded desperately, tugging at his friend's sleeve, pulling at his arms, "Vincent, we gotta get outta here! Your pal Hojo's left us with something I do not wanna meet in that closet!"

There were only the chains holding the thing in now, a couple of rattling iron links binding what remained of the shattered wooden slabs. Chet couldn't pull his eyes away. He made out something glistening like skin there in the black shadows behind the doors' remains. Horns too, broad high whites shapes that almost seemed to glow at him from the gloom. And what looked like, like eyes but they burned as red as Vincent's and appeared just as crazy. Chet was almost sobbing with fear now but he was too scared and desperate to get away to just start blubbering like a girl all over the floor. That would take time he didn't have. He turned back to Vincent, thinking he was his only hope of fighting the monster off, and then it'd happened. Vincent had given off a growl, low and feral, the most inhuman noise a human could ever hope to make, and he'd ran his claw with malicious precision right across the young actor's chest, right through his shirt, tearing through fabric and flesh in a stinging trail. In the same motion, he'd then pushed him back hard, sending him falling into the wall again. Chet had collapsed. More from shock than the force of the attack. He'd fallen head first into the wall and cut his forehead on the edge of the moulding. Then he'd slumped down onto his side, wrapping his arm around his wounds and gritting his teeth.

That pretty much left him where he was now.

Chet blinked yet again.

He still didn't believe any of this was happening. And none of it seemed any saner.

Vincent had pulled himself up from the floor. Chet watched him, eyes glassy, refusing to look him in the face. He didn't care what this guy had gone through, why'd he have to do that? ... just... just claw him! After all they'd gone through together! The actor felt betrayed. Plus it had frigging hurt. He pulled his hand away from his chest and winced at all the warm wet red covering his arm. Terrific. He was gonna die in the god damned Shinra Mansion and no one would ever know what happened to him. Just great. God forbid he die like a hero, like his dad, dying doing his duty and defending his post. No, Chet Hadley was gonna die because the vampire guy he'd been hanging out with had finally snapped.

The sound of the sky cracking pulled Chet out of his self-pity. He looked up from the floor and saw Vincent standing huddled against the opposite wall, blood draining from his bullet wounds in unreal amounts. He hadn't thought people could bleed like that, that people had that much inside of 'em. But Vincent seemed indifferent to it all, indifferent even to the pain if he could even feel any of it. He was methodically plucking the bullets out of himself, using the scalpel-like fingers of his claw with new-found accuracy. The heavy slugs made sharp pings as they struck the ground. There was really only one thing in the world that could make Chet look away from the bizarre sight. And that was his curiosity as to what in the hell had made a noise that had sounded so precisely like the sky cracking.

He looked to the closet doors. They weren't there anymore.

Panicking, Chet managed to get a grip on himself and stand up. The claw mark wasn't that deep, it seemed as though Vincent had made it that way on purpose, as though it weren't meant to hurt him, just warn him, just scare him into backing off. Chet latched onto this hope. He didn't like to think that this guy was really a heartless bastard after all.

"Vincent!" he called out, and was surprised when the bleeding man looked up. Chet gestured to the abandoned closet with a jerk of his head. "There was something really big and loud in there a minute ago," he hissed, "And it ain't there now."

But Vincent didn't look towards the closet. His gaze was actually quite fixated on something immediately to Chet's left. He was analyzing whatever it was very calmly, engrossed in drinking it all in, in seeing just what this new arrival was. Chet didn't want to look over. He really really really did not want to look over his left shoulder. There was a wall at his back, at least he knew there was nothing behind him, but there was a huge, fifteen foot long space to his left and Chet did not want to see what was lurking in the shadows there, hiding in his really bad peripheral vision. But the room had gone so suddenly quiet. It had been filled with the screeching, the screaming, the pounding of flesh, horn, and claw against wood, rattling chains, the distinctly deadly evil noises of whatever Hojo had left in that closet.

But now it was quiet and the closet was empty and Chet wished he could travel back in time to five minutes ago, and grant himself the presence of mind to have gotten the hell out of this office. Swallowing his fear, he at last looked over his left shoulder and said a little prayer to his ancestors' ghosts, asking them to please make this a quick and easy death. He just wasn't fond of excruciating agony.

The monster that was standing there was... pretty monstrous. Chet found he couldn't breathe as he looked upon it. But he was strangely calm as well. I'm calmly suffocating, he thought apathetically, and bleeding to death too. Oh, lovely.

The creature snorted.

It was sixteen feet high at the shoulder and breathing its putrid, warm, wet breath all over the top of Chet's head. It very strongly resembled an overgrown... something. Actually, Chet decided it really didn't resemble anything he'd ever seen. It had six legs, too many horns to count, a head that was as big as he was tall, and two burning red and bloody eyes. They didn't blink. They only looked at the trembling young man beneath the creature's claws as though whatever intelligence it possessed couldn't recall ever seeing a more pathetic looking creature. Feeling like a roach in front of a cat, Chet stared back, whatever intelligence he possessed simply leaving him. He stumbled backwards a step and the horrible new monster advanced a step. Its strides were wide and confident and unreal as it made its way on thickly muscled legs. Its skin was like rubber, untextured, smooth and slick with... slime? Chet didn't want to find out.

"Vincent..." he whispered, jumping backwards quickly. The monster mimicked his every movement, its huge head, somewhat like a snake's, cocked to one side in curiosity. Foot long fangs protruded from its leering, half-open mouth, yellow venom dripping from the ends and striking the ground with little hissing noises. It was a horned, rubbery, six-legged snake! And it was definitely the most terrifying thing Chet had ever come face to face with. "Vincent!" he called again, his legs turning to jelly. He was walking backwards and the monster was following, content to play with him for the moment, to scare him and splash spit and slime his way, taking one step for his every five. But there was a wall coming up and this walking chase couldn't last.

Vincent was watching it all very carefully. There was absolutely nothing in his face. He seemed like a statue carved with a blank expression, dressed in true clothes and erected in the room to frighten intruders away. But then he moved, wincing with pain, and the illusion shattered. He took a shaky step towards the new creature. Chet wondered how he was able to walk at all. Hojo's four bullets had nearly blown him apart. But something else too, that something else, that deadness in his face seemed more lethal than those rounds had been. His eyes were still crackling crimson with insanity... or with that something else.

Vincent didn't have any awareness of how he looked. He wouldn't have cared if he did. He was trying desperately to think a thought for himself. He didn't want to listen to the things screaming at him inside. The voice demanding he kill, the voice demanding he die, the voice demanding he gut Chet because he needed blood to heal these new wounds, and then the voice demanding he leave this room and go find Lucrecia. There was another voice too, the quietest voice of them all, and the one that Vincent was trying the hardest to ignore. The one that was echoing outwards from his battered heart, insisting that everything... everything was over. She was dead. He was a monster. Hojo had won.

He wouldn't listen to that voice. He couldn't because if he did, nothing had meaning anymore and his purpose was gone.

The pain in his soul and mind was somewhat distracting from the agony of the bullet wounds. But he couldn't ignore them forever. He dropped to his knees halfway through his trek across the room, making a little grunt that caused the creature after Chet to look his way. Vincent couldn't help but grimace at the sight of the thing. Chet probably couldn't see, but there was a young woman hanging off the back of it, laying along the length of the sexped's spine. She seemed welded to the creature or... was she this creature? Her body was consumed by the same flesh the monster was composed of, it was hard to tell she was human at all. She was like some ugly lump on the monster's back, a horrible, unnatural growth only adding to its horrifying appearance. Vincent prayed that she wasn't his young friend's sister.

"...get away from him..."

Chet's attention jerked away from the leering face before him, the glistening red eyes, the fangs, the utter lack of compassion and total excess of hunger. Vincent had said something coherent?! Vincent cared enough to save him from this monster?! The man was half sitting, half laying on the floor nearly ten feet away, propping himself up with two weary arms. The blood was already pooling around him again. It struck Chet that his friend was going to die. There was no way

he couldn't, not with how he looked, how much blood he'd lost. Vampire or not, monster or human, it just... there was no way.

Vincent cleared his throat and spoke again. He spat red out of his lungs so he could breathe.

"Get away from him, I said."

The six-legged creature was unimpressed. It gave a growling laugh, letting the two men know there was some intelligence behind the fearsome front, and then it lowered its snaky head, exposing clearly two of its horns. They followed the line of its skull, like bull's horns, pronging upwards fearfully into the air, composed of pure white bone slicked with slime. The monster lowered its pair of swords to Chet's neck.

Vincent shook his head as though he could fling the darkness before his eyes away. He fought to stay conscious, to keep himself alive for just a bit longer. He wasn't going to die with Chet's death on his shoulders. He tried to move his right arm but it wasn't working properly, the strength just wasn't there. His fingers were stiff and cold, trembling with even the effort of twitching. Grinding his teeth until his jaw throbbed in pain, he moved his hand down to Quicksilver's handle, still jutting from his belt. He was concentrating so hard that Chet's scream made him jump.

As though he were watching television, as though he were totally detached from what was happening, as though he weren't himself and this was all a form of twisted entertainment, Chet saw the monster's right horn enter his left shoulder, wedging itself under his collarbone. He couldn't believe the pain was his, nor understand how this could possibly be happening. Cold at first, then nothing but searing white hot agony as the creature picked him clean off his feet, raising his head so that its needle-sharp horn could slide clean through, coming out of Chet's back slick with blood. Chet screamed out anything that came to mind, kicking his feet helplessly, his hands shooting up to wrap around the cold length of bone, to try and hold on though the embrace was agony. The world was spinning, denying that anything akin to sanity or order existed. He was almost twenty feet off the ground and it seemed this would last forever, that he'd be pinned up in the air forever, living in this world of pain forever. But then there were two loud cracks from a gun and the bone in his hands shattered. It split apart at the base, right where it connected with the monster's skull, and the monster itself did the rest of the work. Screeching in torment, gnashing its fangs, it jerked its head about and the horn split entirely away. Chet dropped to the floor like a stone, still holding onto the broken horn in his shoulder. He lay as though dead, the panic in his face fading away.

Vincent swallowed back a holler and lowered his arm, his heart pounding in his ears. The creature screeched and dove for Chet, stupid in its fury and eager to hurt anything it could get to. Vincent cried out a threat and immediately pumped five more rounds into its side, careful not to hit that silent figure attached to its back. He kept his eyes on Chet and was relieved when the monster turned its attention away from him and started charging Vincent.

It was running towards him at a breakneck speed and Hojo's office was not that big. He closed his eyes.

It was like being hit with a truck. Vincent felt the force of the monster's strength with every inch of his body and was thrown backwards, smashing a crater into the wall that stopped his flight. He slid slowly downwards, numb with the force of the impact, shooting blades of pain breaking through the numbness as he sputtered blood and fought to keep alive. It was that night all over again, that night in the Library with Hojo and the gun and the anger. He was going to die for real this time, there was no mad scientist here to keep him alive for the sake of revenge and scientific interest.

His back was broken, he could feel it. Snapped in two at the waist and so he couldn't move his legs. Not that he would have been able to stand anyway. Miraculously, Vincent was still holding his gun. The creature lowered its immense head to take a bite out of him, maybe pluck off his good arm with those dripping fangs, and the man beneath it fired into its open mouth. Three more rounds. One through its venom-coated tongue, two more into the room of its mouth. It screeched and shot backwards, bleeding dark and odoriferous blood. Vincent popped his last clip in, chuckling a silent thanks to Dr. Bier for the ammunition. Then he looked up, ready to empty Quicksilver off and be done with it. There was no way he could win against this monster in his condition. He was dead already. He only hoped his killer would ignore Chet and the actor'd be able to get out all right. He hoped this monster really wasn't the result of Hojo's tinkering with his sister. He hoped a lot of things, all without having the heart to answer himself pessimistically.

"What's the m-matter--?" he choked through a mouthful of salty blood. The creature was turned away, more cautious now that it knew the human had a semi-automatic. It wiped at its snout with a fore paw like some horrific puppy from hell, then stared evilly at the man beneath it. "Come on," Vincent growled, raising the gun, "Kill me-- kill me for real this time--! I'm thirty years out of place! A ghost, you heard Hojo! What's left if I can never get to Lucrecia again... thirty years ago... she was the only reason I did anything. The time isn't even important, it's only her. If it was thirty years ago and I was still a Turk, still a human and I found out she was dead, I'd have put a gun in my mouth then. So the time's not important really... only her absence..."

Vincent laughed a choking laugh, shutting his eyes to stop the tears that wouldn't obey his orders. He didn't want to cry, Turks didn't cry, not over something as pathetic as lost love. "But no..." he whispered, "It can't be lost, she can't be dead. Hojo couldn't have meant what he said... Oh gods... why would he have said she was downstairs if she was dead? It doesn't make sense!"

The monster was circling, watching, waiting. It didn't know what it wanted, it was little more than a child really, newly born off of Hojo's operating table. Little more than a Jenova mutation living off of the life energy of unfortunate Sara Hadley from Nibelheim. Its smouldering red eyes glared at Vincent's gun.

"Hojo!" the raven-haired man hollered out, delirious with agony, "Can't you even finish for yourself what you've started? A bullet in that lab couldn't do it... four bullets tonight couldn't... why torture me like this? If you're going to kill me, kill me then god dammit!" Vincent fired another four bullets into the hesitant monster so that it stumbled backwards in surprise and pain, its front right leg rendered useless. Whimpering and crying, it limped about, snorting in confusion, screeching in an animalistic tongue. The confusion turned to anger quickly enough though and it again tried to bare its fangs. Vincent put another five bullets in its mouth. "Three left," he whispered. His mind raced with Hojo's story, Chet's cry beneath this creature's horns, Lucrecia's cries as he'd lain in the coffin... thirty years ago. Her tears on that long ago night were so fresh to him now. He wasn't sure if he was sane anymore or not. If he wasn't human any longer, if he was some monstrous vampire who one day would turn into the demon that Hojo had always pictured him as, why should he stay sane? "Why should I live then?" he asked the sobbing, bleeding monster. He wanted to throw the gun away and rip his shirt open, call an invitation out. Instead he let his head drop back against the wall and he wallowed in all of it. It was everywhere, pain of every kind. It hurt so bad he had to smile at it all, there was really nothing else to do.

I want to surrender myself to whatever wants me. If the blood lust wants me, it can have me, I'll kill like an animal if it likes. But it won't love me. The demon inside of me won't care for me. What do I do? Why do I live at all? What do I live for?

He put a bullet in the monster's right eye. It cried blood. Vincent laughed.

"Two left.

"I want this to be a nightmare. I want to wake up now and be myself again." He was silent for a moment, eyes closed again, letting the monster rake its horns over his legs. He couldn't feel them anyway. "Is she here? Or is it a lie? Was Hojo lying so that I wouldn't kill him? If she's not here... I can always die later. Dying's easy. Right, monster? Dying's easy. Living's hard, dying's easy, everyone knows that."

The monster roared like a thunderstorm, filling Vincent's vision with putrid venom and its purplish, rubbery skin. It was hurt and it was hurt badly. It wanted the red-eyed man beneath it dead.

Vincent smiled and raised his gun with a trembling arm.

"Two left," he told it again, "Perhaps I'll save the last one for me."

~*~

It was a watercolour dawn.

The skies of Nibelheim were flooded with storm clouds; thick, curling piles of gray and purple smoke, as though the world were on fire and blotting out the light. The real fire was in the east though. A glaring orange sun was fully risen over the horizon, silhouetting the distant trees and mountain crags, turning them into cruel and cutting black shapes against the heavens' blaze. The sun bled and the clouds absorbed it, red and orange spreading out like water and pigment over parchment paper from the wound; the entire sky afire with morning's coming, the remnants of the night dying away on the world's western rim. The last of the stars peeked out from a break there in the clouds, a sliver of moon showing up pale and crooked as though one of its points had stabbed the sun and was the cause of the light puddles now staining the skies. It was retreating though. The night was almost officially dead and the Shinra Mansion seemed weary. It lay at the back of Nibelheim, washed out and ancient in the morning light. The sun shone off its upper windows, reflecting blindingly from the glass. Every imperfection and mark of age seemed apparent in its appearance; from the cracked and peeling paint, to the overgrown grounds. Fallen shingles were scattered in the tall weeds around the walls. A single window on the first floor had been recently smashed in. The glass still glittered on the sill.

The village itself had been up for hours. Chimneys puffed black ash into the air, warming the tiny brown houses against the morning's bitter cold, while chocobos cooed for their breakfast, their breaths steaming from their beaks, white contrasting with the chimneys' black, both contrasting with the thick purple and luxurious blue of the thunderheads above. Muffled morning sounds were floating about. People were walking the cobblestone streets with their hands in their pockets, their chins buried in their collars. Kitchen noises and domestic chatter came from the odd open window. Most action in the town was taking place at the gateway to the Nibel Mountains though. There was a lot of shouting, a lot of cursing, and a lot of concern all emanating from the large group of people congregated in the road. Scientists, guides, workmen, and the curious were all mingled together babbling their thoughts to each other, but you couldn't tell anyone apart. They all were bundled in jackets and boots against the cold.

Dr. Waters was propped against the Mansion's front gate, his hands in his pockets, the lower half of his face wrapped in a dirty white bandage. His beady black eyes looked off towards two trucks sitting further up the road, poised to enter the path leading up to the summit of Mt. Nibel. Workmen were tossing packs and supplies into the backs of them, fitting

snow chains on the tires, filling the tanks and checking the oil. They were old vehicles, remnants from Sephiroth's last mission. They'd been in the town sitting in storage for four years and they gave Waters a weird feeling in his stomach when he looked at them. He couldn't voice his unease though. Hojo had insisted upon stitching his upper lip for him, closing the wound that Cloud had made when the young man had slammed him into the floor. When he'd finished, Waters had looked in the mirror to discover the lunatic Professor had literally sewn his mouth shut. He didn't want him talking. He didn't want to hear it. And to be totally honest, Waters hardly even cared.

"I assure you, there's absolutely nothing to worry about. An unforeseen complication arose last night but it was handled swiftly and cleanly and everything's going according to President Shinra's timeline." The voice was so confident and sure of itself that Waters was half-tempted to believe it. Hojo was a sweet talker when he needed to be. Waters glanced to his left, past his conversing co-workers and towards the fifteen or so men of Nibelheim's watch. They were all gathered around the Professor, assaulting him with questions. Their leader was practically in his face.

"Half a dozen times last night I had to keep men from going into that Mansion," he muttered, getting a little spit on Hojo's glasses, "Screams, gunshots, something that, that sounded like god damned roaring. What in the hell were you Shinra goons doing in there? It sounded like war! A few hours ago there was a crash like a chandelier falling and bloody smoke started pouring out of the window! Is there something you wanna tell me?"

Hojo smeared his glasses clean with a wipe from his coat sleeve. He smiled winningly at the man.

"Not really."

"Where do you get off bringing this chaos into our town?" he went on, "We may not be blasted Kalm, we may not have the most wholesome citizenry on the continent, but we're peaceful and polite god dammit!"

Hojo cocked an eyebrow up. The Watch leader swung his left arm out and accidentally smacked two of his associates in their noses.

"I'm not sure everything is on the up and up with you," he hissed, poking the scientist in the forehead with a petulant finger, "I'm calling President Shinra himself and giving him a report of everything that was witnessed last night. I'm in charge of the peace and safety of this town and I don't care how high and mighty you think you are in the Shinra Company. The President is just as concerned as I am about Nibelheim's well-being. He owns this place! Of course he'd be! You just wait, I'll--!"

Hojo raised his left hand and shushed the noisy man.

"Sir," he began civilly, "If I told the President it was necessary, he'd allow me to have everyone in this place shot. Don't make threats to someone who holds your miserable life in his hands."

This shut the Watch leader up. His mouth closed with an audible pop. Dr. Waters chuckled silently to himself, wincing at his stinging lip and the gap where his four front teeth used to be. He moved a hand up to rub his face through the bandage, then caught sight of a blonde head bobbing about not far off. One of the remaining doctors along with two hired guards were escorting Cloud towards the trucks. His hands were bound at his back, his eyes were turned to the dirt. Everything about him sagged, even his spiked blonde hair. His eyes burned a dimmer blue.

Waters had never really lost consciousness after the young man's sudden attack. He'd lain in the hallway, dazed and dizzy, his head nothing more than a giant throb of pain. He was still holding his gun when Hojo had come along, his steps brisk and loud, an empty derringer pistol in his right hand. He'd given the injured scientist a single disgusted glance, then grabbed up his shotgun and muttered something about doing everything himself. Dr. Waters had shut his eyes so he didn't have to watch him walking down the hall after Cloud and Zack. He'd felt so embarrassed and so angry all at the same time he'd barely been able to stand it.

The entire night seemed ridiculous when he thought back on it now. Monsters and killing and fear... it all seemed insane now that he was outside the oppressive walls of the Mansion and standing in the open sun. Nibelheim was annoying, but normal. Normal enough anyway, after Sephiroth's assault and its reconstruction. Waters looked around at the people and sighed, the cold stinging his injured lip unbearably. A mother walking along, holding a little boy by the hand and pointing out the sight of the trucks, which were strange and marvelous things in a village where nothing ever happened. Dogs were lopping along underfoot, breath rising up warm and smoky from their snouts. The men of the Watch were spitting tobacco and rolling cigarettes. Dr. Vanswith stood directly in front of Waters, talking with Dr. Ghrerd as a kid discreetly picked his pocket.

This was reality. There weren't any vampires here, or fights to the death. Reality. Nibelheim. People. Just another day of work. Waters rubbed his eyes with two stiff fingers, trying to press the weariness and unease from them. Last night was dead. His friends were dead, but they'd been avenged. That was comforting at least. Too bad it was Professor Hojo who'd done the deed. The Professor had never even asked about Miller, that older man who'd fallen under Bier and Waters' bullets. He must have just assumed he was another casualty of Valentine's. Four men dead in the space of a few hours. They were laid out in the basement, awaiting the arrival of choppers from Midgar summoned only minutes ago. They wouldn't arrive until later this evening but when they did they'd take the most prominent reminders of the night away with them.

Of course, Cloud and Zack were still there, Waters thought absently. His wounds were still here. He wouldn't be forgetting Vincent Valentine and all of the hassle and grief he'd caused him tonight anytime soon.

"I was right outside the Library," a voice whispered to Waters' left. The scientist turned slowly and looked upon Dr. Vanswith standing only a few feet away, talking with a Ghrerd. There were only six men left of the original ten who'd arrived in Nibelheim last night. "Right outside the labs with Waters, Miller, and Bier," the skinny little man said fearfully. His face was pale. "But I, I was the only one who had the sense enough not to go in! Gods... when I think how close I came to following that idiot inside..."

Vanswith was calling Dr. Waters an idiot. Usually, this would mean that Dr. Waters would shortly be introducing his fist to Vanswith's simpering face, but no, not this morning. The scientist figured he really didn't have the right; he really really was an idiot. He'd caused two deaths.

"What made you leave?" Ghrerd asked, not really sounding impressed. He was an older man, mid-forties, with a face like unsculpted putty and three days worth of beard on his chin.

Waters wished he could talk for a moment, and answer that Vanswith had left because he was a blasted, worthless, spineless coward.

"I left because I'm smart," the little scientist snapped. He tugged the collar of his bulky coat up closer around his face. "Four men don't go after a monster with so little between them. And nothing more than scientists, any of us. Dr. Waters may be a football player or whatever the hell, but that didn't help him out down there. He couldn't help Bier or Miller. A failure... I doubt he'll have a job anymore once we get back to Midgar."

Waters could feel his face turning red. The cold air burned colder against his hot cheeks. His heart hurt too, and he recognized it as guilt. He hated feeling guilty, it was the most worthless feeling in the world. Ghrerd looked up towards him, aware that he could hear their conversation. He shrugged helplessly.

"Well, Doctor, I don't know what to say. I'm only glad I wasn't well acquainted with any of the men slaughtered last night. I lost nothing save a good night's sleep. And a few years off my life after listening to everything going on throughout the manse. But Professor Hojo seems calm enough towards it all now, so I'm not too concerned. I only wish I knew a little better all that had occurred. You spouted things about a vampire, Dr. Waters, but that seems a little er, exaggerated."

Waters' eyes glittered in silent fury.

"Yes, well, I say we put all that unpleasant business behind us. The choppers will come from Midgar tonight, drop off a few live men, take back the few new dead ones, and then that'll be that, won't it?"

"Are you directly outta your mind?" Vanswith yelled, poking his colleague roughly in the chest. He tried to keep his panic-ridden voice low. "You'll just explain it away? Just like that?"

Ghrerd shrugged. "I put my faith in Hojo," he said, "And he's over there explaining to the village's Watch how perfect and in order everything is. Why shouldn't I take his words at face value?"

"Ah, perhaps because he's merely telling those things to those men because they're ignorant peons who wouldn't understand the situation if we drew them a map? This is Shinra business. And I'm sure, when we all have a moment alone, Professor Hojo will tell us what's going on. Oh, look, Dr. Waters is trying to say something."

Waters was sputtering over his stitches, trying to make his tongue work. The skin of his upper lip stretched and stung and all he could manage to make were unintelligent guttural sounds, more aggravating than his silence. Vanswith gave a merciless laugh and walked away, off to find the rest of their team. He wanted everyone to know just how smart he'd been for running from that basement. In an abstract sort of way, it made him a hero. He'd saved his own life. Sort of.

"How are you holding up, Dr. Waters?" Ghrerd asked kindly, striding over to his co-worker's side. Waters struggled to reign his temper in, then shrugged and pulled the flaps of his jacket tighter. He squinted his tired eyes towards the distant mountains. They were obscured by mists, the limited orange sunlight shining through it in gorgeous prismatic patterns. A rainbow stretched from one crag to another, that beauty a startling contrast to the bare and blasted, lifeless cliffs of the Nibel mountains. The reactor was just visible, just barely, upon a summit some seventy miles off. A huge purple cloud rolled past it, like a gloved hand from the sky desirous to keep the world's eyes away from the sight of something so wrong embedded in the heart of something so natural. The contrast of the thick masses of cool gray storm clouds up against the painfully beautiful blue skies was heart-wrenching in the way that only nature can be.

Waters sighed. He shrugged again at Gherd, then gestured to his stitches.

"Can't talk? That's a shame," the older man said wistfully, "I'm sure you have some amazing stories to tell. You were the one wandering the Mansion all night. I hope you didn't get hell from Professor Hojo for it. I know he hates when any of us actually think for ourselves."

At the mention of his superior's name, Waters looked back towards the man. He was still talking with the Watch leader, only it was obvious now that he'd gotten the conversation entirely under his control. The Doctor looked back towards the Mansion and suddenly wondered what exactly had happened in that office of Hojo's. Was the vampire really dead? But then, he must be. Here was Hojo, alive and well, without a scratch on him. Waters' one hope was gone. And what stung the most when he remembered it now, were Zack's accusations from a few hours ago. He'd accused him of

being a hypocrite, always talking about getting rid of Hojo but never doing anything about it. A coward, in the end. Is that what he was? Nothing but a coward...

Ghrerd was saying something, making polite chit-chat, but Waters ignored the old Doctor's ramblings. He looked instead to the mountains, to that distant reactor, and wondered what they'd find up there. Something else to benefit Hojo, no doubt. It seemed the man was favored by everything in the natural world, as though he were blessed by a particularly cruel god. It was really odd. He succeeded in all of his endeavors. If Sephiroth hadn't gone mad and been killed, he'd have reached his peak of progress by now, and Hojo would be even more revered for his genius. Waters hated it, hated him, envied him, all these things pointing towards regret for not doing something about the skinny little freak ages ago.

The Doctor sighed and shut his eyes, making Ghrerd toss him a funny look. He leaned back against the Mansion's iron gate, smelling the sharp scent of rust in the cold and cutting air. He banged his head backwards a few times, sighing profoundly, cursing his stitches, his wounds, hating Cloud and Zack, hating his job, hating pretty much the entire world at the moment.

When he opened his eyes again, it was to the sound of a scuffle. Zack had broken out of the two guards' grasps, having given one a broken nose and now wrestling with another. They were trying to get him to follow Cloud into the smaller of the two trucks but the Soldier rather disagreed with that plan. He looked up from his fight, pinning a guard's arm behind his back as he pressed his face into the dirt, and saw Waters staring. The dark-haired man regarded the scientist with pure loathing, jumping from the guard and attempting to dart forward, teach him a lesson, make him pay for his bullying ways and for nearly killing Cloud. He didn't get a chance though. The other guard came at him from behind and tackled him by the waist, gouging him in the back of his head with an elbow.

Zack tumbled to the ground and hit it with his chin, hard. Through stars, he opened his eyes to the sight of Hojo's shoes, shuffling dirt into his face. He grit his teeth and craned his head up.

"Have too much sugar in your cereal this morning?" the Professor asked, gesturing for the guards to grab their charge and finish loading him up, as though he were so much cargo, "You're terribly hyper."

"Fuck off..." Zack growled, receiving a smack in the eye for his disrespect.

"The next time you try something..." Hojo began with a dangerous gleam in his eye, "Will most definitely be the last. These guards have rifles for a reason, my boy. And every man in my group is armed."

Zack would have spit in his face but Hojo was too quick. He stepped backwards then whipped around, the watery morning sunlight glaring blindingly from his glasses. He called the Watch leader over as his crew began to gather closer. Zack watched the back of his head until he was thrown quite roughly into a truck, the doors closing behind him and cutting out the scene. He looked forlornly to Cloud, who lay shoved between the floor and back of the driver's seat. The kid only shrugged and nursed his shoulder, content enough to forget for the moment just where they were going.

Hojo breathed deep of the morning air, then scratched at his ear and adjusted his glasses. It was surprisingly nice to be outside. He gave the scraggly mountain trees a glance, then looked to the sky, abstractly admiring the sunrise. A few birds were croaking an ugly morning hymn from not far away. He looked towards them disapprovingly. They didn't pay attention.

With a few words, the guards began moving the Nibelheim citizenry away, the last of the equipment loaded in the trucks. Waters stepped forward though he made sure to stay near the back of the small group of scientists. He didn't feel like being talked to or looked at. Hojo caught his eye anyway, and grinned just enough to be irritating. He then dismissed the hired guards (members of the town's Watch mainly) and beckoned his men to approach.

There were six left. Waters, Vanswith, Ghrerd the MD, and three others. The latter were youngish sorts, just out of school and extremely wise in the ways of cowardice. The first of them, Tutome, hadn't been able to find a decent coat and now stood shivering in his shirtsleeves and cursing the world.

"I highly disapprove of this," he said through chattering teeth, "After all that's gone on, how can we continue? We're severely understaffed, Professor Hojo."

"Yes," Vanswith agreed, stepping forward, "And if I hadn't run out of that basement when I did, we'd be even more understaffed."

Everyone had heard his story by now and tossed evil glances towards the guy. Vanswith shrugged and pouted.

"President Shinra has given us but a scant two weeks leave to occupy this village," Hojo answered lowly. His furtive black eyes glanced back towards the trucks, as though afraid of another escape attempt. His employees watched him closely. "Any delay in our schedule is disastrous. If we're to achieve all that was laid out in the proposal, we must use every hour available to us. There isn't room for squeamishness, nor second guessing my decisions. We go and we go now. The dead are dead, the living live. Being men of science, I'm sure our unfortunately deceased comrades would have wanted it."

Oh that's just god damned lame... Waters cursed mentally, C'mon Hojo, you can come up with something better than that.

"Do you even care that they're dead?" Vanswith hissed. He could barely believe he said it. He drew back the moment the words had escaped his lips and withered under the look that Hojo gave him. The Professor seemed thoughtful for a moment. Then he sighed.

"No," he answered. And it was the truth. He hadn't known any of them except for Bier. And Bier had been too ambitious for his own good. His death was actually a useful thing. "Get your things together and load up in the trucks. Dr. Waters, you'll drive the specimen vehicle, I'll take the first one. Tutome, Nater, Ghrerd, come with me. Vanswith and Meer, go with the quarterback. And try to behave, boys."

"Will Zack and Cloud be all right? I mean, you don't want to keep an eye on them, sir?" Vanswith didn't understand it. He scratched his balding head.

"Cloud's too weak to do much but sit there and look quadriplegic. As for Zack, I'm sure you heard my words to him. He will be immediately shot the next time he tries to leave our friendly company. Don't wait to question me, just do it. Shoot to kill. That goes for anything suspicious. I'm sure you're all painfully aware of what went on last night. I'm certain that it's all in the past now, but don't let your guards down, gentlemen. If something seems suspicious, strange, or out of place, kill it. It isn't difficult. Not often in your lives will you be granted total amnesty from everything and anything that you do. This is a rare case. Kill before questioning and before worrying about consequences. Or you may very well be killed."

"This sounds like a blasted military mission," Tutome fretted, crossing his arms nervously. He shivered in the breeze. "I mean, I'm not ready to head up that mountain and start blowing things up! I-- I'm a scientist, sir! I don't even know how to fire this damned gun you've given me!"

Hojo glanced his way dryly and lifted an arching black eyebrow. "Raise it, aim, pull the trigger," he muttered, "I'm sure you can figure it out. And if you run out of ammunition, pray to your Gods and hope they listen. Hey, that rhymed."

The scientists shifted uneasily, all save Waters who simply stood with crossed arms and stared intently at the Professor, his cheeks red against the white bandage 'round his jaw. Hojo gave him a glance, saw that his little verse wasn't going to get any applause, then turned to the trucks. He stalked away towards the first one without another look back at his men. His ponytail flapped in the winds, waving them farewell.

"This is madness!" Vanswith hissed the moment he was out of earshot. Waters shrugged, lids half-lowered in disinterest over his eyes. He squared his shoulders and followed Hojo to take his place in the second truck, rubbing his hurt lip as he went.

"It'll all work out," Dr. Ghrerd reassured with indefatigable optimism, "Professor Hojo seems quite calm."

"Madness!" Vanswith said again, either not hearing or ignoring the old man, "Those mountains are wretched, dangerous, treacherous things and he's armed us against them! We're scientists dammit, not bloody soldiers! Someone back me up here!"

"Gee, Vanny, if you're so scared and so smart, why don't you run away like you did before?" Tutome sighed bitterly, "I wish Dr. Bier was still here, I wouldn't feel so vulnerable if he was with us. That man had an aura, you know? Dangerous."

"That man was a walking petri dish," his friend Meer muttered, "He had a third eye in the back of his head. Under his hair, you know?"

"Eww! Vanswith, you were his friend, is that true?"

Vanswith looked up, misery and defeat in his face. "Yeah," he confirmed with a shrug, "It was a failed experiment though, since it was blue and Bier had green eyes. The color didn't look natural."

"And if the eye in the back of his head had been green like his other two, it would have looked totally natural," Tutome stated questioningly, shooting Vanswith a 'you are a complete idiot' look.

"Why wouldn't it?" the scientist asked innocently.

"Because it's in the frigging back of his head!! Good gods! what a freak!" Tutome curled his lip in disgust and stalked away after Hojo, muttering curses.

"What the hell's his problem?" Dr. Vanswith mumbled, crossing his arms huffily. Ghrerd the MD looked at him oddly but only shrugged, tugging on the sleeve of the young guy beside him, Nater, and then the both of them moved off after Hojo, leaving Vanswith alone with Dr. Meer.

"You going to stick by me?" he asked nervously. Meer looked startled. He wasn't used to being talked to, he was rather awkward, even for a scientist.

"Uh... sure," he said quickly, "But uh, I thought you were this great hero after you abandoned Dr. Waters and the rest in the basement. Why would you desire my assistance?"

"Mainly because I don't want to die."

"You're still worried? That monster everyone was going on about is dead, Professor Hojo said so."

"Terrific, are you in Hojo's fan club too?" Vanswith hissed in muddled exasperation. He threw his hands into the air, comically annoyed. Meer shrugged, and adjusted his thickly-rimmed bottle-bottom glasses.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"I mean don't believe everything that he tells you!" Vanswith winced and lowered his voice, "Don't believe everything, and if you're wise, don't believe anything at all. Whatever's in the reactor atop this blasted mountain is what made General Sephiroth go insane four years ago. And General Sephiroth was the strongest man I'd ever met. Something here broke him and doesn't it make you just a little uneasy that we're marching up to meet it? Gods... I wish we had some Turks with us or something."

Meer shook his head and frowned. "Professor Hojo doesn't seem worried at all. This Jenova specimen is totally harmless, we've all read the reports, shuffled through the research. It's ludicrous to be frightened."

"Well then call me ludicrous," Vanswith mumbled, tugging his collar up around his jaw. It seemed the winds were blowing colder. He heard the trucks starting up down the path, smelled the exhaust chugging from their tailpipes, and noticed the Nibelheim citizens watching it all with fascination, hanging out in the road just behind the Mansion's gates, too frightened to venture beyond. "What are they so scared of?"

Meer looked towards them, then followed most of their gazes to where they stared off into the distant mountains. He whistled lowly. "We don't live here," he said, "We don't know what these mountains are really all about. If we lived in this village every day, we might have reason to be a bit more prudent towards what we're about to do. Look at them. As you said, those mountains, that reactor, this entire town... it was Sephiroth's undoing. A lot of people died here four years ago. Perhaps what we're doing, repeating the trek that doomed the General, turning up graves, so to speak... perhaps that's disrespectful. I think this place is haunted."

"I don't believe in ghosts," Vanswith said defiantly. Professor Hojo was yelling for the two of them to get moving, they were holding the group up.

Meer grinned darkly as the two of them jogged off towards Waters' truck. "I'll bet you didn't believe in vampires either."

The leader of Nibelheim's Watch shouldered his musket and eyed the exiting pair of men. They hopped up into the rearmost of the two trucks, ignoring Hojo's rebukes and sarcastic remarks, and then with a belch of exhaust, the vehicles were off, puffing their way up the side of the mountain. The Watch leader raised a hand above his eyes to shield them from the glare of the viciously orange morning sun, then gave a little grunt once the trucks had rounded a corner in the treacherous mountain path, disappearing from view.

"You want to raid the Mansion now?" the eager punk beside him asked. He was twirling a stiletto around in his right hand, flipping it about between his fingers. His leader shook his head.

"Let 'em keep it," he muttered, turning abruptly about and heading back into town. "It's their business after all."

~*~

It was early April and the ground was still frozen. The trucks crawled up the ice-slicked mountain trail at a snail's rate, the massive iron chains wrapped about their tires cracking through the wintry tundra and snapping ice shards into the air. The sky overhead rolled, churned, and bubbled like stew in a cauldron, promising a storm and one hell of a storm at that. Winds howled through the mountains' leafless trees, naked branches rattling together, the remnants of a late snowfall turning to slush beneath the lash of warmer air.

Most of the creatures who usually inhabited the forbidden terraces of the Nibel Mountains were still in hibernation. Only a few watched from the shadows as the Shinra trucks rattled past, furtive yellow eyes staring enviously as the opportunity for dinner passed them by. They skulked in the scraggly bushes and hid behind rocks; lean wolves hungry after a harsh winter, vultures starving for prey, and other less definable things, monsters born from the belly of the mako reactor perched at the mountain's summit. A dragon as big as three of the trucks combined lumbered past, obscured from view by a wall of rock. It gave the vehicles a disdainful glance, then continued chewing on the wolf carcass it'd found. Lines of smoke ran from its glistening green snout, rising up past the wall and into view of the rear truck. Zack saw the tell tale signs of danger and frowned.

Nursing a sore jaw, the Soldier propped himself against a wall of the second truck's capacious rear, looking nervously out the window one minute, then nervously back in at his surroundings the next. Cloud was pushed into a corner like a discarded toy, his chin sunk down on his chest and his eyes closed. Zack sighed. He looked outside again at the twin lines of smoke from the dragon that no one saw.

"You know, if that thing decides to jump us," he said to no one in particular, "We're toast."

Zack didn't get an answer. He sighed again, then slumped down and sat on the scuffed floor. This entire truck was making him nervous. It was the same exact blasted thing he and Cloud had ridden in four years ago. And he was sitting exactly where Sephiroth had sat as they'd made their way to Nibelheim. Cloud was where he'd sat before, when he'd been suffering from motion sickness and Zack had kept nagging him in his excitement. The little drama was alive and well again, yet twisted and wrong and different. Where was the General? If the nightmare was real and it was all happening again,

Sephiroth needed to show up soon. He'd already missed his cue. He had a new town to burn, new people to kill. Everything had been replaced, solely for him to destroy again it seemed.

Zack tapped the back of his head lightly against the side of the truck behind him, his long black spikes brushing over his bare shoulders as he shifted. He turned his eyes to Cloud. He didn't know if he was unconscious or merely ignoring him. The Soldier nudged him with the toe of his boot.

"Sorry everything got so fucked up," he began lowly, "I was so sure it'd work out I can barely believe it didn't now."

Cloud opened his eyes slowly and looked to his friend. His wounds had been treated but he was still ill with loss of blood and the stress of the night. His face was as white as the shirt he wore. "Where's Sephiroth?" he asked, speaking through cracked lips.

"Dead, and it's now four years after the fact," Zack answered without batting an eyelash, "Don't start thinking this is a nightmare, okay? I know being in this truck again, being hauled up the side of the mountain to the reactor again, it all just makes your head swim with deja vu but trust me, Cloud, this isn't four years ago all over again."

Cloud looked like he wouldn't believe him for a moment. His blue eyes sparkled with delirium. But then he turned his face away and muttered, "I wanna go home."

"Yeah me too." Zack ran a hand up over his face, feeling the stubble on his chin and realizing he hadn't gotten to shave that morning. But then he focused his attention more keenly on Cloud. "Listen, man. Hey spike, I need you to pay attention for a minute. I know they've got you a little drugged up, but think you can concentrate just a little?"

"Just don't ask me to stand on my head or anything, 'aight?"

Zack laughed in relief, then shoved Cloud chummily in the shoulder. "Deal. Hey, you know where we're headed, right? D'you remember?" He nodded. "Okay, well, I'm going to tell you now that you and I..? We ain't gonna be staying. That reactor... whatever they wanna do to you up there is gonna be the end of all they've done till now. I just know it. That Jenova thing's in there and Hojo's got foul intentions when it comes to that monster."

"Tell me something I don't know," Cloud sighed, "What does it matter? If they make me as crazy as Sephiroth, maybe this all won't be so bad anymore. I dunno."

"Hey, quit thinking like that. No, the reason I bring it up is 'cause we're gonna tell these scientists to go to hell shortly and take our merry leaves. I'm taking you outta here."

"Are you?" Cloud asked bitterly. Zack was surprised at the sudden venom in his friend's voice. "Like you were going to before? Listen, Zack, I've always appreciated your attempts but face it. You're helpless. There's nothing you've ever been able to do about any of this. Maybe you're the reason why it's been so hard. You've never just learned to accept it and go with it and suffer. You always gotta be thinking this is gonna end some day and when it never does, that hope you had, it dying, that hurts more'n a million needles. Fuck escape, it isn't going to happen. Let Hojo do with me what he will. I don't care. He'll have his way no matter what we try."

Zack grit his teeth and narrowed his eyes, his face contorting into cool rage. "He was right then. Hojo was right. You have given up. I hate the both of you."

"I'm sorry you don't like the ride we're on. Maybe if you'd gotten to be in my place, you'd like it more."

Cloud rested his forehead against his knees and drew a few deep, shaky breaths. Zack watched his lowered blonde head and his anger suddenly faded, as it always did. He never stayed mad at Cloud for long. But still, the unfairness of it all, the unfairness of losing his comrade, it stung sharply. If Cloud wasn't going to be his partner in hope, then Zack was alone and sad and defeated. "So will you be all right then?" he asked softly, suddenly. He glanced around from the side of the support he was sitting against, staring at Cloud till he'd look up.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Zack shrugged, a strange small smile haunting his lips. "I only ask because I'm not going to be with you too much longer."

"I told you to quit thinking about escaping!"

The dark-haired Soldier shook his head and raised a hand in denial. Cloud looked upon him with half-parted lips. "No," Zack said, "It isn't that. What I mean is, they're going to kill me soon. Their aims with you are almost complete and my roll as your cell mate has gotten kinda extraneous. So Hojo's going to get rid of me."

"Don't be stupid," Cloud said uneasily but the fear was obvious behind his words. "I mean, no, he wouldn't do that. I'd, I'd go nuts, I wouldn't ever cooperate with them ever again, Hojo knows that! You're safe, man, I won't let 'em touch you."

Zack couldn't help but laugh, even though it angered his friend. "So you're the one protecting me now, huh? Cute."

"You don't protect me," Cloud hissed, pushing himself away as though he might sink into the very wall behind him, "Do you protect me from Hojo and the bastard scientists? No. You never have. I'm not blaming you, but you never have. And I've never been able to protect you from them either."

"Well if I'm so fucking useless you won't miss me when I'm dead then," Zack spat spitefully. He crossed his arms over his chest and sat back against the support, grinding his eyes into the ground, refusing to look up.

"Don't say that..."

But Zack wouldn't take it back and Cloud wouldn't apologize. The air between the two was silent for a while, nothing save the rattling of the tire-chains against the icy ground and the idle chatter of the scientists in the front seat to mar the quiet. Without warning, the dragon outside roared for attention and Cloud flinched sharply. He didn't like the sound of it, he didn't like the feeling in the air, the smell of mako, the presence of that monster he knew was in the reactor. He thought he could hear it almost, but that wasn't anything special. He could still hear snatches of conversation from Nibelheim if he concentrated hard enough. But then, it was ridiculous for him to think he heard Jenova. It was dead, a corpse preserved in a specimen tank, buried in the leaden walls of the reactor. He'd seen for himself. Cloud sighed and rubbed his chilly fingers into his eyes. Maybe he was crazy.

A low rumbling of thunder followed the dragon's roars, as though trying to compete with the sound. Cloud looked up, features draining paler. "S'gonna storm, you think?" he asked timidly. He sounded like a little kid and Zack grinned at him.

"That's usually what thunder means," he answered, trying to force the kindness back into his voice. He was scared of what was going to happen, but he wasn't going to think about it. He'd try and escape when the time came and if Cloud wouldn't go with him, he'd pick his scrawny blonde ass up and haul him away over his shoulder. Although Zack never thought he'd see the day when he'd have to force his friend to leave Hojo's possession.

"Yes, it's going storm..." a voice called from the front seat. There was only a thin sheet of clear plastic separating the driver's portion from the back and Zack looked up to see Dr. Vanswith peering at him through the dirty partition. "It's going to storm bloody hell, I gave the barometer in the mansion a glance before we pulled out. Of all the days for it... I swear you two are rotten luck. Now shut up back there please."

"Why shouldn't they talk?" Dr. Meer asked neutrally. "Dr. Waters can't talk with his stitches, all you want to talk about is how brave and intelligent you are, and I have little to say that hasn't been said before. Let them talk, it cuts the silence."

"If you'd rather we speak," Zack said coldly, "We'll be sure to hold our tongues from now on."

Vanswith scoffed but didn't say anything else, turning himself about and sitting back down in the worn vinyl seat. He was wedged between Waters and Meer and feeling decidedly squished and uncomfortable there. "Don't know what you're being so cocky about, Zack," he said in an ugly tone of voice, "But then I suppose you're always like that." The scientist stared intently out the front window, watching the truck ahead of them as it spewed exhaust and veered haphazardly along the unstable, ascending path. The spindly trees were catching the screams of the winds buffeting the two vehicles and throwing them around like playthings. "Professor Hojo isn't driving that one himself, is he?"

"I doubt it," Meer answered easily, "Menial things like that are what we're here for after all."

"So I thought. Dr. Waters, pick up the pace, they're gonna leave us behind if you keep following so slowly."

Waters had a look on his face as though he'd very much love to take a brick and shove it in Vanswith's ear, then pull it out through his nose, but he didn't do it. Only because he didn't have a brick. He slammed his foot on the gas instead, and the truck's tires screeched shrilly against the ice-slicked road, making the rickety old thing lurch forward a couple hundred feet before falling back into its meandering pace. The lead truck was driving recklessly, accelerating one moment, then pounding on the brakes the next and Waters was having a hard time following. Pulling up sharp suddenly to avoid rearing the thing, he wondered what in the hell was wrong with the driver.

The atmosphere in the other truck was worse than the one in his.

"Thirty years... I suffer, weep, wail, and moan for thirty years and this is what comes of it. I may as well have taken that guilt, spat on it, buried it in the Mansion's front yard for all it did me. What was I expecting of it? Retribution? What the hell good was any of it? Guilt! How useless! I live my life guilty as hell for almost thirty years and then she shows up and, and shoves my face back in my own pile of sins, ones I'd hoped that guilt had purified me of. I was sorry for it, for all of it, had been since the moment it started, yet that guilt gives me nothing. She comes to me, she accuses me, and then she sends him after me. Him... She'd have seen him kill me, that's what she must have wanted. Fit punishment, fit-- fit retribution. Is my death the only thing that would ever satisfy her? The guilt doesn't do it?? Is that it?!" Hojo sucked again at the brown glass bottle in his right hand. He drank so violently that his entire body jerked towards the liquor and took the steering wheel he was gripping with it. His truck careened along the icy road with a heart-stopping screech, coming only inches away from a sheer cliff lining the primitive trail's right side. The other scientists inside were doing their best not to throw up. "She's dead and it's funny how I thought that would rid me of her pleading eyes, that damned hurt look she'd give me, as though I could help, actually do anything about all that was happening... she never realized that I was just as much a tool as she ever was, only she got to die! I'm the one forced to keep on living, keep on playing the part of that tool! She got out! She's free! But she would have seen me pay for that, for things that aren't my fault! And so what's the deal now? Now that he's just as dead as she is, finally just as dead, is he going to haunt me too?! I won't have it! I'll never take another step inside that blasted Mansion again if that's what it takes. They can haunt it together, rattle their chains, moan their lamentations, feed off each other's pain as they always did, the pathetic pair of demented sadists. I'm out of it! They were made for each other? Fine then! They can have each other!"

Hojo beat his fist on the steering wheel without thinking, and the horn sounded off. It echoed eerily through the sharp wintry air, bouncing off the mountain's sides and causing a small avalanche of rocks and ice. They pebbled against the roof of the truck and the scientists inside shivered in anxiety.

"Sir..." Nater called timidly, "Perhaps you'd like me to drive?"

Hojo didn't look up. He stared through his fogged glasses out at the road ahead of them. He sucked again at the bottle. "Perhaps not," he growled, "Of course, God knows I'm incapable of everything, incapable of driving, incapable of handling anything even remotely difficult without pulling out a bottle of this, this--" Hojo looked quickly to the container in his hand, but couldn't find a label. He'd discovered it in his old office, figuring it must be alcohol, and since he was sure alcohol was supposed to improve with age, he'd snapped it up. He didn't usually drink but he needed to take his mind off of things. He was hanging off of the edge of something he couldn't name. "Well, of whatever this is. I'm incapable, a joke of a technician, a joke of a scientist. Gast... he was always better, still is better, hell, who wouldn't be better than me. I couldn't even kill him... thirty years to die and he didn't and tell me how some punk kid in an alley can kill a man in three seconds with a bit of steel and I couldn't kill Vincent Valentine with thirty years worth of time to work with! What do I amount to then? Would you like to let me know?"

"Sir..." Dr. Ghrerd the MD was talking now, looking to his superior with eternally kindly eyes, "Are you sure we should be hearing this?" It sounded as though Hojo was confessing crimes that could be dangerous to whomever might overhear.

The Professor didn't seem concerned though. He laughed a bitter little laugh and gripped the steering wheel with both hands. His eyes were wild and his tie was loose, sweaty hair plastered to his temples. "Like I care who hears anymore. Like it would matter. You can know it all, there's nothing anyone can do about it now, nothing Shinra would do. I dictate laws to Shinra, it isn't the other way around anymore. Without me, that company would topple and fall. I could kill you all and he wouldn't bat an eye. But don't worry, I have no reason to kill you wonderful gentlemen. No reason at all."

"That's good to hear," Nater choked, grinning and trying not to look too nervous, "Er, yeah."

Hojo wasn't paying attention. He leaned forward as though he were trying to make something out more clearly through the windshield, but his eyes were unfocused as he swerved the truck along the road. "I should have killed him, killed him without question all those years ago. But no... I had to be dramatic and I had to have the poetry in blood, I had to do what Jenova said, and I had to turn him into what I saw him as. A vampire... a monster, a thing that I'd never be, as horrible as I might become. And she still sends him after me! Lucrecia! You stupid whore, don't you see, even now? See him for what he is and what he always was behind that damned blue suit?!"

"A v-v-vampire?" Nater mumbled, and his young co-worker, Tutome, tapped him on the shoulder, whispering the same word into his ear. "So it was true?"

"It's none of your concern!!" the Professor barked, jerking about so sharply to face the other three men in the truck that you could hear the vertebrae in his neck snap, "The entire night was my business and now I have to mop up the mess before the world finds out... just like that night... Gah! the entire affair is nothing but aggravation and deja vu! Years of guilt proven worthless! Something I did so long ago now rises to the surface of my life again like, like a drowned spider coming to the top of a pond! It's dastardly and unfair! I won't stand for it!"

"You really did make a vampire?" Dr. Nater asked meekly. Hojo nearly jumped for his throat.

"He's dead now and it doesn't matter!" he roared, "D'you hear me?! It may have before, but he's dead now, as I should have made him years ago! Dead as Lucrecia and I wish hell to the both of them! She betrays me in death as she did in life, the adulterous, cheating--!" Hojo couldn't come up with a strong enough word. His maledictions squeezed themselves out into a powerful, sputtering silence. Then he growled and hit the steering wheel with his fist again. The truck shot forward, and Dr. Waters struggled to keep up.

"What is that thing's problem?" Vanswith wondered aloud, leaning on Water's broad shoulder and squinting out at the truck ahead of them, "Dr. Waters, keep on its tail, it's almost as though it's trying to crash us both off the mountain."

"And what a pity that would be," Zack muttered from the back seat. Cloud snickered.

Vanswith squinted his tiny black eyes as though there were some secret to be revealed in the sight of the truck before him. But no, it was just a typical Shinra transport vehicle, manufactured in Wutai, dirty with age and disuse, and veering along the road as though the driver were... "Drunk," the skinny scientist muttered finally, "Well that's quite unprofessional."

"To hell with you, don't you forget who you're talking to!" Hojo put the bottle to his lips and jerked his wrist again, giving Dr. Nater a lethal glare. He'd just accused him of being drunk but he wasn't drunk, he couldn't get drunk if he tried. He hadn't gotten drunk in years and he certainly wasn't going to put himself in that low state over his dead wife and her would-be lover now. No! he wouldn't give their ghosts the satisfaction!

"But sir, why don't you let me drive?" Dr. Nater asked meekly, speaking in soft and subdued tones as though he were reasoning with a five year old. He put his hands before him, palms outward, fingers extended. "You're our superior, it's really not proper for you to be driving. One of us should take the task."

"Ah, so you're going to tell me what's proper and what's not, is that it?" Hojo snapped, swerving the truck quite suddenly and trying to run down a skittering raccoon as it darted 'cross the road before him. He missed and swore.

Tutome whispered something else in Nater's ear and Nater was inclined to agree. Yes, they were dealing with a lunatic. But then, the ability to deal with lunatics was a prerequisite skill in becoming a Shinra scientist. That, and the ability to take insult after insult from Professor Hojo. "Sir, I mean no disrespect. It's just that you've been ranting on about vampires and your departed wife for a half an hour now and that bottle of yours is getting close to empty."

"Close to empty?" Hojo downed the rest, then hurled the bottle out the window. It flew through the air in a bright arc of glittering glass, shattering to sand against the cliffs in a small, tinkling explosion. "Now it's totally empty, Doctor. Satisfied? And if you think it's all ranting, you're wrong! It's truth, all of it. Dead ugly truth that's never going to leave me alone. I smell it. I smell the mark of something that's going to give me nightmares. I swear by the Gods, sometimes I think I should just inject myself with Jenova cells and give myself entirely to her. It'd save me a lot of aggravation, a lot of grief and worry and thought. One day, maybe, I'll put something a lot stronger than liquor in my veins to get rid of these blasted memories..." Hojo pounded his foot on the accelerator. It was as though the further he drove away from that Mansion, away from that town, the more bearable it was. Yet the relief came in small amounts and he knew with a bitter sort of satisfaction, that it was from the distance, not the damn alcohol.

Unaware of Hojo's little emotional problems and having missed his bottle's short-lived flight, Waters followed the truck persistently, slamming on the brakes as his leader did and nearly rear-ending it. He muttered a few appropriate oaths, then picked up the pace again. The Dragon outside was watching the little game of bumper cars with something like amusement on his reptilian features. He stalked the trucks like prey, though he had little intention of attacking. He just liked to follow the big, noisy machines and peer through the windows at the tasty morsels inside, roar occasionally, and watch them panic. He was actually very bored.

Despite the erratic slowing and speeding, on the whole, the pair of trucks ascended Mt. Nibel sluggishly. After a while, the sun rose a little higher in the sky, illuminating the mountains more fully. Zack pressed his forehead to a window in the side of his moving prison and stared out at the landscape. It was ugly, every bit as hideous as he recalled. The rocks were brown as though dead, there was no vegetation and the only remaining trees were skeletons, leafless ghosts that swayed in the wintry breeze. The motor trail they were on wound its way through the mountains' more stable ground, yet even now the cliff edge lay only a scant two feet from the outside of the trucks. Zack peered over the precipice and gulped, remembering how the bridge had collapsed so suddenly on the mission to the reactor with Sephiroth four years ago. He, Tifa, the General, they'd all plummeted down so far and so fast Zack was sure they'd all be dashed to death on the rocks below. But fate hadn't let it all end so easily, it had wanted to play with them some more.

The truck was rattling just as it had years before. Every jolt shot up through Zack's boots and into his spine, adding to the beginnings of a headache starting to form behind his eyes. He glanced to Cloud who'd fallen asleep, his blonde bangs flapping wildly with the movement of the truck, and felt a twinge in his heart so that he grimaced with sudden sadness, turning away so he didn't have to look at his friend. He didn't want to die. Not because he was scared, or because he had any love for this hellish life he'd been trapped in for so long, but because he didn't want to leave Cloud alone. Granted, it was true he wasn't the boy he'd known years ago, the boy he'd sparred with, talked with in the barracks, joined the army alongside... but he was still Cloud, no matter how much he'd changed and hardened with the years of pain. He was unstable now, a little crazy, a little manic, but he was Cloud Strife, Zack's best and only friend in the world. He didn't want to see him reduced to a shell manipulated by Hojo and chemicals and Shinra and everything other sick fucking thing in the world; becoming nothing but another little puppet with his brain too fried to help him resist anymore. But what was there to do?

"I'm not going to let them kill me..." Zack muttered beneath his breath. There was conviction in his tone that hadn't been there before, "I'm gonna live just for you, spike, whether you want me here or not." He suddenly wanted to hear Cloud talk, to know he was okay. Zack walked a few paces away from the window to kneel at his friend's side and wake him up, not caring he'd probably wind up getting punched in the face for his pains. Cloud just looked so washed out after the long and harrowing night that it was frightening to see him so still in sleep; still as though dead. The bones of his skull showed through his pale skin, his bangs brushing over features taut with pain. Zack bent forward to flick his nose and bring him back to life but the Soldier never got the chance. Vanswith muttered a violent curse, Waters tried to mutter a violent curse (but was halted by Hojo's stitches of course), and Meer got his head smashed against the dashboard when the truck suddenly jerked to a rickety, screeching halt, front end plowing up the rear of the truck before it. Zack found himself on the floor, Cloud laying atop him and blinking away sleep.

"I don't think Dr. Waters should drive on the way back," he said quietly, then worked on pushing himself off his friend.

"Are you all right?" Vanswith asked quickly, giving Dr. Meer's bleeding forehead a quick glance. The young, timid scientist nodded, then tried to push open the passenger door. The lock clanged in its slot, jammed shut by the impact of the crash. Waters growled deep and loud, the only sound he could manage, then shoved his own door open, tumbling out into the road and slipping on the ice. His breath steamed sharp and white from his flared nostrils.

"What sort of driving is that?" Hojo's highly irritated voice called from the open window of the first truck. He stuck his head out, unruly black hair billowing in the chill breeze. He pushed his glasses back on his nose distractedly, then opened his own door and hopped out. "Can't you do anything properly, Dr. Waters?" he demanded, stalking up to the other scientist, who loomed nearly a foot and half taller than him, "I put you in charge of the second vehicle and you can't keep from riding my tail and finally smashing into a fifty-thousand gil Shinra transport?! You're finished, my friend, my patience with you is gone. Once we return to Midgar, I want your cubicle cleared and your reports finalized. You're off of my team permanently."

"But, sir..." Vanswith called out, trotting forward after managing to extract himself from the other truck, "Sir, you stopped terribly short, I don't think there was anyway he could have avoided hitting you..."

"That's not the point!" Hojo raged, "The point is that he's failed and I'm not going to allow that to happen again! Besides..." Hojo lowered his arms, which he'd been flinging around in gestures that seemed to show just how much he'd had to drink out of that little brown bottle, then turned stiffly about, ignoring the cold. He left the congregated scientists and marched to the front of his truck, jabbing his right hand towards it. "You see this?" he called, and his men stepped timidly forward to investigate, "Would you like to tell me what I was supposed to do?"

The mountain trail had never been that wide to start with. It had been dug only a few years earlier and then, only as a primitive service road that snaked a ten foot wide corkscrew trail up the mountain's side. However the bit of trail immediately before Hojo's crippled truck was now non-existent. Examining it now, the men of the team saw there'd been an avalanche perhaps a week or so earlier and after the snowstorms of the past few nights, ice had frozen the fallen debris into a solid, unmovable wall. It loomed nearly twenty feet high and was too wide to contemplate, spilling off the road and over the cliff. Hojo jabbed his bony fists into his hips and pouted.

"I don't understand," Dr. Ghrerd said calmly, coming forward, "When Nibelheim was rebuilt, the path was widened to allow for motor access as they repaired the reactor. What's happened..?"

"It's nature, good Doctor," Hojo sighed in exasperation, "No matter how we plan for it, Nature will screw science time and again."

"You don't think..." Vanswith swallowed hard, trying to act his age. He crossed his arms and popped his lower back, nonchalant, "You don't suppose this has anything to do with last night, do you?"

Hojo looked as though he might spit out some insult but he thought better of it. His crew was unnerved enough, it would be better not to antagonize them. "No," he assured calmly, "This is obviously old. The ice is frozen upon the rocks in layers. This is nothing but ill fortune." The Professor sighed and rubbed two fingers into his tired eyes, trying to think. They'd been driving for a few hours and had indeed taken a good chunk out of the distance required. He turned his eyes up to the mountain's summit, hundreds of feet above his head. He could make out the bottom of the precipice the reactor was perched upon yet he couldn't see the reactor itself. That was maddening to him. He had to get up there. He had to get up there just as he'd ever had to do anything to aid, or to keep Jenova. "Time check," he said curtly.

Tutome glanced to his wristwatch. "A quarter after eleven, sir."

"All right," Hojo sighed, "Now's a good a time as any to break for lunch. Go ahead. In twenty minutes, we start hiking."

"WHAT?!"

Hojo'd been expecting that reaction. He put on his fiercest expression and glared each man down. "You'll do as I say, someone has to be in charge and that someone is me. It can't be more than a few miles to the caves and once we're there, the rest is simple. Now I won't stand for questioning." With that, he turned from them and stalked back to his truck, knowing each scientist must be shooting daggers at his back. It was almost gratifying knowledge.

"But the animals..." Vanswith whimpered, his balding head wobbling back and forth on his neck as he struggled to see everything around them clearly, "These mountains harbor monsters and animals! We can't possibly do this!"

"But we must," Dr. Ghrerd sighed. He placed a hand on the younger man's shoulder, "Besides, Professor Hojo is right. The rest of the way is short and simple. I've been up here before."

Vanswith whimpered some more but everyone ignored him. Tutome and Meer went to extract Zack and Cloud from the truck, binding their wrists behind them and pinioning their legs. Cloud didn't say a word as they rendered him harmless but Zack kicked at the young scientists, spit in their faces, and generally just let it be known that he did not enjoy their company. If the two men had been more comfortable with the guns tucked away inside their coats, they probably would have lost their patience and shot him.

Dr. Ghrerd watched the group struggling for a while, then sighed and placed his wrinkled white hands behind his back. He walked slowly over towards the open rear of Hojo's truck, knowing the Professor was inside.

"Sir?" he called, meekly approaching. Hojo was indeed seated inside and his head snapped up from a clipboard in his hands upon Ghrerd's approach, looking decidedly cranky. "May I have a moment?"

"No, you may not have anything," he muttered, "But you may talk and maybe I'll listen."

The kindly old Doctor chuckled sincerely. Then his features sobered and he stared upwards at the top of Hojo's bowed black head, as the Professor scribbled notes on his clipboard. "I've been watching Cloud and I'm not sure he's up to going through the procedures today. Jenova injections are physically demanding on a subject, we've both seen them kill a good number of able-bodied youngsters. After Cloud's wounds last night, I'm not sure he'd survive. He's weak and he's in pain. I treated his shoulder last night as you know and if it were just that one wound, it might be different. But it seems something... slashed his right wrist open at some point last night. He might have bled to death if we hadn't found him and Zack sooner. He's really in no condition to be hiking to the reactor, or to be undergoing procedures inside."

"The mako speeds his healing."

"True, sir," Dr. Ghrerd relented, "But even that needs time. Perhaps we could put this off for a few days. Since the road is blocked, that might be for the best."

Hojo shook his head with a few jerky motions. He laid the clipboard aside, then peered past Ghrerd's shoulder and to the expanse of sky visible outside. He gestured to it with a flip of his hand. "It's going to storm soon," he said casually, referring to the rolling coloured clouds that had been forming in the sky since they'd left Nibelheim, "We need to hurry."

"Sir... if Cloud dies, that will be years of work wasted. It'll be like the loss of Sephiroth once again and that was such a disappointment."

The words touched Hojo like a heated poker. He raised his lip in a snarl. His dark eyes glittered behind his glasses and he fidgeted in his seat upon an overturned crate. "That wasn't my fault," he growled.

"Sir, I never said it was--"

"No, of course you didn't. No one ever does. But don't you think I understand what you're implying? That Sephiroth's death could have been avoided if he'd been in a better mental state upon coming to this cursed village? If perhaps, he'd never come at all? It wasn't my fault, the mission was done at Shinra's orders and I was the last to hear about it. By the time I arrived, it was too late."

"We all know this, sir," Ghrerd said amiably. He was actually feeling quite cheerful, he was sure he was about to persuade the Professor to follow his advice, "No one blames you. But you may be blamed if today's activities are forced on that boy. It isn't healthy and it isn't wise to continue. Neither is it wise to force six men out into the elements, force them to hike miles to a reactor and deal with the animals roaming these mountains."

"These things aren't wise?" Hojo asked. He sounded almost sincere, a child needing instruction. But then he sneered and turned away. "What wouldn't be wise is delaying this project any further. I won't be delayed because of Valentine. Nor will I be delayed because Dr. Waters got trigger happy. The Jenova Project continues, it would continue if I were killed and had to haunt the Shinra labs to get you all to carry on my aims. Nothing will stop it. It's bigger than all of us and nothing's going to stop it."

"Just a few days, sir..." Ghrerd pleaded, sincerely concerned for Cloud's health.

"I believe you can infer my answer, Doctor," Hojo replied coldly, "As for Cloud, you're the MD. I leave it up to you to keep him alive. If you fail, you'll wind up just as dead, I'll see to it." He took up his clipboard again and wouldn't speak another word. Ghrerd turned away in defeat.

"I'll do my best, sir."

Hojo smirked so hard his glasses fell off. "Of course you will."

~*~

Two hours later, Zack was taking his frustration out on the rocks at his feet as he and Cloud were herded along like pigs being led to the slaughter. He kicked at pebbles and ice, then watched them skid away; over the edge of the cliff, smack into the wall of rock to his right, into the shoes of the men walking before him, he kicked out with each step, though with each step he knew he had less and less time.

Cloud was leaning heavily upon him as they made their way, receiving no assistance from the scientists, only reprimands when he didn't move fast enough for their liking. Zack cursed them all but every word was impotent. So he fell to cursing himself, hating his helplessness.

"I haven't heard that dragon since we started walking," he muttered, not expecting an answer from Cloud who could barely breathe much less talk from his exhaustion. "I almost wish it'd come barging in here and just take us all out, ya know? It'd be worth it, just to see Hojo's mask crack. But nothing alive and with half a brain is gonna dare come so close to the reactor. I think we're definitely on our own, man."

The sky was obvious with its promise of rain. The clouds had thickened and now spread from one horizon to the other. They were every colour that rightly shouldn't be in the sky; green and purple, pink and black. A fierce wind was buffeting the mountain, swaying the seven scientists and their two captives back and forth just as easily as the trees struggling to keep their roots anchored in the deadened ground. There were chilly drops of rain riding on the breeze. Only a few though, tiny promises of the storm to come.

"How much longer until we reach the summit?" Vanswith hollered above the howling wind. He pulled the flaps of his coat closer, brushing raindrops from his glasses with his sleeve, then adjusted the fifteen pounds worth of equipment strapped to his back. The group had been able to carry most of the important items from the trucks, enough to allow their plans to continue, yet it was a back-breaking situation, "I swear I'm gonna collapse! Dr. Meer! How much longer?"

"Maybe an hour?" Meer answered, a hand clamping his hair down upon his head, knees bent under the weight of his own pack.

"But it's going to storm bloody hell any minute! Why doesn't Professor Hojo just give this up?!"

It had taken nearly half an hour for the group to climb over the ice and rock wall that had blocked the trucks' path. Cloud had lost his footing and almost broken his neck but on the whole, they'd gotten over without too much incident. Afterwards, the journey had even started out pleasantly. The storm clouds blocked the harsher rays of the sun, the wintry air hadn't bitten quite so hard, and the recently cleared motor trail had inclined only slightly, clear of rocks and ice. But things had grown worse. The way now was treacherous and difficult, parts of it entirely vertical, turning walking into hiking, then finally into climbing. The avalanche that had hindered their progress before seemed to have only been the beginning. Hojo wasn't certain, but he wondered if there hadn't been some great shift in the earth for so many debris to have broken from the ancient mountain and tumble into the road like this. Slabs of stone lay embedded in their path, their edges sharp as razors, honed by the ice and wind. The snow on the ground had hardened until it was like walking on cold glass. The scientists were too busy trying to find their breaths and find their footing to talk too much among themselves.

A fat cold raindrop spattered on the left lens of Hojo's glasses and he muttered something obscene, wiping the wet away on his sleeve. He was in the lead and paused a moment to turn his face up to the sky. It was almost absolutely black. The sun was gone and the afternoon was like evening, the color knocked out of everything. The wind picked his ponytail up and slapped his back with it viciously.

The very wind is against me, he thought piteously, even as he resumed his journey, plodding forward one step at a time, missing the little brown bottle he'd thrown from the truck window. Nothing's ever easy. Nothing's ever fair.

Waters walked at the very end of the ragtag group of men, moving like a big black barge through the wind and rain. He wasn't quite sure what to do. If he was no longer even a Shinra employee, if Hojo truly had dismissed him back there, why the hell was he here then? Shouldn't he turn around and head back to Nibelheim, get on the phone to his wife and break the news to her? Fired... fired for things that weren't even his fault. Fired after risking his life the night before trying to defend everything that the Shinra Science Department stood for. It was disgraceful.

Ghrerd the MD scratched at his wind-battered eyes, shot a quick glance to Waters' sulking, plodding form, then jogged forward to walk at Hojo's side. "Sir..." he called hesitantly, "Could we have a rest? Cloud and Zack look tired, as do the rest of the men. Ten minutes would be heaven."

"What's that?" Hojo looked up absently, shoving dark thoughts from his mind. He glanced to the sky again and frowned. "We need to get to the reactor before this storm starts. This disturbance looks violent, I'm concerned about being caught out in the open with it raging; there's lightening there on the horizon, it's moving this way."

"Five minutes then, sir?" Ghrerd asked hopefully. Hojo sighed and nodded, dismissing the older man with a careless gesture, "And do me a favor, Dr. Ghrerd? Tell Cloud to stop his damned blubbering. I thought he was over his crying spurts, he's nearly a grown man."

"Excuse me?"

Hojo turned about impatiently and saw the ignorance on the older Doctor's face. His lips pursed in confusion. "Isn't that him crying?" he demanded. Ghrerd glanced back to Cloud, who was savouring the brief pause in their journey, leaning hard against Zack's shoulder, bent double and struggling for breaths. His face was twisted in weary pain, but there weren't any tears in his eyes. Hojo shook his head. "Don't you hear that?"

It was hard to hear much of anything above the roaring of the tempestuous winds, but both men cocked their heads up to listen. The wind was wailing like a living thing but behind it... behind it there was the barely discernible sound of a living thing wailing!

"What the hell is that..?" Vanswith whispered, narrow features paling as the fear grew in his watery eyes. He and Dr. Meer walked a few steps forward, hopping over the rocks in their path to stand at the sides of the two older scientists.

"It's coming from up ahead," Meer said softly, "It isn't just the wind?"

"The wind doesn't snifle," Hojo muttered darkly. There was such malice and anger in his eyes at this interruption that the men about him were afraid to say anything. He stood and listened to the eerie sound of someone's sobs, the soft noise carried to his ears on the breeze, then clenched his fists at his sides and ran forward a few steps, the winds beating at him like the open palms of a thousand frozen hands. His coat and hair were caught up in it, flailing about him wildly. "Come along!" he commanded as the scientists simply stood in the road and stared, "Bring Cloud and Zack and hurry up!"

From the back of the party, Waters frowned through his stitches. Thunder sounded off in the distance, a low and threatening roar, and the scientist gave the stormy sky a worried glance before grabbing a hold of Zack's two bound hands, ushering him forward. Cloud followed automatically, struggling to keep up.

"Someone's cryin'..." he whispered, his head bowed and his eyes half-shut. Zack looked at him in concern.

"I thought I heard it..." he said in his friend's ear, "It isn't just the wind then?"

Cloud shook his head, swallowing hard. He stumbled suddenly over an uneven patch in the road and Waters turned to kick him in the leg. Zack wheeled about on his captor in a fury.

"Your god damned kicking him isn't going to help him go any faster! You bullying prick! I'll tear your head off if ya so much as touch him again!"

Waters grabbed a hold of Zack's hair and shoved him forward so that he fell on his elbows into the icy dirt, scraping himself and smacking his shin on a rock. Then the man picked him up as though he weighed nothing, setting him on his feet again. Zack blinked away stars and looked in his face, unable to help but shiver. The sight of Dr. Waters smiling through his stitched closed mouth was creepy to say the least. He turned away from it, clenching his teeth, and walked forward, doing his best to keep Cloud standing.

"Someone's cryin'..." the blonde-headed kid said again, as though he wanted someone to do something about the fact. Zack shook his head, feeling as helpless, as worthless as he always did.

"I hear it, man."

The path grew steadily steeper, steadily worse. It was sprinkling now, there weren't any delusions that the storm might pass. The cold rain was almost snow, almost. But not quite. It was liquid enough to keep them all miserable, soaking through coats and tripling their weights, spattering against glasses and stinging eyes. Despite the whipping winds, Hojo's black hair was plastered to his scalp. He shivered violently against the cold yet didn't slow his pace. He was almost running, pushing his way past rocks and obstructions, absently listening to the men of his group following as best as they were able. His glasses were hopelessly spotted with water but he wouldn't pause to wipe them clean. The mako caves weren't that far ahead. If they could reach their shelter, it would be all right. Then it wouldn't be too much farther till they reached the reactor, till they reached Jenova...

"It's getting louder," Vanswith whimpered into Meer's ear. Ghrerd looked back to the two younger men and couldn't help but nod. The sobbing was getting louder. Past the wind, past the rain, past the still far-away thunder... someone was weeping harshly. "Damn it... it's getting louder--!"

Meer didn't feel the need to respond to the unnecessary words. He dashed over a fallen tree limb, raindrops flying from his cropped blonde hair. He was shaking but trying to ignore it. A twisting line of lightening split the distant sky. The world lit up bright and purple for an instant, then died back into darkness.

Hojo redoubled his pace. The sound of crying was driving him mad. "Who's there?" he shouted out defiantly. Through the downpour, he could see the cave entrance in the distance now; a round shape glowing green through the piercing lines of rain and the sight gave him hope. He swallowed hard, panting, and headed for it, trusting his men to follow. The way was lined with three story high boulders iced over with greenish hoar frost. The green was everywhere actually, the mako here was strong, glowing up from the very stones, leaving Mother Earth to rise up and wind around Hojo's ankles in wispy green tendrils. Rain streaked down the sides of the glowing boulders, the electrified ground caught the lightening and glimmered. Hojo ignored all of the unnerving distractions and plodded forward, fighting down panic. He flung his hair from his eyes and ran towards the cave entrance. The crying was so near it was as though the source of it were at his elbow, at his side -here-

Ruined patent leather shoes splashing through puddles of mako and rain, Hojo pushed his way past a leaning boulder but then pulled up sharp before taking a single, slow step backwards. The scientists at his back abruptly halted, nearly slamming into him just as Waters had crashed into the truck he'd driven.

"Sir..?" Vanswith let his gaze follow Hojo's and the Professor shook his head and narrowed his eyes, taking another step backwards and knocking into the man. He couldn't believe what he was seeing, who he was seeing sitting there on a low, ice-slicked stone, slumped heavily against the leaning boulder and weeping shamelessly onto its surface. The rain pounded the lone figure without regard to his anguish.

"You...?" Hojo blinked twice, then ran a trembling hand through his wet hair. He couldn't believe it.

Chet didn't glance up if he was even aware of the men. He seemed like a ghost sitting there in the cold; his skin had reached a white that was almost blue, his teeth chattered in the chill wind even as gasps and sobs flooded his tongue. His dark brown hair stuck against his forehead like flattened worms, rain snaking down his neck, down his forearms, dripping from each fingertip. His windbreaker was gone, there was only his ripped and blood-encrusted white t-shirt, his tattered, over-sized bluejeans. The wound in his shoulder had stopped bleeding and was crudely bound with red cloth. Hojo blinked again.

"How did you get here?" he asked immediately. Waters came forward, still holding onto Zack and would have echoed the question if he'd been able to speak.

Chet continued to weep bitterly, his features contorted in grief, his breaths coming hard and infrequent. The tears might have poured from his dark green eyes if not for the rain. He didn't look up, only buried his forehead further into his arm, pushing himself against the side of the boulder he was propped against as though he'd like to melt into it. Without

warning, Waters darted forward, shoving Zack away, and grabbed the young man roughly by the collar of his t-shirt, giving him a little shake. Chet yelped pathetically, tears of grief turning to tears of pain as the unthinking scientist hurt his already throbbing injuries.

"Answer me..." Hojo hissed in his face as Waters slammed him backwards against the rocks, "How did you get here? Where's Valentine? Answer me, boy, or I'll have you tossed from the top of this blasted mountain."

Chet looked as though he didn't understand the question for a minute. He wiped at his nose and gave another gasping hiccup, trying to speak through his tears. "...d-d-dead..." he whispered, "Everyone's dead!"

Hojo seemed to untense just a fraction, though it was barely noticeable. He gestured to Waters to let up his strangle hold. Dr. Waters did as commanded, forgetting for a moment how much he hated the man, the both of them allies when it came to the events of the night before.

Hojo was almost shaking with his curiosity and demand for answers. He flicked a strand of hair distastefully from Chet's face just to keep himself from snapping. "How did you get here?" he pressed.

Chet was sobbing again, that little bit of control he'd managed to find, gone. "D-d-dead..." he whimpered again, "My s-s-sister... the only person I had in the world and you-- you killed her! She tr-ried so hard to make enough to send me to school, t-to take over after dad died and t-take care of me even though I was the br-brother, it was my place-- my place! to provide for her! But no, she n-never 'cused me of slacking, or, or being irresponsible. She was just always there for me and then... you k-k-killed her!"

Hojo sighed, so used to hearing things like this that he felt almost comfortable again. He knew how to deal with this sort of situation. "I did not kill her," he said imperially, "Merely... changed her. For the better. She was quite rude to me."

"N-no!" Chet made as though he'd lunge forward and strangle the man, but Waters held him back, slamming the kid against the rocks in a splash of rainwater and blood. "Nooo..." he moaned, fresh tears in his eyes, "She's dead and so's that guy who helped me. It's n-not f-f-fair..."

"They killed each other?" Hojo asked, arcing an eyebrow.

Ghrerd stepped forward and demanded, "Professor, sir, who is this boy?" He was ignored of course.

Chet gestured weakly to the red cloth binding his shoulder. "He gave me his bandanna..." he sobbed, "And tole me to get out... he said he was s-sorry he couldn't help me with Sara... but that I'd been a good friend ta him. He said there wasn't any reason to live if he couldn't be with his girl... I don't blame him! If Sara's gone... I d-d-don't wanna live either..."

"Sentimental rubbish," Hojo spat, turning away.

"You're more a monster than Vincent was..." Chet whispered, letting his chin drop onto his chest, "Vincent wasn't a monster at all, he was a good guy who got screwed with by a jerk! By a Shinra fucking asshole!" Chet kicked his legs, trying to knock Waters off of him, trying to get to Hojo and take out his fury, but it was like trying to move Mt. Nibel itself. Hojo had his back to the struggle but the sound of his laughter was obvious. He turned suddenly, shoulders quaking, and quickly walked up to Chet. He laid two fingers on the struggling boy's neck.

"A good guy?" he whispered, smiling slightly. His fingers brushed the slash mark on Chet's throat and the young man winced. For a moment, Hojo thought it was odd that the fang marks were still bleeding while the wound in his shoulder, obviously gotten from his battle with the monster back in the office, had clotted. But then he shook his head and forgot it. "Yes, a good guy," he continued, "A good guy... d'you know how sick and tired I am of being referred to as a 'bad guy' while men like Valentine get the adulation of young and ignorant nobodies like yourself? I'm very very tired of it. He bit into you, right here. Some 'good guy'. He killed four men last night. Some good guy."

"...you all had it coming," Chet wailed piteously. His shoulders shook with sobs and Waters dropped him back on his rock in disgust. He curled his legs up, knees to his chin, and lay on his side, crying and not caring that they all were watching. "Sara..." he moaned, eyes squeezed shut, "Sara, I'm sorry I couldn't help you... aw, man..."

Hojo stared coldly at him for a moment, then scratched at the rain tickling his nose and began walking towards the caves again. He'd been sure that Valentine was dead but hearing it now for certain made relief wash clean and cold over his soul. He was almost smiling as he headed away, ignoring the eerie sounds of Chet's wailing sobs. Waters was glad too, though he'd never doubted that the Professor had managed to kill the red-eyed man. He knew how lethal the son of a bitch was. Especially after seeing him walk down that dark Mansion hallway with the spent, smoking derringer still held in his hand. The image of that would never leave him, he was sure of it. He followed after his superior, shivering in the cold, glad that those nearby caves would be dry.

"Sir!" Dr. Ghrerd called out, taking a nervous step towards Chet's oblivious, trembling frame. He gestured helplessly. "We can't just leave this boy here! He'll freeze!"

Hojo laughed lightly, not even bothering to turn. "He can accompany us if he likes. The more the merrier."

Dr. Ghrerd frowned, but was glad of the answer. He approached Chet and tried to put a hand on his wet shoulder. The young man shoved him away.

"I came up here to die," he muttered violently. His eyes were wild and sad, "And so that's what I'll do. Is that why you've come too, good doctors? Ha..."

"Surely you're not serious..." Ghrerd said kindly, "You're covered in blood, the wolves will be on you in a heartbeat. It's a miracle you weren't caught on your way up. Come along with us." He tried to grab him again but this time Chet kicked out with his right leg and landed a solid hit in the man's stomach. The Doctor fell backwards into Vanswith, huffing and puffing. Zack chuckled.

"I think he is serious," the Soldier laughed. But then he sobered and turned to Chet, "Sorry 'bout your sister. Sorry 'bout Valentine too. I thought he was a prick, but, well, I guess we're all pricks in one way or another."

Chet promptly ignored him and swiveled his head about to face the rocks at his back. He curled into a fetal position, frame wracked with crying. Zack stared at him for a moment in complete desolation. But then Tutome and Meer had a hold of his bound hands and he was forced onward towards the caves, the winds freezing the rainwater snaking over his shoulders. Cloud gave Chet a quick glance and hurried after.

"Sorry," he muttered, but the force of the winds carried the word away.

Vanswith walked at the blonde-headed kid's side, Meer only a step or two ahead with Zack. "More happened last night than we know about," he called through the rain, "Professor Hojo seems to be killing things left and right. I think there were some decidedly illegal happenings."

"Stuff it," Meer demanded in uncharacteristic firmness.

"Who do you think that kid was?" Vanswith wondered, ignoring the command.

"Just another victim," Meer sighed, and he gave Zack a forceful push into the cave. Vanswith shrugged, pushing wet bangs from his eyes. He turned to take a final look at the crying kid back on the rock before following.

But Chet had disappeared.

~*~

Pushing thoughts of Vincent, Lucrecia, anything distracting and unscientific from his mind, Hojo pressed onward into the blackness of Nibel's mako caves. He'd been here once before, as a young scientist asked to inspect the mountains and judge their worth in terms of mako abundance. He'd had very positive reports to give at the time. This entire area was phenomenally rich in natural mako energy, Shinra had been absolutely giddy when he'd approved the plans to build a reactor here. Even now, after years of being harnessed to power the light bulbs and televisions of the world, the cave walls glowed steadily beautiful with energy. It curled in the very living rock, writhing in veins of smoky green that stroked the walls, ceiling, and floor. Hojo brushed his fingertips along the damp stone, features lit by the uncanny illumination pulsating up from the surface.

"Stay close behind me," he quietly ordered the men at his back. He spoke as softly as he was able, unsurprised when the high ceilings of the cave caught his voice and tripled the sound back at him in waves and waves of echoes. "It's extremely easy to become lost in these caverns. They connect like--"

"Honeycombs..." Zack finished for him with a smirk, "Yes, our guide told us four years ago, thank you but we don't need a guided tour, doc." Zack ducked a smack from Dr. Waters but the bully caught him on the rebound, landing a solid blow to his dark-spiked head. Zack swore and stumbled forward, but was grinning again in seconds. They wanted to kill him? He'd go out smiling and cursing their names.

Hojo ignored him. He was feeling too good about life to possibly let Zack's usual impudence get to him. Footsteps muted, breaths shallow and low, he led the way through the beginnings of the glowing green caverns, his hands spread slightly at his sides as though to feel his way along. Waters followed closely, shoving Zack ahead. Cloud came last, too weary to even need a guard. He plodded along, wishing he could collapse, almost hoping they'd reach the reactor soon just so he could stop walking. His shoulder, forehead, and wrist all burned in unspeakable pain, yet he bore it as he bore all of the inconveniences of his imprisonment: with apathy and lifeless eyes. The rest of the scientists walked at his back, content to let Cloud, Zack, Waters, and Professor Hojo face whatever dangers lay in these too dark, too mysterious caves.

The storm picked up and began showing its mettle. The noise of fat, merciless raindrops floated through the air muffled and eerie, the sound they made as they struck the stone ceiling of the caverns like the sound of a million fists pounding on a million closed doors. The rain seemed almost spiteful that it couldn't drown the men beneath it. And the thunder roared like a monster, like the dragon that had followed their trucks had, denied of its prey. The storm wasn't a distant threat anymore. It was real and it was dangerous, and it was just outside their damp and frightening little sanctuary.

Vanswith looked about himself fearfully. The cave wasn't pitch dark, in fact it was lit more than well enough for him to pick his way over the rubble strewn at his feet, yet the illumination was dim, it was wrong. This wasn't the filtered energy of the Planet that Shinra used to light a lamp. It wasn't that familiar, controlled glow. This was raw power, the blood of life, and it was intimidating, overpowering, frightening to his civilized eyes. "Dr. Meer," he whispered to the younger man at his side, "How big do you suppose these caves are? I don't like them. I'd be content enough to leave them as soon as we can."

Meer shrugged his narrow shoulders, wiping the remains of the rain from his face and neck. "I don't think they're that long if we're just going straight through. I do know if you don't stay on the path though, you can become lost in miles and miles of subterranean tunnels. Fun."

Vanswith shivered in spite of himself. "I don't like this place. There's something unnatural about it."

Ghrerd approached from behind suddenly, placing his hand on Vanswith's wet shoulder, nearly throwing the scientist into cardiac arrest. "That's just the thing, my boy," he said cheerfully, "These caves are completely natural."

"I don't like nature then."

"Ha..." Dr. Ghrerd chuckled and walked a bit faster to tread at Cloud's side, to give the young man a once over with medically-trained eyes. He was taking Professor Hojo's threat seriously. "I suppose that's why you're a scientist for Shinra then," he called before moving out of earshot.

"If I'd known a night like last night and a day like today was going to happen when I submitted my application to the department four months ago, I would have walked out in traffic. I—" A vicious peal of thunder drowned out whatever Vanswith was gonna whine about next. He jumped half a foot in the air, knocking into Meer.

"Get a hold of yourself!" the latter demanded impatiently. He shoved Vanswith away, then walked faster, leaving him behind, sick of his cowardice. Vanswith looked after him pitifully, his lower lip hanging out in a pout. He whipped about and turned to the other scientists, desperate for company, too scared to walk these green caves alone. Especially now that they were nearing the area closer to the reactor and the light wasn't quite as bright as it had been further back. The guy squinted his eyes behind him, waiting for Tutome and Nater, the two silent techs who seemed to prefer to be left to their own devices, to catch up. He listened beyond the drumming of the violent storm, shuddered as the thunder roared, winced as the wind howled. But it was the silence, the lack of footsteps from behind, that suddenly made him shiver so hard he nearly fell over.

"Dr. Meer!" he pleaded loudly, making bits of the cave's ceiling break away and shower into his hair, "Dr. Ghrerd! Professor Hojo!" He stood stock still in terror, eyes bulging from his skull, sweat replacing the dampness of the rain on his cheeks. "Professor Hojo!"

"For God's sake, man!" Meer rushed back, squinting to see Vanswith through the cave's dim green light, "You're going to bring these entire caverns crashing down on our heads! Lower your voice!"

"Dr. Meer!" The trembling scientist was grateful beyond words to see his face again. He rushed towards him and used all his self-control to keep from flinging his gaunt arms around the man's neck. "I think Tutome and Nater are lost!"

"Lost..?" Meer narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips, not believing the words. He took a few steps back the way they'd come, his face like modeled green clay in the uncanny glow. He could only see a couple hundred feet back along the path they'd traveled, the light was too bad. "Professor Hojo!" he called, turning his head back around and using a much calmer, more controlled voice than Vanswith had, "Sir! I think we've lost two men, hold up!"

Hojo could be heard muttering insults from up ahead. After a few seconds, Vanswith and Meer saw him approaching, Waters, Ghrerd, and the two weary specimen on his heels. He peered over Meer's shoulder, back towards the dark path in their wake. Nothing. The path itself was well worn, full of their muddy footprints. Exits and fissures branched off of it from every angle, yet Hojo knew the way well, it was marked on the walls for anyone who knew where to look. The Professor shoved his glasses further up his nose, then impatiently crossed his arms. "I told the lot of you to follow closely," he growled, "I don't have time for this."

"The way is dark, sir," Ghrerd said in defense of his two lost co-workers, "I nearly took the wrong turn a couple of times myself." Hojo tossed the old man a disgusted glare, then gestured to Meer, who nodded after a moment in understanding. The young scientist was hesitant at first, but then raised a hand to his mouth.

"Tutoooooooooooooooooomaaaaaay!!" he hollered, and the single name bounced about the cavern walls like a rubber ball, traveling miles back the way they'd come, "Naaaaaaaaaaaaayteeeeeeeeeer!!!" The cries were horrible, as loud as they were in the sudden stillness, as much as they contrasted with the muffled roar of the storm outside. What was worse was the lack of response. It meant that the two men had already strayed too far off to be reached.

"Damn it." Hojo put his knuckles to his mouth, grinding his teeth, listening to the echoes of the names die away like lamentations. Waters, Ghrerd, Meer, and Vanswith looked towards him expectantly, curious as to what his next orders would be. Zack just laughed silently, winking to Cloud who offered a weak smile.

"Two down..." the dark-haired Soldier said merrily, "If only the rest of you were just as damned stupid. Heh, the mako fountain's coming up, maybe someone'll bend too far over and drown in it. Preferably Waters here." Waters gave the young man the obligatory punch to the face. Zack grinned even as he slammed backwards against the glowing green walls. "Temper-- temper..." he grunted, blinking away stars.

"Should we go back for them, sir?" Dr. Ghrerd asked, wincing as Zack was beat upon by a mute, glowering, Dr. Waters. Hojo looked to the man like he were out of his head.

"No," he replied simply, "If they're in these caves, then they're fine. We have tracking equipment stored in the reactor for cases like this, we'll bring it with us upon our return. Perhaps spending a few hours in these caves will teach those two young men to follow my orders more carefully in the future."

"Are you sure, er, sir?" Vanswith asked, rubbing nervously at the back of his head, "Will we be able to conduct procedures while missing two techs?"

"We have no choice," Hojo spat, turning violently around and resuming his trek forward, "Better to proceed with two less men than to waste hours searching for them. Besides, you've read the reports, the syllabus, you know that our requirements are sparse, we're dealing with the most basic, yet most powerful aspects of the Project, and so our--"

Zack was laughing.

Hojo frowned, his mouth snapping shut and stopping the rest of his tirade. He turned abruptly and advanced upon his young specimen, his hand raised as though he'd bring it crashing across his face. He'd done it before, in fits of anger. Zack looked up, the chuckles low and rough as they rolled from his tongue. They died away into a toothy smile that only spread wider as Hojo eyed him.

"What amuses you so, Zack?" the Professor queried in steely patience. Zack shook his head as though the joke were too much to give voice to.

"Sephiroth..." he began, and Cloud jerked his head up at the name, "Sephiroth was the same way when we lost a man after the bridge collapsed. I suppose I know where he learned his coldness from. Growing up in Shinra, around pricks like you, who don't know that a single innocent man's life is more important than any goal, any aspiration you can name. Maybe he did know at one point, but I think it was forced out of him."

"The boy's delirious," Hojo muttered, a strangely calm look passing through his features. He smiled a cold and frightening smile. "Out in the wet and the cold for too long, he's caught a fever and is raving of things he knows nothing about. Zack, my boy, continue this, please do."

But Zack only shook his head, smile still firm on his face. "He called you a walking mass of complexes," he said in clear remembrance, "God damn..."

Hojo stared at the Soldier a moment, analyzing him like a particularly busy painting, then huffed off, gesturing for the others to follow. He felt as though he were being tugged toward the reactor by a higher destiny and standing around behind insulted by Zack wasn't helping him advance any further in his goal. "I'm going to miss you, Zack," he called, letting his words bounce about the cave's dimming walls, "You are a riot."

Zack gave a meaningless grunt and Dr. Waters pushed him forward. Cloud whispered frantically, "You're not going anywhere, don't worry," into his ear as he passed.

"Sure, I'm not, Cloud."

Vanswith, Meer, and Ghrerd each gave the cave behind them a final glance before hurrying onward, too scared now to dare lagging behind. The thought of being stranded alone in these glowing caves was terrifying.

~*~

The storm outside only intensified as the minutes ticked past and the group of men advanced through the network of caverns. Hail was clacking against the rocks, smashing to icy shards against the stones and the winds whipping like living things carried the pieces away. Thunder was frequent now, and made conversations hard. The wind cried, sounding uncannily human.

"We begin the moment we arrive," Hojo was reciting absently to Dr. Ghrerd, who was senior residing assistant now that Bier was dead and Waters demoted, "Cloud will need to be sedated heavily, we can't have him injuring himself, as you know he very well may. That young Soldier that Vice-President Rufus sent us last January, he ripped half of his hair from his own head, do you remember that?"

"Yes, sir..." Ghrerd nodded absently, his pale features uneasy, "I supervised the clean-up."

Hojo chuckled darkly to himself, running a hand through his bangs. His hair was starting to dry and getting annoyingly curly in the process. He futilely tried to straighten it with stiff, irritated fingers. "That was different though, he wasn't infused with as much mako as Mr. Strife. Cloud will take very well to the Jenova treatment. He can never be as adapted to her cells as Sephiroth was since he was not born and raised with them in his bloodstream, yet we can simulate the effect quite well, I think, if we maximize the dosage and barrage his heart with Tetro-nanocyde, muscle stimulants... the key, the crux of this, is keeping him sane. He'll be of no use to us as a broken puppet. We can brainwash him later, but we have to have something to work with, a mind to mold."

Dr. Ghrerd nodded, his hands clasped behind his back as they two of them walked. "Zack could be of some use to us there, sir," he suggested. Hojo cocked his head up, arching an eyebrow. He hadn't thought of that.

"Yes, I suppose that's a possibility. I was thinking more along the lines of anti-depressants and Ridilin, but yes, Zack's influence may be of use. Ha, very good Doctor. Though I'm sure you only suggested it because you'd rather not see Zack killed."

Ghrerd reddened in surprise, trying to stutter out some response as Hojo cast appraising eyes over him. "It's all right," the Professor assured, "We all have particular specimen we grow fond of. If Zack proves useful, we'll keep him handy. If he proves too troublesome, he and Cloud are the same blood type, and it's always beneficial to keep a donor at hand."

"Y-yes, sir," the older Doctor said quickly. He could hear Zack close behind, laughing at the bits of conversation he managed to overhear.

"Now, there are transport vehicles available in storage atop the mountain, shut up in a shed embedded in the northern wall, if I remember the reactor's plans correctly. We'll take advantage of these to head back down to Nibelheim, then return to the trucks once we reach that obstruction in the road that hindered us before. Cloud will be in an extremely fragile state after we're through with the procedures, so we must take every precaution to ensure sterilization and stability. The Jenova specimen also, we'll be returning it to the Shinra building for further study, but unless this storm hinders it, there are supposed to be helicopters from Midgar arriving this evening to pick it up. I know we'd planned to move the specimen ourselves but since I had to make arrangements to have our dearly deceased comrades taken away, I thought it wise to enlist Turk help in moving Jenova. It is safer that way, I'll admit that Dr. Waters was right about that. Shame he can't gloat."

"What time will the choppers arrive, sir?"

"Tseng told me seven pm and he has a history of punctuality."

"That gives us six hours roughly."

"No, only six hours until they come for Jenova. We can stay the night at the reactor, if needs be. We don't need the Turks' assistance, only their helicopter. I won't allow them to dictate my schedule." Hojo pushed his glasses up, every bit the academic. "The rest of this day will reveal the immediate outcome of the Shinra Science Department's future," he said lowly, confidently, "And I'm sure that future will be bright. We've finally overcome the terrible setback of Sephiroth's death. We're finally back on track." A rare, honest smile crept across Hojo's thin lips. Dr. Ghrerd shared the expression. He was a little startled when Meer approached without warning from behind and whispered something in his ear. He nodded to the young scientist, then turned to Hojo.

"Sir, could we take a rest? Cloud insists he can't walk anymore."

Hojo looked irked, but somewhat tolerant. He nodded curtly. "We can't have the man our future hopes depend on dying of exhaustion now, can we?" he asked mockingly, "Though if that boy would exercise even half of his potential, he'd realize he could run all the way back to Nibelheim without breaking a sweat. Ah, power is wasted on the weak, Doctor."

Ghrerd shrugged. "Indeed, sir."

They had paused in a broad chamber and Hojo recognized it after a moment. They were only a couple hundred feet away from the cavern exits and so he wasn't so impatient to see his crew take a small break. The space was very dim, most of the mako gone from the walls, only faint veins of light snaking along the stone, glowing out of cracks. It was enough to line each man's features in green, but it showed little else. Waters shoved Zack against a wall and he slumped gratefully to the ground, nursing the thousand and one wounds he'd gotten on the way. His eyes closed against a headache, he heard Cloud sink down next to him, panting as though he'd just run a marathon. Zack glanced up in concern but Cloud's face was turned away. Neither man spoke to each other.

"It sounds like the storm's letting up," Meer thought aloud, turning his head so that his right ear faced the invisible ceiling over head, trying to hear better. It indeed sounded as though the rain had slacked off a bit. The thunder was more vicious than ever though; it shook the very walls and sent hearts to pounding.

"Mountain storms are fickle things," Ghrerd replied amiably. He seated himself daintily on a flat rock, resting his weary, ancient spine against the wall. He leaned on his hands, brushing wet mold away from the rock. "They'll rage one moment, then die away like echoes the next."

"I'll be glad to get off this continent," Vanswith said anxiously. He sat with his hands nervously working over each other in his lap, "I miss Midgar, the city, reality, civilization."

"And I'm sure it misses you," Meer muttered, rolling his eyes, "You're so closed to new experiences, I swear. This is experience, be grateful for it. It makes you a better man and a better scientist. Science isn't all about research, books, thesis papers, and bunsen burners. Science is life and at the moment you're living."

"And what philosophy book did you memorize that out of?" Vanswith snorted, leaning forward, "Sounds like that old crackpot Bugenhagen's words to me. At least try to recite some original crap, Meer."

"Now, now, Dr. Vanswith," Ghrerd began neutrally, wanting to avoid another argument, "I totally see Dr. Meer's point..." The older scientist brushed some more at the moldy rock, then moved up to ease away the strap of the heavy pack at his back. He lowered it to the stone beside him and sighed, trying to relax after the long trip, glad they hadn't too much further to go. His hand brushed against something warm as it left his pack and he absently picked it up, squinting to

see Vanswith's face though the darkness. "If you spend all of your life in a cold and sterile laboratory, you're going to miss out on a lot of personal discoveries. Personal discoveries lead to professional discoveries and professional discoveries lead to fame. Ha ha, and I know that's what all of you young, ambitious technicians are after nowadays. Grasping for that fame, wanting to be at the top of the field. I can hardly say I blame you, there was a time when I would have traded it all to be head of the department. It never happened though, Professor Hojo was always one step... one step ahead of me. But such is life. Ha, now in my g-golden years... I-- I'm trying to recapture a... a little... of that lost experience..." Vanswith and Meer turned to look at the scientist in curiosity. Zack opened his eyes and stared upwards through the gloom, surprised at how that kindly old man's voice had suddenly turned into a questioning whisper. Dr. Ghrerd was hard to see in the dim light, little visible but a faint green outline, but the men watching could see he was hunched forward on a low stone, his hands together in his lap, holding onto something he looked down upon with riveted attention. He was quiet for a moment, and Vanswith was about to ask him what his problem was when the old man finally let out a piercing holler and catapulted to his feet.

"What is it?" Hojo asked sharply, snapping out of a bout of silent scheming, unnerved by the yell. Ghrerd was pressed against a wall, his right hand shaped into a fist, a single finger sticking out and jabbing towards something he'd thrown to the floor. "F-f-fuck!" he squeaked, gasping a deep, sudden breath. Meer and Vanswith drew closer to him in concern. The thing on the floor glistened, suddenly catching the green light. "F-fuck! It's... it's a heart!! It's a heart!"

No one understood what he meant at first. They all moved closer, even Cloud and Zack from their positions on the floor. And then suddenly, it was blatantly clear. Zack swallowed hard, fighting back nausea. In the green glint of the remaining mako-light, he could see a human heart tossed on the stone ground. The longer he looked at it, the more he was able to make out.

Hojo's voice cut through his head, cold and calm.

"Do not panic," he demanded.

Zack thought that was a stupid thing to say. He grabbed at Cloud's cold shoulder and forced his friend to rise to his feet, gesturing to the sticky wet all over the floor that everyone had assumed was mold and damp. But no. Zack moved his fingers to his nostrils and breathed it in, then touched his tongue to it. "This cave's full of blood," he whispered. Vanswith started moaning and Cloud fought back terror. The more they all looked, squinting to see through the dim green light, the more obvious it became.

"What is this?" Vanswith whispered in a daze, his rolling wet eyes stroking the walls. He looked to that cooling heart Dr. Ghrerd had held in his hands and tossed to the floor. It sat there in their midst, motionless and innocent on the rocks, looking like little more than a tiny twisted mass of water balloons. Hojo glanced to Zack briefly, as though waiting for him to take action, but then he blinked hard, giving his head a little shake, and swallowed down a yell. His own heart, still warm, still alive, still in his god damned body! was thumping too loud and too fast in his ears.

"Gentlemen," he began, his voice sounding alien and wrong, too calm perhaps. He gestured with uncalled for eloquence. "Follow me, very slowly, from this place. Dr. Waters, get a grip on Zack. Ghrerd, watch Cloud."

Before any of his men could second guess him or demand answers, Hojo turned quickly about and began walking with short, measured strides towards the cave's exit. He closed his eyes and after a few seconds heard the muted terror of his depleted crew as they followed. He heard Zack mocking their fear and he heard Cloud whimpering, just as scared as any of the scientists were. Things got worse as they went along.

"Run, Professor Hojo, that's right..." Zack called, Dr. Waters squeezing the back of his neck so tightly that the young man almost went limp with pain, "I wanna know how far it'll let you run before it comes after you. Aren't you curious to see too? Cloud and I are."

The light was growing brighter, growing just a little more stronger each second in barely perceptible increments as they neared the way out. Hojo held his breath, hoping for the exit to suddenly appear. Every sound sent his heart to roaring, every shuffling footstep could be a monster's. He felt the touch of Dr. Ghrerd's hand on his shoulder and nearly slid from his skin like a spooked snake. He snarled at the old man before he could mutter a question or a doubt, and then redoubled his footsteps. He refused to look anywhere but straight ahead through the rapidly lightening dark. He refused to look at the walls, or look back the way they'd come.

"Cloud..." Zack's mockings died away and he was starting to get a little nervous. Because as the faint green mako light was gradually replaced by the more natural glow of the daylight filtering through the nearby exit, things became more distinct. He squinted his blue eyes to see as Waters pushed him along. He muttered something that sounded like, "Good gods...", then tried to back away further from the claustrophobic walls girding the path on either side. "Cloud," he whispered, ignoring the scientist's commands for silence, "Cloud, your eyes are better'n mine, is this blood streaked all over the walls or is it just my fucking imagination?"

Cloud glanced to where he gestured, his face molded into a tight frown.

"It's blood," he confirmed dully, "And it's fresh."

"Shit on me..." Zack shivered for reasons other than the cold, trying to draw his bound arms closer to his frame. Oh gods... if he looked close enough, he could see an entire morbid play of pain written out upon these stone walls. This spatter of red just at his back: a head had been smashed into the rock... and there was a trail where the body had been dragged a few feet, then lifted entirely into the air-- the perfectly round drips of blood on the ground proved this-- a larger puddle, they were passing through it now... this is where the victim had landed, sprawled and boneless, from the fall.

It was perfectly still as the group covered the remaining hundred or so feet of cave until stepping out into daylight. There was only the howl of the wind and remains of the rain. It got louder as the exit approached. And when they suddenly left the caves, the group was in the storm again. It was raging as it had been before they'd left it, back when the sounds had mixed with Chet's wails and frightened them all. Now the sound mixed with the unsettling sight of the blood everywhere. There was no mistaking it now. The daylight, even the dim light filtering through the massed storm clouds, showed the pattern of gore on the walls, the clumped blood at their feet. It was pooled here, at the far mouth of the caves, and Vanswith jumped gingerly over it, almost going into fits. The blood was thinning though, lying in the packed, frozen dirt, pummeled by the beating rain, running away in sanguine rivulets from their trail.

"Professor!" Dr. Ghrerd shouted over the beating of the rain, "Professor, what do we do?!"

The caves were at their back, a black mouth spitting blood, and the open, storm-blasted trail leading to the reactor was at their fronts. The winds were buffeting everything, breaking everything into individual fragments of whirling sounds, sights, and smells. Trees threw their bare branches into the air, waving them towards the heavens like supplicating arms, as hail bashed them to the ground, breaking their bark into pieces, dashing their very roots from the frozen earth. Lightning flickered, danced, faded away, chased by thunder that wouldn't cease, only rolled louder and louder, refusing to die, to grant mercy, to move on. They were in the thick of the storm. And the blood running from the cave did not stop where they now stood. It extended onward. If they followed the reactor trail, they'd be following a trail of blood.

"I don't want to see what's at the end of this!" Dr. Meer hollered.

"I think I already know!" Vanswith lamented, clutching his rain-spattered head in his hands. Hojo stood at the fore, one foot forward as though he were ready to sprint on, ignore the signs, go to Jenova. But he couldn't ignore the signs...

Fuck it. He could try.

"Just a little blood..." he whispered, staring intently forward down the trail. He absently swept rainwater from his eyes and repeated, "Just a little blood. Am I supposed to let this deter me? Let this make me turn around and cower my way back to Nibelheim? If I let something like this stop me now, then I'm not the same man I was yesterday or even thirty years ago."

Without a word to his men, Professor Hojo broke into a run, his soaking-wet hair streaming behind him, ponytail heavy with rain. His heavy coat flopped at his back like a sheet of wet rubber and Dr. Ghrerd blinked only twice before huffing along after him.

"No!" Vanswith yelled, as his comrades, one by one, gave chase. He stood and shivered, pleading to anyone, Zack or anyone who'd listen, even that damned Dr. Waters, who had about as much sympathy as a shotgun shell. "No! We can't do this! They tried to do this before, go into that Library and I had the good sense then not to follow! I have a good track record of recognizing mistakes and going on now is a god damnable mistake! Hojo! Professor Hojo, we have to turn back!"

But his voice was little more than a barely heard disturbance, easily drowned by the winds. After only a few seconds, he was standing alone at the mouth of the cave, shouting to the air. The bloody rainwater puddled at his feet. The thunder beat upon him like a rug on a line. Vanswith gave a great moan, then stumbled forward, preferring to face the unknown with others, as opposed to hollering negations by himself.

The cave had let them out into a sort of shallow ravine, a high mountain wall on one side, a barrier of fallen debris and rocks on the other. A few scrubby pine trees poked up through the rolling rocks yet for the most part the path was barren and miserable, more so in the downpour. The storm-light had washed the colour away and everything was flat and gray save the blood lining the worn trail. It splashed up, thinned down by water, and coloured Vanswith's pant legs a ruddy pink as he ran. He was eyeing the ground, face averted from the stinging rain and hail, and a sudden flash of green made him look up. He passed a mako fountain, a gorgeous glowing mako fountain. He only knew what it was because he'd seen them in textbooks before, and he now distractedly realized he would have liked to stay and examine it, see the natural process of materia generation at work. But there was no time. There was blood on the ground and he was running through it alone. He continued on, breaths tearing from his throat.

"Dr. Vanswith! Doctor!"

Ah! They were calling his name! He ran faster, hazarding a brief glance up to see his colleagues in the distance. They'd stopped though. They weren't running, they must be waiting for him. Oh, Gods, why not? He was Vanswith after all, he was a friend of their's, a respected scientist, one of the least expendable people working for Shinra at present. Of course they were waiting on him!

These mad little reassurances were racing through Vanswith's mind as he ran. He was too out of breath to be rational. So was Hojo. Too out of breath, too disgusted, too terrified.

His dash from the cave had been short, he wasn't even sure what had made him start running. But it hadn't lasted. He looked away. He was sitting in the dirt, his hands covered over with oozing, freezing mud, and he looked away from what the rest of his men were staring so intently towards.

Nater and Tutome. The two doctors lost in the caverns back there. The two clumsy, disobedient young men whose punishment Hojo had been contemplating even as they'd rested in that clearing and Ghrerd had found the disembodied heart.

Meer was calling Hojo's name but Hojo refused to look up. He'd found them first. He'd been running in the lead and he'd found them first, looked once. He wouldn't be looking again. Meer said his name louder. Hojo turned his face more firmly to the ground, the rain running down the collar of his shirt and tickling his bare back, the mud seeping through the knees of his pants, mud of dirt, water, and blood.

The two lost scientists had been found. Hojo would not look at them again.

Tutome was crucified up in the branches of a stunted tree. He'd been a slim, bird-chested young man in life and in death, he seemed even slimmer. Suspended by his arms and a crooked leg, his other free foot hung down over their heads, rain mixed with blood dripping rhythmically from his expensive white and blue padded sneaker. Meer was staring and staring, as were Waters, Ghrerd, Cloud and Zack. Their necks were craned back and their eyes were pasted to the sight. The wind caught Tutome's cropped brown hair and it billowed, despite being drenched with rain. He almost could have been alive, almost could have been little more than a fallen parachutist caught up in a tree, but the men below knew it was impossible. His chest was torn open and there were fang marks in his throat, slashes across his hands, forearms, and crisscrossing his face. His eyes were wide-open, glinting eerily, rimmed with blood. His right arm was frozen straight out, hand pointing. When Zack allowed himself to follow the gesture, he saw Nater.

Nater had hardly said a word during their sojourn. He'd been a twenty-nine year old bio-technician from Gongaga and shy to a fault. Now he was laying slumped against the trunk of Tutome's tree, torn almost in two. Zack realized with a sick taste in his mouth that it had been his heart Ghrerd had picked up in the caves. And he realized with an even sicker feeling, that Nater had a very shriveled look to him. His veins were sticking up blue and pale through skin that was too too white for a fresh kill. He'd been drained of blood.

Cloud swallowed hard, ignoring the slack grip that Waters had on his collar, and moving closer to Zack's side. "Hey..." he whispered in his friend's ear, "Hey, who did this? I think that Chet guy was lying." Zack shrugged, helpless and shocked, too amazed to do or say anything. He took a step away from the corpse-laden tree, pulling Cloud with him. Then he came to his senses for a moment, swiveling his head around, looking for the murderer. But the world seemed darker. It was as though he, Cloud, and their captors were standing in a small sphere, sealed away from the rest of life, of normalcy. There was this blood-lined path, the two corpses, the tree, themselves, and the relentless, beating, pounding, murdering rain... all else faded away into blackness and obscurity.

There was a peal of thunder. Zack had to fight to keep from running. But he seemed the only one fighting for composure at all.

"I'm going back!"

Dr. Meer's announcement was sudden and definite. Hojo turned on him in a heartbeat.

"Don't be foolish," he growled, "We're so close to the reactor I can smell the machinery. It would make more sense to keep going, we're already four and a half hours out of Nibelheim."

Hojo didn't turn towards the young man he was addressing. Turning to face Meer would mean changing directions and possibly seeing the tree again, so the Professor obviously couldn't do that. He continued to sit in the mud, staring down at the frothy pink rainwater on the trail.

"No... no, there's nothing in that reactor..." Meer whispered, his hands shooting into fists, "All that happened last night and all you've ranted about... something's coming after you and we're just unfortunate bastards caught in the crossfire. I'm not going into that reactor. It's waiting for you there, don't you see?"

Dr. Ghrerd smeared his sleeve across his nose, blinking away the rain. He put a hand on Meer's violently trembling shoulder, averting his eyes from those eyes of the corpse in the tree. "Do you really want to pass through those mako caves again?" he asked, "Think straight."

"It's that vampire, isn't it?!" Meer ran up to Hojo and shouted down at him, gesturing wildly to the bodies, "Dr. Waters was right all along! You won't be satisfied until we're all dead, is that it? I don't have any intention of being killed by something so meaningless, just because you've wronged it!"

Hojo's fingers curled through the mud he was crouched in, and then he pushed himself to his feet, face contorted in rage and grief. He started running for the reactor, running as though running were the only thing he could do. He didn't know if he was running because he longed for Jenova's protection, her comfort, her damned superiority, or if he was running because doing anything else would be a lie. Sitting in the mud was nothing more than waiting for the murderer to come. Turning back around and hiking to Nibelheim was foolishness. Standing in the rain was cowardice. He ran. And he honestly didn't care if Cloud or Zack or any of his men followed.

Dr. Waters stared at the tree a moment longer, and then he shook his head, teeth grinding together behind his stitches. Zack stared at him, the edge of his mouth curled into a grin. "Scared?" he asked, not caring that he was just as much in danger as the rest of his captors. This was the dragon he'd hoped would attack them all. Only it wasn't a dragon. "Looks like Valentine's harder to kill than you thought."

Waters grunted something that sounded like, "Shut up", then grabbed Zack by the hair, Cloud by his bound hands, and shoved them forward after Hojo. A peal of thunder rolled down from heaven, shuffling the trio off through the rain. Hojo was already far ahead, tripping his way over boulders and stones, kicking debris from his path. They could hear him shouting things out into the air. The reactor was just visible above their heads, at the end of this winding trail. It sent up a ghastly green illumination, caught by the falling rain and reflecting outwards in bursts of prismatic light.

Meer stooped in the mud, muddled mind demanding commands and he didn't know what to tell himself. Ghrerd was pulling at his shoulder, insisting that they move, the rain was only intensifying, the lightening flashing in frequent sheets of white. The tree at their side creaked eerily, protesting the burdensome dead man hanging from its branches, the other dead man sprawled at its base. Meer stared at the two bodies, then grabbed at Ghrerd as though afraid he might collapse.

"Professor Hojo's right, "Ghrerd was muttering into his ear, "The reactor is our best bet right now, we're too far from Nibelheim, we have to seek shelter in the reactor..."

"Why are we out here..?" Meer whispered, the rain running into his wide-open eyes, "Why'd we let him dictate our lives to us? We shouldn't have listened to him, we all knew something dreadful went on in the mansion last night... Waters knew, Dr. Waters was there... but he's listened anyway. He's following him, even now."

"Of course he is, "Ghrerd answered, "The Professor's in charge. We do as he says."

"Is it that simple?"

"It's that simple. Now come on. Don't look at them. Don't look at the tree, there's nothing we can do."

"No, wait. Dr. Vanswith..."

Meer almost shouted the name. He wrenched himself out of Ghrerd's grip, staggering a few steps back towards the caves. The younger, balder, more cowardly Vanswith was huffing along the blood-lined trail trying to catch up as though demons were chasing at his heels. He noticed Meer looking back at him and he raised his arm high in greeting, begging that they wait. His navy blue coat was black with rain and the mud flew beneath his shoes in sprays of brown and red. "Hurry up!" Meer shouted, cupping both hands around his mouth. He took another step back and Ghrerd wasn't sure if he should wait on the two men or continue after Hojo. He took a step towards the reactor even as Meer took another step back towards the caves. Vanswith simply flew forward with little regard to anything, desperate to be in the company of his fellow doctors again.

It flew at him from the side and it gave no warning.

"What the fuck--?!"

Meer was about to tear back down the path and get to his comrade but Ghrerd had his arm around him and pulled him backwards. "Do you want to die too?" he hissed in his ear.

Meer shook his head no. And stared.

Vanswith was rolling on the ground and something else was on top, something wraith-like and quick and tearing at him. The Doctor screamed something incoherent and the thing attacking him shouted something back, right before raising an arm that wasn't an arm and slicing it across his stomach. It picked him up by the new hand-hold, then flung him high into the air, watching stoically as the scientist landed face-first in the mud, twitching and trying to flee. The attacker then hopped nimbly to a standing position, shoes glinting through the mud caked over them and Meer wondered distractedly why this thing was wearing metal spats on its feet. It stared at them apathetically, maybe two hundred and fifty feet down the trail from the pair, a dark silhouette, flat as a placard in the gloomy storm-light. Two red eyes blinked three times, seeming to pierce straight through Meer's heart, and then the monster turned away, back to its prey.

Meer didn't get to see anymore. By this point, Ghrerd had gotten a hold of himself and they both were running down the trail after Hojo, ignoring Vanswith's dying cries, trying not to stumble and fall over the rain-slicked rocks in their path.

"Is that-- is that it then?" Meer gasped. Ghrerd had a tight grasp of his collar, holding onto him like a leashed dog as they raced down the trail, following the footprints of the others, "That's the-- thing Waters told us of, that's the vampire! That's the thing after-- after Hojo but it'll kill us all-- to g-get to him!"

"Just run! Don't think!"

Meer took the words to heart, pumping his arms and legs, stretching each stride as far as he could take it, fairly flying through the mud and nearly leaving Dr. Ghrerd behind. The rain knifed them from above, chunks of hail as big as golf balls shattering with audible crashes on the surrounding ground. The lightening atop Nibel's craggy peaks flashed strange shades of purple and crimson, alternately flooding the world around the two fleeing men in terrific hues, then knocking the colour away and submerging them back into a flat grayness of storm and rain. The thunder was everywhere, without source, which told Meer that they were in the thick of the disturbance. He collapsed forward onto his hands and knees, ploughing up a stretch of mud and ice, just as a particularly stentorian burst of thunder slammed into them from above,

almost as though the sound itself had been two hands knocking Meer to the ground. Ghrerd grabbed at him, hurling him back to his feet and they were off again, just barely able to see a streak of drenched blonde, the flash of a blue coat, from far ahead. Waters, Zack and Cloud.

Lightening zapped Ghrerd's retinas and he shouted out a wordless cry as a tree caught the sizzle of white-hot electricity and snapped in two, only feet away from the pair. A roar of thunder followed the flash and the scientist threw his hands to his ears to block the sound. He opened his eyes, not realizing the deafening blast of the thunder had almost forced them closed, then swallowed back vertigo, exhaustion, and fear to stumble forward, straight into something that dropped without warning from above.

Meer pulled Dr. Ghrerd away before he could crash into the corpse shoved into their path, and both men collapsed backwards into the mud. Vanswith was suddenly there staring at them from the ground, face plastered with dirt, blood, and tears. The gash in his neck bled fresh, a claw mark stretching over his left eye and following the line of his jaw until it disappeared into a gaping wound in his stomach. Meer crab-walked backwards to distance himself from the sight, Vanswith sprawled on his side as his white fingers slithered snake-like through the bloodied mud, the rain pounding his prone form so hard that it made his limbs shake, as though he were still alive.

The back of Meer's head struck something soft but unyielding. He saw Ghrerd only a few feet away, staring past his shoulder and Meer knew the murdering monster must be behind him. He waited for that claw, for the fangs, for whatever grisly attribute it would choose to kill him with but nothing came. He suddenly felt it kick him square in the back with a merciless pointed shoe and he shot forward, barely avoiding becoming entangled in Vanswith's arms and legs. Meer was quick though, even in his terror. He let the momentum of the kick help him rise and he leapt to his feet, hitting the ground running. He grabbed Ghrerd as an afterthought and they both were racing again. Meer hazarded a look behind and he saw a man standing there in the rain, long black hair plastered to his scalp, gleaming when the lightening flickered a greeting. His red eyes burned bright and fiery but without emotion. He absently wiped his chin on his shoulder, his gory claw on his pant leg. He didn't pursue.

Dr. Ghrerd and Meer catapulted down the path and didn't stop. Vincent merely stood and watched them go. He let the rain wash the blood from his clothes and claw, and the lightening blind him until the images of what he'd done didn't flash before his eyes anymore, until there was only the white. The thunder deafened his ears to the screams, to his own beating heart. He stood and lost himself in the storm, letting the body of the man at his feet become just as meaningless as the rocks, the boulders, the blasted, smoking tree.

His red eyes narrowed into the thinnest ruby slits, focusing into the keenest of tools, sharper even than each curling finger of the claw on his left arm. He saw Hojo high above and far ahead, saw just the dimmest bobbing black speck of his rain-streaked head, moving with panicking disregard up the face of Mt. Nibel. The rain was nothing more than a dirty haze trying to hide him but Vincent wouldn't let him hide. He picked the man out and he set his sights on him, just as he had with the two men in the cave, with this man in the mud even now. He picked his prey and the hunt would be carried out, brought to a conclusion, finished. He'd kill every one on this mountain until he found what he was seeking. He'd kill as much as was needed until he was strong enough to search.

"Vincent! Vincent, you okay?!"

Chet stumbled forward from the distant caves, a hand to his chest as he fought to catch his breath. He shoved bangs irritably from his eyes and squinted through the rain running down his forehead and cheeks, trying to make out his friend there in the road. He knew Vincent could hear him, but he'd yet to figure out why he refused to talk to him.

"I saw your handy work in the tree back there!" he hollered above the rain, "Nice touch. You think you could be any more gross?" Vincent didn't answer, he only stared off down the road, hair hanging dead and black from his scalp. "I think we've managed to scare the shit out of them..." Chet muttered, rubbing his sore shoulder, gingerly poking where the monster had introduced him to its horn. "And I'll bet you thought I couldn't act. Well to hell with you. I put up a great show for those egg heads. Like I'd really sit on a rock and cry like that... hmph."

Chet sounded haughty and indignant yet if he weren't out on the side of a mountain, caught in a storm, he probably would have been curled up in a corner somewhere and crying into his shirtsleeve. But he shook his head to rid himself of his thoughts. No time for it now. He'd think about all of this later, all that had happened between him passing out and him waking up, between leaving the Mansion and hiking up here. He'd think of it later, for now he'd be just as cold as the man he was traveling with. At least, he'd try to be. Vincent graced him with a single icy glance before taking off down the trail at a quick clip, moving with undefinable stealth and ease through the treacherous terrain. He made running look like art. Chet sighed and tried to follow, avoiding the butchered body laying rain-spattered and crumpled in the mud. He knew... or at least he thought he knew that all these men needed to die. Yet seeing it happen wasn't as fulfilling as he'd thought it would be. In fact, he did indeed, really really want to cry.

~~~

Hmph. This fic needs to \*end\*, it's starting to bug me. Next update is the conclusion. Who gets to survive Glass's murderous tendencies? Maybe I'll kill Cloud off, to hell with continuity, kya ha ha haaaa... 'vv'  
Two chapters left and they're gonna be posted together, so anyone who's still interested, stay tuned.