



Chapter 7: Demons

He was so wet that water had collected in the wrinkles of his shirt. The chinks in his claw were filled with it too and he almost wondered if it might rust. Vincent gave himself a little shake, loving how the scientists flinched with his every movement. Rain flew from his hair and his hair itself flipped forward to hang in long, twisting strands before his face. His eyes burned as red as rose blossoms behind the vines of black.

Coughing a little, he swallowed the last remnants of blood on his tongue, then laughed again, showing his teeth. Hojo, who'd looked frightened for half a second at first, now drew his haughtiness back around himself like a mantle and swept a hand through his hair, just as messy but not quite as wet anymore as Vincent's.

"So what'll it be, Valentine?" he asked, taking a small step forward. He didn't look down at Meer's body. He stepped quite carefully around it. "You're costing Shinra a small fortune in employees, you know that?"

The smile on Vincent's face seemed cemented there and Hojo noticed that as seldom as he'd ever seen the Turk smile, this one just didn't seem like his own. The Professor feverishly tried to recall everything he'd done to him that night almost thirty years ago, trying to discover some weakness, trying to think of just what he'd made. That night seemed so fuzzy though, he could barely remember it. He only knew for sure that there were Jenova cells in this creature, he remembered clearly enough jabbing that syringe into his veins and cackling like a madman to know he'd imprisoned yet another poor soul in Jenova's tentacles. But this vampire thing... gods above, he could kill himself now for having gone through with that little notion. Not that he'd have to kill himself though, Valentine seemed more than willing to do him that favor.

Looking at him now, Hojo felt a certain repulsion for what he'd done. He got a sudden, crystal clear image of how the Turk used to look. His suit, his finely practiced expression, his picture perfect hair. He'd been a true example of order, now he was a true example of order turned chaos. Hojo found it hard to believe what his actions had done to him. That creature screaming from his soul for blood twisted his psyche and left that terrible grin on his face. His clothing was caked ten times over with gore, both his and others. His hair was a shroud covering a man dead to the world who refused to acknowledge his own murder. Hojo swallowed down a curse to gaze upon this monster now. Lucrecia's eyes fluttered about his mind for a moment, asking in their innocent way just why he'd done this to her Vincent. Hojo had very little answer for those eyes.

Perhaps because I loved you? he asked them, but was granted no response. He didn't believe himself either.

"Do you have any idea just what's going on with you?" Hojo questioned aloud, looking up suddenly into the Turk's bloody eyes. Vincent's smile didn't fade, only anger rose up behind it to give the expression a keener edge. "No, you don't know. Valentine, can you understand me at all? Say something coherent, I challenge you to it."

Vincent looked confused and suddenly uneasy. He raised a hand to rub at his forehead and the men staring at him could visibly see the thoughts and ideas forming and passing through his countenance. A moment of fright stood out in his eyes, clear and cold, but something pushed it away so that he drew himself back up, teeth clenched. Yet he didn't say a word.

"You can't," Hojo said flatly, some of his confidence returning and he wasn't even sure why that was. If his suspicion was true... "Try to remember what you are, Valentine, cling to it, or you will be lost in Jenova's madness and there'll be no return from the monster you are now. You're not yourself. Think about it! Would you go and tear men apart? Would you so casually stick teeth in their necks or leave innocents hanging disemboweled from trees? No. You don't have any control now, Valentine, and you'll never be able to regain control if you don't curb this monster's appetite now."

Vincent heard the words distantly, looking at the reactor through a red haze. The room was red but his tainted vision turned it redder, screaming blood and death into his brain. The impulses were so strong he reeled just to defy them for a moment, falling a step backwards and clutching at the wall to keep possession of himself. Hojo was lying... Hojo was all about lies and trickery, his character painted in broad strokes of deception. He couldn't believe a word of it. And fuck it if it was true... it was too easy to harness this new personality, this new animal living in his soul, let it do the killing, feel the pain, feel the guilt. Anything that helped him achieve his aims was a welcome Master to Vincent. Coughing into his fist, the man ran his eyes over the company of academics, letting his inspection finally come to a rest on Hojo. A thousand emotions tore through him just to look upon that face. Pain and sadness and rage burning as bright as the heated tip of a blacksmith's brand. He grabbed onto that poker, held onto it in his bare mind till it scorched him beyond recognition. He wanted to be the killer. He wanted to take back what had been stolen from he and Lucrecia, wherever she might be.

Trembling in his fury, Vincent advanced upon Hojo, slowly, claw bared at his side.

"What's more important to you?" The Professor asked, holding his ground though Waters and Ghrerd fled. Even Bier kept his distance, eyes bright behind the bandages. "Killing me? Or returning to Lucrecia as the same man who left her so long ago? She won't recognize a monster. She won't want a monster. Believe me, I know."

The words pushed through Vincent's rage. He bit his tongue to keep from leaping at his rival, and the salty taste of blood was in his mouth again. He stared for a moment and slowly the humanity crept back into his eyes. His words were hoarse and rough when he said them, his voice almost as unpracticed as it had sounded when he'd first stepped from the coffin. "So tell me..." he growled, "What you've done to her. Your... story from before seemed sincere enough as pathetic as it was. Is she dead, Hojo? Or does she live in some hell you've made for her, something similar to the one you designed for me? Either way, old man, your thirty years of respite are over. You should have killed me when you had the chance."

"I told you before where she was," Hojo countered, a single ticklish drip of sweat running down the side of his face, "And I assure you she's still there."

"The basement..." Vincent snarled in a tone so low and deadly it was terrible to hear, "Yes, you did tell me."

"So why didn't you go to her? Why are you here, chasing after me instead? Who's more important? Thirty years ago, you felt the need to come to me and announce that grand escape the two of you were planning. You had to pound me into the ground and make your threats before you could be on your way. Don't you see, Valentine? In love or not, you are a Turk and you will always think like a barbarian. You have to have your revenge! You could never be happy with Lucrecia or anyone unless you'd paid for them in blood and violence! You have to earn everything! Yet you lack the strength to ever win these battles you forge for yourself. You fail, time and again, and lose the prize that life, the fates, whoever, were going to grant to you for free. You fail, you lose, all because you have to have that bit of blood. All because you are the Turk who can't take something for nothing."

"Is that how you see me..?" Vincent breathed in wonderment. He drew closer to Hojo and the Professor took a step backward, his heart ready to burst from his chest. He was sure he was going to panic in a moment. He nearly did when his back suddenly hit the wall. Vincent whispered his words into his face and Hojo had no where to turn to escape them. "If so, I can understand how your warped little brain saw perfection in what you've made me. But I'm not any of those things. If I fight for my passions, it's because I have no choice. I couldn't leave with Lucrecia knowing you were alive and well to chase after us. That was common sense. You pervert it to fit your own twisted logic. You perverted it so it would make sense to steal my humanity away." Vincent drew back a fraction, the smile gone from his lips. "If you want a reason as to why I'm here now and not chasing after the bone you threw me, it's because I had no choice. Whether she's in the mansion or not, I can't go to her as this thing you've made me. I can feel in my heart that it would hurt her, and I won't hurt her like you always did. I'd rather not have her at all than have her as a monster. I'm not you. You'd take her, use her, disregard her. She was never first with you, it was only Jenova, then yourself. With me... with me, it is only her. I have no place in the hierarchy."

The words poured from Vincent's heart in a solemn, almost proud stream. Hojo seemed somewhat taken aback by them. Then he sneered.

"You won't have her as a monster? Do you know what? She wouldn't mind. It's your own egotism that's brought you up here. Your own pride that kept you away from where she is. I'm not lying to you. She's in the basement of that Mansion. You're just too pig-headed and vengeful to seek her out. Killing me is more important than finding her."

Hojo spat something incoherent as Vincent's good hand shot out and wrapped around his throat, pushing the seemingly older man roughly against the wall. Gears and pipes protruded through his lab coat, jabbing him in the back as Vincent lifted him up off his feet, holding on with a choking grip. He moved his face so close to Hojo's that his lips tickled the scientist's left ear. His words were a whisper.

"You could be right."

Hojo held his breath and his entire body went rigid as Vincent deftly brought his claw forward and scraped two of the fingers over his chin, leaving a pair of shallow, mocking slashes that stung like hell. Then he released Hojo's neck and the scientist crumpled to the ground, gasping to try and take a breath. White and red spots bespeckled his vision when he found the courage and the strength to look up from the floor again, sure that he'd see Vincent ready to finish him off for good. But the Turk was gone. The pod room was empty. "Wh-where'd he go?" Hojo croaked, a hand to his throat. He pushed himself to his feet, looking around furiously. He hadn't before realized just how many places there were to hide in this chamber. It was full of dark corners and cubbyholes, shadows slanting from the pods and pipes in long strips of black, perfect concealment for a creature who already seemed composed of shadows himself. "Damn it! Where is he?!"

Hojo's words echoed deafeningly in the sudden stillness. Vincent's voice had filled the air like running water and now that it had gone, it left a space far too empty.

"Just... backwards and away," Waters mumbled, brows crinkling together in frustration. He couldn't quite explain what he'd seen the monster do. He'd been holding onto Hojo and suddenly dropped him, stepping away and sliding into the darkness as though he were only as tangible as the shadows. He'd just... left. "He moved backwards and away," Waters repeated, scratching at his forehead as he stood at the far end of the room. Hojo turned from him in disgust, leaning for a

moment against the wall. He smeared beads of blood from his chin with a pale and trembling hand. His brown eyes went to work roving the entire chamber. Cloud had been unceremoniously dropped at the foot of the pod he'd been about to be deposited into. Zack had quit his assault on his prison long enough to stare at the Professor with wide eyes and watch the quick murder. Meer, dead man of the moment, lay sprawled and undignified in the corner, his neck twisted in a quite unnatural position, but otherwise looking almost alive as he stared through the air at nothing. Ghrerd was distantly examining his dead coworker, Hojo saw, with the sickest of expressions on his face. The old man was at Cloud's side but his eyes were elsewhere. Dr. Bier picked at his bandages, sorta sighing a little, as though he were sick of all of this.

Snorting a little growl, Hojo clutched his forehead, his migraine flaring up briefly and dashing a bucketful of colors before his eyes. The slashes on his chin cut through with a sharper kind of pain. "Turk trick..." he whispered, his eyes darting right and left behind his water-spotted glasses in search of his attacker, "Turk trick... leave a mark on the face, something that hurts... in a place where even a twitch of the lips is uncomfortable. The kind of wound that doesn't easily heal, that doesn't let your mark forget you'll be coming back for the kill. Turk trick, Valentine, like I don't know what you are... monster or no..."

"Are you all right, sir?" Bier asked lowly, checking out Hojo with narrowed eyes. The Professor jerked his head around as though afraid, yet even behind all the fear there was a calculating, scheming expression, cat-like in its subtlety. He threw his hand to his mouth.

"Valentine!" he bellowed, head tilted back so his voice would find the ceiling and echo to every corner of the reactor, "Valentine! Your games are getting older by the moment! You're losing any credibility you ever had! This isn't you! Do you understand me?! Vincent Valentine of the Turks would blow me away on sight, he wouldn't play these games! You want to know why? There's no cruelty in the man or my 'Crecia never would have loved him! This isn't you, Valentine. Listen! These are the instincts of a Jenova monster. Is that what you want to be? Hiding like an animal instead of facing me like a man?"

The words faded away, bouncing helter-skelter from the walls. There wasn't an answer and Hojo balled his fists at his sides, shoulders quaking in consternation. He could feel his men watching, even Zack's eyes were scolding him with relentless scrutiny. He wished more than anything that they weren't here. None of them understood. He stood against the wall for a bit longer, waiting, but nothing came. The muffled sounds of the storm outside was the only noise and even it was much fainter than it had been some time before. Bier and Dr. Waters gravitated towards Hojo while Ghrerd stayed at Cloud's side, trying to get him to breathe properly. He was wrapped in the nightmares that Jenova gave to all her victims, the old man had seen it a dozen times before. If Cloud didn't go mad first, they would pass when the virus was satisfied. He didn't know the particulars of Jenova, he'd only watched the pattern of her symptoms so many times before that he'd formed his own sort of diagnosis.

"What is he waiting for?" Waters said aloud, jarring everyone rather badly. Hojo shook his head.

"He doesn't know. This isn't really him."

"You keep saying that," Waters snarled, too tired to even get that angry, "Why don't you try telling us something about this thing? Like why you had him locked in the basement?"

Hojo watched the room carefully, especially the shadows, and shrugged. "What good would it do you to know? Besides, it's a personal matter. Quite frankly, none of your damned business."

Bier chuckled, a dry, crackly sound. "Sir, I think you've made it our business."

"Shut up and keep your eyes open."

"No..." Waters shook his head, "He's waiting for us to make the next move. I can almost feel it. It's like you said, he's a fuckin' monster and all he cares about is making you pay."

Hojo let his head fall back against the wall with a hollow clunk. He wanted to just start smashing his skull into something but he fought the urge. None of this was how it should be. He should never have let it go so far that night. The alterations, the coffin, his grand poetic justice... it had all come back to bite him in the ass with the very fangs he'd given it. There had to be a way out of this mess, there had to be! He had to somehow get Cloud and himself out of this reactor in one piece. He couldn't let himself get greedy and leave the boy behind, he'd been the entire point of their suicidal trip up here. Besides, he wasn't going to go and throw the last four years of his life away like that. He was going to salvage the damned Project no matter what. But what was Valentine waiting for?? Why was he doing this? Biding his time like this? He was a rash and impetuous individual, not a cold and cruel killer, not really. Hojo couldn't understand this delay in his revenge. He sensed something unnatural in it, something wrong.

"Perhaps he's letting us go," Ghrerd suggested from the floor. He wiped at Cloud's sweaty forehead with one sleeve, then cleaned his own with the other.

"I wouldn't put money on that one," Bier said flatly.

"But how do we know?" Dr. Ghrerd went on, the beginnings of hope in his voice, "He only wants Professor Hojo, why should he care about the rest of us?"

"Did you not see the same lovely little show that I saw on the way up here?" Waters called, absently rubbing his stinging lips, "I think he'll kill whomever he damn well pleases."

"Not so loud!" Ghrerd insisted, wincing, "He'll hear you. Last we need is for you to put ideas into that creature's head."

Hojo rolled his eyes, massaging his temples. "If he's in this reactor, he can hear anything we say no matter how we whisper. Don't even bother."

"Heh... you outdid yourself then," Bier said with a laugh.

"Unfortunately," the Professor sighed.

Dr. Ghrerd got to his feet stiffly, laying Cloud's head down gently on the first upraised platform. His eyes were somewhat wild as they tried to see into every corner of the pod room at once. They brushed past the door to Jenova's room, over the darkened walls and ever silent, looming pods, beneath the metal stairs and the bundled sheaves of pipes. Nothing though, at least nothing he could see. But he could almost feel Vincent's presence, those red eyes upon him. He was here and he was waiting and he had the patience of a predator who'd already waited a long, long time for his prey. Ghrerd gulped down a whimper.

"You want to know what I think?" the MD said, staring at Bier for a moment then looking towards Hojo, "I think that standing around in this room gawking at the ceiling and walls and just waiting for something to happen is pointless. Sir, why don't we make a dash for the transports? He couldn't get us all, not all at once, and the storage space is only fifty meters or so behind the reactor. The rain's let up a good bit, I think our chances would be fair. Much better than standing in this enclosed space like rats in a shoe box."

"I think the guy's got a point," Zack called from the other side of the pod door. He glanced towards Meer's body, then to the Professor. He could see Cloud now and was somewhat calmer, though he desperately desired to get out of this damned pod and to his side. He wasn't really sure where he and Cloud stood in all of this though. Just how much danger were they in?

"He's not going to let anyone do anything he doesn't want them to do," Hojo muttered, not even bothering to look up from the floor, "Don't you idiots see? No... how could you... Valentine isn't acting with his own will, he's being controlled by something else, a personality I infused with his own when I altered his physiological make up some twenty-eight years ago. Jenova cells are the source of much of his power but instead of giving Jenova free reign over him, I was more interested in giving..." Hojo's voice faltered as he realized he was revealing too many of his intentions but he continued, "...in giving a monster that echoed his own vicious personality control. You didn't know him then or you'd see how righteous I was in everything I did. You don't have any idea what he did to me or my wife. I don't need your damned accusations!"

"No one's accusing you, sir," Bier assured him stoically, "Not at the moment anyway."

No, no one was. Hojo pressed his crossed his arms closer to his chest, wondering if Valentine was listening to all this. "It's a monster now... that's all it is. And Valentine seems more than willing to give himself over to it. I wonder then if perhaps that is the cause of this. That monster won't let him kill me yet because the moment I'm dead, Vincent will have no more need of it. He'll push the blood-thirst away and leave this place. That creature within him doesn't want that. I think... I think that to some degree, Jenova doesn't want that either. She must have a hand in this... she could stop him if she would." Hojo looked up towards the door to her room accusingly, yet he got no answer from her, not even the wordless warnings he'd picked up on before. "In order to keep in the seat of command, Vincent's vampiric alter-ego will gladly spare me a while. Whether Vincent wants it to or not. He has little say in this. I'm sure he barely even realizes what he's doing anymore."

"So we truly are waiting about on a monster's whims?" Ghrerd burst out, flinging his arms to his sides. His frown was like a slash mark in his face. "It's a terribly convenient excuse, sir. I think perhaps you'd say anything now to keep us with you. I think you enjoy using others as your shield against your own follies!"

"He'll spout any nonsense to keep cattle at his side," Water growled, taking a step towards Dr. Ghrerd, away from Hojo. His swollen lip curled in disgust. "It's following him that's gotten so many good men killed today, last night. I wonder if maybe that vampire's only grudge against us is that we so blindly follow you. If we leave you now, perhaps we'll be fine."

"That's probably it!" Zack called, only too eager to fan the fires of rebellion. He pounded a fist on the wall of his pod for emphasis. Only Bier was silent. He'd read through Hojo's notes back in Midgar, he thought his boss's words sounded rather logical.

"I don't need any of you," Hojo said bitterly, "You've all been useless to me."

"And the Gods only know that you only have an interest in a person if they can be of some use to you," Waters countered, "Well, to hell with you, Professor Hojo, I'm not going to yap at your heels anymore. It's taken me too long to see that you merely chew people up and spit them out without a second thought to their well-being. I thought I might learn to live with that, if only to get the departmental power I needed from you, but it's not worth it. I'm not going to lose

my life over it. Fuck off, Hojo, that's all I have to say to you. The District Finals are next week and I wanna be alive to play in 'em."

"What aspirations," Hojo mumbled sarcastically. Bier sniggered. Giving Cloud and Zack a glance, Dr. Ghrerd moved towards the door, Waters staring at Hojo in icy fury for a moment before following.

"I'll contact Tseng and have the Turks come up for you, Zack," Ghrerd said a little guiltily to the Soldier. Zack sighed.

"Don't do me any favors, man."

Ghrerd looked torn for a moment, one wrinkled white hand moving up to scratch his chin. He honestly didn't like the thought of leaving the two specimen up here with greedy and uncaring Hojo, yet he knew standing about in this reactor for too much longer would have him wind up just as dead as unfortunate Dr. Meer over there. That monster was somewhere in this room, ready to take out Hojo or anyone that followed him.

"You leave now," Hojo warned in a somewhat disinterested voice, "And your job is gone, Ghrerd."

"Ha ha..." Waters laughed, "As though you'll ever get off of this mountain alive and back to the Shinra building to ever fire anyone again." He grinned wickedly, shoving a hand against Dr. Ghrerd's shoulder to get the old man to leave so they could both be out of this unhealthy atmosphere. The scientist felt a sudden rush of adrenaline. He was leaving Hojo! All these years of putting up with his nonsense and abuse was over! Screw the Shinra Science Department! Ha, maybe he'd become a Turk or something, after the past twenty-four hours Waters thought maybe he'd be damned qualified to take up a gun in defense of his company. How much worse could kidnapping, murder, and industrial espionage be than fighting a vampire and his psychotic, uncaring creator?

Zack kicked the floor and swore to himself as he watched Dr. Ghrerd leave. There went he and Cloud's one sympathizer.

The door to the main machinery room of the reactor glowed a dim green, the customary groaning and creaking coming from the ill-oiled mako works held in it. It was decidedly darker than the pod room and Ghrerd took Waters' flashlight from him, switching the little glow on with an impatient hand. He looked to Hojo but the Professor wasn't even paying attention. He only stared down at his pathetically small little gun, flicking at the barrel aimlessly. Ghrerd sighed and stepped through the door, Waters on his heels.

The glint of gold and the glow of two eager red eyes came to the old Doctor's attention too late. The flashlight dropped from his hand and skittered beneath his feet when something cold and cruel clamped onto the top of his balding gray head. The flashlight on the ground threw up strange shadows so that when Waters heard the old man give a stifled cry and looked up, his eyes couldn't really make out what was happening.

"Shit shit shit shit shit!" Zack slammed his hand against the pod window frantically, gesturing to what he could see through the dark doorway. "Dr. Ghrerd, watch out!!!"

The old Doctor heard Zack's cries but it was too late. He was shoved to the floor roughly by whatever had clamped down on his head and then he was left alone, panting for a moment or two. Waters was only just through the doorway, the red room at his back, and he squinted to see what this threat was. Vincent flashed him a grin, crouched ready to spring, lit from beneath by the glow of the churning mako pit. Dr. Waters' survivalist instincts got the better of him and he ran back into the pod room, shouting a curse.

"Wait!" Ghrerd hollered fearfully, pushing himself up on two weak elbows. He rolled over onto his stomach and tried crawling back into the other room, glancing up for a moment to see Zack's face framed in the round window of his prison, gone pale with shock. Vincent tore his claw through the old man's back and raked it down the length of his spine, cutting to the bone. Ghrerd yelped and twisted onto his side, bringing both hands up to try and fend off his attacker. The warm blood oozed from the gash on his back, he could feel it trickling down his skin and wetting the metal grating beneath him. Vincent simply watched his victim for a moment, a peculiar look of blankness in his eyes, then kicked the older man hard in his hip, letting the blood pooling beneath him slide the scientist backwards and into the wall with a nerve-jarring thud. "I n-never did anything to you!" Ghrerd insisted, eyes squeezed shut. He tried to breathe, mouth contorting as though air were a tangible thing he had only to sink his teeth into to attain. Vincent walked slowly to stand over him, the green light from behind creating a halo-ish effect about his shoulders, the red light from the pod room casting a hellish glow over his features. He watched Ghrerd struggling, eyeing the blood at his back strangely. A look of horror and unspeakable sadness passed through his expression. It almost seemed like the tears might well up in his eyes right then, trickle from them and down his pale cheeks, cut through the caked blood on his skin. But something inside pushed his own pain away, something that didn't care about his heart, about Lucrecia, about anything so meaningless as it could make a man cry. Vincent felt no need to struggle against this other force when it came. The blood-lust and the rage it brought with it were welcome distractions from tears. Barely even conscious of the action, he shot forward and pulled Ghrerd to his feet, ignoring the old man's protests and the feeble blows from his balled fists. He barely flicked his eyes up when Hojo was suddenly standing in the doorway, gun drawn and aimed straight at his forehead.

"Put him down, Valentine," the Professor commanded, his tone betraying just how sick and tired he was of watching his men die. Vincent gave Hojo his attention for just a moment, his eyes burning so brightly red that it obscured the blacks

of his pupils. Hojo saw very little awareness in those eyes, just something that he'd imagined had been in the Turk ever since he was born: cruelty. He was only starting to realize that as bad as he thought Vincent Valentine to be, he was nothing compared to the animal Hojo had let loose in his soul.

Vincent turned back to his prey after only a second or two of watching Hojo with a blank, impatient face. He was holding the old man with his good hand so he raised his claw and began playing it over the scientist's collar, severing the top buttons of his shirt. His claw was new, he was still clumsy with it, so his maneuverings weren't the most accurate and Ghrerd cried out when the sharp fingers cut into his skin.

"Aren't you watching yourself at all?" Hojo asked in disdain, "This isn't you but you're letting it become you. Put him down, Vincent! Your quarrel's with me!" Hojo could barely believe his own words, he sounded like some god damned cowboy. Still... "That thing I put in you, this evolution, it's draining your will. If you can even hear me, you have to stop this now. I can fix it, I can make this all stop if you give me the chance. I never should have taken my revenge this far but I can remedy my mistake. I can fix this!" He was talking out of his ass now, there was no way to silence Jenova once she'd started screaming in a man. He had to get through to the Turk though, there wasn't any other way. "This thing in you has a personality, it has its own will, desires, and hopes. That's why it was so perfect! It'll take you over if you let it, it'll take you over fully if you don't stop it now. Death, blood, and fun, that's all it wants. Your pain, your revenge, doesn't mean shit to it. Think about it! Here I stand, Professor Hojo, your sworn enemy. Here I stand, ripe for the sucking, eh? Bad pun, excuse me. Can you even take a step towards me though? No! It won't let you, because if I die you'll have no more excuse to let it have control. You'll lose your vulnerability and it'll lose its power. So you're killing an innocent man right there, instead of killing me, the evil vicious bastard. D'you want that? I don't think so. Valentine of the Turks wouldn't want that, but a murderous fucking vampire would. Look past the blood in your eyes and look at just what you're doing! You didn't survive last night just to be conquered so easily now!"

Vincent turned his head away, the strength draining from him a bit it seemed, since Ghrerd had almost dropped from his hand. There were a thousand little songs playing in his head and he didn't know which was being sung in his own voice, wasn't sure which one to latch on to, to hear. Everything was so sluggish and sore in his mind, thinking at all was excruciating. Something whispered amidst all the pain though, and Vincent leapt on the words, desperate to find a moment of sanity, thinking something as soothing as a whisper instead of a scream, a shout, or a sob, had to be friendly. It was offering to let him have a moment to himself while it handled things. It didn't have to ask twice.

Hojo was waiting, breath held. If Ghrerd slipped just another inch down, Valentine's chest would be in view, his heart. There was only one way to kill him for sure and-- there! Hojo's gun was firm in his hands, he fired three quick rounds but Vincent's altered ears heard the scrape that the trigger made against the scientist's fingers, giving him plenty of time to raise Ghrerd back up before him. The old man took all three slugs in his left shoulder blade, going rigid then sliding down limp in Vincent's hand. Hojo swore loudly, fumbling in his pocket for his box of ammo. He choked and fell backwards into the pod room terrified when Valentine used his claw to tear a hole in the dying old man's neck, wrapping his mouth around the wound.

The monster's feast didn't last. He'd already gorged himself on blood and now the deed was done more for show than out of need. When he felt the last beatings of Ghrerd's tired heart, he flung the new corpse backwards over the railing of the small platform they were both standing upon. There was a small splash from the mako pit below. Vincent turned back around just in time to take a bullet in his right leg when Hojo reappeared with his trembling gun. Three more angry shots followed but their target darted like a wraith back into the shadows of the high-ceilinged machinery room, the rounds able to do little more than ricochet noisily from the metal and pipes.

Gathering his courage at last, Dr. Waters rushed past Hojo out of the pod room, teeth clenched to keep his jaw from trembling. He peered through the darkness, eager to see Ghrerd but the old man wasn't there. He realized after only a moment or two just what that splash he'd heard had been, what it meant. Waters' face was pained for a moment, but then burned beet red with accustomed rage, obscenities falling over his swollen lips as he turned his face up to the ceiling. Valentine was there somewhere, skulking like a coward in the shadows. "Come down here, you sonnuvabitch! Come here to my face! Fucking monster!"

Low laughter trickled like raindrops from the dark. Waters shook a fist in the air as though he wanted to grab that laughter and rip it away, perhaps ball it up in his hands and throw it like a weapon. Good Gods, if only he could leap right out of his skin and tear this bastard apart! "You're no better'n Hojo!" he called, "You're no better'n any heartless fuck right outta Shinra. Just where in the hell does your superiority come from?!"

Vincent had retreated to a narrow bit of catwalk almost thirty feet above the level of the bridge and pod room. The pain in his injured leg cleared the fog of oblivion from his senses and he snapped back to himself, rubbing at his head, trying to remember in detail exactly what he'd been doing for the last half hour. He could recall things but indistinctly, as though his life were a dream and it was now the morning after. Vincent stared mutely at the hole in his lower thigh, the crimson spreading through his pants leg. With a little grunt, he tore the bullet from his flesh with his ever useful claw, then dropped the bloody bit of lead onto the top of Waters' head. The scientist yelped a satisfying oath and Vincent sat back

for a moment to let his leg heal and attempt to collect his irrational thoughts. Just collect them though, he refused to think any new ones. He was through with thinking for a while, he wouldn't again until he could bear it better.

Right now, his life was only about death. That fact seemed like the most obvious thing to him in the world.

Hojo thought his was solely about life at the moment. Life was about all he wanted right now. Even killing Valentine seemed vastly unimportant in comparison with saving his own skin. The Professor began shakily reloading the gun in his hands, feeling Bier's presence at his side, tense as a coiled snake. Their numbers had dwindled and it was making him nervous.

"Sir..." he hissed in his ear, "Sir, what will you do?"

Hojo bit down hard on his lip, clicking bullets into the distended chamber of his derringer. He growled, angry only because he couldn't really answer. "I haven't a clue. Suggestions are welcome." Pushing hair from his eyes, he breathed a sigh, a deep one, long and loud. "He's working his way up to me, I suppose. The influential monster within can't keep him from killing me forever."

Hojo took a few steps backwards, stopping when his shin struck the edge of the first of the stairs leading up to Jenova. He could feel her at his back and it was somewhat of a comfort. If only she would put a stop to all of this. Vincent's power was based largely on the curse of her cells, only Hojo had channeled and specialized the strength to meet his own needs. Still, the power was essentially hers, if she would pull her attention away from enjoying the spectacle of this entire confrontation so dearly, she could easily put an end to Valentine's murderous little alter-ego. If not an end to the Turk himself. But Hojo knew she'd do no such thing. In typical God-like fashion, she largely disbelieved in sticking an intruding hand into the affairs of her creations. She found it infinitely more fascinating to simply watch them toil beneath her gaze, follow her occasional orders. Because she didn't need anything of anyone at the moment, she would allow all this to continue, right under her very nose.

Quiet laughter echoed in the darker recesses of Hojo's brain as he thought these thoughts. Apparently Jenova found him quite hilarious. "Funny or not," he murmured beneath his breath, "If I die, that leaves you helpless, have you considered that? Perhaps you think that since now Cloud is yours, you don't need me any longer? If you'd thought that after Sephiroth was born and let me die then, you'd really be up a creek now though, wouldn't you? No, you must realize you still need me more than you've ever needed any other human. We've been through too much together for you to forsake me now. If Valentine kills me, you'll be trapped back at the beginning of all of this, puppet master no longer." Hojo distractedly considered how nice it might be to die and be rid of Jenova and the thousand and one responsibilities associated with her. But then he remembered Lucrecia, Gast, the countless faces of the people he'd crushed all in the name of his ambition. If there was an undiscovered country past this weary world, Hojo had no desire to face those old phantoms again behind its borders.

Heh. And thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought.

Jenova laughed harder. Oh? She found that quote funny? Hojo smirked weakly to himself and thought he should perhaps buy some Shakespeare works on tape. He could play them for her, introduce the creature to some culture. She needed it.

"Don't dismiss me," he said aloud to her, holding the gun in his hands out before him. Waters had re-entered the room and stood to the right of the doorway leading out, just waiting for Valentine to step through. Even if it killed him, he'd have his revenge on the creature. Bier watched the world closely, his arms crossed under his chin, amazingly nonchalant despite the circumstances.

"Valentine!" Hojo called, licking his lips, "Why don't you come and meet Jenova, Valentine? If you live past today, you'll have to get to know her really well! You belong to her now, you know, I handed you over to her just as I did Lucrecia!"

Bier blinked hard and turned around to face his boss. "Sir? What are you--?"

Hojo shut him up with a single gesture. "That's something else to be pissed at me over. I'm just piling items atop the list, happy to do it. I still hate you, Turk. So I want you to hate me. You don't scare me, you never will, because I've seen you at your lowest, sobbing into your shirtsleeves because you couldn't have what you wanted. I pulled you out of Death's reach, I saved your life and put it in my pocket. If Jenova owns you, I own you too, but more so. You can stop your inane little horror games, quit with your drama, your terror. You're not very good at it anyway. Come meet Jenova. She can teach you how to truly terrify. She'll teach you just what fear is."

Vincent listened to Hojo's voice echoing from the next room and a smoldering fury rose in his chest, licking up the back of his throat. That voice and its owner were what he'd been seeking all night. He was the one face from the past that he'd come across, the one face that seemed like the key to the puzzle that Vincent's life had become. Vincent was shaking as he let himself drop back to ground level, his feet meeting the metal platform below with a twin set of metallic clinks. A spasm of dull pain shot through his injured limb and he limped a bit as he made his way through the portal, but his face didn't show a hint of the discomfort in his leg. Rather his expression was steely-cold, burnt out to an ashen hue with the continuous fires of his passionate grief. He'd burned in agony for almost thirty years, he now realized; awake, asleep, the

pain of the undeserved, the pain of loss, of fear, of vulnerability; it had raged and eaten up his soul, stripped it of any flesh that'd ever made him human and left him a bare-boned monster, a thing only thirsty for blood because he hadn't enough warmth left in his own self to ever satisfy. Sure... he reasoned to himself brokenly, Sure, it's a pretty metaphor for what this thing is. If it arranges this chaos into some kind of sense, I'll take that clever poetry and never let it go.

Waters fought down an urge to kill when Vincent stepped through the door and into his sights. His fingers grappled through the empty air at his sides, each one a blunt snake thirsty for a victim. Vincent walked past him without a glance. His fiery eyes were trained on Hojo.

"Why?" he asked, approaching the scientist until they stood nose to nose, just as they had minutes before. Hojo looked surprised for a moment, then remembered Vincent and all the damned ignorance that came packaged with him.

"You asked me that before and I told you. Why? You practically demanded to be punished. I don't want to listen to any more of your whining. Insipid little fool... you'll mewl like a lost lamb... "Why, why, why?"... and then you'll turn around and tear someone apart. You want to make the world suffer because it's hurt you? Take lessons from me then. Or Sephiroth, the man you never knew. Yes, Lucrecia had her son, you know. A wonderful child, truly. He knew how to hurt a cruel world and he did it without whining about how unfair it all was. Too bad he's dead, or I'd have him tutor you."

His shoulders drawing up in anger, Vincent snarled something unintelligible and lashed out with his claw, shoving Hojo back with it, leaving four bright lines of red through the scientist's thin shirt. He stumbled back a few steps, but kept on his feet. "Ha... ha... you were never one to like hearing the truth of the matter, were you? Sorry, must be getting forgetful in my old age. What about you? You seem to be forgetting your desire to kill me. Go ahead, Turk, do your worst."

Vincent wanted to kill him, he wanted to do it, wanted it so much he could taste it but it tasted sweet and cold, not warm and salted. He wanted him dead, hooked at the end of his claw, but no... he wanted to kill him like a Turk, put a bullet between his eyes, watch the life pass out of his face, watch him gurgle some last pathetic syllable then sink down and grow cold on the ground. Quick Silver, with one lone last bullet in the chamber, was still with him so it was plausible. But he couldn't do it. He couldn't and he didn't know why.

A stab in the stem of his brain had Vincent reeling suddenly. He clamped a hand to his head and looked towards Hojo. He had that damned derringer, why didn't he use it? Why did he seem just as incapable of killing Vincent as Vincent did of killing him? "Go meet Jenova..." the Professor whispered, motioning towards her door with a flick of his head, "She's really eager to see you face to face."

"You are a bastard." Vincent thought then just how insufficient words were when it came to conveying what his heart felt. He turned about and looked towards the door crouched at the summit of the stairs.

"Jenova's what took Lucrecia away. She was the pigment and myself simply the medium in this masterwork of ours."

"She's not alive," Vincent snarled, shooting the man a lethal glare, "She never was, Lucrecia thinks you're insane for believing she is."

"Past tense," Hojo whispered, "Get used to talking of 'Crecia in the past tense. It took me a few months to do, but the sooner you can, the better."

Vincent punched him across the jaw, a single savage blow that Hojo never even saw coming. He smeared a trickle of red from the corner of his mouth, then blinked in shock. But shock turned to anger quickly, he didn't exactly enjoy being battered. "You want to know what's alive and what's dead, you brainless barbarian? You ask Jenova, and she'll tell you anything you like!"

"Jenova, Jenova, that's all it ever is with you!" Vincent gave the scientist a final shove backwards, then pushed past Bier, past Waters, fangs bared in fury. He set a foot on the stairs, good hand getting a white-knuckled grip on the railing. He caught sight of Cloud out of the corner of his eye. The young man still lay in a ball on the floor, staring up at nothing, sweat running into his eyes. Pushing past nightmares to see what was going on in reality was difficult.

"...don't..." he mouthed, breathing labored.

"If Cloud says not to do somethin', it's usually a good idea not too," Zack informed from his prison. When he didn't get an answer, he started rocking the pod again. He could feel the supports holding it upright beginning to break down beneath his assaults. Vincent scoffed at the both of them and took another few steps towards the door.

"What'll this pile of nothing tell me, Hojo?" he called over his shoulder, "It'll tell me that you're just as crazy as we always knew you were. You couldn't deal with rejection or failure, so you conjured up a friend. An imaginary lover named Jenova, but being the sick slime you are, you seemed to enjoy this lover taking the form of that monster you and Gast dug up. A psychiatrist could make a life's work out of studying the shit in your head, you know that? Jenova... if it were as mighty as you claim, would it have let me get as far as I've come?"

Hojo didn't answer his question. He simply halted Bier from going after the man. He had to aim his gun at Waters to keep the Doctor from jumping after the Turk. This wasn't their business, the Professor had already decided that. This was an unsettled score from thirty years before. It'd be settled now. By him. And Jenova.

"What's behind here? A collection of bodies? Another tomb? Or is it really that ugly sack of shit you called Jenova? Lucrecia hated it, you know that? She hated spending her days down there and she hated you sticking cells into her. She

hated throwing up, she hated feeling so sick, she hated the labs, the Mansion, the Turks and the Scientists. She'd hate that you named her baby Sephiroth, she'd hate the connotations that name carries with it."

"I'd watch myself if I were you," Hojo said softly, "You'll make her angry."

"But there's nothing to anger," Vincent said with a little laugh. He was nearly at the top of the staircase now and he didn't quite notice the slight rumbling beneath his feet, "There's nothing, Hojo, but what you've conjured to place the blame on. Some phantom where you fancy cares enough to protect you." He placed his feet on the bit of floor before the thick leaden door and laid his gory claw atop a panel to its right. Below, Cloud pushed himself backwards with his elbows, blue eyes gone wide as saucers. Zack watched his friend through the breath-fogged window of his pod, shoving it back and forth, sure it was about to give. He had a terrible feeling in the pit of his stomach. He'd known Hojo long enough to be sure he was convinced Jenova was real. Whether she was or not, Hojo believed it utterly. He shoved his shoulder harder against the sides, panic starting to set in. He wanted out of that reactor now.

"If I thought for a moment that this creature of yours had any validity to it at all, I'd cut her apart myself." Vincent scraped his claw over the panel, circuits crackling from severed wires. "I'd make sure that if nothing else, you never had any kind of physical representation to this mystical, magical, creature you claim is so much more superior than you are." Vincent's face twisted into a sort of wicked glee as he imagined the damage he'd do. "Certain animals like flatworms, they regenerate; you have to cut them into tiny pieces to be rid of them. I'd do that to Jenova. I'd split her apart like kindling from a single felled tree and spread her at your feet." Another pain stabbed through his head, a compression of every other pain he'd experienced in the past day, only this was one single stab, one line of agony. He pressed a finger to his right eye and ignored it. But Hojo saw him stumble.

"I'd shut up if I were you," The Professor recommended, yet there was no feeling behind his words. Vincent was actually acting just as irrational as he'd predicted. Ah... how Hojo loved the human mind. A prod, a push, and emotions would do the rest. Vincent was as readable as a kindergarten primer; emotions so raw and untrained dwelling in his heart that they leapt towards hate, or love, or fear, with hardly a touch. Hojo let a smile cross his lips to see the Turk utter a gasp. He knew what that pain felt like, knew it only too well. Heh. He couldn't have wished it upon a finer individual.

Cloud closed his eyes and laid his head back upon the floor. A voice he didn't know and yet knew very well whispered sweet evil in his ears. He didn't want to watch. He didn't want to see. Zack looked upon the young man in concern yet even he sensed the tension and wouldn't break it with a handful of meaningless words.

"Am I supposed to believe that I've made it mad?" Vincent asked, a catch in his voice simply because his head hurt so terribly. He leaned against the door now, strength draining like blood from his limbs. "If it were real... If these things were true, perhaps that would make her as much to blame as you, Hojo. What would be my job then? Kill it..?" A new kind of madness burned in Vincent's eyes. He drew his right hand back and pounded it into the door. He wanted it ripped from its hinges, the contents exposed to the world. "It has to end!" he demanded, "And is the ending here perhaps? Or is this just another beginning, as that night in the Library was when my old life ended?!" The unrelenting pain came again, a kind of rebuke; punishment for an unruly child. It was so intense that Vincent went blind for a moment, crashing his left shoulder fiercely into the door. The very ground moved under his feet as though the entire reactor shifted a bit, jumped a half a foot in the air and came to an undignified crash back in the dirt. Hojo shivered. It wasn't often that Jenova decided to prove her sentience, but when she did, people died, things changed, the very Planet would bleed in response to her softest, weakest whims. Perhaps his quickly pieced together little plan had been a bit too rash.

"Valentine..." he called, shooting looks to Bier and Waters, who were both feeling rather confused and not a little out of sorts. Hojo's glare didn't go far in alleviating that, all the Professor meant to convey was a warning. He heard Jenova's intentions just as clearly as Cloud.

"No! I won't listen to your shit! It's all self-serving shit! It could be lies or clever truths or who the hell knows what?!" Vincent slammed his fist into the door again, then scraped his claw quickly over the wall. A screech, like a single scream, made Cloud throw his hands over his ears. The reactor shook more fiercely. The storm outside had quit and the world seemed much quieter now with the constant pebbling melody of the rain gone. But behind that silence, something crouched; a sound so piercing that you couldn't hear it, only feel it deeply; in the back of your mind like the uncomfortable memory of a nightmare; in the heels of your feet as though you tread upon opened switchblades; in your fingertips as though bamboo shoots had been shoved beneath your fingernails. It was Jenova's voice, and Vincent was too angry to ever believe he might be hearing it at all.

"Get away from there, man!" Cloud moaned, unable to hear even his own hallucinations as they raged in his skull. Was it Sephiroth that was pounding his fist against Jenova's door? Cloud would blink once and see the General, he'd blink again and the image would fade back to Vincent. Was it Sephiroth again? Not dead? Never dead? He couldn't be because he was here again, calling for his mother to let him in, the blood dripping afresh from the sword in his hand... or... was it blood dripping from a claw, from a bronze claw that Sephiroth had never had before..? The excruciating buzzing of Jenova's sadistic song swirled everything together until nothing was as it was supposed to be, not even the memories he'd

held so close to his heart for so long. "Get away so she stops!" Cloud insisted, wiping tears from his eyes. But Vincent had neither the patience nor the will to obey.

"I want to see this magnificence," he whispered bitterly, voice choked with pain. He stood with his entire right arm wrapped about his head now, a bit of blood oozing from his left nostril. He couldn't explain the pain but he never thought to blame Jenova. To do so would be ludicrous, he thought, the final nail in the coffin of his sanity. He made his claw screech again, glad to cut through the buzzing in his head and the ringing in the air with pure, whining sound. "If it's so grand, Hojo, that it's worth your life, mine, my Lucrecia's and the life of her son, this Sephiroth you say is just as dead as me... if it's so grand, I want to pay my respects to it."

Hojo's face showed neither mercy nor fear. "Go ahead then," he said, almost like a dare, "I'm sure she's waiting with bated breath to say hello."

"Oh, I'm sure..." Vincent growled, barely able to speak through the ache. The world was too dark, too fuzzy, too red to his eyes. Perhaps this pain in his head would blind him and he'd never have to look upon himself or any of the world's other sinners again. Blackness... like the interior of his velvet casket... forever. As good as death in a way.

Moving through the pain and sound was like moving through mud but Vincent raised his claw and with a single raucous shout, tore it through the rectangular panel keeping Jenova sealed away. A shock of sparks shot upwards through the bronze of his left arm, a burst of new pain bringing different colors to the explosions before his eyes. It was a relief though, perfect bliss, as it made that other pain drilling into his mind recede for just a second or two.

There was a moment of expectation then and every eye in the reactor was fixed upon the door and the trembling man standing before it. Vincent himself couldn't really remember why he'd come up here to begin with. If Hojo was down there and his 'Cecia was back in the basement in Nibelheim, why was he standing in front of this door? It went against every ounce of Turk logic in his head, any of it that was left anyways. Here he stood. And strangely enough, when the door hissed open, some sick sense of joy swelled his heart.

"This is gonna be bad..." he heard Cloud fretting softly at his back. He heard Zack's obnoxious bashing of his pod too. "Man... don't go in there. If you listen to this noise you'll realize just how mad she is."

"And just who is 'she'?" Vincent questioned rebelliously, words coming out through teeth clenched in agony. He thought his head might burst from the pressured pain bashing his brain yet he was sure he knew the answer to his question. So without another word he went inside--

--And the pain stopped. He sank to his knees in relief right in the doorway. Suddenly he could see perfectly, the knives in his brain were sheathed again. Weary with gratefulness, all Vincent could do was sit on the ground just inside the new room, resting his weight on his hands, letting the sharp sculpted iron of the rusted floor cut through his pants and into his knees. It was much colder in this room. Much drier too. With his eyes shut in exhaustion, he could just use the feel of the air on his skin to get a sense of the atmosphere of this place. Cold, definitely. The cold played hell with him, wet as he still was from his sojourn through the storm. He shivered a little, nose tingling, and he could feel how pristine this place was, like a mountain lake in the middle of nowhere. Flecks of water dripped from the ends of his hair and the sounds they made as they struck the ground reverberated ridiculously loud. So did the very scrapings of his ruined clothes, his own heartbeat and breaths. Anything but macabre silence was an intruder here.

The more he listened though, the more he realized that there actually was sound. It was faint, steady, so steady it was more a friend to the silence than an enemy, singing with it and adding to it. Much more pleasant than the noise outside the room had been, that horrible painful noise that had been just as inaudible as it had been loud. This new noise was enough to whet Vincent's curiosity. Very, very slowly, head still sore with the intensity of the pain that had torn through it, he lifted his chin from his chest and opened his eyes.

It took a moment to make out the furnishings. His breath was steaming up smoky and white from his mouth, obscuring his vision. He stood shakily and found a wall to lean himself against. This room was cool blue in color and very small. Massings of pipes made up the walls, panels of shiny silver aluminum hid the circuits behind them. Much of the buzzing sound came from these latter, massive amounts of electricity pumping through them. Vincent laid a hand on a quivering pipe, then took a step forward. They all bunched together here before him, leading up to a glass cylinder in the center of the tiny space. He tread carelessly over a plate in the ground bearing info on the room's lone occupant: date discovered, date sealed, name, species, and supposed age. It was an elaborate set-up, surely, he thought in embitterment. An elaborate set-up for a monster whose existence had hurt his love. Vincent whispered his threats now as he approached the darkened cylinder. His crimson eyes bore down hard on the creature inside and he thought for a moment it was strange that it was too dark in here for him to see it yet. He'd been able to see so well in the dark all night but his 'gift' wasn't working here.

"Maybe you have answers," he murmured, treading the little walkway of pipes carefully, "If you're everything Hojo thinks, maybe you can tell me why my life fell apart. Who I am anymore... And where I'm supposed to go now... I find them to be very simple questions. The answers are too complex for words though. And something inside of me insists

they're not important at all. How easy to be a monster who needn't care about the lives he squanders. I kill and forget myself in the act. Lucrecia would be disgusted ya know. Maybe that was Hojo's ploy."

He was standing at the cylinder's base now, head craned back, eyes piercing upwards through the gloom yet able to see nothing. "Nothing..." he said softly, but the anger was creeping back into his voice, "Because you are nothing. Just an excuse, just like I said. Well to hell with you. Maybe Hojo would never have lost it if you hadn't been found, I don't know. But you can't be blamed. I might as well blame the very gun that shot me, or the needles used to put that poison in 'Crecia's veins. You are nothing. You're dog meat. And Hojo is a dead man."

He'd do it now. His resolution was firm. The snarling, snapping consciousness in the back of his brain teased him with options but he ignored it. He'd given in to it enough tonight but he was sure he was lucid now. He turned around briskly.

The pain chose that moment to return, stabbing him once straight behind the eyes. He gave a cry and dropped back to his knees, clutching his head through tangles of hair.

"You're not-- you're not d-doing this..." he panted, "'Cause you're n-not real--!"

Outside, perched at the base of the stairs, Hojo grabbed onto a railing to steady himself as the reactor shook again. A gasket at the base of the pods burst sending green steam hissing into the air. If Jenova was too much rougher on this thing, he realized, She'd blow them all to kingdom come. As though to challenge this thought, the reactor shook even worse. Hojo fought back panic. This wasn't good.

"What's going on?" Waters demanded, hands wrapped around the edge of the door frame for support. A bulb shattered in the ceiling, followed by another. Paper thin shards of glass rained onto his head and the room darkened marginally. A deep roar tore through the reactor, rolling like mist along the ground. Vibrations rattled up Waters' calves and he swallowed back his nerves, looking towards the doorway he'd watched Valentine stumble through moments before. Bier did the same, not caring enough to fight the structure's shaking. He sat on the floor against a wall, staring up.

"Cloud!" Zack called, giving his pod one final smack of his shoulder. It was tilted at a dangerous 45 degree angle and now he simply started stomping the wall-turned-ground with an impatient boot. Cloud looked up, blinking away his fear. The pictures in his head had gone. Jenova was too preoccupied to maintain them now.

"Oh, shit..."

A startling realization suddenly knocked Hojo on his ass "Oh, shit..." Without warning he ran up the stairs in a blind panic, falling every other step and scraping the palms of his hands. "Oh, shit..." He'd never imagined she'd do this. He'd never imagined it! Why didn't she simply drive Valentine mad?! Or kill him?! No! Not this! This wouldn't help! "Oh, shit! Shit! Don't!"

The pain was everywhere in Vincent now, not just his head. He writhed on the floor, kicking the pipes so that they clanged, the sound intermingling with Jenova's sadistic song and his own sobs to create something truly horrid to the ears. He was burning, he was on fire! Flames licked through his muscles and they spasmed so that he couldn't control his movements, lashing out at everything around him, clawing gashes in the grating underneath. That thing inside grinned and snarled and laughed, enjoying the pain because it knew it meant something. Vincent knew it too after a moment, and when he was able to make his eyes open at last, mouth stretched in a wretched grimace, he saw something odd. He was covered in blood. It coated him as though he'd been dipped in a grisly vat of it; his skin glistened red and wet. This was a nightmare, it had to be! Only in something as unreal as that could he be lying on his back like this, wallowing in miserable anguish, covered entirely with a sheen of blood. He forced himself to try and wipe it away, absently amazed to see how dark his skin had become beneath it.

You don't think I'm real, Vincent Valentine? It's to be expected. But you want to know something? I don't think you're real either. And I can prove it.

Suddenly he couldn't remember anything; he couldn't remember why he was here, couldn't recall where Lucrecia was, nor Hojo, nor the Turks. He only knew that he was horribly tired and that something was screeching at him from inside. It was similar to what had let him kill so easily before, the same sort of sing-song invitation that had demanded he have blood. Vincent shut his eyes and let his head fall back, losing himself to this otherness just as he'd allowed himself to earlier. Fighting it was hard and undesired anyway. Before blacking out, he felt he was climbing to his feet despite the fact he was allowing himself to collapse. He was waking up despite passing out. No. No, this wasn't giving up, as much as it felt that way. He was only beginning to fight. Blackness descended and consumed before he could do anything about this contradiction. It was good to let it all go anyway.

Hojo reached the doorway and tripped over a seam in the floor. It was just as well too, since the moment he stood erect at the stairway's summit, an eight foot tall glistening purple demon rocketed from Jenova's chamber, his claw swiping past Hojo's head so fast it whistled in his ear. It had been about to take said head from his neck.

"Shit shit shit shit..." Hojo shot a glare through the dark doorway at Jenova. He swore if she'd had her head, she'd be grinning at him. "This isn't funny," he growled, "And this wasn't what I had in mind when I asked for help. Stupid silly bitch. Shit shit shit shit shit..."

Zack's pod slammed to the floor with an eardrum-cracking crash. The Plexiglas window popped from its frame and Zack reached his arm out to unlatch the door. He hopped out and landed roughly on his knees, struggling to catch his breath. When he caught sight of a demon straight from the pits of Hell trying to fit his sixteen foot wingspan in the suddenly tiny room, he wished he'd stayed in the pod. "Cloud, you okay?" He knelt at his friend's side, a tide of relief rising over him.

"No... gotta get outta here," the boy insisted and Zack had to admit it was one of the sanest things he'd said recently. Dr. Waters, back pressed convulsively against the rear wall, stared at the two specimen for a moment then turned back to watching the demon above them in horror.

"Wh-what is that thingie?" he whispered, wide eyes darting to Hojo. The Professor sighed and rubbed at the claw marks across his chest, smearing a little ticklish blood from his stomach.

"Chaos," he answered simply, "Jenova's favorite word."

The demon above grinned to hear those two syllables, fangs flashing in the dim red light. He liked that word. Chaos. Sure. He knew he could live up to it too.

He was a giant of a creature, human but more so; a gargoyle come to life. He seemed carved of stone, modeled after a monster, but he moved with an eerie human-like quality that bespoke a devilish intelligence. The wings at his back were like a bat's but enhanced, built with power in mind, capable of long distances and becoming weapons in their own rights; razor-edged and stream-lined. Hand-like claws tipped the ends of each powerful arm, twisting horns crowned his head while a long and curling tail slashed the air in his wake. Chaos had the bulk that Vincent lacked in his human form but he moved with the Turk's same grace, retaining his agility and speed. Other than that, he looked nothing like Vincent, nothing like any human at all. Chaos loved that. He had no desire to be associated with his human Master.

Behind burning blood-red eyes, Chaos' mind was his own. He was in charge. There could be no interfering conscience nor second thoughts now. Thanks to Jenova, any compassion lay sealed; the human lay asleep. Chaos liked it that way. Just as he'd been when Vincent had killed that young man Pepper after first coming from the coffin, Chaos was in power. He had been waiting 28 years for that first murder. Yes, and it had been delicious too, after so many years of starvation. Vincent had slept for so long, had those nightmares, and Chaos had fed off of his unconscious suffering ravenously. Still, that was a feeble excuse for sustenance. Blood was better. And the blood of Vincent's enemies was best, doubly satisfying. Somehow it tasted better when the murder was done out of vengeance, despite that vengeance being a human's. The demon already despised his human Master. Vincent could push him away when he tried hard enough. He got control of the body, got to do what he wanted, go where he wanted to go. Chaos was a passenger, a backseat driver to be sure, but the controls weren't in his claws. Yes, he already hated Vincent a good bit, he could say that readily. But the hatred was immaterial. If vengeance made the deaths sweeter, Chaos would bear the bitter salt with the yummy sugar.

Ah, speaking of vengeance and death, there was Hojo.

Chaos cocked his dark head to one side, horns scraping the reactor ceiling. His wings were brushing against pipes and wires, stinging him a bit, but it felt good to fly. He hadn't done it before, hadn't known that he'd be able to manifest into such a marvel when he finally gathered the strength to take control at all. This was nice.

The demon stretched his claws, eyes glowing crimson in wicked satisfaction.

Ah, yes. Hojo.

That much-hated man was cowering like a whipped mule at the top of the stairs. Chaos smelled the fear on him, a musky scent that made his jaw twitch. Could he kill Hojo though? If he did, Vincent would be harder to influence. If he did, his Master might go figuring things out, things he wouldn't like and maybe... maybe go back into that blasted coffin. Chaos didn't like the coffin. There wasn't any chance for murder there, just time. Lots and lots of time to lie dormant and listen to Vincent cry in his sleep. That was hardly fun.

Still... it was Hojo. That sniveling little scientist with the cockiness painted thick all over him like tar. He exuded something the demon automatically did not care for. He stood there as though he were better than demons or vampires or murderers or, or whatever it was that Chaos was. Could he kill him though? He was in control after all so it was his decision. Perhaps Vincent would never have control again. That Jenova thing had taken the reins away from him, what cause would she have to ever give them back?

Hojo... he had some little piece of steel in his hands, some little machine. Chaos remembered the word for it, pulled it out of Vincent's unconscious mind as he might a magazine from a box: gun. It was a weapon. Oh, that was just too funny.

Hojo was pointing the gun at him now, baring his marvelous toy. Heh heh heh... if the little human wanted weapons, Chaos would show him the meaning of the word. Screeching, yes, he found he could make an awful racket, screeching, the demon dove with spread claws towards the little figure on the platform atop the stairs. Hojo fired his mighty gun and Chaos felt sudden sharp stings in his face that only added a touch of anger to his pleasure. He didn't grow truly angry until something knocked into him from the side, throwing him off course and roughly into the reactor wall.

Bier gasped for breath. He was in seriously bad shape, worse than he'd thought. His battle with Vincent had really torn him up and diminished his energy. He'd barely been able to muster up the blast of power that'd just knocked the attacking monster from its target. "Sir!" Bier called, trying to keep the calmness in his voice, "I recommend haste, eh?"

Hojo blinked a dozen times, not sure he was really alive. He checked himself quickly, looked down to see if he'd need a new pair of pants, was relieved to see he wouldn't, then turned tail and fled for the nearest shelter, Jenova's room. "You're on my shit list," he said to the headless alien once she was looming before him in all her horrible splendor.

Bier watched Hojo until he was sure he'd be out of harm's way, then swallowed back a yelp to notice Chaos had recovered from his poor excuse for an attack, doubling back around now and raking razor sharp claws along the length of the scientist's right arm before he could do anything about it. Damn arm had been through too much today all ready. Bier turned sharply at the hip, his burnt skin crackling like paper with the sudden movement, and watched as Chaos caught himself from the aerial attack, jerking about to face him again. "You a product of Hojo or Jenova?" he asked the thing.

"Oh, you think it's going to talk?" Waters growled, inching his way towards the exit. Bier shrugged.

"Don't see why it wouldn't."

"Where the hell'd it come from? Why was a monster being kept in the reactor?" Waters suddenly saw Zack and Cloud had the same idea as him, both men moving towards the way out. His and Zack's eyes met for a moment but the Soldier looked away.

"My guess..." Bier began, adjusting his position as Chaos sized him up, "Would be this is Valentine. Hojo's notes stated he'd altered the man to evolve in his mutations. Say hello to the vampire's successor. Rather drastic jump though."

"You've gotta be kidding me..."

"Wish I was."

Chaos took a few truculent steps forward, hind claws clacking against the rusted metal floor. Bier noticed this thing never stopped grinning. As long as he was battling, he was thrilled. Bier was sure he'd continue to smile whether he won or got his cocky demon ass smashed into the floor. Not that the scientist even remotely thought he'd be able to do anything like that in his condition. Chaos roared and leapt straight towards him, tilting his spread wings just a bit like a hang-glider adjusting his course, sending himself barreling towards Dr. Waters. Waters was watching the scene with exhausting attention and reacted fast enough to save his life but not to avoid a bone-crushing blow to his shoulder. Chaos' claw-studded fist slammed into his side and Waters stuttered a miserable oath as he was knocked to his right, head grazing the edge of the pods' control console. He rolled away before Chaos could lunge in and finish the kill, relieved to see Bier grab a hold of the demon's horned head and wrench him backwards, slamming a power-laden fist in his face.

Bier skittered away after the assault. Stick and move. All right.

"Can you run?" Zack whispered in Cloud's ear. He'd ducked them both behind the control console but spied Waters nursing his shoulder down at the other end. Cloud shook his head.

"Zack..." he said sadly, "I can barely think. Stuff's screaming in my head but you can't hear it, can ya? So glad you can't, it's horrible. Jenova's gonna kill everyone, she says so. You go and I'll stay here. I should stay with her anyway, ya know?"

"No, I don't know," Zack answered angrily, "Get on your feet, Spike, and let's scram."

Cloud shook his head vehemently, clutching a temple with one hand. "N-no. I'm s'posed to stay here. I have to. O-or J-jenova will do somethin'..."

"Fuck..." Zack shook his friend's shoulder, looking desperately for something, anything familiar to shine out at him from his mako blue eyes. "What's he done to you? Cloud, you gotta get a hold of yourself, man. Jenova won't do anything, she's not like, I mean... she's just some headless thing..." Zack ran out of words quickly. He couldn't convince Cloud of things he didn't even believe himself. Still, he grabbed him firmly by the arm, cautious of his bandaged wrist, and pulled him up, letting him lean on his shoulder as he led them both towards the door.

Chaos caught sight of blonde and blue out of the corner of his eye. They were moving away and his natural instinct as a predator was to give chase. He had Bier standing before him though, a strange, shriveled human thing that smelled like cooked meat. Chaos wrinkled his nose in displeasure, wondering why in the hell anyone would cook meat. It was much much better raw. Even though Bier didn't exactly make the demon rage with hunger, he attacked anyway, swiveling gracefully outwards, on the ground now and taking advantage of his uncanny agility, veritably dancing circles around the weakened and exhausted scientist.

"Ya know... if you'd have come after me last night, "he began through pants, "I'd have cleaned up on you. You're making a million mistakes in your attacks, I'm just too damned worn out to take advantage of them." Chaos grinned harder at the words, red eyes widening so that white was just barely visible on either side of the pupils. He twisted to his left, swiping Bier from the side and the man was too slow to swivel about and block. He was knocked to the ground with tremendous force, half of his rib cage shattering to splinters in his chest. He slid a bit towards Waters then his back slammed into the door frame with an unhealthy crack. Gurgling a shaky breath past a mouthful of bitter blood, the

scientist summoned deep wells of stamina to shove himself entirely through the door, putting a small barrier between himself and his attacker.

Waters immediately retreated from his small console shelter, dashing towards the stairs. Hojo looked out the doorway of Jenova's room like a mouse peeking its head from its hole. Chaos' back was turned as the demon tried to squeeze himself into the reactor's machinery room, Bier taking advantage of the small doorway and blasting him with sputters of power from his damaged arm. "You've fucked up my plans, Jenova," Hojo muttered to the creature over his shoulder, "You've gone and turned him even worse than he was. Why the hell d'you have it out for me? Or were you really trying to help? Hey, a word from the wise: next time, ask first."

"Hojo!" Waters was calling his name from below and the Professor tilted his head down to stare at the fuming Doctor. "Get down here and let it kill you! This is your fault, your penance, your monster! If you die, it'll leave us alone!"

Hojo couldn't help but smile at that one. "That's not the case anymore," he answered, "I think Chaos would love to sever your head from your body as much as he would mine."

Speaking was a mistake. Hojo realized it instantly.

Chaos forgot Bier in a heartbeat, spinning about like a top and staring at the scientist framed in the doorway atop the stairs. After half a moment of contemplation, the demon let fly a steaming ball of hellish flame, a roar of enthusiasm following the attack through the air. Hojo's brown eyes snapped opened wide and he was pinned to the spot, frozen. Something quick, clever, and unseen prodded him in the side of his stomach and he flinched away from the pain, falling to his right just as the fire sizzled past him, frying a few black bangs. There was an explosion then, a flash of white like a single sheet of lightning, and a crack so stentorian in nature that Hojo cupped his hands to his ears, crying out in fear. Suddenly he was deluged in something freezing cold, the force of it knocking him clean from Jenova's room and half-way down the stairs before he thought to grab onto the very grating of the floor with his fingernails. He hung there, waiting to die, wondering why he hadn't already, when he realized he was soaking wet, bitterly cold, and there was a horrible stench in the air; truly disgusting like rotting flesh or decaying garbage; the stink of carrion on the battle field, days old and covered in flies. Gagging, he opened his eyes and saw the off-coloured liquid soaking his clothes and hair, strands of tissue mixed with it and emitting that god-awful stink. It clicked all at once what had happened.

Jenova's torso had landed at the foot of the stairs, looking very small and insignificant outside of its tank and monitors. The chemicals that kept her preserved were dripping from the stairs themselves, from the pods, still running in rivulets from the doorway to her chamber. But Jenova just lay there, still as Death, flat on her stomach with two sharply defined shoulder blades catching the light and casting dark triangular shadows on her bluish flesh. Cords and wires attached to her organs stuck harshly through her skin. Hojo gaped.

"Y-you-- you see?!" He hollered down at the thing, a twinge of fear for her in his heart, "You see what your playing around's done?! Your very creature's knocked you from your throne! Still laughing, my dear? Still having a good time?"

There was no answer. Chaos prodded the frozen and inanimate bit of meat at his feet with a hind claw, then turned back to Bier when the scientist started drop kicking the back of his preoccupied skull.

Waters had gone pale with shock. The front of his shirt was soaked with that Jenova monstrosity's blood or formaldehyde or whatever this was. He'd been standing right at the foot of the stairs as her tank had burst and now peeled long strands of stringy tissue from his clothes, flinging them disgustedly on the floor. He took a step away from Jenova. There was no head, just a messy stump of a neck, pale vertebrae barely visible embedded in the muscle that'd grown up over it somewhat since Sephiroth had claimed his prize years ago.

"Wh-where's its head?" Waters whispered, trying his damndest not to hyperventilate. This was nothing, this was science, this was okay... Zack heard the panicked words and looked up from the floor.

"The general took it with him on his way to hell," he answered tranquilly, "Why don't you let me send ya there and you two can discuss the matter over tea? I'm sure he'd love to show his mother off to you--"

The screech of metal tearing cut Zack off sharp. Chaos had torn the lintel from the doorway and now he was pushing himself into the reactor's machinery room, frothing at the mouth in anger. Bier swore lustily and backed out onto the bridge over the mako pit, not seeing anywhere else to really retreat to. Chaos' first attack was easy enough to avoid, the demon was maddened and clumsy, swinging too wide. Bier darted to the side then dashed forward between his foe's spread legs, rolling a foot or two then springing to his feet to kick Chaos out off the bridge. The monster fought for balance but his wings hampered him and he plummeted over the edge like a stone, wailing protests. He tried to open his wings to fly but there was no room, they scraped and tore against protruding machinery as he neared the merciless green of the churning pit. Inches from the mako's surface, he shot his claws out in desperation and found a handhold, coming to an abrupt stop. Chaos screeched self-approval and began climbing upwards, blood-fury in his eyes. He spread his wings and pumped them once, enough momentum there to send him floating upwards a few feet to come to a graceful, arrogant landing on the bridge.

Bier was disappointed but he was ready. He crouched low, expecting an attack. Chaos simply smiled at the little man. Oh, how he loved this. The blood pumping through his veins, the sweet smell of his opponent's fear, the adrenaline and

dark energy that gave him the strength he prized so dearly. He could feel it coursing through him; power such as these pathetic creatures could not know. This human Bier thought he was altered? Strong? Powerful? Jenova did not favor him, he had not been chosen by her and so he was nothing. Chaos felt her approval. He enshrouded himself in Jenova's praise despite the hatred he knew Vincent felt for him. Jenova's approval was enough to make him want to destroy everything, conquer humanity, ravage the world and burn everything on the Planet. Still, the smaller victories were the most satisfactory. Killing this thing now, this little burnt man with all the composure in his eyes, seeing that composure crack and crumble as Chaos stilled his heart... this is what the demon existed for; it was the murderer that Vincent never was able to be, no matter how many men he killed in the names of more powerful things. Vincent was cold and detached as he shot people, facing them from a bullet's length so that their blood could not touch him, their fingers could not wrap around his ankles, he could not see the fear or pain in their eyes. But Chaos was heated and passionate about his murders. It was all about the pleasure, about the contact and the sensation of life leaving a body. He was nothing like Vincent and the demon roared this thought to himself now as he advanced upon Bier. He'd been created by Hojo to be the epitome of everything Vincent was yet Hojo hadn't known Vincent and wound up creating his exact opposite. Chaos laughed at the foolish bastard's mistake. Know your enemies! he wanted to screech, Know your enemies inside and out, else risk becoming your own greatest foe!

Hojo was in the doorway, derringer reloaded though it was useless in his shaking hands. Chaos felt a certain respect for the old man. Father, Victim, Master, Human... all those and more in that thing with the glasses and dripping wet ponytail. Killing him would be sweetest.

~*~

The reactor was visibly trembling. It lay on a slightly upraised plateau of rock, mountain walls nestled fifty feet from every side save the front, which faced the cliff edge. That plateau was quaking though the earth around it was still. Chet watched the unnatural occurrence from the top of the trail he'd just finished trudging his way up. He was caked in mud and still wet, though the storm was moving away and the sun was burning up the plush purple clouds still in the sky. In fact, it was starting to get uncomfortably muggy out.

But he couldn't complain. He was just glad he'd reached this reactor in one piece. Especially since the storm had gone; the dragons wouldn't come out in the rain but they'd be more than willing to show up and chew on him a bit now that it had cleared. One roared in the distance, probably the same big ugly reptile that he and Vincent had watched trail the two Shinra trucks. The young actor from Wutai couldn't help but shiver, even in the heat. Dragons roaring bloody murder at his back and a big ugly hunk of shaking, quaking, noisy mako reactor at his front. It was noisy too! There were shouts coming from behind its walls, panicked ones. Chet figured Vincent must be inside. Heh. He'd thought for a little while, naive though it had been, that perhaps Vincent would wait for him to get here before venturing in. So much for that.

He was rather sad that he'd lost his friend. He was a good guy, when he was sane. But Chet couldn't blame Vincent for cracking, not after all that he'd heard had happened to him, all that that happened in Hojo's office, the lives he'd taken in Nibelheim in order to get the strength to get up here. It was enough to crack even the stablest guy. Sure, Chet could understand it.

A muffled screech, sorta like the kind of noise a bird in pain might make, rose from the innards of the reactor. Chet balled up his courage and took a step towards it. He was sort of scared and yet he wasn't too. He couldn't get scared when he thought about Sara. He just was sad. Sadder still when he thought about Vincent. His dad too, he'd been thinking a lot about his dad tonight. So there was really no room to be afraid past all that sadness.

The ground gave a great shuddering sigh, trembling as though things were buried beneath it, scrabbling for the surface and not caring for the tumult they caused on the way. Loud as a dragon, the reactor creaked in response, leaning precariously to its right for a moment before settling back into place when the earth calmed its spasms. Chet set both sneakered feet firmly before the dirt of the thing's trembling staircase, ignoring the bloody footprints lining its length. It rattled then, the metal grating cacophonous and cruel to his ears, and the earth groaned before something inside the reactor screeched its own song. Chet winced. But he wasn't going to run away.

He could though. He could turn around and take his chances with the wolves. The rain had cleared a good deal of the blood from his shoulder and he'd noticed that the animals upon the mountain top were too frightened of his approach to attack anyway. Maybe because Vincent's scent was upon him? He wouldn't have been surprised if that was the case. Vincent had come across a lone wolf on his hike up here and Chet had watched from afar as he'd cruelly and recklessly torn the creature apart, acting with a speed that'd left the wolf stunned as he'd lain in four or so separate sections in the dirt. The detachment in Vincent's eyes as he'd done the deed had been the worse of all. At least a wolf kills for a reason. Chet'd thought Vincent had seemed as though he were killing simply because it was just as easy to kill as to walk away.

Chet had to wonder where the guy who'd saved him from the monster had gone. Maybe he'd died with those few victims in Nibelheim.

The stairs were slippery, still glistening with rain, steel black and biting to Chet's eyes. He put a sneaker on the first step, holding tight to the railing to fight the reactor's constant quakes, ascending the walkway like a sailor moving abaft in a storm. The noises and screams grew louder with each tread until he at last stood in the doorway, struggling to stay on his feet against the pitching reactor platform.

Sweat was running in his eyes. He blinked twice then paused to rub it away, one hand hovering just over the edge of the door. Blood slicked its surface and he wouldn't touch it. A nudge with his shoe sent the gory portal swinging a few inches further open, effectively shoving away a heavy stone that had been wedged between it and the wall. The reactor shook again, a deep rumble that tore through the platform viciously, nearly sending the lone traveler to his knees. But Chet caught himself and moved hair back behind his ears, trying to find the courage to enter. Another screech and another tremor didn't strengthen his resolve. A man's scream followed and Chet's fingers trembled as they played over the collar of his windbreaker. He knew he had to do this. He had to see this through, see something through for once in his life! If not for him, then for Sara. She'd always done so much for him, believed in him, worked for him, taken care of him more than a sister was ever really expected to. He had to see this through for her, it couldn't end in an incomplete like everything else in his life did.

Chet looked behind himself once, turning to face the sky. There was so little to see. The storm had left in its wake nothing more than a leaden curtain of clouds, a solid barrier of gray against the blue of the sky that must surely be behind it. A lighter patch in the monotone expanse bespoke a shining sun but he couldn't see it. So he turned back to the reactor, grimly staring through the darkened doorway. It was much too dark to see inside but he stared anyway, squinting his eyes and bracing himself against the relentless quakes. Then he said a little prayer and stepped through.

Immediately, he was blinded. Compared to the glow of the outside world, it was inconveniently black in here. Chet rubbed his eyes, forcing away the little glowing specks and trying to see what he'd come into. The reactor was warm and loud. The screeches he'd heard outside bounced from high ceilings and steel walls and he swiveled his head about desperately trying to make out the source of the racket. It seemed to be coming from everywhere but there was nothing to see but thick blackness and a sickly green glow from somewhere up ahead. Chet found a wall and pressed his back against it, clutching behind himself with two shaking hands. The wall was layers of pipes and circuit boxes, nothing too comfortable to be pressing oneself against. The machinery stuck up through the thin fabric of his jacket and poked into his skin. Still he kept his eyes aimed forward, knees buckling as he fought to stay on his feet against the force of the still rocking reactor.

After a moment of staring, Chet could make a few things out against the dim glow of the green before him. He was standing on a little platform just inside the entrance, the door to his right, a railing to his left. If he were to walk straight forward, there'd be a narrow bridge of pipes leading to a ladder surrounded by thick hanging chains that even now rattled as the world shook. Chet took a single careful footstep towards them, peering out over the edge of his platform. The ladder led down to another catwalk which in turn came out onto a long, stone bridge, girded by strips of steel track like a mining car might follow. The green there was strongest, he saw, changing the bridge into a near black silhouette. There were other silhouettes too. Moving ones. Chet stepped entirely away from the wall now, grabbing onto the railing and staring below, intrigued. Two figures. One was a shriveled, darting little creature, a human, he supposed, but twisted and bent with pain and fatigue. Chet thought he recognized him. There was a sort of nasty, familiar smell that accompanied the sight of him anyways, sorta burnt. It wafted up with his every movement. And he was moving a lot.

Chet stepped out onto the smaller of the reactor's two bridges, the little catwalk that made a hollow, metal sound beneath his sneakers. He darted his arms above his head and wrapped his hands around the bunches of chains hanging from the ceiling. They were the only things he could see to possibly hang onto. He had no desire to fall off this damned catwalk and wind up a little stain on the reactor's floor. Chet tip-toed another few steps forward, watching the obscured actions going on below him with barely capable eyes. He saw the bigger shape dive, attack, and jump upon the smaller one again and again, each action accompanied by a heart-stopping screech. As the reactor shook, a noise bubbled up from the very earth; a groaning as though it were trying to speak or trying to scream just as horribly as the demon.

"Ya wanna-- ya wanna go at it fer real--?" Bier sputtered between gasps, letting himself fall backwards to land on his outstretched palms when Chaos leapt again, spattering a fine sheen of spittle on the blackened scientist's face, "Oh ho ho... ya think I'm just a weakling, izzat it? I'm just-- just letting you get a little false confidence. Heh, I could skin your ass and make a purse out of it if I really wanted to."

Chaos paused for a moment, cocking his monstrous head in surprise. He wasn't sure whether he should believe this little termite or not. He decided after half a second not to. His claw shot out and embedded itself in the bit of bridge where Bier's head would have been if he hadn't darted out of the way as fast as he did. The scientist said a little prayer to whomever might be listening, then rolled to the left, hopping so quickly to his feet he almost looked sprightly. Before Chaos could extract his claw from the ground, he felt something brain-numbing slam into his skull. He pulled himself

immediately around, snarling bloody fury, but Bier was already backing off again, his white grin standing out sharp and harsh against his burnt face. "Just a brute," he murmured, flitting his eyes about. "No matter how strong you think you are, you're just a brute. You were a brute when you were human too, ya know that, Valentine? Heh."

Chaos didn't mind being called a brute. He was almost flattered by it. When he leapt at Bier again, shaking off the little man's recent attack as though it had never happened, he did so because he felt like it, not because he was particularly irked.

Still standing in the reactor doorway with harsh white daylight streaming in from behind him, Chet couldn't help but cringe to see the sudden action. The demon thing was just so damn quick. Bier didn't have a chance against him. Another exchange of blows and the scientist got the worst of it this round, trying to pivot his body around Chaos' when the demon struck out with a claw that pulsed red in power. He was caught mid-maneuver by the monster, who hooked his arm in the soft muscle just beneath his collarbone, pulling Bier up sharp. The scientist tried to twist around, get a good grip on the thing that had such a good grip on him, but Chaos caught his other arm up and bent it backwards, smiling in satisfaction at the eventual *crunch*.

"Son of a bitch!" Bier roared in pain and anger, hanging almost limp from a possessive claw, "Gut me, kill me, break me into a thousand pieces, Valentine! I'll climb my way back up from hell to beat you down again!"

Valentine!

Chet grimaced in shock to hear the name. Valentine?? Like, as in, Vincent?? Was he supposed to believe that that thingie was Vincent? It was a coincidence or somethin', that guy was crazy. Chet pulled himself around to notice Hojo suddenly standing at one end of the bridge. His delicately pointed chin was jutted just a little forward in curiosity. He stared at Chaos with eyes too used to seeing things so horrible.

"What are you?"

His voice was decidedly calmer than Bier's and much more coherent than Chet's thoughts. Though Hojo felt neither calm nor coherent. He simply had good panic-handling abilities. "What are you?" he demanded again, standing just outside the doorway of the pod room looking out. Waters hovered just over his shoulder, emotions sky-rocketing between fury and knee-knocking terror. "Jenova won't say a word to me. I don't understand why. Yet it seems she speaks to you quite freely. Is that because you're so much more intelligent a creature than I? More useful perhaps? Or is it perhaps because you are nothing but a stupid brute. Bring the Turk back. Bring him back, I say!"

Bring him back?! Chaos curled a lip up in distaste, rattling Bier around like a doll. He'd never bring that human back, he'd never relinquish control to anything that couldn't appreciate the glory and beauty of slaughter as he could. This freedom was too wonderful, too grand to ever end. He wouldn't let it end! The idea that it might sent the demon into a rage. Bier took advantage of his foe's distraction to extract himself from the curling claw embedded in his chest. He collapsed in a boneless heap on the bridge, taking half a second to catch his breath and try to staunch the flow of wicked black blood from his shoulder.

"Wh-what's wrong with me..?" Bier shook off the pain to stare down at himself, at the strange color of the blood pouring from his wound. As fucked as he was as a human creature, his blood had always been as red as the next man's. This stuff now was warm and black, like thick, syrupy coffee. He hadn't long to ponder it though. Chaos swooped over him, descending in a flash of cool purple, sticking both claws into his back and picking him up clean from his feet. Hojo's exhausted eyes opened wide and he ran a few steps forward before common sense could pull him up sharp. Thin fingers scrabbling for his derringer, he was much too late to fire when Chaos hurled Bier's bleeding body into the far wall of the reactor.

The scientist's body stuck against the pipes for a moment and then began to slide slowly, slowly downwards, nearer to the steaming pit of mako that lit his features up a sickly green. Chet bit the inside of his cheek then ran out to the end of his catwalk, leaning far over the railing to watch Bier finally come alive, an arm shooting out to find a handhold. Brittle burnt fingers wrapped desperately around a seam in the wall. His descent halted and he cried a feeble curse. Suddenly everything had begun to fall apart. And something in his head was screaming at him.

Hojo took a step back towards the pod room, noticing Chet's presence in the reactor suddenly yet too panicked to even comment on it. But Bier's sudden piercing shriek sent him racing back to the railing.

"Get it outta my head!" he screamed, struggling to wrap his free but broken arm around his head. Something was there, embedded in every crevice in his brain, showing him things he didn't want to see and saying a thousand words he never thought he'd have to hear. "No! No! You stupid bitch, I never did that! Nooo!"

"What the hell's wrong with him?" Waters whispered, fear making him move closer to Hojo than he usually would have. The Professor ran a trembling hand through his hair.

"Jenova..." was all he said. He watched with wide, frightened eyes as the black blood poured from Bier's shoulder. So did Chet.

"Leave him alone!" the Professor demanded suddenly, clutching at his collar. He shouted into the air, not to the headless monster that was still lying broken in a pool of chemicals in the room behind him. That lump of cells was no more

Jenova than a carrot stick. Jenova was in the air, the ground, the sound of the distant thunder. She was everywhere, as omnipresent as a God but as impassionate as a Devil. "Leave him be!" Whether listening or not, she didn't comply. Bier slid further down the reactor's sloping wall, leaving a dark trail in his wake. Chaos had perched himself like a brooding gargoyle on the edge of a platform just beneath Chet's catwalk and Chet could feel him shaking their entire side of the reactor with his every movement. Back and forth, like a ship in a storm. He hopped away from the edge, deciding to make for the exit again. Vincent wasn't in here. He'd made some kind of mistake, some kinda mistake to ever come in this reactor. He had to get the hell away!

Raving and screaming, Bier tore the bandages from his scorched arms and face, letting them flutter down to float atop the mako pit before dissolving into its depths. He was sliding closer too, too preoccupied with whatever Jenova was screaming in his head. She'd never spoken to him before! Why now? Did this mean that Hojo had been right all those years? That when Bier had allowed himself to become a host for Jenova, he truly had sold his soul? He'd never believed his boss's nonsensical dogma; Jenova was a tool and nothing more. She wasn't supposed to take a man's heart and pour acid upon it. She didn't torture things like this!

The scientist clutched at his head again, forgetting that he needed one of his arms to hang on to the pipes of the wall. He slid faster now, rattling over the uneven surface and heading feet first towards the green. Chaos leapt from his perch and into the air, spreading his wings carefully and swooping down to grab a hold of his prey yet again, clinging onto the thrashing creature like an eagle to his salmon. He rose as high as he could in the limited space, hanging onto Bier by his already gushing shoulders. Chet craned his head up to see the sight. He didn't like that this thing was above him now. He could see him. But Chet couldn't make himself run, he had to know what would happen first.

Bier laughed long and loud, like a lunatic who didn't mind letting others hear his insanity. This pain was driving him from his skull. Jenova's screams were deafening. He saw a vision behind his eyelids of people dying, a world bloody and torn and Jenova standing triumphant over all of it. A vision from the past or the future, he didn't know. "Get it outta my head!" he sobbed as Chaos ascended. The demon glanced down to hear the cries, smiling because he recognized anguish and another creature's pain was almost as delicious to it as death. He readjusted his hold on the scientist once he'd reached as high as the pathetic reactor would allow him to go, flipping upside down to hang like a bat from the steel girders composing the ceiling. He dug his hind claws into them, bending his knees just a bit as though supporting its own massive weight was nothing at all. Bier whimpered limp from his grasp, eyes squeezed shut.

All he'd wanted was immortality. Was that too much to ask? A chance to live as a man who needn't worry for the future because he had none. A future implied an ending, and Bier would not end. Thus no future. No fretting over trivialities, no horror, no pain. A life where he and he alone was most powerful. Jenova had offered that to him. Hojo too. The injections had been his idea, he'd wanted an assistant worthy of the position and Bier had leapt at the offer eleven years ago, on that strange night in the Shinra building after everyone else had gone home. Ever since then, until last night, Bier had had his dream. Power, esteem, and more power. Both kinds of power; the kind that gave you complete and total control over a man by strength, and the kind that made your every word just as commanding as your fists. Why then this turn-around?

The voice came at him again and again, words mocking him for people he'd hurt, things he'd lost, lives he'd taken that strangely enough, he never had. Jenova had sins enough to share with every child she took under her wing and she poured sins on broken Dr. Bier now so that he suffocated in misplaced guilt. So many little lives, they were spent and thrown away before his eyes, whether he kept them open or closed. Ignoring the pain in his shoulders, the trivial gouging sensation of Chaos' claws wrapped about his body, Bier shoved both fists into his eyes, sure that if he tore them straight from his skull he might not see the pictures anymore. But when they came away in his fists, a pair of warm rolling wet eyes, eyes just as brown as they'd been on his first day at Shinra, the pictures didn't stop. They slammed against the walls of his brain; faces, familiar and strange, pleading with him for mercy that never came. They were Jenova's victims, Bier realized this almost instantly, yet their deaths were no less jarring and painful with that paltry knowledge. When they screamed, they screamed that he stop hurting them. And when they died, there in his head, millions of people he never knew, their last breaths carried his name upon them.

"STOP!!!"

So she rejected him now?? Was that it?? He, a man who'd never said a word to the entity he was supposed to serve but didn't believe in? She didn't want him to hurt her new toy, her Chaos, so she was going to drive him insane and let him die? He was dying, he knew this now. This wasn't like when Valentine had put the gun to his head, or when those fires had baked the skin from his bones, this was real Death and Bier wasn't sure what to do now. He hadn't been so utterly powerless in so long.

Chaos hung pleasantly from the ceiling, watching the little man squirm in his claws. It was interesting, observing a pain that he was not the cause of. His respect for this Jenova creature was doubling every moment. He breathed a deep but contented sigh, and let his red eyes roam the space about him. Hojo and Waters down below, staring upwards in horror. He liked that. He could hear two others in the room beyond, Zack and Cloud, scrabbling to make it out but Chaos

knew they had no chance. He wouldn't let the both of them leave here alive because... well, just because. The demon snarled to itself, a low snarl like a chuckle. But then the breath caught in his throat and he froze, eyes fixed on a single pale face that he hadn't noticed before. The smile that spread across his countenance then was hideous to see.

Too distracted to do anything about it, Bier felt a fist shoot into his stomach. A stream of blood frothed over his lips, then was smeared across his cheek as another blow caught him in the face. He moaned in pain and let his head fall back, mouthing words that had no meaning, translating as prayers perhaps to the Jenova entity that was hurting him so. Chaos watched his victim for a moment, then turned his head back towards Chet, wanting to be sure the boy saw this. He knew it terrified him so. The young actor from Wutai yelped and drew back on his catwalk when Bier's right arm was torn from the socket again, for the second time in the last twenty-four hours. Chaos dropped the limb and roared in glee to hear it splash and hiss in the mako below.

"Put him down god dammit!" Hojo roared his demands in uncharacteristic bravery from the bridge. He'd exposed himself fully, unable to watch the torture from afar any longer. Jenova would not do this! Surely he had to have some say and Hojo insisted that she could not do this! Bier was his man! "You sack of shit, I made you! You'll release him or I'll march back in that pod room and set your filthy remains on fire, Jenova! How would you like that?!" He was waving his fist above his head, sweat slithering down his back and dampening the hem of his slacks. He felt a surge of empowerment, as though he were immune to Chaos and his silly sadism. What did this demon know about hurting people?? Hojo was a master of pain!

"J-just 'cause she likes... it b-b-better..." Bier coughed, dripping black blood from wounds too numerous to count, the empty sockets in his head glistening brightly. Hojo saw that blood and could explain it easily but uncomfortably. Jenova was killing herself off in him. She was killing her own cells to deprive him of his power. "I-if I'd been given the chance, if she'd only talked to me, told me she was really real... mebbe I woulda served her too, served her b-better," Bier muttered deliriously, clutching his feverish head. Hojo frowned.

"Don't you think that's what every Atheist must say when they find themselves suddenly standing at the gates of hell?" he asked wryly. Chaos smirked and acknowledged the Professor with a single glance before raking his claw the length of Bier's torso, from navel to neck, splitting him wide open. He then hoisted the wailing creature up high above his head and hurled him like so much trash into the mako pit below. Bier didn't make a sound during his short fall. He was only too glad that the pain was finally about to stop.

Waters didn't even wait to hear the inevitable splash. He took off across the bridge after shoving Hojo to the ground, thundering his way towards the exit. Chaos snapped about, cutting short a cocky roar, and dove to knock the Doctor off the bridge to follow his friend. Waters was quick though. He ducked out of the way and Chaos pulled up sharp, leaving the man unfortunately unharmed. Chet was ready to turn and run back for the way out himself. He stared at the rapidly sinking black body in the green pit below, sure that he heard laughter erupting from beneath, release and mad mirth in the vacant face, but then he shook off his stupor and turned towards the way out. The reactor's exit glowed a beautiful, enticing white, the sun having broken through the cloud cover to bathe the mountainous terrain outside in pleasant warmth, despite the wintry chill still present in early April. The reactor itself was colder though, the steel walls harboring icy air that had its occupants shivering. Chet raced towards the doorway, shoving away his guilt and the little voices insisting that he mustn't run away, that he must see this through and find Vincent. Waters wound up being a more forceful deterrent than his conscience though. He pushed his way past Chet, Chaos' hot breath on his neck, but was struck with a sudden idea that made him halt entirely.

"What the hell are you doing?? Let go of me!" Chet tried to pull away, all the time running from the demon he knew was rapidly approaching, but Waters got a quick hold of back of his windbreaker, jerking him around roughly and nearly breaking his neck. Eyes wild in fear but also in a certain clever cunning, the Doctor hurled his hostage from the catwalk, over the railing, flying towards the bridge below. Chaos had been in hot pursuit of the man, Bier's black blood still dripping from his claws, and he screeched a demon curse to find this other human so suddenly shoved in his way. He was ready to lash out unthinkingly, clear this meaningless chaff from his path, but just as it had before, Chet's face made the demon pause.

He knew this face.

He knew it simply because Vincent knew it; knew it well and liked it too.

Go ahead, Chaos.

The protest in whatever humanity lay dormant in the demon pricked him sharply but Chaos paid it no mind. Jenova's insistence was loud and unmistakable.

He caught Chet before he smashed into the ground, taking him up in one claw by the side of his torso and striking a deadly blow to his throat before the boy could even land. A ragged red mark blossomed through the dirty gray of his shirt. For a moment then, there was a single feeling of utter ecstasy in Chaos. It ran shuddering up his spine, sent chaotic bursts of color and beauty screaming through his brain, and the creature was satiated like he could never be otherwise. Because Vincent was screaming inside of him, that little piece of his weaker human Master was screaming in anguish that someone

he cared for was harmed by his own hand. Chaos closed his red eyes for a moment and reveled in that scream, though it made his form unstable, made the demon have to try with all his might to keep in control. Ah, but what lovely bliss, to taste his Master's pain. It was a marvelous, delectable desert after a satisfying meal; the pinnacle of an already unbelievable spree. Chaos roared savagely, fangs jutting from a wide open mouth because it felt good to let the air strike them. Like a steak from a meat hook, Chet was hanging from his grasp and he watched the demon weakly. "What're ya gonna do?" he gasped, "You ain't impressin' me, sorry ta say."

Chaos gave his equivalent of a laugh, then hurled the boy into the stones of the bridge, turning about lightning quick to find his original target. He caught up to Waters in seconds, flapping his wings slightly to speed his dash, then leapt on the Doctor's broad back, pulling hard and flipping him head over heels to smash his skull into the metal grating of the catwalk, only feet from the exit. "Valentine! Get offa me! Get off!" Waters cried his demands, face pressed into the ground, but he was ignored as always. His fingernails scraped along the walkway as he felt himself pulled along.

Hojo shook his head in wordless disbelief. Still standing on the bridge over the mako pit, Chet thrown and having landed directly before him, the Professor's mind raced for options. But he was running out of them, out of men, out of things to distract Chaos from his true goal. And Jenova had abandoned him for a man he himself had given to her. Oh fuck, but it was an irony he didn't even want to acknowledge. Hojo glanced once to the boy on his knees, watching him try to catch the blood falling from his throat, but then he stumbled backwards in a panic, suddenly more scared of dying than he'd ever been in his life. With Jenova shifting loyalties, he was as vulnerable as anyone else here. Something firm halted Hojo's beginning attempts at a retreat and he turned to see Zack and Cloud suddenly standing in the doorway of the pod room, both ready to push their oppressor from the bridge to a messy death below. Neither got the chance. A bleeding, cursing Dr. Waters was heaved by Chaos' claws into the both of them. The group flew backwards, smashing unceremoniously into the wall.

Hojo was left alone, unharmed, on one end of the bridge. Chaos descended dramatically from above to land delicately on the other end. His wide mouth angled up on one side, displaying a wickedly curved fang and an arrogant smirk. Blazing red eyes bored into Hojo's. The latter still had his gun but he knew now to not even bother wasting a bullet. This just wasn't in his hands anymore. "K-kill me..." he reminded, "And you're killing yourself, Jenova. This thing will kill your precious Cloud, it'll kill all of your precious children just as it killed unfortunate Dr. Bier moments ago. You love your destruction and you are short-sighted and foolish because of it."

Chaos shook his horned head, weary of the talk. Only Chet stood between he and Hojo, a single trembling boy whose red blood was staining the stone of the bridge. He was doing his best to stay sitting up but Chet found himself slipping closer and closer to the ground. His fingers were numb with pain, a cold sweat sprang up to replace a warm, panicked one. Chaos watched the boy and Hojo saw the demon pause, staring as though concentrating deeply. Suddenly he drew back, grunting in disapproval, then snarling in rage. Hojo, scientific interest always prevailing over anything else, stepped forward and voiced his question.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

Chaos wasn't about to answer and he seemed irritated to even be asked. The demon didn't want to believe what was happening was real. He looked again to Chet even though he didn't want to, watching the young man struggle to take a breath and keep from crying out as he felt the blood flow freely from the horrible gash running diagonal across his throat and chest. Chet couldn't even comprehend the existence of it, nor the great throbs of pain it caused that didn't cease, only bled away into something uniform and familiar. This, the sight of something that would so customarily cause great pangs of hunger in Chaos, now only sent him reeling back, clutching at himself as though to keep control.

Animal, killer, fiend, and demon, there's nothing to return to now. You knew the retreat was a permanent one, a welcome one when it came. Don't come back, don't come back.

Triggered by this whole pathetic scene, Chaos felt hands, not claws, grabbing at his mind. Two hands, not one fleshly and one metal, but two real human hands demanding control. He didn't want to give it but he knew it had to happen. Jenova was allowing it. Jenova wanted it. Chaos roared ghastly protests that cracked the reactor's leaden pipes and shattered the plexi glass windows of the pods in the next room.

Why now, Vincent? Because you're still too human? Is that it? A disappointment, surely. I'm willing to go to great lengths for you, Vincent. You can kill Hojo if you like, you can have his heart if you'll stay with me...

Chaos staggered backwards, his wings shooting out to their fullest length in his rage. Chet looked up weakly from the ground but hadn't the power to move away as the demon paced about in what might be interpreted as pain but what was truly fury. He shoved at the man inside him with all the power he had yet the power wasn't his, it was Jenova's, and she was returning it to who it belonged to.

Still too human, too human. Perhaps Chaos is too much for you. One day perhaps, but right now, you aren't monster enough for my monster. I need my killer, my love. And you're just not there yet.

Chet thought he must either have died or gone so far off the deep end of a hallucination that he'd come out the other side into a place that even druggies could only dream about. That monster with the wings, horns, and great clacking claws

was changing. He grew smaller, purple skin smoothing and tightening around muscles that suddenly seemed more naturally formed about a skeleton more human than giant. The wings shriveled until they were nothing more than bone, then retracted into shoulder blades that finally disappeared entirely beneath pale flesh, blood slicked and clammy. Chet watched a familiar face emerge from Chaos' twisted visage, black hair springing in tangled waves to cover it. And then the eyes changed. Two human eyes, tortured and tear-filled, replaced the emotionless eyes of a demon. Red still, but there was life behind the blood lust, familiarity in the killer.

Chet thought he saw Vincent standing there suddenly, but he couldn't be sure. He was dying after all. And he knew people tended to see strange shit when they were dying.

Panting with the exertion it'd taken to battle off Chaos, Vincent fell to his knees. Was this his hand? His hand?? He looked down to see the pale flesh, the five fingers, the five jaggedly trimmed fingernails that he'd chewed short after waking from the coffin and finding them so long. His hand, his knuckles, his hand leading up to a wrist he knew and a human arm that mocked the bronze contraption on the other side. He was himself again and it was a relief so great that he felt numb with gratitude. His mind was his own, though even now the demon's dark voice screamed evil in it, first threatening him, then turning to kinder tactics and calling invitations. Hadn't it been simple when he'd let the monster take control? Hadn't the pain vanished, the thoughts of Lucrecia and a haunted past disappeared in the thrill of killing? The answer was yes to every question and Vincent wasn't sure why he'd come back at all.

It had faded to black, like when the curtains close on a bad play and that sense of relief mingled with disgust rises with the sound of fitful applause. Faded to black and he'd been gone save for dreams. Blood there behind his eyes, and screams as a demon roared. He knew it was no dream now though, and Jenova was no figment of Hojo's brain, as diseased as it was. There was no point to any of it now, he realized, He didn't even belong to himself anymore.

Chaos. Chaos. He made his wordless demands in Vincent's skull and Vincent had to push them away or go mad. Chaos. He had a name to put to what had made him kill tonight. Not just vengeance but Chaos. Something he knew would haunt him for the rest of his life, in whatever form the madness decided to take.

He'd been given to Chaos. The Turk, too naive to be suffered to remain, had been given to-- no, made into Chaos. Chaos. Not the creature, but the idea. A thing that would remain forever as evil as it had been when he'd allowed Lucrecia to be hurt. When he'd assassinated all those people as a Turk in Shinra's name.

"There's no second chances, are there?" he whispered, so softly that only he and the things in his head could hear, "I've damned myself."

"Vincent... yo man, what's the deal with this?" Chet called his question from the floor, "Did that thing eat you and you burst outta its stomach or somethin'? Fuckin' neat trick, man..."

He frowned to hear the boy's voice so soft, it wasn't something he was used to. Chet didn't know how to be anything but loud and obnoxious. This new, weaker version was disconcerting. Vincent looked towards him, climbing to his feet and smearing blood from his naked chest. He was himself again, as human as he could ever again claim to be. His body seemed to have regrown itself after changing into that monster. He was a terrible sight and he knew it but he didn't care. Chaos chaos, inside and out. Horror like this simply didn't suit Chet though and Vincent frowned to see the awful red wound yawning deeply across the young man's torso and neck. He spoke softly, voice as heavy with guilt as it could be. "Are you all right?"

"Dunno. Probably not." Vincent could feel the warm wetness on his hand and claw. Chaos had changed, given him his form back, but the blood from his deeds was still here, sticking to hands that had done nothing. Though he wondered just how much influence he might have had on all of this. He wondered how much he'd have to blame himself. He'd hurt this innocent kid like he'd hurt everyone. Jenova laughed ticklishly in his synapses as Vincent stabbed self-forged needles into his heart.

"Back away from him, Turk."

Eager but frightened, Hojo stepped forward, gun raised. He ground his teeth together. "Back the hell away from him. Back the hell away from me and everyone else in this reactor. Get onto the catwalk. Move."

Vincent looked confused for a moment, bright lips pursed. But the expression turned to a frown, long tendrils of hair falling over a face that had taken all it was going to take of Professor Hojo. "You gave me to Jenova," he accused, stepping forward, trembling in rage. He had. He'd stolen his humanity. "You're why she could turn me into that thing. You're why I can't even call myself human anymore, why I spent the night playing the part of a god damned vampire, why killing becomes this great release to me, as though I were nothing but a monster anymore, who can't live without taking life! Whatever retribution this is, it's too much!"

"Impossible," Hojo answered stiffly.

"You're a real piece a' work, prick... know that?" Chet's eyes were closed, he found it too hard to keep them open. But he managed to put enough force behind his words to make them audible. "Using people up like garbage bags t'suit you--" His voice cut off in a choke and suddenly nothing made sense to Chet but pain. He curled in on himself in a spasm of agony, fists reaching up towards his neck but not grabbing hold, only clawing impotently as the blood oozed over them,

between the knuckles of his hands like rivers through mountains. The impassiveness of Chaos left Vincent in a painful snap and he forgot everything at once. He didn't even think before kneeling down to Chet and grabbing him up in his arms, despite the boy's protests. "You're not going to die," he told him firmly, "Because Hojo is going to help you before I kill him. Isn't that right, Professor?"

Hojo let a lilting laugh grace his lips. He jiggled the gun in his right hand for emphasis. The reactor was quiet about the group, Chaos' roars died away from the walls. The amusement turned to anger quickly. "To hell with you!" he thundered, "You want me to help him?! You fucking did this to your little fanboy yourself! Because you're a monster, altered or not you kill indiscriminately! Deluded as always, Turk. But maybe I will help him. Maybe I will. Move away and I'll put a bullet in your friend's brain. That will end his suffering."

Vincent shook his head, fighting for control as he held his charge closer, pressing Chet's forehead into his chest with his good hand and wrapping his battered claw about his waist. The tears in his eyes blurred his vision and he really wasn't sure who he was holding. Lucrecia, Keen, Chet, or anyone whom he'd allowed to be hurt. He was tired of being left alive to wail and mourn his own hypocritical actions. "I'm not that monster," he insisted, voice cracking mid-sentence, "I didn't do this! Jenova, you stupid silly bitch! Stop your accusations!"

"She speaks to you too?" Hojo asked in amazement. Dark black brows dropped crooked over a pair of snapping brown eyes. He could feel the anger swelling his breast, a jealous rage, a lover angry after discovering infidelity. "She won't acknowledge me! She-she-she ignored me! Gives me a simple order and turns away when I ask a question or a single boon from her! I don't understand it!" He was on the verge of frustrated tears but Hojo pushed them back. All of his life it had been like this. He wanted attention but no one gave two shits for him. Jenova finally had appeared with love in her sightless eyes and acceptance in her chilly arms but she was turning from him now. And to what?? This loveless Turk who could turn into the embodiment of his own evil. "I'll fucking kill the both of you," the Professor raged, stray lights catching his derringer's sides, "Move aside, Valentine, so you can see me kill that rat you think is worth a single thought of yours!"

"Like you killed Lucrecia...?" Vincent whispered. He nudged Chet to the side, shielding the boy with his body. Chet was barely conscious of the action. His clothing was soaked in blood. He felt the gash from Chaos' claws extending from just under his chin and all the way down in a diagonal path to his navel. It burned not like a cut but like someone had lit a fire in his skin. Strange, he was burning just as they'd burned Dr. Bier with the chandelier. This day was all about fire.

"Yes... just like Lucrecia." Hojo smiled a bitter smile of satisfaction and didn't know why. He wanted to cry now, more than he had before. The lump was painful and unbearable in his throat. His mouth stretched into a long, broken line as he held back the tears. "You know it now, you can say it. She is dead, Valentine."

Vincent, strangely enough, was much more reserved in his emotions. His voice was dead when it came. "I don't like to hear you say it though."

Shaking his head, the Professor answered, "No, I don't imagine you would. Not my fault though, Valentine. Remember that."

"I'll remember only that you were the one to watch her dying and do nothing. The one who initiated her descent. The one who took away the only chance she had of escaping it." Vincent held Chet tighter convulsively. His fingers wrapped themselves in his shirt. It didn't make sense that she could be dead. It was like saying the sun might never appear in the east again. That another moon would never rise.

"You've killed my entire crew and yet you call me murderer." Hojo had to laugh. "Yes, perhaps I did murder that woman whom I loved with all of that remained to me of my heart. I murdered her to serve another. And I murdered you too, killed anything you had resembling a soul and shut the remains out of my sight. I did it. I did it, Valentine and I admit it. I'd do it again if the opportunity arose only I'd be sure to kill you at the conclusion of that grand phantom retrial. You were a weed that was never supposed to take root in my well-planted garden. The proverbial thorn in my side that took thirty years to begin to chafe."

"How..? How could you do it if you loved her?"

"The love for her was there but the love wasn't the most. The majority of my heart went to something else and what I did was the loyal thing to my true infatuation."

"Bullshit! Well-worded bullshit!"

Hojo ran a hand through his hair. "Well-worded bullshit? An interesting phrase. My friend, I think you've just described poetry. Poetry is nothing more than well-worded bullshit. I'm a poet first class, grade A caliber. A poet in blood who wants his milk and honey but settles for his gore. I want beauty, Valentine, perfection. My Promised Land. We all deserve it, even fucks like you. My love for Lucrecia, as delicious as it seemed at the time, was a poor substitute for what Jenova offered me. I'll write my odes for her, my sonnets and songs in her name. I have no regrets. Only that I let you live thirty years ago."

"It can't be like this, it can't..." Vincent buried his face in Chet's hair as though to hide from the words. "I don't want to be alone again. She can't be dead. I won't let that be true. You said! You said she was in the basement! Please Hojo!"

"Yes..." The Professor nodded once. "Yes, and it's true, she is. But she's dead. Died after giving birth to a son that was a waste. Her death was a waste. Does that make it hurt more, Valentine?"

"Please stop..."

"Ach, V-vincent, quit holdin' on so tight... can't breathe, man..."

Stepping closer, Hojo stood right at Vincent's side now, looking down into his face as he tried to hide it behind Chet. "No ambiguity anymore, Turk. Dead. Now move aside and I'll kill this boy too. He'll die anyway but you should see the life leave him as it left our Lucrecia."

"OUR'??? Never!" Vincent snapped his head up in fiery anger. "She was mine! From the first moment!"

"Wrong. I took her life. So I owned her. You took her heart though, so I must share some of my claim. She had plenty of pieces to go around but I believe when they all were broken, you were most upset by the loss of your plaything." Hojo laughed to stop his tears, peal after peal falling from his lips. But then he took quick aim and fired off a shot from his gun. Vincent saw the action and turned his body to accept the bullet for Chet. It tore viciously into his side, hot and steaming in the cold air. "Move aside!!" Hojo's patience was slipping. He wanted to kill something important to Vincent, take a small revenge against all the murders the Turk had caused.

"N-never! I moved aside before and left you a clear path to take her from me!" Chet didn't understand the pain in Vincent's voice. It broke his heart though and he wished he could help him.

"You want her back so badly?" Hojo snarled, scared to move too close to his vampiric rival but itching to spit his words directly into his face. He jammed his little gun closer, only a few tense feet from him. "You want her back? I'll kill you now. You think you can't die? Foolishness. I made you and I know how to kill you. It's the blood you steal from others that keeps you alive. Your heart pumps it. I stop that heart, I stop your life. It's simple. And I don't need a fucking wooden stake to do it."

Chet flinched when the sound of another round tore through the air. He felt Vincent shudder when the bullet entered his back, just a few inches over from his heart.

"Th-this whole nightmare then, was for nothing. The whole night, all the death, and my introduction to Chaos. It was for nothing. I'll die here, leave a surrogate hell for the true one when you could have just killed me thirty years ago and spared me all of this shit now." Vincent's voice was blank.

"Word it however you like," Hojo spat, setting his aim for Chet's head again. The Turk had turned his back away to shield his charge but the boy's head was just visible. Hojo squinted one eye shut. Vincent blocked the bullet again though, wrapping both arms so close around Chet that he could feel every beat of his weak heart as it trembled its way through his frame.

"I won't let ya die..." he whispered into his ear, "I promise I won't let ya die."

"Dead men can't keep promises," Hojo reminded. He dropped to his knees, unable to fight the urge anymore. He stuck the derringer point blank against the Turk's bare back. Vincent didn't make a move to stop him, though Chet muttered protests in his arms. "Shoulda done this so long ago. It's my fault, everything that happened today. I wasn't thinking clearly thirty years ago, I was too angry to."

Behind the confrontation, Zack disentangled himself from Cloud and Dr. Water's limbs. He crawled quickly from the dog pile then climbed painfully to his feet, blue eyes sweeping the expanse of bridge before him. Hojo had a god damned gun in his hand. Looked like the Turk's number was just about up. Zack decided he couldn't let that happen; Valentine was the most powerful ally he had at the moment. The thought that he might not be an ally at all never even crossed the Soldier's mind.

"Kiss Lucrecia for me." Hojo jammed the muzzle into Vincent's back just as Zack lunged at him from behind, tackling the older man around the waist and jolting the gun out of place so that when it fired it did nothing more than give the Turk another wound in his already battered back. Vincent shivered in pain, collapsing for a moment over Chet before catching himself and turning around. All he could think about was what he'd finally come to realize. He was a monster and a stranger in a place he didn't know. And his Lucrecia was dead.

Zack pummeled Hojo mercilessly, going for the gun that the Professor was trying to bean him in the head with.

"Rebellious little rat!" Hojo roared, rolling around on the ground with the Soldier. His struggles were futile as Zack rammed fist after fist into his kidneys and jaw. It felt unspeakably good to be doing this now and Zack didn't let up, reveling in the sight and feel of the blood pouring from Hojo's broken nose.

"Stupid specimen? Worthless? Ya wanna call me worthless again, ya sack of shit? Yo Cloud, come get some of this, it's great!" A final rammed fist to the side of Hojo's head and the Professor was knocked hard against the railing of the bridge's far platform, ponytail flown up over one shoulder and spreading across his cheek in a cascade of black. His glasses lay in a pile of glistening shards and bent wire to one side of his face. Zack leapt to his feet and went for Cloud.

"C'mere!"

He never got a chance to retrieve his friend. Waters was suddenly standing over him and Zack had to duck out of the way or lose his head as the bulky scientist descended with swinging fists. Waters was wild like a horse in a burning barn,

too insane after hours of watching everything he knew be torn away by a monster with first a human face, and then the face of something from the worst night visions a drunk might ever fear. Clinging to the last thing he really knew for sure, he was convinced he couldn't let Zack or Cloud leave this reactor.

His lips had scabbed over but they cracked and bled again as he stretched his mouth in a horrible grimace, shouting Zack's name. "You're the same as that freak, ain't ya? You're with him then, aren't you?! This was all some fucking scheme you hatched up to earn you and Cloud's freedom! It isn't going to work, I'll never let you leave!" Chaos had left him hurt but capable and Dr. Waters launched himself on the Soldier, knocking him from his feet and letting his head slam backwards into the floor. Keeping on top and taking full advantage of a quarterback's weight and speed, he slid the younger man along and towards the edge of the bridge. The inferno of mako blasted green heat into their faces and Waters tried to shove Zack down into it. He could make out Bier's black head still just bobbing on the surface of the green. It was strange, the mako was liquid and gas all at once, a weird form like something in-between; it could slither between your fingers in tendrils of smoky translucence and then leave your hand dripping with acidic damp. Bier sunk lower and lower into it and Zack swallowed back a scream, trying to shove Waters off and keep himself from sharing that monster's fate. He finally managed to get out from under him, hooking the toe of his boot around the track spanning their bridge and pulling himself away. Quick as he could, the both of them still flat on the ground, he pushed his shoulder full-force into Waters' ribs, trying to roll him over the side. The Doctor was too strong and too determined to fall. He dug himself into the stones and fought the attack, using every bit of stamina he had left to rise back to his feet. Much to Zack's dismay, he was suddenly standing over him, bent almost double with exhaustion but ready to kick one of Hojo's precious specimen into the pit of hissing mako. Cloud had found his feet and found the discarded derringer though. He pistol-whipped the obnoxious scientist once from behind in the base of his skull and Waters crumpled to the ground.

"Cloud! 'Bout time you came around!"

The blonde-headed kid shook his head, letting the gun fall from his fingers. Jenova had shut up, gone back into dormancy or wherever it was she spent her free time. Though his brain still buzzed with voices and confusion, he could think again. Sephiroth had stopped his taunts. "Let's get outta here," he said, helping Zack up, though Zack wound up having to keep Cloud from collapsing once they both were standing side by side again. "I never wanna see the inside of this place again."

"Ditto to that."

Zack in the lead, they ran quickly across the length of the stone bridge. The reactor was as silent as a cemetery around the both of them, fitting since it had become the final resting place for so many in the last hour. The silence just as loud as a scream, Zack felt it calling to him to stay. Or maybe that was Jenova who seemed so unwilling to see two men leave her presence with their lives intact. No though, this was it. This was their escape. Only they weren't escaping, they were retreating, their liberation granted by a man who hadn't been fighting to free them at all. Zack looked back for a moment over the reactor once he and Cloud had climbed the chains and slammed their booted feet on the upper catwalks. The exit called a white-lit invitation and Cloud moved quickly towards it but Zack paused to give a glance to the bridge below. Waters lay unmoving at the far end, Hojo was just starting to rub his head and move around, half hanging off one edge of the narrow stone walkway, while Chet and Vincent sat in a silent heap nearest the far platform, the chains casting linked shadows across them. Vincent was awake and alive, Zack saw that now. His red eyes glinted as they stared off at nothing. His arms still embraced the younger man curled close to his body but Chet's eyes were closed. Zack shook his head and ran off after Cloud.

There was a buzzing sort of sound coming from outside that made Zack slow down before he could even leave the cold confines of the reactor. It was somewhat familiar, a steady beating motor that buzzed and whistled and roared all at once. "Heya Cloud, hold up!" Cloud was too busy hurrying to listen. He swept a hand back through his mussed blonde spikes and pounded his feet along the metal catwalk, shaking the supports on either side. He smiled softly, to feel the warmer air from outside wafting through the tall doorway. It had been so cold in this place, he'd been able to think about little else but that as he'd lain at the foot of the pods for so long. Even when Zack had come, telling him to hurry, that they had to watch carefully for an opportunity to escape lest it pass them both by, even then he'd been cold, chilled to the bone. He had to smile sadly to himself now and run his hands up and down his arms. He barely felt like himself anymore yet he knew enough still to feel cold. It was strange to realize that. Even imagining Tifa failed to warm the ice in place around his heart. He was just so numb to his own thoughts, though this simple yellow light falling in broken shafts from the reactor's exit warmed his skin and made him smile. If everything were as simple as finding warmth from the cold, he thought that perhaps he might not despise his own existence so much.

The buzzing grew louder as Cloud neared the way out. Zack's rapid footsteps rattled at his back so he picked up his own pace, shooting from the reactor without a look behind him. It was too bright outside to immediately see clearly and Cloud threw an arm up before his eyes, slowing a moment to try and get his bearings, decide which way to run.

"Whoa-ho! And where are you takin' off to in such a hurry, kid?"

Covered in black leather gloves that had to be new because they still smelled a good deal like a department store, Cloud felt two hands grab him casually but firmly by his arms. He blinked away the light and as his pupils shrank, he could see sunglasses and tumbled red hair standing over him. Reno grimaced and tightened his grip.

"This must be it," he called over his shoulder, ignoring Cloud for a moment and turning to a bald guy and then one with longer, blacker hair and a scowl a mile long on his handsome face. Reno's hostage knew all three of these bozos too well. He hated Turks. Tseng and Rude hopped down from the chopper perched on the edge of the reactor's precipice, the latter giving a signal to the pilot, who settled back in his seat to wait. "Cloud wouldn't be gallivantin' around unless Hojo was close by and-- Hey! Here comes the other one!"

Zack heard their voices but it was too late to quit his dash and he flew from the reactor right into Rude. The tallest of the Turks got the Soldier in a headlock, having dealt with him and his stubbornness before. Zack immediately protested, kicking out wildly with his legs since his arms were pinned, trying to twist his head around and use an eager set of teeth to chew Rude's face to a bloody pulp. "I'm not goin' back!" he roared, struggling so hard that Rude had to put forth more effort than he was used to to even keep on his feet, "Let go a me, ya bald bastard, this isn't fair! We were so close!!"

"So close to what?" Reno queried, tossing Cloud off to Tseng like a toy he'd already grown tired of. "Fuck, I'm not gonna waste my time with you. Where the hell's Hojo? He's got a helluva lotta explaining to do."

"I left the both of you here yesterday and everything was fine," Tseng said, turning from a quick surveillance of the mountainside, then back to face Zack. He could already feel Cloud withdrawing into his own little world, he wasn't going to bother questioning him. "What's going on? There are more bodies laying wrapped in plastic in the Shinra mansion than I care to think about."

"Yeah, and dot-head here made me examine 'em and let's just say none died too pretty. So c'mon, Zack, what's goin' on?"

"Fuck off..." the blue-eyed, dark-haired man muttered, sagging suddenly in Rude's relentless arms. He turned his face to the dirt, watched the footprints there in the cracked and drying mud. "None of it matters. Nothin'... nothin' came of it. ...shit."

"Watch your tongue." Rude beamed Zack sharply in the head, then shoved him forward as the group of Turks made for the reactor. Reno ran ahead, ignoring an order from Tseng, who had a gnawing feeling in his stomach that something decidedly deadly was inside. But when the group of five stood on the mako bridge spanning the ever-churning mako pit, things were as quiet as the grave.

Everyone lay where Zack had left them and the reactor itself was still just as motionless. It was very dark, he hadn't really noticed that before but after coming in from a sunny afternoon, the reactor was shadowy and more frightening than it had been before. He stood quiet and sad, refusing to look into the eyes of the men who'd sprang from nowhere to steal away he and Cloud's brief taste of freedom again.

"Turks!!" Hojo climbed to his feet painfully, searching blindly for the remains of his glasses then setting them on his nose again. Both lenses were gone and the frames so badly bent they barely stayed on his face but he seemed not to notice. He held a hand to the broken nose Zack had given him, and swayed for a moment on his feet. Tseng looked at him with an expression of awe. Hojo bleeding... he'd had dreams about seeing this some day. The Turk leader grinned, then shoved his professionalism back into place like a Tetris piece. He returned Cloud to an unwilling Reno, then stepped forward. Hojo cut off anything he could say.

"Turks!" he exclaimed again, the word like a little prayer. "Where the hell have you been? I don't care, I don't care, just kill that son of a bitch on the floor! The black, long-haired thing covered in blood! Kill it! Shoot it, shock it, punch it to a pulp, I just want it dead!"

Tseng scowled, disliking taking orders from king freak of the science department. The scowl disappeared once he turned to see what Hojo was so frantically gesturing to.

"Where?"

There was some dead kid on the floor but he hardly seemed a threat. Tseng looked again to Hojo. "This isn't funny, Professor. Despite your power in the company, there isn't a single man working for Shinra who can carelessly get away with as many deaths as we've seen proof of in the last hour. There were three bagged bodies in the basement of the mansion in Nibelheim, as well as the entire place being in a shambles. There's millions of gil worth of damage! A fire in the foyer, the chandelier's cracked the floor entirely, and there was some sick and mutilated monster laying in a heap in your office, shot through its brainstem by someone very talented with a gun. Coming up here, we were greeted by two dead men from your department hung up in a tree, another poor bastard laying half buried in mud in the road, missing an arm. Which I think I see sitting in the middle of the pod room back there. Along with..." Tseng took a step past Hojo, squinting his eyes, "...another body? Plus Dr. Waters back there. Is he alive? And this butchered kid here. Professor Hojo, care to explain?"

"Where is he?!" Tseng nearly lost his professionalism again, snarling a curse when Hojo shoved past him to look at Chet. Actually, he realized after a moment that he wasn't really looking at him, he seemed more interested in looking for

something that wasn't there at all. "Where'd he get off to? Watch yourselves! You want to know what's killed all my men? Well, it's probably above your heads as we speak!" Hojo seemed crazier than usual, Reno observed with a private laugh. He looked worse than he usually did, and Reno wasn't one to usually comment on appearances. Still, he couldn't help but cock an eyebrow at the Professor's torn and blood-stained clothes, his smashed glasses, wild hair, and busted nose. Looked like he'd been to hell tonight and come back after having had words with the devil.

"Hojo!" A broken voice croaked the name and the Professor turned sharply about. Waters was sitting up on the floor, massaging his brow. He pointed to a streaked trail of red leading back into the pod room. Hojo raced after it and returned a moment later, face contorted. Tseng stared at him.

"What's wrong?"

"He's escaped the same way he came in. Blast! Blast blast blast blast!!"

"You never should have made him," Waters accused half-heartedly from the floor. He was thinking about all the dead men and though he wouldn't weep, the ability to grow angry at the thing that had killed them was gone. Even anger towards Hojo was impossible to muster.

"Shut up. I don't need it from you."

"I think you need it from someone. It's obvious you were created without a conscience."

Hojo laughed to hear that. If the stupid man only knew.

"Well, I want an explanation in fuckin' English!" Reno demanded, sick of the cryptic comments and sick of Cloud looking like a damned zombie, not even fighting the grip he had on him. Tseng shot his employee an evil glance, then gestured dismissively with his left hand.

"Reno, Rude, drop the specimen in the chopper, then clean up this mess. Hojo, you've been through something and you're thinking even less coherently than usual. I suggest you come with me. Dr. Waters, do the same please."

"No, he's out there. He has to be." Leaning against a wall now, rubbing his jaw, Waters looked to the Turks like they'd lost it. "I'm not leaving this reactor. Fuck... it isn't safe anywhere! He'll come for you, Hojo, then he'll come for me 'cause he won't ever leave us alone!"

"Shut up." Hojo realized suddenly that his glasses weren't functioning. He ripped them off and threw them away. He knew where Valentine had gone. He knew oh so well but he didn't want to think about it. He was tired of thinking about all of it; his past, his sins, his regrets. He had to concentrate on the here and now, leave Valentine to rot in the annals of Bad Judgment. "Please, Tseng, just a moment to myself. Take care of Zack and Cloud."

Tseng seemed dubious of the request. He exchanged a glance with Reno, then nodded his head once. "Give me Cloud, you drag the corpse out."

"Hell! I want the live one! At least Cloud won't ruin my suit!"

"There isn't anything to ruin."

Reno threw Cloud at his boss and huffed off to do as bid. He always got stuck with the slop work! Did they think just because he dressed like a slob that he liked to be dirty? Uck, dirty with blood and bodily juices, this was soooo not what being a Turk was about. However, when Reno bent down to get a hold of the dead kid's collar, wincing to see how torn up his throat was, a bit of surprise replaced the grimace of disgust on his face. Stray strands of hair were moving before this kid's mouth. "He's still breathing," Reno announced. "Heya, anyone got some materia?"

"Get away from him!" Hojo ran forward madly, an arm wrapped around the claw marks in his side. "Leave him be and let him die!"

"Fuck off, four-eyes!" Reno declared, remembering some drugs he'd stuck in his pockets after seeing all the carnage in the Shinra mansion. He pulled the cork stopper off a bottle of green stuff with his teeth and forced it in the kid's mouth. "Saving someone not associated with you and your half-assed Science Department would be going a long way towards getting some real answers. Don't ya agree, Tseng?"

"Good thinking. Professor, back away."

Hojo couldn't believe the gall of these barbarians. He wasn't going to listen for a moment, he was going to run right up and roll Chet's body off the bridge and into the mako pit, be rid of a witness who knew too much! But Tseng had a gun drawn and in his hand. Though it wasn't raised, Hojo decided not to carry out his plan.

Chet felt something warm and liquid wetting his parched tongue. He gulped it down greedily, thirstier than he could ever remember being in his life. The stuff was terrible but it was warm, got hotter by the second. The rest of him was so cold and this knocked all that away. After a moment, he opened his eyes to a familiar face.

"...Reno?"

"Do I know you?"

"Did I die? Damn... if you're here, this must be hell. Man, three years of Sunday school for nothin'."

"Drink this and shut up."

Reno opened up another vial of green stuff and rather impolitely slopped it down his throat. Tseng watched his underling's actions for a moment then turned brusquely about, motioning to Rude. The both of them moved for the exit,

dragging Zack and Cloud along behind them, leaving Reno to shove two more potions down the kid's gullet. When his neck stopped bleeding, the Turk peeled off his jacket and tore the cheap polyester into makeshift bandages, wrapping them around the nasty looking gash. Mainly because he really didn't want to look at it.

"My sister went on a d-diet once where she had to eat all these f-f-foods with like, negative calories. Celery, carrots, grapefruit and stuff. You into that? You're even skinnier than ya were in Wutai." Chet winced at the taste of the medicine in his mouth. Still, he could sit up now and he did so.

"Wutai?" Reno seemed skeptical. "You're Brett, right? The kid with the dog."

"Heh. You remember me. It's Chet though."

"I think I do. You were funny or somethin'. And ya managed t'keep up with me for a helluva long time at the bar before I finally beat ya down. Reno of Shinra never forgets a worthy adversary. Here, sit up. Get another gulp of this stuff. It isn't sake from Turtle's Paradise but it'll keep you breathing till I find a doctor."

"Not a Shinra doctor," Chet pleaded, wrapping both hands around the little vial Reno handed him.

"Course not. Hell, you think I'd trust anyone I wanted t'live with a Shinra doctor?"

Hojo watched the two with narrowed eyes. Reno picked Chet up after a moment, moving to cross the bridge. He wanted to save this kid. He didn't like seeing so many guys dead in so short a time, saving just one might make him feel a little better. It might keep him from strangling Hojo too.

"Wait! Wait, where's Vincent?" Chet's weakness turned to panic without warning and he fought to free himself from Reno's well-meaning arms. The Turk nearly dropped him but held on tight. "He was with me a minute ago. Where'd he go?"

"I don't know who ya mean."

Hojo held his breath, waiting for the accusations. He took a step forward, eyes squinted into slits, and stared at Chet until the boy finally stared back. Chet's gaze was weak and frightened at first. The more he looked at Hojo though, the angrier he became. But he didn't say a word to the Professor. He only turned back around and rubbed his head, allowing Reno to move on.

"My sister's dead, ya know."

The red-headed Turk blinked in surprise. "Sorry."

"I think I'm gonna become a Soldier or something. She always wanted me to make something outta myself. Think I'd make a good Soldier?"

"Testify against Hojo and I'll make you a captain in Junon."

Chet grinned a mile wide. He didn't look back as they left the reactor. "Cool."

~*~

"So where is he?"

Dr. Waters watched Reno leaving with Chet for a moment, the Turk's relentlessly red hair glowing from the gloom until he disappeared through the upper level doorway and back out into the open air. He left the reactor deathly still and uncomfortably quiet between the two remaining scientists. At least, it was uncomfortable for Waters. The fight still raged in his head; screams and roars; maneuvering desperately just to try and keep your life for a little longer. He shivered. Thinking back on it was terrifying. He couldn't believe any of it had really happened. Remembering Chaos now was like remembering a nightmare that seemed less and less real the longer you were awake. Still, the signs were everywhere. Claw marks graced the catwalks and walls, the pod room doorway had been ripped apart, the pod room itself was a shamble, especially the unit that Zack had tipped over and escaped from. All of that was so unimportant. Waters was amazed at how intently his mind insisted upon thinking about it though. It was because the other wrecks here, the dead men, that topic was unthinkable. He wanted to run and hide from it. All of them gone. Not friends but co-workers. Casual company from Shinra, not his mates from the football team or his fellow researchers in the gene labs back in Midgar. No, the newly assembled Jenova Project team. This almost made it more horrible though. If he'd died today, he would have been just another unfamiliar face to anyone else who might have survived. The deaths of today and last night made him realize his anonymity, his worthlessness. In this place, he was nothing.

Waters suddenly longed for Midgar, his wife, his home and friends. This place was a war zone where he was little but a faceless soldier, as expendable as any other recruit. If he could get back among people who knew him again, he could be something more than the worthless worm he'd become here in Nibelheim. To get back to Midgar though, he had to get out of this Reactor. Even the thought of moving from this bloody bridge was terrifying. To move anywhere with their enemy's whereabouts yet unknown was unwise and frightening. So Waters approached Hojo from behind, sweeping a thick hand back through his tangled mop of knotted brown hair. It fell over his eyes and he sighed.

"Where is he, Professor?"

Hojo was ignoring him, that was obvious enough. Waters poked the skinny little man in his shoulder with two blunt fingers. "Do you suppose he's still here but hiding? You know he has a passion for ceilings, shadows, and waiting for the most opportune moments to strike."

"You know nothing."

Hojo's answer surprised the hell out of Waters. The Doctor drew back, anger curling his lip. "Fuck you. After last night and today I know more than enough."

"Then why do you come to me for an answer?" Hojo's voice had a frightening blankness to it. He was staring off after Reno but not really. He could have been looking anywhere, it was obvious he was truly seeing things in his head, his eyes had lost their usefulness for the moment. What would Valentine do? Now that he knew? Now that Hojo had spelled the truth out for him in black and white, simple answers, small words? Most likely, he would return. He would kill Hojo yet, the Professor had no doubt about that.

Jenova still lay on the floor, dethroned and dripping. Hojo turned around to face her, staring down dourly at the physical representation of the thing he worshiped. It was a sorry looking idol, that was for sure. Not exactly a golden calf. He needed to get this hunk of disgustingness back into her chemicals before she began to decay. It was a distasteful task though, and he wasn't eager to begin it. Perhaps he could pawn it off on a Turk...

--You sold her out for this--

Clear and sudden, this sentence was murmured into his mind.

He had sold Lucrecia out for this wonderful, fragrant pile of cells.

Hojo shook his head. He was being shallow now. The look of the thing wasn't important, the ideals were! The power, the progress, the promises! Jenova's genius was what he loved, not her flesh. She hadn't the silken auburn hair, nor the entrancing blue eyes, but she had-- she had--

Taciturn, Hojo turned away from Jenova, rubbing his sore head. He felt suddenly very old and tired. He wanted his Shinra building and his order more than anything else in the world at that moment. Being in this situation made him doubt very much everything he'd ever done and he did not like that. Never never never did questions such as these arise when he was in his office, or in the precious confines of his sixty-eighth floor. Nibelheim was nothing more than a cruel intoxicant that had no respect for the repressed memories laying dormant in Hojo's skull. It and an insistent Turk had dragged back to the surface all that he'd been so sure was buried forever. The love and the joy, the pain and all the sadness were fresh in his heart again.

He missed Lucrecia.

He hadn't consciously admitted that in almost as many years as she'd been dead. But he missed her now and was sorry that he'd been why she'd had to go. Even Jenova was not bothering with a rebuke or a reassurance as he thought these thoughts. Hojo was upset that she didn't.. But then... she was in her own way, a God. And Gods had to trust their believers to have faith. Hojo had just lost his. Hell, he'd been through a harrowing experience, it was understandable.

It really wasn't fair. He convinced himself of this. No matter how hurt Valentine thought he'd been, how unfairly treated, going throughout the mansion and killing all his men had been rash and unfair! And where could he be now? Waiting by, waiting to kill again, to do away with Hojo finally since Chaos had kept him from it all night? Chaos... Hojo was scared of the thing now. It had seemed like such a poignant, wonderful idea thirty years ago but seeing the creature who'd been nothing but numbers and calculations to him in a notebook... seeing that creature alive, thinking, acting with a will of its own that had no respect for its creator or even for Jenova... Hojo sincerely regretted ever putting the thing in Valentine's body. If the Turk ever decided to let it, Chaos could take over permanently and Hojo doubted there was any force in the world strong enough to defeat it. As it was now, it would surely have the strength to steal control from its human Master for a little while, as long as Valentine was somewhat willing and somewhat weakened. That must have been what happened before. With Jenova lending a helping hand of course.

"Sir..." Waters wanted acknowledgment from his superior. He poked him in the shoulder again, "Sir, we have to take action."

"So it's back to 'sir' then, is it?" Hojo sneered, a bit of his old wickedness returning. He glowered at Waters in contempt. "What did you say before? That you were sick and tired of pandering to me, that I was a user? In fact, didn't you so eloquently tell me to 'fuck off'?"

Dr. Waters smeared a sleeve across his nose. "Dire circumstances make us say strange things."

"I'm sure."

"Do you think Valentine will come back for you?"

Hojo sighed and turned away, moving towards Jenova. His ruined shoes splashed in the pungent chemicals surrounding her form. "I don't know."

Waters' next question was a little less obvious.

"Did you truly love Jenova more than your wife?"

"That's none of your concern!" Hojo tried to work indignation up in his voice. This stupid bastard had heard more than anyone should know! He shouldn't be making it so obvious now. He certainly should not have been delving into Hojo's own personal, private business. "It's none of your concern," he said again, "My private demons shall remain my private demons--"

"Except when they fly around in reactors and rip people open," Waters interrupted.

Hojo chuckled. "Yes, well, don't you wish your past had such interesting elements in it?"

"No."

Hojo kicked a few stray chunks of tissue back onto Jenova's pale stomach. Bits of her were scattered everywhere. It was quite unpleasant. Waters regarded the Professor sullenly. "What will you do now? You'll have to explain things back in Midgar..."

"No. Not really." Hojo wiped his hands on the front of his bloodied shirt, though there was really nothing on them. He spied something out of the corner of his eye. It glinted brightly, catching a stray shaft of light from one of the few remaining overhead lamps. He bent over and picked it up. His gun. He methodically went to work reloading it, pulling a near empty box of ammo from the back pocket of his slacks.

"Sir, even you can't get away with this. President Shinra values you but, but the public wouldn't stand to let all these deaths slide without someone taking the blame. They'll need a scapegoat."

"Will they?"

Hojo hardly seemed to be listening and Waters had the urge to go up and smack him upside the head like a disobedient little brother. "Why are you messing with your little gun again? You already know that it's useless against Valentine. Unless you weren't bluffing before and you really do know how to kill him."

"Of course I know how," Hojo answered. It was a stupid thing to say. Hojo always left himself a way out. He snapped a slug into each chamber of his gun, clicking it shut and jamming the ammo box back in his pocket when he'd done. "I'm not a completely short-sighted fool."

Waters looked gingerly over the side of the bridge they both stood upon. Bier had utterly disappeared beneath the green. "You are a completely arrogant one though," he muttered before he could help himself. "He won't appear and give you the chance to kill him now. He's won. What's that feel like, Professor? I know you're not a man used to not having everything exactly how you want."

"That's true."

"So what is this like? Having lost?"

"Who says I've lost." Hojo hefted the gun and stared at it thoughtfully. He looked again to Jenova. He missed her face and despised Sephiroth for having taken it away. "Valentine suffered unspeakably. My experimentation, vastly ahead of its time even by today's standards, proved to be a success. And I still have possession of Cloud. I even managed to complete the Jenova Project. That boy's ready for everything I have planned for him. Actually, Dr. Waters, this little trip to Nibelheim was a rousing success."

Waters crossed his arms in disgust. "You're as mad as always."

"Nice to know some things don't change though, don't you think?"

"If that's stability, I'll do without it, thanks."

Hojo laughed amiably, flipping the little gun over and over in his hands. What had he used to shoot Vincent..? Some ridiculously huge thing that he'd immediately thrown into the well in the center of the village. This derringer was a thousand times more appropriate for a scientist who preferred reasoning to fighting. Not that reasoning could solve everything. Jenova knew that. Jenova was beyond reason, that's why Hojo cherished her so much. Lucrecia had always been inferior to him and he'd known it, hated her for it in some deep, secret part of himself. Jenova was his superior so his love for her was tempered with respect. That was the key to his heart right there. He had to fear the one he loved. Hojo silently laughed at himself. Funny how well even he could be psycho-analyzed.

"Stability is overrated."

"You wouldn't have said that when Sephiroth died four years ago. You cursed the chaos of life then. He went out of bounds and your precious Project suffered because of it."

"Perhaps that was for the best." Hojo could hear the Turks outside, Zack's protests as he was shoved into the helicopter, Cloud's lack of protests as he lamented his position. He didn't hear Lucrecia though and he couldn't hear Vincent. Jenova was ignoring him. He felt amazingly alone.

"I'm going to tell everyone." Waters moved a step or two closer to the Professor. He heard the Turks outside too and that boosted his confidence. "You know there's no way you can explain away everything that happened and still keep your job. I'll be head of the department. Ghrerd's dead, Bier's dead. And you, Professor Hojo, you're up to your eyeballs in your own shit."

Hojo laughed again, as though his spirits were as high as they were ever going to get. Mainly he just found all this very funny. He turned slowly and faced Waters, grinning all the while. "You said yourself earlier. No one can touch me."

"I only meant that no one had been able to yet. Doesn't mean it'll never happen." Waters sniffed and turned away, eyeing the lowered gun in Hojo's right hand. "After all, that Chaos creature managed to dethrone almighty Jenova. And I'm sure you're just as vulnerable, if someone knows just where to strike."

"Heh. Your threats couldn't be any less subtle. And you couldn't be any more stupid. I'm holding a gun in my hand, you contemptible ignoramus. Even Valentine would have shut up by now."

Waters vehemently shook his head. "You can't do anything to me, the Turks are right outside. I'm not afraid of you. I won't be anymore."

"You're right about that." Without batting an eye, Hojo raised the little gun and emptied it off in Waters' chest. Four rounds point blank at his heart. The Doctor didn't have time to scream. Which was fine by Hojo, the Professor was of the opinion that he talked too much anyway. Waters stayed on his feet for a moment, swaying like a mighty tree, the last stroke of the ax yet to be launched against its base, and then he began to tip slowly backwards. Hojo helped him on his way with an impatient kick and the scientist plummeted from the bridge and down into the mako pit. "Give my regards to Sephiroth. Tell him I want his mother's head back."

Reno had just finished strapping Chet into a seat in the chopper when Hojo sauntered out of the reactor, his troubled eyes to the ground. The Turk and the actor watched him dubiously, neither had any reason to trust him. Tseng and Rude didn't bother with a glance. Both headed unenthusiastically back inside to clean up some of the mako reactor's mess before they all set their courses back to the larger, ickier, more involving mess in the Shinra Mansion.

"He's lookin' kinda smug," Chet muttered, rubbing helplessly at his throat. Reno flicked him in the head and turned impatiently about.

"Yo, Professor! Where'd Dr. Waters go?"

Hojo glanced up blindly. He waved the meddling Turk off with one hand. "I shot him and pushed him into the mako pit."

"Oh...." Reno scratched the back of his head with one end of his nightstick. "Well... ya really shouldn't do stuff like that."

"I know." Hojo approached the idling helicopter and swung himself into the seat beside the pilot. Relinquishing a weary sigh, he rested his head back against the luxurious Shinra chopper headrest and was immediately asleep, leaving the trio of order-following Turks to clean up after him.

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Evening had already turned the sky a milky shade of rose and twilight blue when Vincent finally dragged himself back into Nibelheim. The bullet wounds in his back were a hindrance so he quickly killed the first man who wandered too close, pulling him into the shadows between two cottages and sliding fangs into his neck. When the body lay still and cooling in the dirt, he crept as stealthily as was he able to towards the Mansion. Entering through the window Chet had broken earlier the night before, he crept across the building's silent foyer, metallic soles clinking dully against the broken tiles and bits of glass scattered about.

The place was dark and abandoned. He'd cleared the vermin from this nest himself. So Chet was dead. So was everyone. It didn't matter.

Vincent ascended to the second floor and made his way fearlessly to the basement. Night came down quickly and the Mansion soon grew black with it. He moved without regard though through the spaces other men might fear. The staircase twisting down to the dirt-floored crypt held no menace for him and the skulls lining the subterranean hallway were nothing unique. He'd seen more horrifying things than them, though their owners had faced death itself. Ha. So had he, and he'd lived to tell of it. He'd died already and fared better than these grinning skulls. So why should they get his attention?

The Library at the end of the hall was bright with light but he had no business there anymore. He halted instead at the door to the tomb. It was still hanging open, swinging a little in the cold draft. He brought his claw up and pushed it the rest of the way, letting the time-worn slab of wood gently meet the grimy wall behind it. Vincent went inside almost casually. It occurred to him how much he'd changed since the last time he'd stood in this doorway. That had been less than a day ago. Of course, he'd still imagined he was the same man who'd went to confront Hojo then. He realized he was something quite different now.

Pepper the intern had been scraped from the floor by the Turks. A faint dark patch on the dirty concrete was the only sign he'd ever died here at all. Vincent passed by the spot without giving it a glance. He went instead to his coffin, brushing the side of it with his good hand so he'd be able to feel the soft wood and the rotted velvet inside. He didn't lay down in it though, the idea never even occurred to him. Maybe Chaos still held some sway over his thoughts. He went to the other coffins instead. Wordlessly he placed the lid back over his old Turk friend Jimmy, sliding it securely until the

ridges found their grooves and the stone groaned and fell into place. He didn't look at the blue-suited remains, he'd done that earlier and gotten his fill. Besides, he was here to pay his respects to someone else.

Vincent had immediately known what Hojo had meant with the spiteful words he'd been saying all night. In the basement. Sure. The interpretations were not unlimited after all.

He left Jimmy's casket behind and crossed the dark space of the crypt, crunching bones and crushing rats too slow to avoid his treads. He stopped before another sealed box diagonal from his own. The creatures of the tomb were silent, cowed by his impatient presence. There wasn't anything in the air but the scrape of granite against granite as Vincent moved the lid from this untouched coffin. Not caring to preserve it, he let it drop completely away. It cracked into three pieces against the floor.

Pale like the skulls, Vincent stood and stared for a few minutes. He made no movements except to breathe and brush long, mussed strands of black hair from his eyes. His good hand moved up to rest against the rim of the coffin, sliding against the stone with no intention at all. His fingers played over it with a mind of their own, his claw was still and lifeless at his side, the bronze dulled by battle and bloodshed. Something like speech began on pale lips but it faded away into a sigh.

After long enough, Vincent reached his hand inside and withdrew something that sparkled. He hid it away in his pocket. Then he turned and began the end without saying a word.

~*~

The trip to the Waterfalls was thankfully short. It had never been that far from Nibelheim and in that it had held most of its appeal for Vincent and Lucrecia. A trip there at 3am had never been entirely out of the realm of possibility no matter how closely Hojo, Gast, or the others might be deciding to watch the pair that night. Vincent made the trip on foot, not trusting the murderer in him to do anything but kill any chocobo he might steal. The burden at his back was not a burden at all. He moved just as swiftly with it as he might have alone.

He buried her just past the falling water, in a little spot they'd liked to sit in and stare out at the falls from. It was cool and blue. In the moonlight it looked uncommonly like a misty graveyard. Vincent flung a last shovelful of dirt onto the pile and turned that fancy into reality.

The cave was small, round, unnaturally so; built by human hands. Cetra maybe. There was an altar to some forgotten god. Runes, symbols, ancient writing of some sort was carved into the back of it. Vincent had done his best to distract his love as she'd sit for hours and try to translate it. That process had always seemed magical to him. Turning meaningless scribbles on a rock into poetry he could understand and appreciate. Lucrecia would sit on the altar, pen, paper, and textbook in hand. She'd analyze the letters, brushing dust or mold from the grooves in the stone, then make a rubbing since the light was too bad in here to see by. Vincent would spread the fresh rubbing closer to the falls for her, where the light was better, and he'd record whatever phonic sounds the characters became. Then he'd try to pronounce the ancient language, she'd laugh, pronounce it properly and translate it. That was the magic. Abstraction to poetry. The spells she would weave always entranced the simple Turk with his gun and his base skills. He'd feel so inferior to her, never even imagining how inferior he always managed to make her feel. Her silly books and interests never failed to degrade into triviality when he was there. So they'd sit in the moonlight, covered in thrown patterns of light and shadow from the falls, and laugh at themselves, putting each other on pedestals though neither one ever knew just how much they meant to the other.

"Ah... I loved you though."

A tear ran free from his eye as he spoke.

"Yes. Not sure if I told you enough. The word never meant anything to me, you see. I... ah, not sure if you understood, if you ever understood just where it was I was coming from. Th-the things I'd seen. My life, it wasn't pretty pictures like yours. I didn't have the same stories to tell you that you told me. Just hearing about your old home and your parents and, and how you had a cat when you were twelve, it meant more'n... more'n I can ever say. I always felt guilty that I couldn't tell you the same precious things. You didn't want to hear of my past. I didn't want you to hear it, there was nothing beautiful or precious about any of it. I don't want to remember my childhood nor cherish it like you want to yours. I want it all dead and buried, don't want you to have to know of it. And so I never told you. You never knew, Lucrecia, did you? No, I never told you. I was a Turk and I had a pessimistic view of the world and maybe you thought it a challenge to break my shell. You took it up with a smile I'll never forget. You wanted me to want you but you knew I never could. Or at least, you knew that at first, didn't you? Later, you found out differently. You were persistent and I was alone. And you became so easy to love.

"The word never meant anything to me. Love. I'd see a man tell his wife he loved her before putting a bullet through her head. I'd see people beating kids in the name of the love that spilled over their tongues as the babies cried. Love... it

meant nothing. I was right all along, ya know. I know now that what I felt wasn't love. It was need and it was undying and you were the only thing that could stop it. It wasn't love, it was... life. You. You were my life.

"The past's not important though or the things that made me hate the word 'love'. What... what's important is that I never told you enough... I never said that word enough to you..." Vincent squeezed his eyes shut and rested both hands over the loose mound of earth. He lowered his head atop his knuckles and wept. "I never told you enough and now you're not here and I can't tell you now. Oh, God, you're not here. You're not here. I'm alone again and I can't stand it! What does anything else matter? What does any of it matter when you're not here and I can't say those words to you? That word you put so much stock in, that word you were searching for newer, better meanings for. Lucrecia... Lucrecia, I'm so so sorry... so so sorry I failed you in your s-search.... I never told you enough and you'll never hear it again. And neither shall I. You were what the world was saving for me after twenty-seven years and I couldn't hang on to you! You were what I had to have! And I tasted you for those days, those nights, those afternoons near the gates with the sun shining warm on the top of our heads and the light in your eyes so strong, so dazzling that it made me drunk and I forgot that it would have to end. That the mansion walls would be there again to keep us separate; you with Hojo, and myself alone.

"I never told you enough... and you're not here to hear it now.

"And it's my fault."

He choked on his guilt, gasping for air, trying to squeeze a single breath past the sobs tearing through his throat. His bare hand sunk into the soil of its own will. The mists of the single waterfall slid over his back and into his hair, curling to his scalp like his lover's intangible fingers. "My fault," he sobbed over and over because he couldn't believe he could be so evil and maybe hearing it again and again would make it real. "I could have saved us and I didn't. I could have... but I didn't. And now I'm damned and I'll freeze in this cold, cold hell I've made. I am the monster that Hojo created for that hell. I am the monster that let you and your son die. I'm the monster with the gun who terrorized the world before you tamed him but ultimately turned on you, my mistress, ripping you apart for your troubles. I... I I-let you d-d-die..."

"...die.

"And I... I can't follow you, can I? That's the cruelest aspect, there. Love shines brighter, shines more beautiful in heaven... but this blackened soul can't go there now. This blackened soul doesn't deserve it. It isn't capable of heaven. Is it?

"But I can't live here. I can't live at all. I can't be without you, who became my life... how- how I can live as a dead man?!?! I can't!! I'm dead! Oh God, I'm dead but what is this pain? How can it still hurt so much? Lucrecia... 'Crecia, I can't believe you're gone..."

Vincent took the engagement ring from his pocket. It was smaller than he remembered; the rubies and diamond were like specks of sand. He stripped the shooting glove from his right hand and slid the band over his pinkie finger. It was almost warm against his chilly skin but he had to replace the glove quickly. He couldn't bear to look at the ring on his hand, his hand, where it did not belong. He could barely see it through his tear-blurred eyes. He could barely muddle through his ravaged thoughts. He only knew and breathed and felt and tasted and smelled one thing.

"It's my fault."

Because the pain of losing her was too much to contemplate, Vincent focused on this. It was in black and white and guilt was the one thing the Turk could understand. He was guilty. He was a murderer and punishment was at hand. He thought and thought and thought on this as he knelt in the dirt and the blue of the cave tried to distract him with a beauty he ignored. He still cried. He couldn't stop. He was crying as he staggered to his feet and stumbled towards the waterfall again. The sound of his own gasps echoed back to him.

"I never told you enough," he whispered but he wouldn't look back towards that mound of earth, "I never told you all you should have heard. I love you though, I love you and I'll always love you, Lucrecia. I'll love you until I'm able to die some day and look into your eyes again and you can smile at me and laugh at me and call me yours. When I'm dying, I'll whisper your name so you'll know I'm coming. But not until I've paid. No peace until I've paid."

He would make himself pay. A thousand crucifixions of his soul until he was ready for her again.

"To hell with you, Vincent Valentine," he cursed, crying stopped at last, "To hell with you."

And he truly meant it.

~*~

"Yes, sir.

"Mmm-hmm... I'll keep that in mind, sir.

"At least three-quarter million gil, sir.

"Yes, sir. Good-bye." Hojo scowled and slammed the receiver down, jamming his finger in the process. "Ignorant, brain-dead sonnuvabitch!" He stuck said finger in his mouth and sucked the nail, pushing a new pair of glasses a little further up his bandaged nose. Tseng watched him from the doorway, trying to hide his smile.

"I assume that little conversation did not go well."

Hojo growled another curse, then turned back to what he'd been doing before the phone had rang and he'd been so rudely interrupted. "Your employer is an idiot. He just does not understand that a setback or two is to be expected in an undertaking as grand as the Jenova Project."

"A setback or two..." Tseng mused, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully, "But as many setbacks as you've caused and even President Shinra will begin to question you. As I assume he just has."

"Oh, shut up. Go do something useful."

Tseng's indulgence turned to a frown at Hojo's less than polite tone of voice but he shrugged it off, reminding himself just who he was dealing with. "There's nothing left to do. Three days of hard labor, a garrison of troops, and we've knocked this pit back into shape. My two associates are even now ready to pull out with the rest of the Shinra guard. I need your say-so to move Cloud and Zack and we can finally leave Nibelheim behind for Midgar." Tseng was inexpressibly glad to finally be ready to leave. He hadn't known when Hojo had first phoned for assistance three days earlier that he'd wind up stuck in this backwater hole in the wall for so long. If he had, he would have just sent Reno and Rude alone and put up with their bitching later. Just to add insult to injury, he hadn't gotten a single word of thanks from Hojo for all the work he'd done-- or rather, that he'd had other people do-- at all these past few days.

"Well, you're a good little robot," Hojo commented absently, flipping through a stack of papers on the desk before him. He dropped noisily into a chair and tucked himself behind it, burying his nose in paperwork. Tseng scowled down at the top of his greasy black head.

"What did you tell Shinra about the dead men?"

Hojo didn't look up. "Small pox. A horrible epidemic."

Tseng snorted. "And he believed that?"

"He believed that this town has no real authorities and that he owns the police force in Midgar. So he believes anything as long as I take the full responsibility that will never come."

"He won't listen to what that Chet Hadley kid has to say. Reno faxed him a signed testimonial and Shinra sent back a fax of a quarter. So he could call someone who cares."

"Ah, so that's why the fax machine is broken," Hojo laughed, resting his head on his hand and weaving long white fingers through his hair.

"Yes. Reno didn't appreciate Shinra's humor. Though he won't go back on his word to that young man."

"I don't care," Hojo replied testily, the rare bit of humor dissipating quickly, "Do with him as you will. Station him in Junon but keep him far from me. I'd kill that boy as soon as look at him."

"I've no doubt. You're a real piece of work."

"Ach. You're just jealous."

"Perhaps." Tseng played with his tie a moment, making sure it was straight even though it was clipped so securely to his shirtfront that Reno insisted it could be moved by neither train, truck, nor trepidation. The Turk leader shrugged suddenly and turned about. "We'll be leaving in the morning. I suggest you have all of your paperwork together. I would have had troops crate it but since you insist on keeping everything to yourself..."

"Too many eager eyes and flapping tongues in this company," Hojo muttered, scribbling something or other on a notepad.

Tseng grunted but answered, "Yes, well, have whatever you need loaded into the airship arranged and ready to go by oh-seven hundred hours."

"You can count on it. Have your men be careful with Cloud. Zack too. Your soldiers don't know procedures, just leave them in the tanks until tomorrow. I'll supervise the movement of them."

Tseng arched an eyebrow, one foot in the hall. "We have to feed them."

"Leave them be. I won't risk anything now. Not when this is all so close to being over."

"Whatever."

The Turk leader turned sharply and Hojo could hear the clacking of his custom-fitted dress shoes as they carried him down the hallway. The noise died away after a moment or two, leaving the Professor in a perfect silence. That was why he liked this secluded office of his so much. He'd built it down here thirty years ago for a reason; it stifled Gast's bellowed commands, it shut up the babbling of the ignorant Turks, it killed Lucrecia's piercing screams. And now it gave him a moment away from Shinra's suited monkeys and the crass troops they'd brought with them. With his science team dead, this had been a long and lonely three days.

Hojo went to work opening up the drawers of his old desk, pulling papers and books from them in stackfuls. Most of this was trash and went immediately into the fireplace. He'd started up a roaring blaze earlier for this very purpose and it lit his small office up fully, sending a cheering glow into every corner of the eerie room. They'd cleaned the remains of the monster he and Jenova had made, burning the beast up in a pungent blaze in the back grounds of the building. Hojo was

amazed Vincent had managed to kill that thing. A single shot to its brainstem with a single round. Still, it was really nothing. Just good aim and a good guess at the anatomy of a creature Hojo had made up on a whim.

Old notebooks... old notes of Gast's... ha! college cheat sheet! Hojo looked over crib notes he pulled from a drawer and chuckled. He'd only cheated occasionally because he'd been too damned busy working on projects of his own to bother with the piddly, common-sensical shit that his Professors had insisted he learn. He'd gotten through college by the skin of his teeth and med school? He didn't even like to remember the late night cram sessions and all the equipment he'd had to sell for bribe money. Still those days were behind him and it was all much better now. Definitely.

He was the head of Shinra's Science Department. He'd risen from intern to presiding Professor with the speed and prowess of a bird of prey. It was a grand thing to walk into a meeting and have all talking cease because they all wanted to hear what you had to say. Gast had gotten that same treatment and Hojo had envied it terribly. So he'd grabbed it up for himself just as he did anything that caught his eye. Now here he was, calling the shots again. Tseng might fancy that he'd cleaned this mess up himself but Hojo had been the real directing force here the last three days. None of the men knew what to do, what to say to the Nibelheim watch who'd been close to revolt yesterday afternoon. Tseng wanted to talk to the men, create a clever lie. That was nonsense though and Hojo had told him so. Better to have the too vocal leader assassinated by a well-placed sniper. Tseng had protested the idea but Shinra had given Hojo the okay.

Reno was still pissed that he'd been the only marksman worth anything in town when the need had arisen. But Hojo hadn't cared to listen to his whining, the job had been done and the problem was solved.

All of the problems were solved. Jenova was in the Shinra building. She'd been moved there yesterday, Hojo had tanked her himself. He felt a little better knowing she was back where she belonged and with a space of her own to reign, even if it was temporarily without him. The reactor too had been restored to full functionality. It was nothing but what it was supposed to be now, the specimen he'd had ripening in the mako pods had all been disposed of after Sephiroth had torn through. It was just as well, they'd only been side projects of his, nothing truly important. Jenova didn't approve of him playing with mako anyway. She thought his work should only revolve around placement and manipulation of her cells. Mako was a waste of time.

"It is, isn't it?" he replied aloud to the empty air. Jenova's voice grew closer and closer to coherence every day. She'd condescend to speak to him soon. Hojo knew she only didn't now as a sort of punishment. Or maybe to keep him in his place. Killing the Watch leader had been her idea. Trying to kill Chet with a bullet from his bedroom window last night had been hers too. Too bad he'd fallen asleep elsewhere, too suspicious to trust any bed that Shinra gave him. Hojo had to laugh at the kid. If he kept his mistrust of Shinra up, he'd go far in the Company.

He could feel her tugging from Midgar. The gentle touch of her being from the far off city tickled his synapses like eating ice cream too fast and he looked up from his papers, staring with absent eyes through the office's east wall. She missed him. It was unspeakably wonderful to be missed. Jenova's love was something he couldn't describe. It just seemed to mean more than anything else. Maybe that was because she had such firm control over his mind and made him think that, he didn't know, but if that was the case, that was fine. Real or false, love was love and he had his. He'd hand her the Planet on a silver platter if she demanded it. He wanted to appear worthy in her eyes. That was where all these sacrifices came from; his wife, his son, his humanity and his pride, he'd given it all to her without a second thought that it might be missed by he himself. She must think of him as worthy though he thought himself unworthy, he always had. He was just another man with ambition. A little smarter than most, a little weaker, but just one of many. And since there were so many just like him, so many other human beings all scrabbling for their own piece of the pie on a Planet that didn't care for them, looking to Gods who'd looked away a long time ago... since that was the way of the world, why in the hell should Hojo ever look to THEM for approval? Jenova's judgment was all that mattered. She herself was supreme and so she herself was the only being in existence who had the right to bestow the title of "Supreme" on anyone else. Fuck the human race and what they thought of him. They did not matter. Only Jenova and those who knew of Jenova mattered. And anyone that did not accept her into his heart was even worse than the ignorant ones who'd never know her. They were traitors. Hojo would never have any sympathy for them. Nor for the masses who'd die never knowing the splendour of the thing that had killed them.

Heaving a little sigh, Hojo dropped down in his overstuffed office chair again and plopped his head in his hands. It was frustrating never knowing just how much of this adulation was true and how much was only spawned from Jenova's influential words. Ah, well, it was futile to think about when all was said and done.

Something caught his eye suddenly. A reflection of white rolling along the curved edge of his new glasses. These things were a stronger prescription than his last pair and he didn't quite trust everything he saw in them yet, but he still had to raise his head and check.

The room was empty. The firelight flickered warm shadows on the bare walls. The lone doorway looking out onto the hall was vacant. The Professor jerked his head quickly to the right. Then the left. Nothing. Maybe Lucrecia wouldn't haunt this place anymore. That was fine by him. Even though he suddenly wanted to see her face more than anything else in the world.

Shit. He pushed that notion quickly out of his head. He couldn't afford to be nostalgic anymore. The entire trip up here had been a waste of regret and nostalgia. The present was pressing much too forcibly for him to indulge any more of it. A sound came. Everything was sounding suddenly too loud and too unnatural but surely it was just the creaking of the room, the old Mansion settling further on its foundations, or the Turks shooting the breeze down in the foyer, packing up the last of the never-used equipment. Maybe Zack was ranting again, he hadn't shut up in three days.

Hojo turned back to his papers. He was cleaning this desk out completely. He hadn't realized just how many incriminating documents were in here. He had to sweep away some of his tracks.

There was another sound suddenly and it was too strange for Hojo to ignore. Metal scratching wood. The Professor glanced up with half-parted lips towards the doorway situated in the wall directly across from his desk. Vincent stood there, leaning just inside of it, his claw aimlessly scraping against the worn wooden frame. The firelight was a strange thing to examine something by, it threw everything into conflicting patterns of orange and black that never stayed still long enough to be any good, still it was enough. Hojo ran cool brown eyes over the Turk, never flinching or showing any surprise that he was there at all.

"Nice outfit," he remarked, standing casually from the desk. He saw Vincent smile, a little crescent of white that flashed and died beneath unruly strands of black, skimming the top of the wide collar of the mantle he was wearing. The cape was blood red, a perfect match for the eyes that were so intensely watching the scientist now. A bandanna, wide and dropping down to those same eyes, again the same sanguine color, hid the top of his face. Only his nose and eyes were visible. Even those were hidden mostly by hair. Hojo cocked his head to one side in curiosity. "Why are you hiding your face now? Get burned by acid or something during your three day sabbatical?"

Vincent shrugged, turning the severity of his gaze away. He watched the fire. "It isn't mine anymore, this face. I can't remove it, so I'll hide it."

"Ah." Hojo kept his movements friendly, easy, and cautious. He edged a hand closer to his coat. He'd been religiously keeping a pistol on his personage since returning from the reactor. "Where have you been? I noticed someone had gone through the crypt. I assume that was you. What did you do with her?"

Vincent looked up again, masking the pain and keeping himself cold. "Why do you care?"

"I don't really. Just making polite chit-chat. I've never been good at pleasantries. Neither have you, if I remember correctly."

"We're men of actions, not words I think."

Hojo moved from behind his desk and laughed. "That's not true. I love to talk. Just not pleasantly."

"Ah."

Hojo moved a few steps closer. He saw that his rival'd been busy. He'd repaired his claw himself, gotten some new clothes and cleaned himself up. Hojo wondered who he'd killed for the cape. Someone in Nibelheim maybe. Two bloodless corpses had turned up the day before, stuffed in an alley like trash. The Professor stuck a hand in his pocket, fingering the gun there. He waited for Vincent to make the next move. He wouldn't though. He only went back to watching the fire.

"What are you going to do?" Hojo finally queried. His eyes were bright behind the glasses and he kept the anxiety from them. "Kill me at last?"

"Would you like me to?"

"Not particularly. I have too much to do to die."

"All right." The deadness in Vincent's voice was unnerving. Hojo wanted to see some kind of passion there; anger, sadness, something. Not this listlessness, as though nothing the Turk said or did mattered at all. That was how it seemed. He watched the fireplace with a dead man's eyes.

"I'm on the edge of my seat here," Hojo said impatiently, "Why did you come here if not to kill me? You just want to intimidate me? Stand in the doorway there and watch me squirm? Well, sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Valentine, but there's only so much you can frighten a man before he reaches that point where you're no longer frightening, just annoying."

"Do I scare you?" Vincent's question seemed strangely sincere. He looked to Hojo, his face unnaturally white. The scientist could have answered honestly but he decided not to.

"No. Of course not. I made you what you are and so you don't scare me. No. And if you're waiting around for an apology, you're going to be waiting one hell of a long time."

Vincent smiled softly and returned his gaze to the fire. "Your belligerence is funny. Turns everything you say into a lie."

"Glad to be of some amusement to you."

"You know... you've mellowed after thirty years. Perhaps I should say you've replaced vigor with calculated evil. I almost feel I don't know you anymore."

Hojo frowned and turned away, somewhat insulted. "You never did know me, Turk. You knew me only through Lucrecia's stories and your own skewed observations."

"Yes, you're right," Vincent answered in his same flat tone of voice, "And you knew me even less than I, you. Yet you were presumptuous enough to make me a monster because you thought it suited my personality. Funny. You didn't know my personality and you thought you could make a "new" me. Chaos isn't me. I'm just as wicked but in an entirely different way. So, Professor, you were wrong."

"So says you. I think I was entirely right."

Vincent shook his head and smiled again, a sad smile that related more to tears than to amusement. Why did he bother? Hojo would think whatever suited him. "You know..." he began, taking a different tack, "I can't stop killing things. If I don't do it while I'm conscious than Chaos will come and make the poor things that have to die suffer unspeakably. At least, I assume I become Chaos during the periods I black out. When I wake up..." Vincent shook his head, perplexed. "But as long as I'm in control, I can make it quick."

Hojo scowled, not really interested. "Sorry."

"The control slips sometimes though. I wonder if it's me or the other. I can't tell the difference. Do you think some day there won't be a difference?"

"I say there isn't one now."

"Yes. You would say that." Vincent let his head fall against the door frame, his hair coming forward over his eyes. "I only ask because I thought you might know. You are the genius and this is your doing. But never mind."

The pain in his voice was making Hojo uncomfortable. This was going to turn into guilt if he didn't get it over with quickly. "What the hell do you want from me, Valentine? You've had your revenge, you've killed my men and stuck a very ugly twenty-four hours into my Book of Days. What do you want now? If you're not going to kill me, get the hell out of my office."

"I wish I could kill you." Vincent rubbed his forehead absently. Hojo eyed him.

"And why can't you?"

"Because I need you to do something for me." Vincent moved quickly. He straightened his dejected posture, bringing himself up to his full six feet and standing almost a head taller than Hojo. He stepped forward out of the doorway and towered over him, pulling his bloodless lips into a frown. "I need you to... put me... put me back on the shelf."

"What?"

Vincent shook his head, trying to phrase his ideas correctly. Sometimes speaking was so hard he didn't know why he even bothered. He had a history as a man of few words for a reason. Words were inadequate. "Back on the shelf," he repeated, "Away. Asleep. The coffin."

Hojo thought he must surely be mad. "But why?"

"Do you remember the story of the tin soldier? He stood and watched his wax princess dance her dance in the music box? Watching and doing nothing was the greatest pain. I deserve only to watch and to wait forever... because I did nothing."

"Love makes fools of us all," Hojo muttered, running a hand through his hair. "Don't let it do the same to you again. Just let me kill you. You can't live in this world as what you are anyway. Let me put a vial of cyanide in your veins, that would do it quickly enough. Come on, don't be foolish."

Vincent shook his head and backed off a little. As though his words had drained him, he fell upon the wall and leaned heavily against it. "I stayed with her for three days. She had no words for me. I saw her before though, in the basement. She spoke to me then, told me to find you. Do you know why she said that to me? It was punishment. She insisted that I find you so that you could perform the punishment on me that I deserved. "Find Hojo so he can torture you." She simply did not finish her sentence. She left it for me to figure out. And so, Professor, please do what's worst. Put me back in the four-walled hell. You owe me something, I think. This is worse than death. This is your revenge, Lucrecia's demand, and my own hell. This way, everyone is happy and you don't have to see me again."

"Forget it. I won't do it." Hojo turned uneasily from him, taking off his glasses and kneading his closed eyes with his knuckles. "It was a mistake the first time and I won't repeat it. You just need to die."

"You owe me, you god damned lunatic." Ah, there was the passion Hojo had wanted to hear before. A touch of anger. "You've wronged me in a thousand ways. So do this. It can't cancel your evil but it can help mine. If Sephiroth was alive, maybe I could go to him and beg his forgiveness but there's not even that. This is all. Let me have the nightmares that I deserve, let Chaos starve and feed on me instead. I want his fangs in my neck, I deserve them."

"Zealot," Hojo whispered bitterly, back turned and arms crossed. He slowly slid his glasses back on his nose.

"I suppose I am," Vincent agreed easily, "And so are you in your own sick way."

"Don't compare us."

"Gladly."

Hojo balled his fists up at his sides, kicking the front of his desk spasmodically. His shoe clunked hollowly against the wood but it wasn't as loud as he would have liked. He wanted thunder and storms and lightening to express his frustration. What did Jenova think? Did she say he could do this again? She hadn't wanted it before and he'd done it

anyway and look what had come of it! Murder after murder and the creation of a monster! She wasn't talking now. All Hojo got from her was that she missed him. All that came from his own intuition was a cartload of anger and a lust for revenge that was frighteningly strong.

Vincent's whisper broke his thoughts. "Do you have any idea what it was like to see her as I saw her?" he began, face impassive but voice heartbreaking, "You don't because you've never loved someone with everything that you have to love with. Then lost her in the worst way that you can lose someone. You cannot judge my request because you cannot know."

"Die then. Be with her."

"That's the worst of it!" Vincent smeared tears from his eyes, flinging them disgustedly away. "I can't just grieve, I have to suffer! She said I had to suffer and my soul says I have to pay! Purification, Hojo. Redemption. You wouldn't know of it."

Hojo shook his head. Rubbish. He knew of it. It was the same as him; proving yourself worthy to the object of your devotion. He understood it too well. And that was why he brushed wordlessly from his office, making his way for the staircase. Vincent snapped around in surprise. Then he followed, looking out through every window they passed since he knew it would be a long time, if ever, that he'd be able to see the sky again.

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When Hojo shut the lid on the coffin, he didn't feel the same sort of satisfaction as he had twenty-eight years ago. He left the crypt with no smile on his face, and he was frowning as he locked the heavy door behind him.

"I really am crazy."

He moved through the labs quickly, cleaning up the few remnants of what he'd had to do to the Turk to keep him alive in the box. He flung used syringes in the bio-hazard bins, threw away scalpels that he was too unwilling to clean, then balled his lab coat up and tossed it in the furnace. The tanks were empty, Cloud and Zack were gone. There was a little broken glass on the floor around them but Hojo marked it up to clumsy Shinra soldiers and thought nothing more of it. He shut the power off to the labs and hurried down the hallway, not looking again to the door of the silent tomb.

The sounds of bustling guards and commanding Turks grew louder as he ascended the spiral staircase. He sneezed twice, an old ritual when these stairs were concerned, and rushed to the top, avoiding broken steps and swirling dust, fighting off vertigo. He headed down the hall to a safe and flung a key inside, slamming the leaden door shut. The sound echoed from the dusty, dark ceilings and he ran from the room before it could die away.

Something was going on below. Hojo descended the main Mansion staircase with quick little footsteps, his hair swept back in a messy ponytail, fresh slacks and shirt thrown hastily on. Tseng and Reno were exchanging words near the front door, Shinra guards were loading the last of the crated equipment in an airship docked on an outcropping of rock behind the building. No one would look him in the eye though as he set down in their midst's. He approached Tseng, the expression on his face so sour and impatient that he managed to make even the Turk leader think twice about what he had to say. Reno just stuck his hands in his pockets and started whistling.

"What's going on?" Hojo demanded, flinging bangs from his eyes. Tseng scratched his ear.

"We're almost ready to go," he said calmly, "I'm going to ride back in the chopper with Rude and a few soldiers. Reno can accompany you and the rest of the men in the airship."

"And I'm really looking forward to it!" Reno added cheerily. Hojo scowled towards the Turk, his least favourite of the three, finally returning his eyes to Tseng.

"Why so many in the chopper?" he asked, and then a horrible feeling turned his stomach inside out, "We need as many eyes on Zack and Cloud as possible."

"Yes, I would agree with you of course," Tseng said cautiously, "If they were still with us. The both of them broke out this morning when I had one of my men try to give them something to eat. You have to understand I couldn't let them starve. We tried to find you all morning but the labs were locked and I guess you couldn't hear me shouting over whatever music that was you had blasting. How do you work with that noise? Professor though, I assure you, worry is unnecessary. We'll pick up on their trail. With us in a helicopter and the two of them on foot, they don't have a chance in hell."

Reno and Tseng both waited for some sort of outburst. They expected it. Nothing came. The Professor's expression softened for a moment, his gaze turned down to the dusty, cracked tiles at his feet, and Tseng thought he saw him smiling. If he did, the smile didn't last. When Hojo looked up, he was himself again, though maybe his frown seemed a little forced. In all actuality, Tseng thought the Professor was laughing at himself. Or laughing at the situation.

Reno stepped backwards quickly as Hojo pushed his way through to the exit. He stuck a hand in his pocket, drew out a little crumpled note and threw it a ways from them. Then he walked outside.

"Take me back to Midgar, gentlemen," he sighed over his shoulder, "I'm tired of failure."