

The Poetry in Blood

by GlassShard

Chapter 6: The Reactor

With each steel pipe and rain-spattered girder acting as a finger, the mako reactor looked like little more than a demon's spread talon, grasping the side of Mt. Nibel in an embrace it refused to relinquish. It rose imperially from the surrounding mountainside, sharing the color of the stones, yet there the similarity ended. The mako reactor was simply a little piece of Shinra, a little piece of Midgar planted like a flag in a far-off colony. It turned the atmosphere's reclusiveness to a sham, turned nature into a liar, reminding any and all who managed to reach it just what they had reached. It was Shinra. The reactor was solely Shinra.

The name of the corporation itself was brash on the steel beast's side. Kanji twelve feet high spelled it out, white characters on a field of red, that red the only scrap of colour in the entire lonesome scene. The reactor was gray, the sky was gray, the mountain was gray, only the red diamond was vibrant among all that dull, a single crimson bloom lost in a field of weeds. Even the green hue of mako was absent, the pounding rains beat it away. Just the gray. The red. The rain.

Lightening flashed an impatient reminder, coupled with a growl of thunder, harsh lyrics accompanying the pebbly melody of falling water. The storm was still raging and it didn't seem like it would quit anytime soon. An endless tarp of black clouds covered the mountain sky, rolling off into more clouds, coloured almost to black at the horizon. The winds that blew were cold and sharp as razors against the skin, freezing the rain into a sheen of green ice covering everything in the open. Hojo's fingers were numb as he scrabbled over a last bundle of tumbling rocks, pulling himself up onto the precipice holding what he sought. He watched the knuckle of his left middle finger chafe against the sharp plane of a boulder and come away bloody yet he didn't feel the pain. Air ripping in and out of his tortured lungs, he let himself fall on the frozen ground for a moment and thought he might kiss it. But he was too afraid his lips would freeze to the stones so he wisely changed his mind. He lay on his side and closed his eyes instead. He was so cold and wet he could hardly feel the little needling raindrops; the only sensation really was on his lips and eyelids, where the rain was a soft deluge of cold. He licked his lips and suddenly realized how thirsty he was. Glasses slipping from his tingling nose, Hojo rolled over onto his back and let his mouth hang open, catching the rain. He opened his eyes for a moment and without his specs, the world was just a mass of gray, sparkles of white cutting through in occasional brilliance. Things were indistinct enough that if he let his mind drift he might imagine himself back in Midgar, stranded on a park bench in the rain.

For a moment, he wished he really was there, even though he always missed Jenova (or imagined he did) whenever he was cemented behind the walls of the Shinra building. He'd been hoping and wishing and living for Jenova yet now that he was finally here, laying in the rain at the very doorstep of her reactor, all he could do was long for the peace and order of his beloved two floors of Shinra. No danger there, no worry, no rivals. It was nice to have your own kingdom.

Yes, definitely. And though this reactor was a relative colony of the company, the colony wasn't enough for a king who missed his castle.

Hojo closed his eyes again for a moment, just a moment, to relieve them of the rain's sting, and when he opened them he thought he saw the quick, clever flash of red eyes. Forgetting his exhaustion, the fiery ache in his calves from having ran the entire last half mile up here, Hojo leapt to his feet, stumbling a step or two to the side. His numb right hand fumbled for his glasses, which were hanging hooked from an ear and he shoved them back on, the nose-rest jamming for a moment in his nostril.

"Valentine!!"

His voice wasn't as commanding, as fearless as he would have liked. It trembled coming from his throat and the dull roar of the rain shrank it further. He turned completely about, expression as composed as he could make it, yet the space around him was clear, frightfully so. The reactor and the rocks about it offered few places to hide and the open precipice was small, easy to examine with a single certain sweep of the eyes. It was empty now. Rain, rocks, reactor. Hojo swallowed back a curse as the rain poured upon him, telling himself it couldn't have been red eyes, couldn't have been Valentine. There was no colour here, just the Shinra seal, the spot of red emblazoned a hundred feet above his head on the mako reactor's side. His traitorous mind was playing him for a fool, that was all.

A few swipes from a shaking hand tucked his soaked and bedraggled hair back into place. Hojo flung his heavy wet rope of a ponytail back over his shoulder then smoothed down the frozen sides of his ruined thermal jacket. He was rather glad the thing had come out of Shinra's budget, else he might have to be a little irked to see it so spattered with mud and rain now. Feeling somewhat like himself again, Hojo stalked the seven or so paces leading back to the main path, still breathing abnormally, still trying to calm his erratically beating heart. Red eyes were everywhere if he let them be. So was Lucrecia's face. It was framed in the trembling branches of the few naked trees; it glared at him from the sky. Standing

with his shoes covered over in an inch of mud and rainwater, he shivered and tapped a foot, wondering if anyone else was still alive.

Hojo made certain not to think upon what he'd seen in that tree back there. Or the yelling, the screams he'd left behind as he'd dashed madly up the mountain's side. Instead, he stood and stared back down the path. The path itself dipped immediately and obscured its own length, snaking back down Nibel's steep southern slope. Nothing was visible really, nothing at all from the top of this precipice. Looking over the lip of the cliff didn't reveal anything but black and the sparkle of rain, nothing to hear but the latter, a steady pebble and drip with thunder thrown in just seldom enough so that when it did roar, Hojo had forgotten about it and it managed to make him jump. Standing here was like being up on a pedestal only not in a good way. Hojo felt every eye upon him, more than the red pair he thought he'd seen before, even more than Lucrecia's. He fancied the whole world was watching, infinite eyes pinning him to the landscape itself. Could he move, if he tried to? Would he be able to run away if Valentine were to walk out of the rain now with his claw bared? Or was this it? The world, the Planet itself had damned him, condemned him, sentenced him to die at the hands of the very man he'd destroyed.

There was poetry in that. Hojo could see the poetry, the irony there, and be mildly impressed.

But then, a gust of cold wind smacked the Professor upside his rain-soaked head, shoving him back a step, shattering his delusion. He wasn't trapped. He could move, he could run away but that ability wouldn't necessarily keep him alive. Neither would the little freshly loaded derringer tucked in the back of his pants. It hadn't killed Valentine, after all...

Good Gods, the bastard was alive, mobile, and out to kill him.

The thought scolded Hojo's logic like a flash of boiling water flung over his brain. He reeled with the knowledge; too busy running before, it hadn't occurred to him yet what was really going on but now there was no denying it. Vincent Valentine was not going to rest until Lucrecia's murderer was dead!

His hand went to the useless gun regardless. It rested there on the handle, a hard knot of steel beneath the wet lumpiness of his coat. He surveyed the precipice through the water beaded on his glasses and saw the ever so empty distorted world. So where was he then? This phantom, murdering avenger? The executioner, where was he hiding? Perhaps this would all be a game until the ax fell at last.

A sudden grunt from the path at his back and Hojo whipped about. Zack came sliding along headfirst through the mud, coming to a sputtering stop at Hojo's feet. The Professor clenched his teeth in fright then slapped a stern frown on his face.

"Wh-where's Cloud and Dr. Waters?" he demanded of the Soldier, kneeling and grabbing onto him by the shoulder. Zack spit out a mouthful of mud and gestured back down the path. On cue, the two emerged from the silvery curtain of rain, Waters resembling a drowned bear as he pushed Cloud forward.

"By the Grace of Shiva and all things Divine, don't even tell me you're the only one left alive, "Hojo spat venomously in Water's direction, "I need you like I need a hole in my head. Where are the others?" Without a single extraneous gesture, Dr. Waters dropped Cloud like a rock beside Zack in the mud, then whipped a pocketknife out of the innards of his jacket and deftly severed the seven stitches holding his lips together. The tiny threads broke apart and his injured upper lip split anew, a single dollop of blood rolling from the wound and down his face. The rain quickly washed it away, stinging him unbearably though the Doctor hardly flinched.

He stood trembling for a moment, his massive shoulders quaking, weary from his flight up the mountainside, and then he muttered, "This is all your doing."

Hojo seemed surprised for a moment, then sneered. He peeled a long wet strand of black hair from the side of his face and tucked it back behind his ear. His brown eyes glittered like two lumps of dark honey from behind his glasses, stinging with rain and sweat. "What of it?" he finally asked, letting his gaze pierce Waters like a finely honed lance, "Why do you feel the need to tell me that, Doctor? I know that you know. When you came pounding on my bedroom door last night in your oh-so-subtle manner after you first saw him, asking how I could possibly have made a vampire, I knew then that you knew. Don't take it personally, but I never cared. You are as inconsequential as the rest. Actually, never mind, please do take it personally."

"You didn't even think!" Dr. Waters raged, ignoring the snub, engrossed in unthreading the little stitches from his swollen lips, letting the black strands flutter to the mud, "You didn't even consider the consequences! You never do! Didn't you realize he'd come after you?!"

"Some things are more important than one's life, "Hojo muttered, crossing his arms as though bored with the conversation, "No... more like sometimes some thoughts, ideas, goals rise to a level higher than the physical and things like life and death become less than trivial. I live every day on that higher plane."

"You're so fucking insane, "Water growled, clenching his fists, "So-- so-- how in the hell did you get where you are?"

Hojo shrugged smally, letting the water run free over his brow and cheeks. "Luck," he answered simply, "Fate. Maybe Jenova played a hand. But mainly I think it's the madness itself that's been my greatest asset. This is idle chatter, you don't

know me. And standing in this rain isn't getting us anywhere. I stitched that great yap of yours closed for a reason. I honestly didn't want to listen to this nonsense from you anymore."

"Why?! Because I confront you with the truth? Because I'm not another one of your simpering little clones who bow down at your every command, licking at your shoe soles for promotions and funding? Is it because I see exactly, exactly what you are?"

"Stop giving yourself so much credit!" Hojo hollered above the rain, "You know nothing about me!" The Professor turned away bitterly. Waters was about to wrap his thickly muscled hands around his scrawny little neck and end their arguments for all time, but a sudden barrage of shouting halted him. He and Hojo both moved a few paces down the path, shoes sliding in the mud as Zack and Cloud huddled behind them in the downpour. The shouting grew closer at an unreal speed but the falling rain obscured the world from their stance near the reactor. Again, it was as though they stood on a stage with the spotlights in their eyes, blind to the landscape around them. When Dr. Ghrerd and Meer came catapulting down the path, it was though the pair had melted from the darkness. Meer was in the lead and he nearly crashed headfirst into Hojo who barely saw him in time to duck out of the way. Ghrerd thundered along next, sick with exhaustion and fear, falling to his knees and panting into the ground. Zack waited for something else to appear from the rain and silvery darkness, he waited for Valentine, for the flash of his claw or the glint of his eyes. But after a minute or two of listening to the newly arrived scientists' panting, he and the rest realized no one was coming.

"What happened?" Hojo prodded the two men mercilessly, immediately, stooping over them as they stood bent over double in the mud. He poked Meer in the side with the toe of his shoe but he didn't answer, only clawed at his chest, fighting to breathe through gasps. He was waiting too, waiting for the thing that had flung Vanswith's bloody body into their paths to come forward and carry out that wordless promise he'd made. He wasn't safe yet, he could never be safe again, at least not on this mountainside, surrounded by fools who didn't realize the kind of danger they were in. He stumbled to his feet and for a moment, it looked like he'd take off running again, but Ghrerd was standing now too, and he halted his younger colleague with a hand on his shoulder.

"Was he chasing you?" Waters demanded, stalking towards the two men, "Where's Vanswith? Is he coming?"

"He's dead!" Meer gasped, his voice a sob tearing through the rain, "It jumped him from the side, just- just that very thing you warned us all of!"

"Did it chase you both though?" Waters insisted, "Is it coming?" Meer looked up into his bleeding face, a bit of insanity creeping into his rain-stung eyes. Seeing the bloody gash on Water's lip, seeing where the holes from his stitches stood out like bright jewels, and then the memories of moments ago- the murder, that tree, his comrades- Meer fell to the ground again, the world spinning around him.

Ghrerd seemed a bit better composed. He stared at Meer for a moment, the rain plastering his graying hair to his head, then turned to look at Hojo. "The least you could have done, sir," he began in surprising coolness, "Was have made him a true vampire so that he couldn't chase us during the day. That would have given us some advantage."

Hojo blinked two or three times, then burst out, "It was five o'clock in the morning at the time! I hadn't had my coffee yet and I wasn't gonna get that detailed! Good Gods, everybody's a critic..." He put a hand to his head and stalked a few paces away through the rain, hardly even feeling its sting now and totally ignoring the chunks of hail that pounded his scalp and shoulders. Lightening was dancing as though God were making hand shadows in front of the sun, yet Hojo ignored the danger, moving closer to the reactor. He suddenly wanted to run inside, be done with the storm, the scientists, and the specimen, but he fought to keep himself in control, maintain a decent state of mind. Panic would have been nice though, just blindly shoving his way through the steel machinery of the mako reactor and throwing his arms around Jenova's tank. He sighed, pushing the temptation away. Then he turned back to his men.

"Follow me inside," he commanded with the air of one accustomed to being obeyed. He was very surprised when no one made a move to comply. His three remaining scientists simply stood and stared at him with gawking, rain-spattered fish eyes. Zack tried to suppress his laughter. Cloud couldn't help but smirk. A peal of thunder topped it off.

"You'd have to be insane to expect us to go in there after all of this..." Waters whispered, shaking rain from his face, succeeding only in making room for new water.

"Duh..." Zack muttered, leaning up on his elbows in the mud, "Where have you been, bright boy? He is insane, that's the whole problem."

"Professor Hojo..." Dr. Ghrerd began in his kindest, most rational tone, taking a tiny step forward. He spoke as though addressing a five-year-old, but with respect enough to make it obvious that he wanted to keep his job, "Sir, considering the drastic, terrible losses we've suffered, and the fact that we have an uncontrollable, murderous creature chasing after us--"

"Not us," Meer interrupted from the ground, "Just chasing after the good Professor here..."

"-- Well, regardless, considering all of this, perhaps it would be best to seek shelter elsewhere. Those transports you said were stored nearby, couldn't we take them? Drive back to town?"

"Why?!" Hojo demanded, running forward madly, "When we have a perfectly adequate shelter right in front of us, at our disposal?!"

"It'll kill you if you go in there..." Meer said with his chin buried in his chest.

"Shut your mouth." Hojo hissed the words and each man there drew back. "You know nothing, nothing of what's going on, not a single one of you has any inkling. He'll come after me if I trek to the moon, it doesn't matter if it's the reactor, in the mansion, in the god damned Shinra building. Now, you can argue with me but can you argue with this storm? Come along! Into the reactor before we all drown!" Hojo took a few steps in that direction, his shoes making little squishing noises in the mud. He looked over his shoulder, getting a mouthful of his own wet ponytail, and saw that they still weren't budging. Zack had a grin a mile wide on his face.

"Looks like that's that," the Soldier said gleefully, "Good work, boys, don't listen to four-eyes here, he doesn't care whether the lot of ya jump off the cliff or go eat a strawberry sundae. All he wants is his stupid procedure to be carried out. Isn't that right, Professor Hojo?"

Anger getting the better of him, Hojo suddenly darted a hand around to his back, a cold and mirthless smile breaking out on his face. "Couldn't have said it better myself." Water smeared a forearm across his bloody mouth, looking up to see the Professor standing in the rain with a drawn gun in his hand. It was the tiny derringer he'd seen him in the hallway with earlier only the scientist felt rather certain it must have been reloaded since then.

"What are you going to do?" the man asked, refusing to flinch, "Are you going to kill every one of us?"

Hojo shrugged, pivoting on one foot to take aim at Waters' head. "If I did, I'd start with you."

"But sir!" Ghrerd pleaded, "We're on your side! We only want what's best for the group! Sir, you have to see what's going on, our very lives are at stake!"

"Your lives are garbage," Hojo answered coolly, "Trash. Now grab a hold of Zack and Cloud and get into that mako reactor before I start shooting just to show you how worthless you lot are. Remember what Zack said. I am insane. Don't make me prove it."

There was a horrible moment of pure confrontation then. Hojo stood with the reactor at his back, the rain pounding against his front, lightning turning him into a hunched, armed silhouette. The other five men stood before him, Cloud and Zack in the mud and practically able to taste salvation, the scientists still haunted by the murders they'd only just witnessed. They were an odd looking group stranded up on the precipice with the thunder grumbling psychotic songs into the air.

"That's nothing but a COP," Zack declared, "It can't have more'n four rounds in it. We should rush him. Yeah, we could take him out before he could fire."

Hojo chuckled, running a freezing cold hand through his hair. "Who wants to try it?" He held his right arm out stiff and sure, systematically bringing the tiny gun around in a line with each man's head. He made brief eye contact with Ghrerd, staring at the older man until he looked away. But then the kindly old MD shrugged his shoulders and began shuffling through the mud towards the reactor, head bowed in defeat. His posture didn't last long though, he was immediately alert again as the rain fell, swiveling his vision around, looking for danger. Hojo watched him go for a moment, then turned back to the others.

"I had the chance to take you down, you know..." Waters growled, bending his knees a bit to bring his hand within reach of Zack as he sat in the mud. He grabbed a hold of the back of his shirt and yanked him to his feet. "This lab rat right here insisted I should side with Cloud, Valentine, and himself to rid the world of you. I had the chance..."

"And you didn't take it?" Hojo asked with a little grin, "Ha, I always said you were stupid, Dr. Waters. You prove my theories so well."

A little vein started throbbing in Waters' temple but he said nothing. Breathing a muffled snarl, he pushed Zack after Ghrerd, giving Cloud a little kick so the kid would stand and follow. "Stupid and a coward, I see," Hojo called mockingly after him, "And you never shut up. Next time I'll simply cut out your tongue. Impudent bastard. Dr. Meer, what are you waiting for? Get up. Have some dignity."

The younger man didn't look at him. He was on his hands and knees, staring at the sticky mud as it oozed up between his fingers. His clothes were caked with the stuff, his thick glasses hanging half-off his nose. Hojo prodded him in the side like he might a carcass in the road, and the scientist rose slowly, pushing his glasses back into place. "We're all gonna wind up dead," he muttered miserably, the words like a last, useless protest against the gun in his boss's hands.

"Speak for yourself." Hojo smeared a sleeve across his nose to rid himself of some of the ticklish raindrops and then, when he was sure his men were out of earshot, he breathed a quiet sigh of relief into the air, trusting the storm to take it away. He wanted to strangle Zack, take his neck in both hands and just squeeze the life out of him. If Waters and the rest had listened to the Soldier's words and overpowered him, that would have been the end of it. This derringer was no good at anything but close range and even then it was low caliber, useless. Hojo had to silently thank his twisted guardian angel for watching out for him there. He lowered his gun to his side, trying to still his ravaged heart. This entire trip was simply not going at all according to plan. Valentine was alive despite it all.

Hojo began to wonder if maybe he'd cursed himself by not killing him when he'd had the chance to thirty years ago. Or perhaps Lucrecia had cursed him. Bah, but he was a scientist, if he started believing in fate, curses, and foul luck, he might as well trade his logic in for a four-leafed clover and a ouiji board. This was just misfortune, was all. And he'd battle it with a little bit of clear-headed thinking, a little of that old Hojo reasoning. Things were going okay anyway now, he'd reigned his men back in and they had managed to reach the reactor despite losing half of the group in the process. Okay... not too shabby.

Hojo raised a hand to shield his eyes from the rain for a moment, then quickly surveyed his surroundings. Still clear. But too clear for comfort. He kept the gun tight in his hand as he stepped towards the glistening hulk of the reactor, wincing when a particularly loud burst of thunder sounded off in his ear. The scientists didn't look up when he stepped into their midst, they were all staring too hard off at the structure before them. And all three had gone white as sheets.

"What is it now?" Hojo snapped impatiently, setting a foot on the first step leading up to the door. The metal grating was slippery and he grabbed the railing to steady himself. Zack nodded his head towards the reactor entrance.

"Message for you."

"Pardon me?" But Hojo had already seen. He shrank back in sudden repulsion, then grabbed a hold of himself, swallowing hard and trying not to retch. The reactor door was half a foot of solid steel reaching nine or so feet tall, studded with rivets and streaked with rust. It was closed and bolted as it had been for years, the only difference in the thing from the last time he'd seen it was now someone had written the word HI diagonally across it in blood.

"This monster of yours is quite a sociable little creature, isn't it, sir?" Dr. Ghrerd asked blankly. The old man sighed. "This does not bode well."

Reaching some sudden breaking point, Hojo stamped his foot against the metal staircase, sending the entire support structure of the reactor to trembling. He whipped about to face the blank cliff edge, gripping the wet railing in one hand and his gun in the other, shouting out into the rain. "You don't scare me!" he roared, "You're nothing but that god damned Turk, and I know everything about you! You're scared of me! That's why you won't show yourself and end this, you're too frightened! Well, I have all the answers, Valentine, any time you're ready to hear them, you come and say "Hi" to my face, you vicious bastard! Good Gods, when did that Turk get such a flair for the dramatic?" Hojo flung a hand towards the door, one end of his upper lip curling in disgust. He stumbled up a few more of the steps, his muddy leather loafers sliding against the steel, then stood on the little platform before the door with his hands jabbed in his hips. Some body's disembodied arm was laying off to one side of the little space and Hojo discreetly shoved the thing away with the toe of his shoe before any of the men behind him saw it and panicked. "Slob..." he muttered beneath his breath.

Shoving blonde wet bangs from his eyes, Cloud licked his lips and turned about, looking back through the rain at the mountainside below them. Zack nudged his shoulder anxiously. "Yo, you hear something, or somethin'?"

"No..." Cloud answered somewhat thoughtfully, "But he's out there, man."

"Yeah, well I wish he'd--"

The rest of Zack's words were cut off by a grunt as Waters shoved him forward into the steps. "Shut up, "the scientist warned, "I'm tired of you."

"Well, I love you too, "the Soldier muttered, pushing himself off the sharp metal edges of the reactor stairs, trying not to scrape his knuckles too badly. Hojo watched him for a moment, tapping his chin with the muzzle of his gun.

"Dr. Meer!" he barked.

"What?!" The younger guy shot a foot into the air, shivering in cold and fear.

"You go first. I'm positive that there's nothing to fear inside, but I want you to go first regardless. You're the youngest of us, the most agile, and--"

"The most expendable..." Meer finished for him in a sob. Hojo shrugged.

"That too."

"Well, I-- I-- I... that's not happening! I'm not stepping foot into a place that practically has 'you're gonna die!' written on its front door! You're going to have to shoot me!" Meer drew himself up, trying to bring some degree of intimidation into his voice. Hojo stared at his young employee coolly, then raised his derringer, cocked it, and took aim at his head.

"All right."

"Gah! Fine, fine! I'll go!"

"No, I'll go..." Meer turned about and was quite surprised to see Dr. Waters had spoken up. The scientist's cut lip had stopped bleeding but it was swollen twice as big as it should have been. He looked like a boxer fresh out of a losing match. His eyes glittered with determination though, as though he'd discovered the answer to something within that had been nagging at him for a while. He lay a thick hand on Meer's narrow shoulder, applying just enough pressure so the little man wouldn't think to protest. Not that he'd have protested anyways. Hojo though, did.

"You're needed to keep a hold on Zack, "the Professor said calmly, not lowering his weapon, "Besides, my order has been given. Meer goes. Don't defy me, Dr. Waters. If you think that I've already done the worst that I can do to you by

taking your job away, you're sorely wrong, my friend. I can make you wish your father'd never met his cousin, you inbred ignoramus."

Waters' eyes narrowed into slits of charcoal and he ascended the reactor steps as though an executioner rising to meet the condemned, the rain striking his hair-plastered scalp with audible thuds. Hojo's heart was racing and he wasn't quite sure what he'd do if this man decided, truly decided, that he was going to take over. He kept the derringer raised though, knowing that as ineffectual as the gun was, none of his men knew of it, it still gave him an edge. He breathed an inaudible sigh of relief when Waters simply paced past him and approached the door. At the same time though, he growled a curse and swore to get back at the lousy, cocky upstart for going against orders. "Do you truly think you can redeem yourself in my eyes by this little display of bravery?" Hojo asked, trying to keep from looking so bad in front of his men. He chuckled darkly. "You are too funny."

"Shut it." Waters stared at the door for a moment, watching the rainwater running down the corroded steel sides, making little glistening trails through the single word of blood upon it. Whose blood? he wondered silently. Vanswith's, Aaron's, Pepper's, Bier's... so many men had died in the past twenty-four hours, and it would really be no surprise if murder was repeated with him. Chance was like that... he didn't know what in the hell might happen.

But his hand rose to the latch of the reactor door regardless. He made himself press on.

The reactor was roughly twenty-six years old and signs of its age were everywhere. Patches of rust, holes in its steel sides, leaks in the mako tanks... being so far from Midgar, it wasn't very well kept, Shinra didn't feel the need to pay very much attention to something so far away and inconsequential. Its distance and unimportance were two huge contributing factors to his allowing the Science Department to house Jenova here. Nibelheim's size had added to it; after all, if something did go awry with the Project, the tiny village would be no great loss and relatively easy to cover up. Both Shinra and his legal department had been relieved at how well their theory had proven true after the Sephiroth 'incident'.

These thoughts whirled through Waters' mind as he fiddled with the opening mechanism on the reactor door. A key card and password used to be required for entrance here but seeing the slash marks that had smashed the locks to pieces, Waters assumed Sephiroth had been a little too impatient to bother getting his out when he'd come after Jenova four years ago. With a little prying, the rust-eaten door slid open on loudly creaking hinges, shivering beneath the insistent touch of Waters' wet hands. He wiped away the blood that'd come off on his pants legs, then stared through the portal at the perfect blackness of the reactor's interior. His mouth ached, his hurt lip was on fire, but he shoved it away, taking a single step inside.

Zack leaned against the railing lining the short staircase. He turned to Cloud and asked, "Stupid or brave?"

Cloud shook his head, "Impatient," he answered, "If he'd gotten chewed on by that Turk thing, he wouldn't be so eager to head in there now."

Zack glanced to Cloud's bound wrist, eyes bright in concern. "You okay?"

"Yeah, sure," the blonde-headed kid answered, faking a grin, "And so are you. I told you I wouldn't let anyone hurt ya."

Zack ushered Cloud up the stairs. He could see Hojo eyeing the both of them from the top, his little gun trained on his head, and he sighed as Ghrerd's bony finger poked him from behind. "The day ain't over yet, man."

Waters was surprisingly quick to enter the reactor. He took a flashlight from his pack, flicked it on with a cold-numbered thumb, and let the slice of light do its best to penetrate the space before him. He stalked a good distance out onto the catwalk inside, letting the thick iron door hang half-opened at his back. Hojo eyed him for a moment, then ordered Cloud and Zack to follow, finally prodding Ghrerd with his tiny derringer and kicking Meer soundly in the shin to get both men to do the same. When his little crew was inside, the Professor tossed a last bitter look to the storm, fished out the disembodied arm he'd shoved to the side before, and used the limb to prop the door open. Shaking his head violently to rid himself of some of the rain, Hojo entered the reactor, movements slow and measured in the semi-darkness.

His eyes ran over the sights inside suspiciously, yet Hojo could feel right off a certain sense of time in this place. The atmosphere was musty and aged like the interior of an old attic chest left undisturbed for years. It was cold too though, keenly so, causing them all to shiver in their wet skin and drenched clothes.

"Watch your steps..." Hojo spoke softly as he had back in the caves and his voice reverberated just as jarringly. "The footing's tricky here, the catwalk's narrow. Cloud, keep a hand on the chains."

"Sure, dad..." the kid muttered, tripping over the grating composing the floor the moment he said the words, glad Zack was there to clasp a steadying hand on his shoulder. He ignored Hojo's amused snort and trekked onward.

Waters was in the lead and it seemed the surface of every feature in the darkened, freezing reactor caught the beams of his flashlight as he moved them along. It all glittered; the very walls were alive with reflections of electric light, creating terrific patterns to the eye. The iodized metal of the pipes and machinery glowed in greens and blues beneath four years worth of rust, the catwalk beneath their feet cold and gray and treacherous to traverse. Most of the space was hidden though, Waters' flashlight was a weak thing and only made visible their immediate surroundings, lighting up tanks and suspended chains in garish yellows and blacks. He cranked up the power level on the little light but if it had any effect it

was minimal. It was still like moving through a moonless night. The sparks of reflected light from the steel walls were the stars.

After only a few hundred feet of walking, a corner or two in the catwalks, and a slim ladder that was nearly Cloud's undoing, the group came to a halt and Waters shone his flashlight on a bridge of bricks held together by a pair of steel rods extending out past the tiny platform they'd perched themselves upon. The underside of this massive walkway was lit by the green glow of raw mako churning in a pit below, while across its length was a rectangle of hellish red light, the entrance to another chamber. Waters stuck a tentative foot out onto the bridge, then hopped fully upon it, trying not to look over the side at the lethal drop.

"Sephiroth soup," Zack commented, pointing down at the mako and tossing a grin to Cloud.

"Gross..." he answered, sticking out his tongue, "I knew you'd say something like that. I do not like this place, man..."

"You kidding me? This decor, this lighting... man, I'll bet we could get rich selling vacation packages to this joint. Hell, we throw in a tour of the Shinra Mansion and I say screw becoming mercenaries if we ever get outta here, we'd be millionaires overnight."

Cloud craned his neck over the side to look down at the gash in the Planet. Dripping pipes as big around as he was jabbed into the wound like swords, sucking at all the LifeStream had to offer and destroying even that as it manipulated mako into something more practical, something easier to define. Cloud rubbed unconsciously at his stomach, remembering the icy feel of Masamune through his gut as Sephiroth had so casually ran him through that night. He wondered if the Planet felt the same way as he had with all these pipes sticking into her. Only hers was a wound that no materia could heal. At least, none that he'd ever seen. "Ha ha," he answered Zack absently after a moment.

The Soldier grunted out a laugh, trying not to turn around and punch Hojo when the Professor jabbed the derringer into his back. "Man, that was a delayed laugh if I ever heard one," he said with forced levity, his blue eyes watching Cloud like a mother hen's as his friend teetered unsteadily down the way. He turned back to look at Hojo for a moment, something nagging at some corner of his mind, but the scientist seemed preoccupied, busy with something else on his mind, so he thought nothing of it. Of course, it occurred to him after a moment that it wasn't good for Hojo to look preoccupied. He should be shaking in his shoes like the rest of the science goons, not walking through the reactor with that thoughtful expression on his face, his keen brown eyes piercing the empty air as though there were a thousand schemes hatching behind them. Zack moved closer to Cloud protectively, almost treading on his heels. He wished Valentine would show up and show up soon. Things were getting down to the wire. What in the hell was he waiting for?!

"What's it look like in there?" Hojo called to Dr. Waters as the latter stepped off the bridge and into the red-lit room at the other end. Zack and Cloud both knew what it looked like all too well yet they also knew what Hojo must be concerned about.

"There's no blood or bodies, if that's what you mean," Waters answered, entering the space gingerly and shutting off his flashlight. Zack grinned, a hand on Cloud's elbow, helping him down from the bridge.

"Give Hojo an hour or two and he'll remedy that."

Cloud shook his head and laughed, leaning heavily inside the door frame. Zack clapped him on the back.

"I knew I'd get a real laugh outta ya," he said kindly. He spat a sudden oath when Dr. Meer laid a palm against his back and pushed him rudely out of the doorway, shoving his own way into the room. His frightened eyes took the sights in cautiously; the rows of bright white pods blooming out of the gloom and the steep set of stairs leading up to a single door set in the opposite wall. The pipes here read Jenova and Meer seemed mildly impressed as he examined the whole setup. After a moment though, that emotion turned back to fright. There was something fatally wrong about this entire room and that wrongness seemed to stem from whatever lay behind that bolted door atop the stairs. The younger Doctor took a step towards it before he could help himself.

Zack felt equally uneasy to say the least. He looked to Hojo again. He was fiddling with something in his hands but held it close to his body so the Soldier couldn't see. Zack sighed and moved his eyes all about the small antechamber, praying that someone with red eyes and a claw would come swooping down from the black ceiling really soon. Aaaaaaaay time now would be good. Yup, whenever he was ready...

But there was just the sound of the storm outside, softer now yet strong and steady, settled in for a long haul and showing no signs of abating any time soon. The Soldier swallowed down his anxiety and started thinking again about running away. The things he'd been planning, he and Cloud's grand escape, all had been shoved from his mind with the events of the last half hour. He'd really been hoping that Valentine would wind up being some kind of hero to them, the savior they'd been waiting to come for four years. Yet it seemed he didn't care any more for the pair of them than Hojo did. He had his own agenda. It didn't include rescuing two inconsequential little guinea pigs.

Zack sighed bitterly, shaking rain from his dark hair, shivering in the biting chill of the reactor. But then he noticed the scientists looking at them and he bristled; his ears and tail would have stood on end if he'd been a cat. A feeling of cold dread in the back of his throat, he grabbed a hold of Cloud's shoulder and tried to take a step backwards with him. But suddenly, Waters was behind them. He'd never even seen him move.

"You're not going anywhere, Zack," the Doctor said flatly. There wasn't the usual malice or mockery in his voice this time, he seemed too tired to enjoy his power. Grimacing, he wrapped Zack in a choke hold before the smaller, shorter man could dart away, strangling him beneath the strength of a thickly muscled forearm. Zack clawed at him as best he could, little explosions of white going off before his eyes. He could see Hojo staring at him, his gun tucked away back inside his coat now, whatever he'd been messing with before now glinting in his hand.

"Shit! Cloud, scram!"

Cloud blinked once or twice, rubbing at his left elbow with his right hand like a little kid waiting in a corner to be picked on by the bullies. Meer, Ghrerd, and Hojo were blocking the way out yet Cloud didn't have the urge to even try to run. His mind was really rather preoccupied with thinking about what was behind that closed door with the Jenova sign hanging over it. He distantly heard Zack's warning but didn't take it seriously. Scram... yeah, sure. Run back out into that rain and be clawed to death by a monster. He'd rather take his chances inside.

Or would he?

Giving a great roar, Dr. Waters quickly grabbed hold of the back of Zack's rain-soaked tee-shirt and threw him with all of his might into the base of one of the platforms holding the first row of pods. The world spun by before Zack's eyes and it was going too fast for him to get a handhold on anything. His head struck the edge of the ledge and he crumpled into a little ball, his fingers reaching up to dig through his hair, find the injury, and stop the waves of pain thrumming through his skull. He didn't have the presence of mind to do anything as Waters lunged for Cloud, yanking up the already weakened man by both arms and pinning them useless at his sides. Cloud struggled feebly, eyes on Zack.

"They always have to make this so difficult," Hojo muttered, adjusting that thing in his hand and approaching Cloud in what almost seemed like disinterest. He too seemed totally preoccupied with thoughts of what lay behind the door at the stairs' summit. His eyes were bright and feverish behind his glasses and he turned to stare at the door once or twice before raising his right hand to the light, letting the little syringe he held in it sparkle brilliantly through the low, red haze the room sat steeped in. The others had snapped back into scientist mode suddenly it seemed. It gave Cloud a sick feeling in his stomach to see Dr. Meer and Ghrerd hovering nearby, their raincoats stripped off, standing at Hojo's elbow and ready to assist him with only the smallest of gestures.

"What're you gonna do?" he whispered as the needle slid into his skin, Hojo finding his favourite vein and pressing his thumb down on the plunger with practiced precision. A single bead of red marked where the injection left his skin. Hojo swept a hand back through his mussed hair and took off his ruined coat, flinging it on a humming generator to dry.

"Do you think we've been playing games with you these four years?" he asked quietly. Without a second glance, he left Cloud's side, approaching a panel to the left of the room's entrance and fiddling with a few knobs there, most likely the controls to the silent brooding pods scattered about. Rain thrummed the reactor's ceiling from above, thunder still rumbling distantly though not nearly as intensely as before. The sounds were pleasant to Cloud's ears, like a lullaby, and he didn't realize until it was too late that it wasn't the rain making him sleepy, it was whatever god damnable crap Hojo had just stuck into him. He slumped a little to the side, going weak in the knees. He would have fallen to the floor if Waters hadn't had such a firm hold of his arms.

"Dr. Ghrerd," Hojo addressed, not turning from the panel. His head was bowed over the controls and he bit his lip in thought, trying to remember the proper sequencing. It had been years since he'd been here and had to use these things. They were rather primitive by today's standards actually. "There's a passageway to the left there, in that little alcove. A door's at the end, and the freezer room is beyond. I need one of the corticosteroid and immunosuppressive medication kits, there should be a few made up in the steel cabinet in the back. Dr. Meer, go in the freezer and bring out whatever trays of cells you find in there. I'm not sure what Professor Gast left here, we may have to take entirely new Jenova samples, I'm not sure. Dr. Waters...." Hojo turned and looked at the man, trying to think up some task for him, "Stand there and look intimidating."

Waters obliged, having to put forth a little more effort now to keep Cloud from collapsing completely. Ghrerd and Meer hurried to do as ordered, nearly forgetting their ordeal in the rain in their rush to do their jobs and Hojo watched them go for a moment before flicking a last few switches on the control panel before him. There was a huge burst of steam from some of the pods in the third row, then the grind of machinery and a noise like water rushing through a pipe. Waters took a nervous step backwards, trying not to look as frightened as he felt. Hojo glanced his way and shoved his glasses a bit further up his nose.

"You can drop him," he said, referring to Cloud, "He's full of a good dosage of succinylcholine, he isn't going anywhere for a while. Open the three valves to the right there. Two and a half clockwise turns apiece should do it. Do something with Zack first though, I'd prefer not to have to look at him if at all possible." Zack laughed at the words from his sprawled position on the grating, trying to see straight and keep conscious. His fingers came away red from his scalp and he sighed deeply, from the tips of his toes, making a sudden attempt to sit up. The rain was a soothing song against the reactor's roof. It would have been easy enough to let it lull him into oblivion, but he kept awake for Cloud, one half-shut blue eye trained upon his spiky blonde head. He kept it there, even when Waters grabbed a hold of his own collar and threw him

into an empty pod. The door clanged shut behind him but he pushed himself to his feet and stared out the tiny round window, trying to ignore the little jabbing thoughts in the back of his brain; he knew the kinds of things that customarily were kept in these tanks. Ah.... he'd nearly jumped out of his skin when he'd first peeked through these windows and discovered the first of many things about Shinra that would make him question the company he'd once respected so much.

Cloud distantly saw the pod open and shut and he wondered rather absently where Zack had gone. He kept waiting to pass out but he couldn't for some reason. He lay on his side, the cold hard metal grating of the floor beneath him leaving indentations in his skin, and he couldn't move a muscle. His eyelids slipped shut but he forced them back open, shooting daggers at Hojo's back. Hojo seemed too engrossed in his little button-pushing to pay him much attention though. Hell.... Cloud knew he didn't really care how deeply he was hated. He was in his element now, in the midst of an experiment, a procedure, his precious Project. The world could fall to ruin around his ears and he wouldn't blink twice. Cloud blinked though. He blinked away two heavy tears from his eyes and watched the little room, wondering what was going to happen to him. They'd already taken so much away, changed so much else. What was there left of him that they so desired? Why did they want to make him into a carbon copy of the very man Cloud hated so desperately, even though he'd already sent him to hell four years ago? Of all the things, all of them, that they could do, what they were planning was among the worst. Hojo wanted his super Soldier back. He was going to get that in the form of Cloud Strife, to hell with what the kid thought of it. All he could really do was lay on the floor of this reactor and take it.

He felt the vibrations through the rusty grating of the two scientists' footsteps as they returned from their rummaging around in the back. Ghrerd said something to Hojo but it didn't register in Cloud's mind. He listened only to the rain, the thunder, and wondered what these people would do to a poor kid from Nibelheim who'd never really wanted anything else in the world but to prove himself worthy of the life the crazy Gods had seen fit to grant him.

~*~

Chet was hopelessly wet. He felt more wet than he ever did in a shower and figured that was because he had his clothes here to remind him how wet he was. The storm had let up a good deal but it still was emptying buckets of rain all over the mountainside. The path he was following had been totally washed out. He wasn't even tramping through mud anymore, it was just a river that went up over his ankles, brown and gross and hiding rocks at its bottom that tripped him up every few feet.

He'd been hiking/climbing for a half an hour now and been starting to worry that he was lost when he caught sight of Vincent not too far off, sitting in the highest forked branches of an elm tree, one leg dangling over the side and swinging carelessly. His gaze was affixed on the nearby reactor and he watched it as a lion surveys the antelope herd he's about to tear into. He was far ahead on the trail and Chet could only see him because his form was silhouetted so perfectly against the flat gray storm clouds overhead. The actor hurried to catch up, sloshing through the watery trail, trying not to fall forward onto his face as that would only factor mud into the mess of rain and blood already dirtying his jacket.

He looked up at the reactor as he ascended, thinking that he'd never really been this close to the thing. He'd never exactly had any kind of a flaming desire to scale Mt. Nibel before. It was enough to look at it from the front room window of his place every morning and watch the mists around it make rainbows of the risen sun. Yeah, that was always cool.

The rain was stinging the fang-wounds on his neck like a bitch. Chet flipped his soggy collar up to try and protect himself a bit. He was actually feeling dizzy as hell, it was hard to keep from just sinking to his knees and laying face-first in the mud, close his eyes and give this damned mountain a chance to stop spinning around. But he wanted to keep an eye on Vincent, as much as he knew the guy really had no desire to associate with him anymore. He knew this because he'd told him so. Flat out. Different from when he'd yelled at him in the hallway and told him to go home, Vincent had more or less threatened to kill him if he didn't leave. That confrontation had been horrible. Chet had been sprawled on the floor of Hojo's office, helpless, Vincent had been sprawled next to him, far from helpless despite his broken back, with his claw wrapped around Chet's neck. That moment when Vincent had said he'd wind up dead if he stayed with him probably ranked up there as one of the scariest moments of his life. It amazed him now to remember that he'd told Vincent "You're not the boss of me", and shoved him away. He had thought Vincent was being terribly rude at the time.

Chet shook his head now as he plowed through the rain. A peal of thunder caused him to lift his chin and he surveyed the reactor again, this time in the quick flash of a sheet of lightening. He wasn't looking forward to whatever was inside, but he knew he had to see this all through to the end. By breaking into the Shinra Mansion last night, he'd planted himself in something he never could have imagined in his wildest, most drunken dreams. Now, he was as much a player in all of this nonsense as anyone was. He was gonna see what happened, he was gonna help if he was able. There was nothing else for him to do. After tonight, the thought of going back to Nibelheim, of shuffling around the town every day and passing out in the bar every night, of going back to that pile of crap that was his life, just waiting for opportunity to come and poke him in the forehead.... it was an impossible, ridiculous thought. He didn't want that garbage anymore. Sara wouldn't have

wanted it for him, she'd always hated the fact that he was such a loser, though she of course wouldn't have told him so nor hurt his feelings for the world.

Chet gasped when that name tickled his mind so he immediately shoved it away again. No time for it.

The path inclined sharply without warning and Chet eyed a few projections of rock dubiously. They stuck out of the inclining ground slick with rain but he grit his teeth and darted his grappling hands out towards them, climbing the steep path as best as he could. His dizziness nearly won for a moment, and then all the sounds started to get really dim, the low storm light got lower and Chet could feel himself sinking into a faint. But with a little curse he bit his tongue and shook his head so hard his eyes started to tear up. He rose back into consciousness and scrambled up the rocks. If Vincent hadn't sucked so much outta his freaking neck after killing that monster he wouldn't be in such bad shape. But nooooo, the vamp had to almost suck Chet dry to heal himself enough to scramble into town and take out a few villagers. And of course Chet hadn't protested. He'd helped him out around Nibelheim, showed him where this asshole Bernie had lived (who'd conveniently owed Chet money) and well, Vincent hadn't left blood enough in him to scramble up the side of Mt. Nibel. In fact, Chet was pretty sure Bernie wouldn't be scrambling up anything ever again, especially not the shallow grave he'd dug for him.

And then there'd been the auburn-headed chick that lived four houses down from him. Chet didn't know her that well, she was pretty hot and wouldn't give him the time of day, but Vincent had spotted her right off. He'd been leaning against the side of a building, hiding in the shadows and trying not to be seen by the people wandering all over the streets. He'd just regained the ability to walk but he was too messed up everywhere else to take advantage of it. Something had caught his attention about this girl though and he'd stumbled towards her, then ran, and all that happened next was a blur to Chet. All he knew was that Vincent was saying a single name as he went towards her: Lucrecia... and when he saw she wasn't who he'd thought, he'd put his teeth in her neck to keep her quiet, bitter tears in his eyes when she dropped lifeless to the ground. That had upset Chet quite a bit but he'd buried her just like he'd buried Bernie. Just like he wound up burying two others that Vincent killed. He'd move from one victim on to another simply because he was still bleeding so badly from his wounds that anything he took in didn't stay there very long. Chet didn't know that much about vampire physiology, especially had no clue about artificially-created vampire physiology, but he saw that Vincent got a little better with each bit of blood he could get. And so he'd helped him out. He hadn't known what else he should do.

Even though he'd said he'd kill him if he didn't leave. But nah, Vincent hadn't done it, he needed Chet too badly. Chet wasn't sure how to feel about this. He rubbed his neck and wondered if maybe he was like one of those poor saps who got bitten by a conniving, clever monster and wound up being his slave until he finally got offed. Eesh, rotten deal, if that was the case.

The reactor was closer now and so was Vincent. The man sat up suddenly on his perch and Chet saw him dart down the tree faster than his eye could follow. He disappeared among the rocks and tall boulders but Chet knew where he'd wind up. He was acting weird. Even weird for him. It probably had something to do with all the murdering he'd had to do. Chet had heard that Hojo guy say something about evolutions... well, Vincent had had to let this vampire evolution thing of his take control as he'd lain dying under the injuries that monster had inflicted on him. He'd had to use those instincts and use that healing ability to pull himself up from the bottom of the pit Hojo had cast him in. Chet wondered if maybe it wasn't so easy to come back from what he had to become. The instincts and lust implanted there were strong, that was obvious from how he'd brutally tore into those people in Nibelheim. So how strong was the Turk that Vincent claimed he'd been before being fucked with then? Was it stronger than the monster? If not... Chet shook his head in the rain. If not, they were all screwed.

A push of thunder shoved Chet to the ground but he was on his feet again in an instant, eyes searching out the sight of the reactor. He pulled himself over the face of a slippery chunk of granite, spitting out rainwater, which he thought tasted rather bad considering he was up in the mountains, then he lifted his head again and saw Vincent, way off in the distance and moving forward with the speed, stealth, and disregard of an animal. He looked no where else but ahead as he made his way.

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Vincent felt strange. Cold inside, yet warmly detached, as though he were an invisible man treading the abandoned halls of an old stone castle. If he shut his eyes, he could almost imagine that the clack of his shoes on the rain-spattered stones were the echoes of footfalls in that stone keep of his imagination.

He moved up the last summit of Mt. Nibel with amazing accuracy. He hardly had to exercise any effort to keep up his pace. His feet knew where to go, his eyes knew where to look, where to find the more treacherous places in the path and then avoid them. The rain was a pleasant, constant sensation on his skin. He almost wanted to strip his shirt off, remove the fabric that kept him from a total relationship with this storm, this sky, this utter chaos of nature and destruction. Instead, he paused for a moment in his advance on the mako reactor and threw his head back, letting the rain strike his

face and run stinging into his blood-red eyes. He laughed when it slid into his mouth and down his throat, so much different, so much colder than what else he'd been drinking tonight. The acrid taste of the mountain rain pushed the taste of blood from his tongue and that made something inside of him angry, made something there want to repeat murder and regain that sweet taste of death. Vincent lowered his head again, smearing rain from his vision with his good arm. He shook himself a bit, as though he were falling asleep, then continued his ascent, peeling long locks of wet black hair from his face.

The reactor was only a few hundred feet further above his head. It looked like a dragon from down here, some glistening steel beast with all four feet implanted in the earth. Green smoke rose from its nostrils, a halo of mako and light. Vincent blinked the image away until he could think straight again. He didn't know what this structure was. It hadn't been here thirty years ago. Mt. Nibel had been untouched and wild then and he and Lucrecia had spent many a long afternoon tramping about the squirrely paths that crisscrossed its sun-dappled sides. It was different now though, just as Hojo was different, just as the Mansion had changed, the people, the world, the way the sun looked in the sky. There were monsters on the mountain now, and the trees were all dying.

Vincent stumbled a bit on the path suddenly, skidding down onto his knees. He climbed back to his feet clumsily, his heart racing for reasons unknown. The reactor beckoned from above though, and he knew he had to continue just as he'd had to before. He'd raced up and left that grisly message for Hojo on the door, writing it in Vanswith's recently shed blood, then darted back down again to watch the reaction. He hadn't been disappointed. Though he had been sorely tempted to take Hojo up on his offer as the scientist had shouted out his threats into the empty air.

Rubbing at his eyes, Vincent suddenly, deftly severed the buttons of his shirt with his claw, quickly ripping the garment away. He left it laying in a puddle in his wake, then kept climbing, feeling a little better. If he kept everything physical, if he overwhelmed himself with sensation, then he wouldn't have to think. Thinking right now he knew would drive him mad. Of course he would have been content to go mad if it didn't hurt so much, but it did. He was mentally exhausted, his defenses were low. Thinking, reasoning, remembering... it all rammed finely honed and heated poignards into his brain and he couldn't deal with the agony of it anymore today. Not now anyway. Maybe later.

There was thunder. It spun from the sky and Vincent listened to it absently, cocking his head to one side as he advanced. The trees rattled their branches in the wind and he listened to that too, losing himself in sound because that drowned out his thoughts. The rain striking his bare chest, stinging his only recently healed wounds, that was another distraction that he welcomed. And the lightening... the lightening blinded him and he smiled at it, twin fangs glinting in the harsh light. Thank the Gods for this storm... he might have gone insane without it.

He might have gone insane if he didn't have his goal. If he didn't know how terribly Hojo needed to die.

The single fact blared through his brain; it was really all that he knew for certain. Beyond all he threw at himself to muffle his thoughts, the idea of Hojo's death revolved in Vincent's mind. He wasn't sure what the fact stemmed from. Killing Hojo seemed obvious, it had been on his list of priorities all night, yet now he clung to the desire with something like desperation. If it stemmed from his overdeveloped sense of vengeance, his rage, or his feeling of obligation towards Lucrecia, he wasn't sure. He only knew that that was why he was climbing this mountain. He would gut Hojo on his claw and then he would deal with whatever came next. Then he'd think about the things Hojo had said about ... her. He'd contemplate how true or false any of it might have been. And he would find her. Alive. Or he'd kill himself and find her dead and they could be dead together.

Dead together... why did that phrase strike such a chord in his soul? Something that Hojo had said...

"It just wasn't meant to be, Valentine. She's mine. You almost had her, I almost let you die and you two could've been together eventually. But no, you don't deserve that. You deserve to live on as what you should have always been. A monster. But just wait. Just wait and watch. I'll let you be together eventually, you'll see. Even I am not that cruel."

Vincent's features contorted in a single sudden second of irrepressible agony. He clawed his good hand into his brow, drawing his shoulders up around himself as though preparing for a blow. But then it passed, or he pushed it away, and he kept up his trek. He felt so cold and so warm and he didn't understand the contradiction. Then without warning, he felt vicious as hell, ready to kill someone just as he'd killed those scientists back on the trail. His claw twitched at his side as though with a life of its own and he ground the backs of his teeth together, leaping into a tree, climbing a few feet up, then throwing himself onto a precipice, quickening his progress. He was almost running now and he shook his head to clear it but the craving for murder wouldn't leave him. And he didn't really want it to. Just like the rain, the lightening, the thunder, it was nothing but another distraction that he welcomed because it kept him from thinking about all that he'd done and all that he'd lost. The murderous thing inside, whatever it was, it was almost like a friend to him and he felt so grateful to have it. It had saved him from all those monsters in the Mansion. Now it would save him from himself.

Chet swallowed back a gasp, both elbows scraped beyond recognition, as he pulled himself up another steep face of rock. He saw Vincent surmount the last lip of the mountain, a black silhouette just as fearsome as any other monster in the area. He was on the upper precipice now, on a level with the reactor. A sudden flash of lightening split the sky in two,

coupled with a perfectly synchronatated blast of thunder. Chet thought the storm couldn't have possibly given him a worse sign.

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For a while, the reactor had been as loud as an erupting volcano, a thousand voices, screams, whispers, mumbles, and shouts all churning as one and echoing off of the high corroded ceilings, floating about the small chamber without regard to anyone's abused ears. Now the voices all had died into a pregnant silence that was worse than the noise had ever been. The silence echoed just as surely as its predecessors and Zack's ears rang with the reverberations. This silence was pounding and deafening and maddening and he wanted to shield his ears from it with the palms of his hands, cower against the back wall of the mako pod they had him closed up in and shiver uncontrollably. But he of course, didn't.

The silence consumed the main chamber of the reactor. It seemed like a silence that must have consumed the entire world. Forget the sound of the rain thudding against the ceiling, that was a sham. The world outside was a noiseless vacuum too, where terrible things were happening as friends stood by, helpless and defeated. Zack rested two closed fists against the pod's sides, leaning his forehead on the small round window in the front. He couldn't see too much from here, at least not what he wanted to see. All he could make out was the hellish red glow of the room, assorted pipes and machinery, and the left side of the staircase. Anything past the stairs remained obscured by the rim of the window no matter how much he craned his neck or squinted his eyes. Just the brush of an occasional white lab coat. The intermittent view of a scientist's bony elbow. What he wanted to see was Cloud. He wouldn't be able to quit pacing around and kicking the sides of this god damned pod until he knew Cloud was okay.

He called out for someone to pay attention to him a couple of times. He knew his voice could be heard, even past this pod's leaden walls. It surely echoed back loud as hell to him but no one was answering. "Yo!! Dickheads! Helloooooo! I know you can hear me, ya pack of mewling little nerds, you wanna tell me what in the fuck you're doing?! Don't make me break this door down, 'cause I'll do it! So help me I will!"

His voice was startlingly loud in the tiny pod. He didn't bother shouting again, knowing they were ignoring him and likely weren't going to stop ignoring him any time soon. It hurt his ears too much to yell anyways. He pressed a cheek to the window and strained his eyes trying to see to the other side of the room, to Cloud.

Though Zack couldn't get even a glimpse of him, Cloud was stretched out on a counter, his eyes half-shut and a moan escaping his lips. The moan was the nearest thing he could manage to speaking and he so desperately felt the need to speak. Little sparkles and bursts of rainbows were going off before his eyes. He felt rather deliciously numb though. It actually felt pretty good, especially after how tired and in pain he'd been since arriving in Nibelheim yesterday. This sensation was almost something he could grow comfortable with. He laid his head back, a soft sigh escaping his lips, his eyes slipping delicately shut. If he could just get some sleep.... he hadn't slept all night, he'd been too busy listening to ghosts and screams and vampires and Zack. But sleep now would be bliss. He didn't think he could really fight it. Sleeping now, never re-awakening to a life of torment and guilt... guilt because he'd allowed Sephiroth to destroy his home, his mother, Tifa... all of those faces from his past that would haunt his poor mako-ridden brain on especially dark, especially quiet nights. Even now, Tifa's hands nipped at the corners of his mind, her voice sang a cutting song past the noise of the thunder and the chattering scientists. Even now, Cloud wanted to cry because he knew when he opened his eyes, she wouldn't be there. She was never there. He'd lost her years ago...

But to sleep now, to forget all of that, to become something that didn't have to worry about pain or failure, something like Sephiroth had been. Had he worried about what he was doing as he'd sliced that cutting arc of silver across the bellies of those men in the fire? Had he thought twice about causing that fire itself; transforming his rage into something that would burn others as badly as it burnt his own soul? No. He'd acted out of instinct and desire, without a thought for anyone else. Even when he'd fallen into the mako pit, Cloud could remember the look on his face. He'd been too insane to care, too out of it to worry about his body dissolving into goo in a vat of raw mako. No, just the mocking smile on his face, no humor in it, no joy. The smile of someone who's seen something that sane people can't see and then return from afterwards. The smile of the damned, the mad, the liberated...

A sharp sting in the neck jolted Cloud from his half-sleep and his thoughts. His eyes snapped shut in time to see Hojo's face in his. The Professor slid a hypodermic from his flesh and gave the needle a little shake. "That wake you up?" he asked absently, dropping the needle off with Dr. Ghrerd who let it fall it into a plastic bag, setting it aside. Cloud grit his teeth together, fighting off a wave of dizziness to stare at his tormentor. Just keeping his eyes open burned. The sleep offered by a vial of chemicals was nearly overwhelming. But to close his eyes or turn his back on Hojo was just totally unappealing.

"What're you doing to me?" he demanded in a whisper, his voice returning to some degree. Hojo shot him a 'you are a stupid specimen so shut up' look.

"Give it ten minutes," he said to Dr. Ghrerd and Dr. Meer, who both stood at his side, the latter staring at Cloud as though he were waiting for him to grow another head. Hojo approached a little silver tray on the counter and examined it

minutely, turning it so it'd better catch the chamber's scant light. "Another ten minutes and then we begin to worry. If the immunosuppressive drugs, the corticosteroids, don't take effect, then the Jenova cells we're about to inject him with will grow hostile when they're attacked by the body's natural lymphocytes, and in turn will attack the mental facilities or cell structure itself. Then after all this trouble we'll have little more but another lunatic on our hands. Or another deformity. Most likely both."

"You can prohibit this so easily, sir? Without allowing the Jenova cells to utterly corrupt his tissue?" Meer questioned wonderingly.

"Jenova prefers to merge rather than to dominate. She is a parasite. Because of that she prefers to take advantage rather than take control. Though in some cases that latter can occur, when it is to her benefit. Sometimes it can be to our benefit to allow a specimen to be corrupted by defensive Jenova cells, but in this case we are in need of a man who can think for himself when he's allowed to. Someone who can use the facilities granted to him in a logical, rational way. Not a dumb brute, snarling and growing extra limbs on a whim."

Cloud's eyes snapped open. They'd slipped shut again without him realizing. He could make out Hojo's silhouette at a nearby counter, only feet away, the rest of the scientists congregated at his back. This entire scene was like some horrible nightmare, something he'd seen in his sleep: himself helpless on a table with a lot of guys in white coats ready to turn him into something he didn't wanna be. A sense of panic welled up deep in his stomach and he tried to move his arms, turn his head, do anything to alleviate this horrible tension. But Hojo had filled him full of muscle relaxants and he could barely breathe much less get off of this table.

"You ain't doin' nothing t'me..." he hissed, hoping he was speaking loud enough that they could hear, "Ya can take your Jenova shit and swallow it yourselves cause it'll be a waste trying anythin' on me. I ain't even gonna give into ya. Never. Never ever."

"Babble," Hojo said casually, gesturing over his shoulder without turning around. "They always feel so obligated to say things like that, I honestly don't know where it all comes from."

"Fear," Dr. Waters answered tonelessly. His thick arms were crossed over his chest and he stared at the back of Hojo's head as though he wanted to crush it in one hand. "They always say you'll never get away with it just so that they can believe it. If they can believe it, it can never truly happen. Until it does happen. And by then, it's too late."

Hojo grunted. "Deep." He heard Waters growl a bit at the little brush-off but he didn't really care. Breathing a shallow sigh, the Professor took a careful look at the contents of the little silver tray on the counter, his nose wrinkling up in thought. And at the smell of the stuff. After a moment or two, he mixed the rather large concentration of cells on the tray with a solution composed mainly of saline and then drained the mixture into another hypodermic. An IV was almost always the norm when dealing with Jenova injections but the conditions in the reactor were not favorable towards something like that. Not to mention he just wanted to finish this up and be done with it. The situation had changed. This would not be the great triumph of four years of hard labor that he'd hoped it would be. Now it was just a nuisance, a danger, something he was completing only because he was too scared of Jenova not to. Hojo raised the syringe to the light, checking the dosage. An infusion of these damned cells and then Cloud Strife would no longer have a real will of his own. And that simple fact, this simple procedure, it all defied every god damned law of science that Hojo could come up with. Yet such was Jenova. And such was why he loved her so dearly. To hell with science. It all turned hollow once she entered the picture.

"Pur-pur-professor..." Cloud was whimpering now, his dim blue eyes fixated at the shining needle in Hojo's hand. Hojo felt that old raw power at being pleaded with and he smiled, his first in a while. It had been hard to smile with Valentine breathing down his neck, yet now, thoughts of that monster he'd made were distant and unimportant. All that mattered was that the Jenova Project, so long halted by Sephiroth's death, was about to be furthered once again. "Professor Hojo... please... I've known what you were g-gonna do since day one, but gimme some more time. Please... I d-don't wanna be that thing yet. Just another day, another hour. C'mon, I'm begging you..."

"Yes, I see that." Hojo chuckled and approached the table, "And I find it rather funny. You can stop it though, you're wasting both your breath and your dignity." Hojo felt a sudden hand wrap around his upper arm and he turned about with a little snarl to see Dr. Ghrerd looking upon him with a pleading expression.

"Sir..." the old MD began, "Are you quite sure Cloud will be okay with this? He's still very ill from last night and the journey up here. Another day could be invaluable."

"Ha. Another day for that monster to kill more of you?" Hojo asked with a sneer, "Another hour for Valentine to slither his way up the mountain and tear you all to pieces? Hell, I'm game if you are, good Doctor. Perhaps it would be fun to watch. Dr. Waters, kindly do something about Zack! If he keeps pounding on the side of that god damned pod I swear my head's going to cave in!"

Waters jumped to do as he was bid and Hojo shoved Ghrerd from his side, adjusting his grip on the needles in his hands. He'd made up three of them, it was a higher dosage of cells than he'd ever given a subject before but he was confident that Cloud was ready for it. His was a strange sort of half-daring confidence though. He almost wanted this all to

fail, just so he'd know once and for all that the world was totally against him. Then he could go off on a mad spree and have a fit and fire everyone at Shinra and swear until he fell over gasping for air. But at the same time, he knew this would work. Jenova would make it work. He could feel her watching, laughing at them all, and running loving eyes over the man that Hojo was about to hand over to her.

Meer, the young scientist with the thick glasses and cropped brown hair still slick with rain, pressed himself against a wall of the pod chamber, the palms of both hands flat behind him. Hojo and Ghrerd, after a moment of hesitation, approached Cloud, who grunted a thousand curses after he realized his pleas weren't going to get him anywhere. Waters looked on for a moment, then hopped up onto a raised platform to pound his fist against the side of Zack's pod, in hopes of getting the young man to stop pounding his own fist against the side of it. It didn't work. Dr. Meer's head was spinning with all the noise and all the tension. Yet his nerves wouldn't allow him to do anything else but strain his ears to hear past all the immediate ruckus. He listened to the storm still wailing beyond the reactor walls, trying to hear any signs of the thing he'd seen so briefly in the rain. He'd known, known the moment he looked in that pair of red eyes, that the thing was going to kill him. So now he waited, remembering Vanswith's blood body as it lay before him in the mud, remembering the single savage kick in the back he'd gotten from the monster, remembering how he'd ran and given himself up for lost.

Yet he'd made it here. He was standing in the almost pleasant warmth of this reactor.

Still he listened. He knew that past the rain, past the thunder, the howling of the vicious mountain winds, he'd hear a claw scraping against the walls. Or the sound of those metal shoes on the metal catwalk. He could almost imagine the noise now and his teeth chattered, even as he saw Hojo bending over Cloud's prone form with three separate needles in his thin, white hands. Waters threw open the door to Zack's prison and swung a single savage fist inside, letting it meet Zack's head before ever offering a word of warning. He closed the door again and turned towards Hojo. There weren't anymore disturbances from the pod.

Still, Meer listened to other things. He almost wanted to hear Valentine's approach. That at least, would be some sort of confirmation. Instead, all he got was the noise of the storm. So he turned his attention to what he truly should have been observing.

"I never thought.... I never thought that I could take his place," Cloud sobbed quietly as Ghrerd checked his pulse, strapping a blood pressure device around the bulk of his upper arm, "I never thought you could make me into him, but everyone tells me I'm crazy anyways and the General was crazy so it's already starting.... Hojo, why you wanna do this? I'm sorry I killed him, I think I'd take it back now if I could, I'd climb down into that pit and pull Sephiroth out of it, return him to ya if ya let me. Don't do this, don't take my own will away from me.... it's all you've left me after these years and all I got to cling to at night when a million mako voices are shouting at me. Please don't.... please...."

Hojo watched Dr. Ghrerd turn away from the piteous voice. There was a little unease, a little guilt on the old man's face and Hojo almost laughed aloud to see it. "Can't stomach this?" he asked him, testing the end of the needle he was about to slide into his patient's neck. "Didn't you do worse than this in med school at least? Surely you gave cancer to rats and exposed monkeys to radiation all to record a bit of data on a clipboard. By the Gods.... I'm surrounded by fools and cowards, not enough spine between the lot of you to construct an amoeba."

Ghrerd looked almost ashamed and Dr. Meer really had to marvel. He didn't understand how the man could be so squeamish. Meer himself feared only for his own well-being, the whining little specimen could turn their toes up and bleed all over the reactor for all he cared. Hell, the vampire stalking them could drain Cloud and Zack dry and Meer wouldn't blink an eye. He'd be too busy running the other way.

Cold and sudden, Cloud felt the hypodermic enter his skin just as he had a million times before. Usually it was mako, or a sedative, something like that, but it was so much worse knowing how different this one was. He trembled with that knowledge and had to keep from throwing up as Hojo repeated the action with two more dosages, flinging each spent needle back onto the counter. The contents roared their way through his veins, a spreading warmth and he could feel their path. It worked its way up to his brain and he gasped when his vision exploded into fragments of color.

Outside, the storm picked up. The eye had passed over, if what had been considered calm had been an eye at all.

With a little cry of triumph, Hojo drew away from Cloud, letting Dr. Ghrerd clean up the small puncture wounds from the injection, then prepare a dosage of heart stimulants to keep their patient from going into arrest. He had to be watched carefully for signs of shock too. As mystical and powerful as Jenova was, the human bodies she inhabited were merely human after all; frail things that Hojo despised half of the time yet he still had to treat them with some sort of respect, unless he wanted all the men he altered to wind up dead and useless. Ghrerd wiped clammy sweat off of Cloud's brow with the wet sleeve of his coat, whispering something into his ear that Hojo couldn't hear. The Professor sneered in his general direction and turned away, wondering where all the power and majesty of being a Shinra scientist had gone. How could he be expected to hold his head up in this traitorous, cowardly atmosphere?

"What now?" Waters asked rudely, approaching Hojo without the slightest semblance of grace and shoving at his shoulder for attention.

"Get away from me," Hojo sighed, glancing once behind him at Cloud and then sinking to a sitting position against the wall. He felt suddenly spent, as though he'd injected all of his strength into Cloud instead of just a bit of cells and saline. Jenova said something to him in her wordless whisper but he brushed it away, too tired to be concerned. The words weren't really there anyways. He just knew she wanted something. She was anxious.

Well, for the moment, fuck her. She could play with Cloud and leave him alone.

"We don't have the luxury of sitting in this damned reactor for the rest of the day," Waters babbled on in his ear, kneeling a bit to spit in his face. Hojo turned away and shut his eyes. "I don't understand why he hasn't come after us but he will. He hasn't chased us through the rain and killed so many men just to stop now. Don't delude yourself into thinking that."

"Shut your mouth," Hojo demanded in a dangerous tone of voice. He could feel his hand working towards the derringer he'd returned to his coat. Just a moment of rest and then he'd worry about what the hell he'd do to keep Cloud safe until they got back to Midgar. If Waters didn't shut the hell up, he'd try a more extreme method this time than simply sewing his lips together.

"He's probably outside this very instant," the scientist went on desperately, "In fact, we know he is, who the hell else wrote all over the front door in blood? He's playing with us, you know. Killing us one by one, working his way up to you. It's almost god damned admirable. If I were him, I'd work it all out like this; make the fun last; make you tremble in your shoes until he finally brings you a slow and agonizing death...."

"If you're trying to frighten me, Doctor," Hojo began in a tired voice, "It's not working. I don't get frightened of anything but failure. And that is not going to happen today. Now shut the hell up before I introduce a bullet to your brain."

"Sir..." Ghrerd called, looking up from his examinations of Cloud who'd fallen strangely silent after the injections. His eyes were opened wide, the whites were bloodshot and visible all about his mako blue irises. He was waiting for something he couldn't even name. "Sir, Dr. Waters is right. Where are the Turks you said were coming in the chopper? What time were they to arrive? Will we be leaving with them?"

"Do you think I still won't shoot every mother's son of you?" Hojo hissed, a hand darting up to rub at his throbbing head. Every noise sent a stab of pain through his brain and he wondered why in the hell he had to develop a migraine now, of all times. His fingers worked through his hair to rub at his skull and he cursed his men, cursed Jenova, cursed the fate that had him sitting in wet clothes on the floor of a mako reactor with a dead alien humming wordless threats and promises into his mind. "None of this is over yet! I want all of you away from me, and I want you all to shut the hell up!" Hojo pounded his fist against the wall at his back for emphasis, enough fury in his words to make even Dr. Waters take a step backwards. The Professor let his head sink down into his arms, which he rested on a pair of knees drawn up close to his chest. "My kingdom for a cure materia," he muttered, "Dr. Ghrerd, keep an eye on Cloud, please."

"I am, sir," the older man answered with a bit of haughtiness. Of course he was keeping an eye on Cloud, Hojo had threatened to kill him if anything happened to him. Besides, it was his job. And he was concerned anyway, just as any compassionate human being should be.

As the MD hovered like a mother bird over his charge, Dr. Waters took up a post at the entrance to the room, and Meer tried to hide himself in the shadows and not be noticed. Hojo blessed the quiet that came then. There was only the steady thrum of rain on the faraway reactor ceiling and the thunder that was erupting again with newfound strength. Still, Jenova thrummed with the same kind of monotonous, relentless intensity as the storm. She wanted something and she wouldn't let Hojo find peace at the moment. The Professor lifted his head and stared upwards. He was seated almost directly below the steep staircase leading up to her chamber. The tiny window in her door was like a single eye boring down on him.

"What the hell do you want now..?" he queried beneath his breath, even the dim red light of the room harsh on his now sore eyes. Was this a warning? A threat? Just random bitching? The man snarled to himself impatiently, loud enough so that Meer looked towards him with an unspoken question parting his lips. But Hojo hadn't a word to say to him.

Cloud was the only one who dared to make a sound after that. He lay on the table, his eyes squeezed shut as sweat dribbled down the sides of his face, collecting on the cool ceramic tiles at his back. He was muttering things that didn't make any sense. Ghrerd bent down closer to try and hear what he was saying. Even then, he was convinced that the mumblings weren't words at all, only random sounds, snatches of speech that lost their coherence long before they could reach the boy's tongue. Cloud himself wasn't sure what he was saying. He rambled things only to keep himself grounded. He felt rather light, as though he could lift right off the table. Only the sound of his own nonsensical words in his ear, and the pain he still felt in his shoulder, wrist, and head, only these things were real enough to keep him from flying apart into a million pieces.

"Sir..." Ghrerd's voice was low, one that was accustomed to bearing bad news. Medical doctors had to learn how to say certain things without panicking themselves or those listening. "Sir, his blood pressure's dropping. Damn it... don't you stop breathing, Cloud. Listen to my voice, boy."

Hojo flicked his glance up but he seemed wholly disinterested. For a moment of distraction, he watched Dr. Meer trying to avoid his gaze. Jenova was humming something to him, something important, but he couldn't make the words out. Maybe because he was so close to her, maybe that was why... He got to his feet painfully, ascending a few steps of the stairs leading up to her door. If he went straight to her, perhaps he could look into her eyes and see what she wanted of him. Or maybe not. She didn't have a head anymore, he'd nearly forgotten. Hojo chuckled to himself at that one.

Cloud took a deep shuddering breath and Ghrerd saw his eyes moving about erratically beneath the lids.

He was in the reactor again, wasn't he? Yes... and there was Sephiroth, holding onto that dripping head. The madness was in his eyes, that brand, as though all the books he'd read had left their marks and he could never even look the same, much less act or think the same again. The fear was here too, welling up in Cloud's breast like hot lava. The heat from it was what was stinging his eyes, making the tears roll down his cheeks. It wasn't the despair, the helplessness, even the rage. He was crying because he was afraid he'd be cut down too and never be able to avenge his hometown. He looked down at the sword in his hands, stained with the same red blood that was sliding down the back of Sephiroth's black leather duster and spattering onto the catwalk. If he was a God like he'd claimed, why was he bleeding? Gods didn't bleed. But he wasn't a God, he was only a psychotic madman and he was just walking away as though that fact were nothing... just walking away with the hole in his back, leaving Cloud to stare dumbly after him.

And what did you do then, Cloud?

Oh this next part was easy. He'd known then, despite the fear and despite his crying, that General Sephiroth could not leave that reactor alive. He'd rushed after him. After all, he'd managed that initial strike, a second, finishing blow should be easy. Yet Masamune and its dark master saw differently. The arc of silver swung about, whistling a path through air, and impaled him clean through the stomach, already slick with the blood of the hundred other people slain that night. It stained Cloud's hands as they wrapped around the blade. Sephiroth sneered, holding his mother's head close in the crook of his arm, nearly resting his chin atop it. It was a hideous thing, catching the attention of Cloud's dimming eyes. For a moment he forgot about the sword in his gut. He just stared at the divinely gorgeous face nestled against the black leather, held close by a blood-stained black glove.

Her features were peaceful, eyes open, staring at him. The skin of her face was thin and blue, so delicate, almost like barely opaque sea-coloured glass. Cloud wanted to touch her cheek but he didn't, knowing he'd smear blood all over her, and surely she was too beautiful for that. He kept his blasphemous hands around the sword in his stomach, and stared and stared at the head of Jenova. It wasn't grotesque to him at all. Not even the bit of spinal cord trailing past the severed neck, the hanging strands of tissue and muscle trailing like hair from the wound. No, in a lot of ways, it reminded him of his mother. Certainly this face was a much more pleasing image than the one he'd left in the burnt ruins of his old home. A lump rose up in his throat as he remembered that other face, that face burned black and unfamiliar by fires he hadn't been able to protect her from. Before he could begin crying again though, the notion was pushed from his mind. This face pushed it from him. He only wanted to look upon it, examine every perfect line, every translucent curve of flesh. The delicate arching brows, the sensuously angled mouth. This would have been God's face, if God had one. Every answer to every question he'd ever asked was written there and by looking hard enough he'd see them revealed in a script that he would be able to decipher with ease. Now he couldn't help but reach his hand out to touch it. Sephiroth watched him. Cloud glanced up at the man and saw the mirth in his eyes, but he saw the sadness too. He was surprised when the General handed Jenova over to him.

"Wha--?" His words were cut off by an oozing of blood erupting from his pierced chest. Masamune had torn through his left lung. Yes, he remembered this part. Laying on the reactor floor in complete agony for half an hour before Hojo and the Turks came to take him away. Cloud clutched in fear at Jenova's head as though he couldn't stop himself and he held her near to his chest, cradling the thing in both arms, forgetting about the sword holding him up, the inconsequential pain. He held the head so tightly to him that he could feel the coldness of her through his shirt and she scalded his bare arms with her iciness. He shivered and had to stifle a sob but he didn't loosen his hold. She would keep him alive and anchored and keep the guilt from tearing away at his soul until he couldn't live with himself anymore. She was the thing he'd been waiting to come for four years. She was what would end this all.

When Cloud looked up, Sephiroth had Masamune's hilt in both bloodied hands. He gave the sword a quick jerk to his right and Cloud screamed out in agony as the blade met his spine and he was pushed against the railing of the catwalk. Empty air caressed his back but he wouldn't throw his arms out for balance, lest he drop his precious burden. No, he held Jenova tighter and shut his eyes. The heat of the reactor was oppressive and maddening. He kept the sight at bay, eyelids locked so tightly together that tears squeezed out their sides but then Sephiroth stuck his boot out, kicking him straight in the chest, pushing him off the end of his sword. Cloud slid backwards, sickeningly slow, the cry dying in his heart before it could escape his lips. He looked down at the head clasped in his arms just as the free fall caught him, stealing the air from his lungs. Jenova stared back. She blinked twice, lazily, and the corners of her cold, dead mouth turned up in a pleasing smile. Cloud screamed for real now. He tried to throw the thing away but his arms wouldn't move, his body wasn't his

own. All he could do was scream, and feel the way Jenova's face contorted in mocking laughter against his arms. The entire head shook with her mirth and it kept shaking until he hit the bubbling pit of mako and dissolved wordlessly into it.

He still couldn't move, not even to thrash about. Everything had gone dark but there were eruptions of green and white light through the darkness. He tried to scream out but there was a hand around his mouth. Or around his throat. Hands holding him down, and someone was talking to him and then he was scrabbling about because the head he'd been holding onto was gone. He couldn't even remember dropping it. Surely the mako had snatched it away. God damned mako, it took everything from him...

"...don't hurt him, Dr. Waters! Careful!"

Ghrerd shoved at the younger, larger scientist, trying to get him to ease up his hold on Cloud, who had fought his way through the effects of Hojo's drugs and was now fighting against them all. Sweat stood out gleaming on his skin, a thick sheen of it on the Shinra guard's face. Waters held his wrists down on the table and Ghrerd grabbed his legs. Hojo stood nearby, watching in silent amusement. He'd been climbing his way up to Jenova but something had halted him. Something beyond Cloud's delirious cries or struggles. He stood halfway up the stairs and stared back down towards them.

Dr. Meer was still pushed into his corner, his arms crossed close under his chin. He looked out on the scene like an unwilling participant in some unholy nightmare. He was somewhat irritated at Cloud with all his noise though, now he couldn't listen to the noises from outside quite so carefully. A sudden thunderclap made the man draw his shoulders up about his ears and push further against the wall.

"Hold his arm steady! Steady dammit, I can't get the needle in!" Dr. Ghrerd grabbed futilely at one of Cloud's trembling arms, trying to sedate him again but Cloud was struggling too furiously for it. He managed to push his fist in the old man's face so hard that he stumbled backwards, the wire frames of his little spectacles bent in half. Dr. Waters grabbed his left arm by the wrist and wrenched it backwards, nearly snapping it off at the elbow. Cloud grunted and fought against him, knowing he had to fight and not even sure why. Wait, he knew! He'd drown in the mako if he didn't! He felt another pinprick in his upper arm and then a strange weariness passed over him, so that Cloud forgot to fight and could only struggle through thoughts that got harder and harder to think. Still though... when he closed his eyes, he was still writhing, burning, drowning in the mako pit. Sephiroth was above him, telling him to keep his chin up, to keep a hold of the head he'd been entrusted with, not to let go or give up just because he was tired. Sephiroth... the General was giving him orders and he had to obey or be shot. You had to obey or you'd be shot for treason on the spot.

In morbid curiosity, Dr. Meer took a few steps away from his wall to see Cloud's face. The sedated specimen was breathing raggedly, his eyes closed but his face working around in awful contortions as though he had a million things to say but couldn't get any of it out. Meer squinted through his thick glasses at the sight, then turned his head around towards the open entrance back out to the machinery room of the reactor. The doorway glowed a slight green contrasting with the red of their pod room and was hard to see through, the room beyond was too dim. Still, Meer thought he heard something from out there, something that made his heart start doing amazing palpitations in his chest. The little man drew back closer to Hojo, shooting his superior a questioning glance.

"S-s-s-sir..." he whispered, words nearly lost beneath the noise of Cloud's moans, "Sir, I th-think I hear something out there."

Zack was laying slumped on the floor of his pod, a bit of blood running from a cut just above his right eyebrow. Last he remembered, Waters had thrown the door to his prison open and bashed his head in with a fist. Said head now throbbed mercilessly but Zack didn't waste a second in jumping back to his feet, fingers scrabbling to find the upraised rim of the little window in the door looking out. The little sterilized pod was stifling, the air tasted bad. Oxygen's starting to thin out in here, he thought to himself distractedly, Makes sense, it's air-tight after all. Clutching at his sore head with one hand, Zack pounded on the pod door with his other. He could see Meer looking up the staircase as though looking up to Divinity, and he tried to make eye contact with the squirrely little scientist.

"Zack..!"

Cloud moaned his name like a prayer and the sound of his friend at that moment made his throat burn in anguish even as his fists clenched in rage. "Cloud!" he thundered, shouting past the pod's leaden walls, "God dammit, Hojo, you leave him the hell alone! D'you hear me?!"

Cloud could hear Zack's cry but he couldn't understand it. All he saw was Sephiroth, grinning down at him, then frowning, then grinning again, as though he were a sadist with a heart to feel the pain he was inflicting even as he reveled in it. The mako pit he floundered about in burned Cloud so that he couldn't breathe. He burnt everywhere, he was burning everywhere, he was in burning Nibelheim only he was the one dying in his house. Perhaps these hands were his mother's, perhaps he shouldn't fight them, nor these vicious magical flames that Sephiroth had left in his wake. He was dying when he should have died, back with the death of his town, his mother, of Tifa. This was proper.

Something massive fell against the roof of the reactor and the entire structure shuddered. The sudden impact was accompanied by the crash of something solid against steel and both Meer and Hojo dropped to their knees, the former throwing his hands up over his head. "Tree must have been struck by lightening," Hojo muttered, rising back to his feet,

wincing at the thunder and rain from outside, "Fell against the roof." It was as though the sounds of the storm amplified themselves as they passed through the walls. The Professor turned to look at Cloud and smeared a hand across his eyes, ridding them of all the wet hair fallen over his forehead. Jenova called at his back but he turned away and walked back down the stairs.

"Sir!" Meer called again, trying to get Hojo's attention. He could swear he heard footsteps from outside! "Sir! Professor Hojo, I really think I hear someone outside!"

Hojo halted, his clenched jaw visibly trembling. He turned and looked once at Meer. "We're leaving," he announced brusquely. Both Waters and Ghrerd looked up in obvious relief but Meer couldn't make himself look away from the door.

"It's about bloody time," Waters spat, pushing down hard on Cloud's chest to keep the young man from rolling clean off the table.

"Bind him in manacles, there are few pairs in back, but use the padded ones or he'll chafe his own wrists away trying to free himself. Dr. Ghrerd, prepare tank 2 for standard mako immersion therapy. We'll store him there until we get back to Nibelheim. Then I'll phone Tseng and he can pick us up. We'll have the Turks rid us of our monster, then we can safely return here for Cloud."

"Sir, we can't leave him," Ghrerd insisted, struggling to keep Cloud from clawing at his throat to free it of the mako he imagined was flooding into his mouth, "He's hallucinating. He'll go mad if we leave him alone in a tank for days on end and that would defeat the entire purpose of these pro--"

"Drug him up then!" Hojo thundered, pounding a fist into the air. His eyes were wild with sudden fear. They wouldn't look at the door. He wouldn't acknowledge what he heard.

"I did, sir! The fact that he's still mobile is amazing, there are enough tranquilizers in his system to subdue four men. It's the Jenova cells, sir, you know they neutralize everything!"

"Do as I say!" Hojo commanded imperially, "We can't stay here any longer! Stick him in a pod!"

"Why the sudden fear?" Waters questioned unctuously, "Has it suddenly struck you how in forfeit your pathetic existence is? What did it? Scared of the fuckin' thunder, Professor? Did the storm get to ya?"

"No, I think he simply heard me arrive."

Every man in the room froze in place, then turned slowly about to stare at the entrance to the pod room. The voice that had just spoken had drifted in from outside. It made Hojo's blood run cold in recognition. He drew his derringer with a violently shaking right hand and aimed it towards the doorway. They could all hear the footsteps on the catwalk outside now, the very sound Meer had been so frightened of, now it blasted in his ears and he shrank back further against the wall, whimpering. Even Cloud silenced for a moment, though his eyes were closed and he mumbled Sephiroth's name in his delusions. Holding his breath, Zack pressed his forehead against the window in his pod, squinting his blue eyes to make out the figure slowly approaching the room from outside.

Without warning, a disembodied arm was flung through the doorway, turning over a few times before coming to a landing at Hojo's feet. The Professor's lip turned up in a sneer and he raised his gun further, head level towards this sudden intruder.

"I found that outside holding the door open. I replaced it with a loose rock, thought that might work a bit better. Hello, gentlemen, so surprised to see me?" Moving like a scarecrow, stiff and disjointed, Dr. Bier entered the red-lit chamber with no expression on his face. Since he no longer had one.

"For God's sake, you stupid bastard," Hojo breathed in relief, pocketing his gun, "I thought you were him."

"Yes, I'm sure."

Bier was dressed in new clothes and had totally covered himself with fabric, even gloves and a ball cap. His face was wrapped in bandages, all save where his two bloodshot brown eyes peered out, and a slit for his mouth, which he didn't open very wide for fear of his jaw dropping off. Again. Ghrerd thought he smelled suspiciously of barbecue. "I'm glad to see you all alive. The hike up here was one hell of a grisly spectacle. Are you just going to leave those bodies along the trail like that, sir?"

"Professor Hojo, we have to get out while we can," Waters insisted, recovering from his fear and slapping the manacles he'd found around Cloud's wrists. "If we can get to the vehicles in the caves behind us, we can rush our way down the mountain faster than he can follow."

"What the hell happened to you?" Hojo questioned, ignoring Waters and poking a finger at Bier's bandaged face. Bier sighed profoundly and peel away a strip of bandage to reveal what was little more than baked skull and flesh beneath. Hojo wrinkled his nose up in distaste.

"You're looking... blech... well. Don't get too close to me, I don't want you flaking all over my shirt."

"Yes, sir," Bier answered with another sigh, "Here I go and hike my way up the mountain to try and be of some assistance and you complain about my new skin condition. Hell, I should have stayed in the mansion. It was your marvelous creation that did this to me. Sir."

"My apologies," Hojo answered absently, turning about and making sure that Ghrerd and Waters were following his instructions, "How did you get past him?"

"He didn't seem interested in me," Bier said with a cough, clutching at one arm as though it hurt him still, "And I wasn't going to stick around and wait for him to become interested. He's watching this structure like a hawk, a thousand vicious intentions about his person. I'm really beginning to wish I'd stayed in Nibelheim. I've had my fill of Vincent Valentine tonight." Bier found a wall and leaned against it, his soaked clothes making little squishing noises as they pressed upon his blackened skin. His breaths came in dry and rattling wheezes but Hojo was decidedly amazed he was still alive at all. Damn... the Professor pushed his knuckles to his lips, scratching at his headache with his other hand. He had to figure out a way to escape this prison he'd placed them all in. He wasn't sure if the Turks were going to come up here or not, he'd left his message with Reno and the Gods only knew if that punk had been sober enough to remember to relay it to Tseng. Hojo cursed his own impatience. They might very well head towards the Mansion to pick up the bodies and never even touch down on the mountaintop reactor. Damn damn damn. "Do you think you could handle Valentine again?" he asked Bier, who was looking askance at Cloud.

"No. It takes me longer and longer to regenerate myself. I can't believe the combination of a chandelier and one hell of a lot of volts of electricity didn't do me in. God bless Jenova."

"To hell with Jenova," Hojo muttered, eyeing the inside of the reactor fearfully.

"I saw you laying dead beneath that chandelier... in the foyer," Waters accused, his eyes even and unwavering as they roved over Bier's soot-smearred clothes and bandaged face. The monster shrugged.

"I think I was dead for a while. But death's like a head cold to me. I get over it eventually. What happened to your lips?"

"What the hell are you?"

"A scientist. What happened to your lips?" Bier answered, blinking soberly.

"You were dead though, damn it! Are you another fucked up little toy of Hojo's?! Am I the only human being in this place?"

Bier snorted, nudging the Professor in the ribs. "What do you think, Simon? Would you classify him as human?" Hojo glowered a bit.

"It's Professor Hojo, Dr. Bier, thank you very much. And no, I'm not quite certain that Dr. Waters even falls under the same genus. I'm actually quite amazed his opposable thumbs don't fall from his hands in protest."

"So what happened to his lips?" Dr. Bier asked again after sniggering loudly for a moment or two.

Dr. Waters growled and turned back to Cloud, clenching and unclenching his fists at his sides. Bier always backed Hojo up. Brown-nosing bastard. "Blessed Professor Hojo sewed them shut for me," he answered the man after a moment of seething.

"Well, hell, why'd you go and undo it? What an improvement that must have been."

"Ah, yes," Hojo answered with a smile, "It was nice while it lasted."

An intrusive peal of thunder interrupted the brief conversation. Dr. Meer gibbered in his corner and stared out at his fellow scientists as though they themselves were what were truly to be feared. Bier's arrival was almost as horrifying as Valentine's might have been. A flash of light caught his eye from above and he turned his head up to see, but the ceiling was black and indistinct, composed of layers of pipes and circuitry all leading back towards the Jenova room in the rear. Another flash of white light lit the pipes, very faintly, for just a fraction of a second. Meer turned his head around and around looking for the source but suddenly it was black again. A real sense of dread tickled the back of his throat and he looked quickly to Hojo before bowing his head and staring at his feet, trembling in agonized panic.

"Sephiroth..." Cloud groaned, breaking the silence that followed the thunder. Hojo looked his way and frowned.

"If you drive him mad, Jenova," he spoke aloud, much to the other's surprise, "He'll be of no use to us. Just as you drove Sephiroth to the brink and he wound up dead and gone, so will you do to Cloud if you persist in this."

"Sir..." Ghrerd spoke timidly, "Sir, it cannot hear you, it is not alive."

"Be ignorant in silence if you must be ignorant at all," Hojo snapped, taking a single step towards the stairway again. Zack could see him from his window and he beat his fist against the side of his pod, making the entire thing rock on its support. Hey! maybe he could knock this sucker over, just like that mutant had managed to when he and Sephiroth had been in here fixing things up! Zack set to work slamming his body against one wall then the other, the white pod rattling back and forth like a giant egg balanced on a spoon. The reverberations rose up to the ceiling and played with the thunder echoes from outside so that the small space fairly roared with noise. Cloud sobbed silently, working his hands around the manacles he was chained in, trying to keep his head above the mako pit, trying to breathe through the imaginary blood frothing at his lips. Sephiroth smiled down at him coldly, as though to say 'welcome'.

The green was building, massing around him. This was no stagnant and currentless pit, this was an ocean of mako and it would drown him should he stop struggling. How long had he dog-paddled his way through this life of green? Four years? Could he never stop? He could stop though, any time he was ready to let himself go, to sink, to die.

Someone was calling to him from under his kicking feet. Cloud expelled his breath and sank downwards, letting the mako acid flood up over his head, up his nostrils. He opened his eyes and the green cut into them so that he thought they would melt from his skull. Strangely enough though, he found he could see through it all. He saw the source of what was calling him. That head. It bobbed below him with open eyes, unaffected by the mako, grinning up like a skull but still beautiful in its terrifying ugliness. Cloud let himself fall towards it, the mako sucking up his tears before they could leave his eyes. There was no oxygen down here, nothing to breathe and he burned on the inside now, wanting air.

No, he didn't want air.

He didn't want it.

He wanted to die in Nibelheim with his past, he wanted the last four years of his life and every memory of pain to dissipate just as surely as his flesh was dissipating into this acidic pit.

His burning fingers were suddenly able to feel the cool skin of Jenova's face. He pulled the head close to himself and cried into the top of it. So cold. The flesh of this creature was so so cold and crystal clear among the raging fires of this mako. It was no wonder that Sephiroth had loved her so. Cloud loved her too. He wouldn't let go despite the pain. He dug his fingernails into her smooth forehead and felt the skin around her mouth pull into another hideous smile. How was she smiling? This dead monster had no business smiling. But he loved her even more because of it. He knew he himself might never smile again.

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Cloud's eyes slipped shut and his struggling ceased.

Dr. Ghrerd shook the boy's shoulders, checked feverishly for a pulse. "Has your god damned monster killed this child then too?" he thundered, forgetting himself in his sudden rage and using a tone no one there had ever heard the passive old man use. Hojo scowled at the words and flew to Cloud's side, clamping a hand to his neck, searching for life. He knew Jenova wouldn't kill him, she wouldn't reject this offering he'd made at her shrine. She couldn't! This had taken four years of his life to put together!

His heart was beating, weak and erratic like a little mouse struggling in a trap. He was simply unconscious at last, the waking nightmare turned true.

"Cloud!" Zack screamed from the pod, afraid that his friend's sudden silence meant his death, "Cloud! Hang on, man, I'll-- I'll do something!" He was still rocking the pod from side to side, ignoring Dr. Waters' threats and Hojo's vicious glares. He didn't even care that Dr. Bier was staring at him with his burnt-out eyes from behind the bandages. Meer covered his ears with the cold palms of his hands, trying to bury his head in his shoulders, sinking further to the floor each moment he attempted to keep standing. That strange light from above came again, a quick flash of white illumination, almost like lightening. This time a spattering of rain accompanied it, just a few drops flashing in the light and alighting on Meer's glasses. The young Doctor brushed them away on his sleeve, smearing his vision. He looked to Bier, to Hojo, to those he knew were a good deal more capable than he was-- to think he'd yelled at Vanswith earlier for his cowardice!-- but they were busy with Cloud.

Ha... Vanswith had been the only one who'd known how foolish all this was. Too bad his knowledge hadn't done him any good.

The water came again and Meer though he smelled rain.

"He'll be fine. Stick him in a tank," Hojo ordered, motioning for Dr. Waters to lift Cloud up and carry him where directed. Waters seemed dubious for a moment, suspicion turning his swollen bloody lips down in a grimace.

"We can't leave him here, sir!" Ghrerd insisted, "If we do, he'll wind up just like all the other specimen: brain dead or crazy. Cloud isn't another disposable body! There's four years of work and funding behind him!"

"HA!!" Hojo laughed aloud, grinding his teeth together and pulling his lips apart into a wicked grin, "HA! As if I supposed for a single moment that work and funding were your true motives, good Doctor. No, you love these two little specimen like one might grow to love their house cats. Well, your sentimental bullshit isn't going to jeopardize this project or my life! We leave him here and then we leave this reactor and make a break for those transports. Valentine won't attack me... I know he won't. He didn't before. Waters! Put Cloud in a tank!"

Ghrerd took an offensive step towards Hojo, feeble fists raised as though he might strike out. Hojo was actually older than the MD but a lifetime working around mako had had its rewards and the Professor hardly looked his age. If it came down to it, he could probably do more than hold his own in a fight. Ghrerd saw this quickly and backed down before he even made a move, sadly shaking his head. Dr. Waters might have rebelled then if not for Bier. But he thought better of it, remembering this strange man's actions in the basement, knowing for certain there was more to this creature than there seemed. Hojo watched his scientists do as bid and if not for the dire circumstances, he might have let a smug smile tickle his lips.

Meer was eyeing them all through the shadows, praying for a confrontation, anything that might knock Hojo from his seat of power. He was disappointed to see Waters give a great sigh and walk up to Cloud, hoisting the unconscious man up by the waist of his pants. He moved off with him towards a pod that Ghrerd was even now calibrating.

Another few drops of rain wetting the top of his head caused the young Doctor to turn his face away from the scene. His brow wrinkled in curiosity, like a mat caught under a door, and he arched his head back, watching the pipes in the ceiling light up with that strange, unexplained white light again. The source was definitely coming from above, he thought maybe there was a faulty emergency light up there or something. Replacing the bulb might make him look busy and productive to Hojo and would definitely help take his mind off of all this chaos. What was this random water though? He'd read of the construction of these reactors, they were water tight, they had to be. Water could short-circuit this entire plant and blackout the village below. Meer glanced once towards Hojo but the Professor had his back to him, he was talking with Bier, yelling at the others to hurry. Now that he'd finally gotten the idea in his head to leave, he was pursuing it with a vengeance.

There was a little cubby hole, a closet-like little space only three feet or so deep back behind this furthest column of pods and platforms, wedged between two fat, vibrating pipes. Meer peered into the gloom and a helpful flash of that white light he couldn't quite explain showed him a few shelves in the back. There were boxes and tubing of some sort on one, and he could swear he saw a light bulb icon on one of the former. He looked again at his co-workers, then sucked in his gut to squeeze himself through the narrow space between the two pipes and retrieve a bulb.

Another flicker of light caused Hojo to glance up and over towards the bit of shadowed corner to his left. He noticed one of Meer's legs sticking out behind a wall of pipes and circuitry and he kneaded his forehead with a tired hand. "What is that moron doing?" he asked no one in particular.

"Dr. Meer!" Bier called, striding towards the cubbyhole. He noticed the strange flickering light and slowed his advance a bit, cursing as his mouth tried to work into a frown behind its wrappings. A strip of baked flesh fluttered out from between his bandages and he sighed, picking it up and putting it into his pocket. Not because he could reattach it or anything, he just felt rather strange leaving pieces of himself laying about. The light flashed again and a low rumble of thunder followed it. A bit of rain fell from a certain spot and Bier looked up in frustration, letting it splatter in his sore eyes. Was there a leak in the ceiling or what?

"Dr. Meer, assist Dr. Ghrerd with the pod, will you? What the hell are you doing back here? Looking for a way outside?"

"Ha..." Meer muttered faintly, wedged into the space and rummaging through the boxes for a light bulb, "Like I'd want to get outside. And I don't take orders from you, Bier."

Bier watched Meer's ass twitching about, sticking straight up through the air as the scientist stooped over in his search. He briefly considered giving him a good swift kick right in the seat of his pants but thought better of it. Instead he grabbed him by the belt and tugged backwards, hoping he'd smack his head on a low-hanging pipe. Meer didn't come free though. Bier swore once or twice for good measure and yanked again, sure that he couldn't be quite that weak from the fighting last night.

"Shit!" Meer spat, "I'm stuck!"

"I see that... suck that fat gut of yours in, will you?"

"Fuck off!"

Bier pulled again, a violent yank that made his coworker cry out as his ribs scraped against a projecting aluminum control box. But then he cried out again, in a different pitch, and Bier quit his efforts.

"You okay?" he called, bending over, "I didn't hurt you too bad, did I? Heh, we may have to grease you up like a--"

A sudden scream from the scientist cut Bier's words off. Hojo and the others looked over and watched him suddenly throw himself on Meer, both hands wrapped around his waist now and pulling with all his strength. "What is it?" Hojo demanded, pacing a few steps towards the pair.

"Gah! Let go of me!" Meer pleaded, his voice muffled. Bier snarled curses and then almost let go in surprise. Something was pulling on the trapped scientist from the other end.

"What the bleeding hell--?!" he spat, burnt skin crackling beneath his clothing with his movements. Meer gave another scream, high pitched and terrible and suddenly only his calves were protruding from the space behind the pods. Bier raised his head to try and see inside the cramped cubbyhole past the man's shoulders, Waters, Hojo, and Ghrerd running to his aid. Whatever was pulling on Meer put forth one final burst of power and suddenly Bier lost his grip and collapsed backwards right into Waters. Meer was dragged into the darkened corner, legs and all.

"Back off..." Bier whispered, pushing himself off Dr. Waters, eyes wide. A few droplets of red spattered from the gloom and landed before his shoes, glinting terribly in the white light from above. But Meer didn't make another sound until he was hurled from the darkness and onto Dr. Bier. The latter was knocked straight from his feet by the flying scientist and both wound up in a tangle on the ground. When Bier came to his senses, he pushed Meer off him, looking for a moment into eyes glazed with death. The twin fang marks on his neck weren't really even needed for the scientist to know what

had happened. "Shit," seemed like the only thing appropriate to say. He said it again when Vincent stepped quite suddenly and dramatically from the tiny cubbyhole he'd thrown Meer from. Suddenly the light and the rain made sense. Bier looked up towards the ceiling above the bit of space and saw a gap there. Vincent threw a chunk of metal off his claw and Bier had to laugh out loud. He'd clawed his way right through the solid steel and lead walls of this god forsaken place. The storm had gotten in through the gash he'd made. Terrific.

Vincent darted his eyes towards the new corpse crumpled on the floor, stopping for a moment to study Meer's frozen expression. A dark smile curled one side of the ex-Turk's lips up and he licked at a smear of blood on his chin, oblivious to the fang that glinted from one side of his mouth when he did so. There. That had washed the taste of the rain away and somewhat appeased the monster inside of him. Vincent smiled a bit harder, simply standing on the floor of the reactor and staring out at all the people staring back at him. He lightly leaned his shoulder against a thick, trembling pipe, delicately licking his bloodied claw clean. He actually hadn't used the claw that much in his murders of the past hour. It was much easier to just clamp onto their neck until they quit their struggling.

Vincent's smile turned into low laughter and he scraped one metal-shod toe against the rusty iron floor. He liked the way it made Hojo wince.

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Weird weird weird. I guess this was the chapter where everyone just sorta officially went nuts. Go read the ending, you know ya wanna 'vv'