

# The Poetry in Blood

by GlassShard

## Chapter 2: The Nightstalker

Okay, I'm not playing around. There is some \*very\* disturbing stuff in this chapter. If you get totally disgusted, don't worry! That means you're normal! But I'm serious, this is dark stuff from the dankest recesses of my twisted lil brain, proceed with caution.

He'd been starting to pass out again. But when the scream came, Cloud suddenly felt more awake than he had in years.

"Zack!!!" he hissed, darting away from the cell door as though the entire slab were red hot to the touch. He leapt on his sleeping friend and pounded on his shoulders. "Zack! Wake up you lazy bastard! Didn't you hear that?"

Zack rolled over onto his stomach and plopped his cheek hard against the concrete floor of their prison. His voice came out sleepy, muffled, and annoyed.

"If it's the frigging ghost again, I ain't interested."

Cloud kneeed the reclining man impatiently in his stomach, yanking at his hair, flicking his ears to get him to pay attention. The cell was quiet around them both but the air still held the echo of that one short-lived scream. Something had died. That had been the scream of something, someone, at the door of death. It scared the hell out of Cloud but it excited him at the same time. "Zack!" he pleaded, "C'mon, man, something's going on! Get up off your ass!"

"What is it?"

He rolled over finally onto his back, squinting his eyes against the scant light filtering from the window and into his face. It was just mellow lantern light from the Library but his sensitive sight made it out to be an inferno. "You have no idea how tired I am."

"Yeah, well I'm tired too. But you... ya didn't hear that scream?"

"I heard your scream. That's it."

Cloud fell back, somewhat crestfallen. He knew he'd heard it though, he still heard it. The sound tied his stomach in knots. So shrill. And it had stopped so suddenly. Zack watched his friend in the dim light, blinking hard to try and wake up a bit more. Cloud seemed awfully excited. But still, he was being such a dolt. "Just go back to sleep," he demanded softly, "Being here is just playing tricks on your imagination is all. There's nothing."

Cloud wanted to believe Zack's words but something wouldn't let him. "It always starts out like that," he whispered, "Everyone says it's nothing. Everyone says it's all in yer head. But ... but people said I was imagining things when I said Sephiroth seemed upset. When I told you he looked so angry, you said for me to ignore it, that he was fine. And so I did. I ignored it all. I ignored it all until he decided to torch Nibelheim and cut off his mother's head one night. I suppose you believed me after that. I suppose maybe then you realized what I'd seen."

The dark room was quiet after Cloud's words had echoed away. Zack scratched his head, profoundly guilty and feeling unexplainably responsible.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"Yeah... well, never mind. Guess it was probably a dream then. Ghosts... I'm crazy. I'm sorry."

Cloud stepped into the corner of the cell and crouched down against the wall, hiding his face from the light. He lay his cheek against the cold stone and hoped he wouldn't hear the scream again. Because maybe it was just coming from inside his head, perhaps Zack was right. How could he escape something like that?

"Go to sleep, man."

"Yeah..." Cloud buried his head in his arms and closed his eyes. But just as he had four years ago, he knew something was wrong in the mansion.

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A dripping sound.

Warm yellow light.

Biting, merciless air.

The intricately carved door lay where it had fallen, bundles of bones escaping from beneath its tremendous weight, crushed to powder and unidentifiable fragments. The rats were growing braver now that the noise and movements from

before had ceased. A fat brown one scurried out from between the cracked teeth of a grinning skull and fell to examining the broken bones beneath the door. His wet pink nose trembled in the icy air, so alive, almost separate from the animal it existed upon. Brown fur caught an unknown light source and glinted yellow, bright white teeth were as sharp as razors, as hard as stone. They gnawed on the wood experimentally, making a scratching sound so soft a normal person couldn't hear it. Back and forth they ground over the door, chewing a dent simply because their owner was a rat with little better to do. Back and forth, and other creatures came from the shadows, feeling safe in the sudden stillness, to investigate the new elements in the long-sealed space. Light at last, yellow light from the hallway outside. Bones scattered in new positions, a coffin lid broken to pieces on the ground, and something soft and yielding to their chiseled teeth that lay beside the shattered wood. Shattered flesh it was, which to the rats, was something entirely novel and new. A dozen or so black, brown, and gray furry forms scampered over the corpse, leaving tiny red footprints on the pinstripe pajamas. And the rat at the door continued to chew away, oaken splinters gathering in a heap by its paws.

Without warning, a bare foot shot from the dark and quickly crushed the tiny animal to death. The heel ground down until the rat's shrill squeaking ceased. Deathly silence then, and the rest of the vermin skittered back into the shadows as though for their lives.

Despite the yellow hall-light, the coffin-studded, bone-lined crypt was very dark. And when the rats left, it became very quiet. Except for a steady drip. The drip made a dull thud, whatever it was, onto the dusty stone ground; the source of it thicker than water because the noise it created was louder. And the noise came every three seconds. Then every four. Then only five times each minute. After long enough, it stopped altogether.

There was a rustling noise then and a black shape inside the crypt moved. A coffin in the center of the space, someone had been sitting in it and now he stood up, slowly. He could barely stay on his feet at first, wobbling back and forth like an unsteady tin soldier left to sway in the breeze, but then a bare white arm shot out and a hand was planted firmly against the wall for support. He stayed like that for a while and the sound of broken breathing punctuated the still air.

Don't leave me down here! That's what you're planning, isn't it? I'll scream my head off, I swear to God! They'll find you out and you'll fry, d'you hear me?!

Those threats might have worried me before, but you made threats equally as vicious last night. And as you can see, they obviously amounted to little more than shit. I've won, Valentine. And I'm taking all the spoils for myself.

A cry broke the silence; a sound of rage and pain and the steadying hand left the wall, clenching into a fist, letting its owner's bare back slump against the stone. The trembling hand reached upwards and pulled through a tangle of raven black locks, finally dropping to hang lifelessly at his side. The other arm, the blood-caked bronze claw, raked across the wall at his back and made a sickening noise. The rats drew themselves further back into the shadows.

You're just a ghost now, Valentine. Just a ghost who doesn't make a difference anymore. Good bye.

Except for the very shredded remains of his blue suit pants, the man was naked. Lines of scars crisscrossed his white chest in careless patterns, faint lines of white; surgical scars. He fingered them with his good hand, almost afraid to touch, but any pain that could have accompanied the marks had faded years ago...

... years...

His skin was pale and deathly cold. He ran a hand through his hair again, finally realizing how long it was, down almost to the middle of his back. It had grown out full and black and vicious, cascading over his shoulders and making him seem whiter than he was. And the claw...

Leaning against the wall, he stared and stared in disbelief at the thing on his left arm. His arm itself was there, he could feel it, the dull sensation of the bronze covering his flesh but he couldn't get at it, he couldn't see his own arm. It felt different too and he wondered why that was, and why someone had put metal over it. Shot. He'd been shot... in... the arm? Yes. Shot in the arm. But still, this was ridiculous. These curving pointed fingers, each one like a little jack knife and the overlapping plates of bronze over his palm, all held together with delicate pins and hinges, yet with a few tests he saw how strong it was. Those pins had been screwed through the metal, through the flesh, and into the bone, he could feel it. Each movement of it sent a dull ache through his forearm.

Vincent Valentine didn't recognize himself.

He was sure he must be dreaming.

He remembered dreams suddenly, fragments of nightmares. But still, his mind was dull and hazy and he couldn't recall too much more than phantom fleeting images of demons and monsters and things that had chased him in his sleep. A woman too, he remembered that, and other things... pictures of Wutai, where he'd grown up, pictures of the Shinra Building, and the Turks, his boss, his few friends from Midgar... but had any of those things been real? Had he been dreaming of them or had they never been anything but dreams themselves? And was he really awake now?

Memories seemed fleeting things. Vincent tried to stand straight, tried to forsake the inner for the outer and take in his surroundings. Somehow, he knew he was in the Shinra Mansion. No other place in the world had this feeling to it. The room was so dark though. There was a doorway to his left, a rectangle of yellow light so bright that it sent stabbing pain

into his eyes. His claw instinctively went up to block the blinding glow and Vincent suddenly saw the glistening blood standing out upon the metal. Some sixth sense made him back away from the wall, bare feet sloshing in something wet and he looked down to see the remains of the young man who'd freed him. Pepper lay on his side with his eyes open, still staring up at the thing that had cut him apart. But the murderer couldn't remember his crime.

"I-i-instinct... "he whispered, looking from the body to the claw in barely restrained horror. His voice hurt as though he hadn't used it in a while. "Instinct... but whose?"

Vincent stepped away from the grisly sight until he bumped into his coffin. He didn't recognize it at first, but then he vaguely remembered it was what he'd come out of. He touched the crumbling velvet inside, stroked his trembling fingers over the nail holes ringing its perimeter, and then laid his hand near the top, inside a faint depression in the material, where he knew his head must have rested.

A coffin... why had he been in a coffin?

Hojo.

The name sprang into his mind like a monster unleashed, fangs bared to rip his brain apart. He collapsed to his knees, a hand reaching up to clutch the rim of the casket and keep him from sinking to the floor completely. It rushed back, that scientist named Hojo, that self-righteous madman, and the entire five months spent in the mansion under his scrutiny. He'd known him before that, known him from Shinra, known him since before he'd become a Turk, but living with him in this mansion had changed that relationship from common disdain to complete hatred. On both of their parts. And because of one woman.

"Lucrecia..?"

Before he could stop it, the name tumbled over his lips like warm wine. With it came a flood of other memories, beautiful moments and thoughts he could remember cherishing. And... they were still there to be cherished, but... something was wrong with them, something was different.

He was stooping in that man's blood, so Vincent rose to his feet again, leaning heavily on his coffin. Cold air made him shiver but he was almost glad. His skin was warming up again, losing some of its unnatural iciness. He blew on his fingertips but his breath was just as cold as the air. His shivered in spite of himself.

All right, think like a Turk, think like a Turk, think like a Turk...

Vincent repeated the phrase in his head like a prayer until he was able to regulate his breathing somewhat and slow his heartbeat. Maybe this was a dream, maybe none of it was real, he needed to be logical and calm until he figured out what the hell the deal was. Yes, he'd think like a Turk. Vincent Valentine of the Turks was renowned for his cool head and quick judgment, he never bugged out in a situation, he never gave anything away unintentionally. He had a reputation to live up to and it wasn't going to be ruined now, no matter what the hell this was.

Thinking of the Turks made Vincent want a gun. But there was nothing here. His only weapon was this nightmarish claw. Which might not even be real at all. He flexed it a bit, the bronze sparkling in the yellow light, then wiped the blood there on Pepper's pajamas, figuring he should keep his only weapon clean, that was the responsible thing to do.

Eyes narrowed against tears that he swore would not escape his eyes, Vincent began to examine the small room, mutely stepping over the scattered bones. He saw his coffin lay in the center of the crypt besides a few others, sealed tight and offering no answers to the lone observer. But maybe there were answers inside, maybe there were other people trapped there too, just as he'd been. Yes, most of the caskets were open, spilling skeletons onto the dusty stone floor, but some were still sealed, none nailed closed as he now saw his own had been but who was to say what lay in those shut boxes? Perhaps this was all some vast conspiracy... but why... why had Vincent alone been freed to uncover it? He honestly didn't want the honor. But to hell with the cowardly thoughts suddenly invading his brain, he'd be the savior if that was what was now required. He'd be the Turk, that's what he was used to, what he was good at. Taking a deep, trembling breath and steeling his courage, he approached one of the sealed caskets. It was a simple affair, nothing more than a stone box with some Latin inscriptions on it, but Vincent noticed immediately the bones that had lain inside were scattered on the ground beside it. They'd been disturbed, discarded then replaced. Something was inside now that shouldn't be. Maybe someone would be there that could explain all of this to Vincent. Maybe he'd find a confidante in this bizarre adventure. Vincent wasn't sure he wanted to be alone.

Without another thought, he wedged his claw between the lid and body of the stone casket and lifted it out of the niche, surprised at how easy it was. Something was powering his arms, something... something he couldn't identify but it certainly wasn't his own strength. He dropped the lid in surprise, a little startled by his power. But he doubted any of it was real or at least permanent so to hell with it. Vincent grabbed a hold of the coffin lid again in something like impatience.

The worn stone slid away with a grinding noise to reveal a skeleton, no surprise there. The musty smell of death drifted to Vincent's nostrils warm and somewhat familiar. He looked the ancient corpse over with a thoughtful expression, almost sad that it was nothing but a dead man after all. No answers here. Just bones in a blue suit. And then he realized who he was looking at.

“Jimmy...”

He remembered his old friend now, he remembered a voice thick with anger and unease, demanding he leave Hojo alone, demanding he stay far away from the Library. He'd never hear it again, the tongue that had formed the words was rotted away. Just this collection of dusty bones, decaying skin, and the rotting suit. Jimmy's sneakers too, and the class ring around the shriveled finger, what Vincent had identified him by.

“Oh, gods...”

He turned from the sight of his friend and again his hand went to his head. What the fuck was going on? Was this a joke?

His claw caught the light again, just a glimmer of bronze out of the corner of his eye. But it infuriated him. He was sure he was going mad. Nearly growling in his rage, he tried to rip the metal from his arm but was met with no success. Just shooting pain. The damned thing was a part of him, it wasn't going anywhere. He looked down at the scars on his chest, eyes finally finding the marks of the old bullet wound in his shoulder; a snaking path across his upper arm; healed and painless. But now he could remember where it had come from. Hojo'd pulled a gun on him. That sniveling little worm had pulled a gun on him. And Vincent of the Turks had been shot by a god damned four-eyed weakling! He burned with anger at the realization. And the things that the scientist had said as he'd lain bleeding, the taunts and the teases-- he'd make him pay!

“What happened, Jimmy?”

But that corpse wasn't spouting any answers. Without another word, Vincent replaced the cover on the casket, then backed away. There were a few more sealed coffins but he was afraid of what he might find in them. So he stumbled backwards, a thin, scarred figure in the quiet darkness of the crypt. He suddenly found the place damned frightening. The bodies and the coffins and the fact that his old friend was laying in a state of decay inside one of them. And he... he'd been in one too. But he'd come out. People were put in coffins all the time but they weren't supposed to come out. What was this?

“Lucrecia...”

Again that name rolled off his tongue and Vincent knew he had to find her. She'd know what had happened. Hojo must have done it. He'd been shot... and then...

Vincent shook his head. That was the last he remembered.

But he'd been here a while, his hair was so so long. And he was so pale and he felt so damned strange. And this claw and these scars, he hadn't had most of these before, bullet wound be damned. He had to find Lucrecia, whatever had been done to him, he'd left her alone in this mansion.

No. No, visions of old nightmares suddenly came to him again, things he'd dreamt of inside that box.

He'd been asleep in there, he finally realized. The thought made him breathless with disbelief and fear.

But the sudden memories of his nightmares made him truly terrified. She was always dead in his dreams. And he was always a monster.

Vincent stepped swiftly away from the coffin, trying to keep panic at bay. Think like a Turk, think like a Turk, think like a Turk...

Jimmy was dead, fine. He didn't know how it had happened, but he'd find out because Vincent himself was alive. He'd been shot and sleeping in that box for the dead, but he was alive. But Lucrecia, his lover, he had to find her and make sure she was all right too. And that bastard Hojo... he had to confront him about what had happened in the Library and make the little runt pay for this bullet wound, whether he'd cured it or not. Okay, the goals were simple, he just had to execute some kinda plan. The mansion... this was the mansion... he'd lived here for months, he knew it and Nibelheim well. He'd find her, find them both.

The body of that young man caught Vincent's eye. He'd stopped bleeding, it seemed, but that was probably because there was little else left within him to come out. His blood glistened red and bright and Vincent couldn't pull his eyes away from the puddles on the grimy stone ground. It struck him that he surely could see well despite the darkness of the room, and he wondered for a moment how that was possible. The blood was visible especially. Red and pure in the darkness. He had a strange urge to go up and slide his fingers through the warm sticky gore. Maybe just to feel something real. But then he shook his head in disgust, wondering what in the hell was wrong with him. He'd butchered that man and he didn't even remember doing it and now he wanted to fawn over his blood. What a god damnable sicko he was. He had to get out of this place, it was going to drive him mad.

He padded in his bare feet towards the crypt's door, wishing he had some clothes, moving awkwardly and cautious of the grasping claw at his side. He tried not to think about the thing, he was already half-frightened of it. He swung his arm out wide past his hip so it wouldn't hit his leg as he walked but he couldn't forget it was there, it was too heavy, weighing down his entire left side. At last he stood in the doorway of the dark and death-filled room, leaning in unabashed exhaustion just inside the door frame. He was so suddenly tired, so suddenly hurt. Vincent bent over nearly double trying to catch his breath, sweat standing out on his forehead, then rolling down the side of his narrow face. He opened his eyes

and all he could see was the man he'd killed, staring up at him from the floor with wide, sightless eyes. He lay in his blood as though on a blanket of red silk and Vincent could hear the rats in the shadows as they trampled over the bones of the less recently deceased. What in God's name was this place he was coming from? Had he been reborn from such a pit? Such a stagnant hell?

The smell of the musty coffin clung to him as he stumbled out into the hallway. He wasn't really sure where he was going.

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It had taken Chet a while to work up the courage to actually approach the mansion's front door after hearing that scream. It had sounded so much like his sister Sara. But maybe it hadn't been, maybe it'd just been some unfortunate chick and Chet's one track mind had just been fixated so much on his sister that he'd made it out to be her, who knew? But he couldn't very well head home without checking. His neighbour had said she'd seen a bunch of Shinra guys lead her away to his place. So, after a lot of calling himself a coward, Chet had inched towards the front door and rapped his knuckles against it, determined to figure the whole thing out.

An older guy with spectacles, a thinning hair line, and a long black ponytail had answered his knock. They'd stared at each other for a long while.

"What do you want?" Hojo had finally asked.

"I... I think I heard my sister."

"And this means what to me exactly?"

Chet had stuttered like a faulty car engine at that one.

"I mean... I mean I think I heard her inside this place. Is she here? Her name's Sara Hadley, um, dark brown hair, green eyes, big gap between her two front teeth..?"

"Was she wearing a white t-shirt and a pair of faded jeans with a mustard stain on the left knee?"

"Yeah!"

Hojo had grinned and shook his head then.

"Haven't seen her."

And then he'd shut the mansion door in Chet's face. An immediate torrent of giggling had then drifted to his ears from inside and Chet's hands had clenched into violent fists, brows lowering black and dangerous over his narrowed, glinting eyes. Oh yes, he'd gotten good and pissed, almost to the point of breaking that door down, finding that skinny little guy, and cracking his glasses.

But being the sensible young man that he was, Chet had opted to go to Nibelheim's lone bar and spend half his paycheck on booze instead.

That'd been hours ago. Now he was good and drunk and ready to do something about Sara.

Chet stood inside the gates again, the tall grasses and weeds around the mansion coming up to his knees. The sky was overcast, occasional clouds scudding over a sliver of moon near the rim of the sky and blocking the meager light it managed to cast onto the scene below. It wouldn't be too much longer until that moon sank behind the trees and left this place totally dark until the sun decided to reappear and illuminate it all again. Chet wanted to be finished with his mission before that happened though. He wanted to get to his sister and get home before all of this got out of hand.

But how?

A quick glance at his watch told Chet it was about 1:30 in the am, still pretty early by his standards, yet he knew the stiffs inside the mansion would all be asleep. He doubted these scientist types would be throwing any mad raves tonight, they were probably all wrapped up in their musty sheets and fantasizing of test tubes, getting off on the periodic table in their dreams. If he tried knocking on that door again, he doubted he'd even get an answer this time. And if so, it might be that skinny guy from before, except now, he'd be in a really really really bad mood 'cause Chet had woken him up and denied him his much needed beauty sleep. Yeah. And Chet didn't really want that, the dude in the glasses and ponytail had really managed to intimidate him before. He didn't want to see him again now, grumpy and aggravated. No thank you.

And so, what to do? No front door, no knocking. Hmph. He could go around to the side of the building and try to find a way in. He could sneak in, yeah, he could do that. If all the occupants were asleep, they'd never know he was there. Was he drunk enough to sneak into the Shinra Mansion though? Even with all the vodka sloshing around in his insides, the place was still frigging scary. And the night was growing darker and darker. Morning seemed years away. Yet, he knew Sara had to be inside here, he'd cased the rest of town, she wasn't in Nibelheim, it was that simple. That just left this blasted mansion. This freaky, scary as hell on a Sunday, Shinra Mansion. At least it wasn't storming.

Buttoning up his windbreaker against the bitter cold breeze, Chet began trekking through the dark sharp grasses that made up the yard, his eyes turned up to the mansion's weathered walls. There were a lot of windows, tall dirt-covered

windows only four feet or so off the ground, but they were all locked tight against intruders. Figured that they were locked, he just had the worst luck of anyone he knew. Stupid Sara, stupid Shinra...

Ignoring the mountain winds, Chet quickly stripped off his jacket and wrapped it as best he could around his right fist. Then, shivering violently and muttering curses, he reared his covered fist back and slammed it as hard as he could into a narrow, dirty window in the western wall of the slumbering mansion.

"Ow!!!"

He fell back entirely, fist shooting to his stomach where he cradled his poor hurt hand, tears springing to his eyes. The still whole, unshattered window looked down at him and he thought he heard it laugh.

"Always freaking works in the movies," he hissed to himself, sprawled in the dirt. His uninjured hand quickly searched the grass around him until he found a rock, and then he was on his feet again. "Breaking and entering," he muttered, "I'm an actor, not a two-bit robber. Damn it, Sara!" On the last word, he brought the rock slamming forward into the window. The perfect pane shattered and glass rained down, V-shaped shards threatening to put his eyes out. Chet stumbled backwards until the shower of death ceased, then threw his jacket back on and tried to swing a leg up over the window sill. After a lot of grunting and swearing, he fell inside the dark and dusty mansion, landing on his elbows. He pulled his legs through, avoiding the glass on the floorboards, then lay panting in the blackness, vision swimming.

He flipped over onto his back and watched the dust motes dancing before his eyes. It was warm inside but there was a vicious wind blowing through the window he'd busted. Damn it, it could wake everyone up. Chet stood up quickly and closed the shutters with trembling hands, wincing at the wind as it blasted full force into his unprotected face. The moment he'd blocked them though, he immediately missed the violent gusts, because now the inside of this ghastly place was as still as a cemetery at midnight.

Very slowly and very quietly, the actor turned away from the newly shuttered window, then turned himself completely around, glass crunching beneath his worn sneakers. He held his breath, afraid to make anymore noise, then pressed his back against the wall, the mansion's moonlit foyer stretching before him. Ick, hardly moonlit, what little light there was was quickly dissipating. Seemed the moon knew better than to stick around here, it was retreating beyond the horizon and leaving Nibelheim in shadows.

"Sara..! Sara, where the hell are ya!?"

Chet hissed his words into the darkness, then nearly smacked himself for a fool. He couldn't go around yelling like a maniac, he was going to have to look for her more carefully, go systematically from room to room and hunt the little nuisance out. He stepped forward into the foyer, trying to mute his footsteps, glad he was wearing three year old sneakers that wouldn't have been able to make noise against the floorboards if he'd wanted them to. Okay. Okay, he was an actor. Now was the time to see how good he was. How skillfully could he play the part of a hero tonight?

Chet headed for the stairs and carefully ascended, hoping he'd remember his lines.

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Nothing seemed out of place really.

Vincent walked the halls of the mansion on muffled cat-like feet, trying to shake off the stupid feeling seeped into his brain, and taking in the building's somber sights with curious, tired eyes. He was horribly tired and he didn't know why. There were various pains all over, the most prominent being an ungodly headache that seemed to have set up permanent residence behind his right eye. He rubbed at it irritably with his good hand, weaving back and forth across the hallway, intermittently brushing against a wall and then straightening his course.

"Walking like an old woman..." he muttered to himself, shivering slightly in the draft that blew up from the floor, "Can't even walk straight. God damn it..."

Breathless all of a sudden, he came to a jerky halt and threw himself heavily against the nearest wall that offered itself, trying to calm his headache, and then trying to figure out why he couldn't breathe. A hand to his chest, he stared at the ground, idly watched the cockroaches make their rounds. He'd thought they only came out when all the lights were off, but it seemed these guys were a little braver than that.

He stood there for a while, thoughts drifting far, and then he finally realized with a stupid little snap of common sense, that the lights were off. Yet he could still see this gloomy hallway as easily as if it were lit with fluorescent flashbulbs. He rubbed at his eyes again, an expression of wonder and fear drawn over his features like a fine muslin curtain. What the hell was wrong with him? What was wrong with his eyes?

Asking a million silent questions, Vincent pushed himself up from the wall and started walking again. He was still in the basement, his bare toes plowing up loose dirt with each step, but he'd refused to head for the Library. He didn't want to admit it, but he was scared to go back in there. He'd never liked that place and his opinion of it wasn't going to change now that he owned a wonderfully distinct memory of nearly dying in it. He'd made a right turn instead at the door to the crypt, steering far away from the cursed place, and now Vincent found himself moving through darkness, bare stone and

brick walls on either side. Bones lay in the crevices of the hallway and he could hear monsters moving about in the shadows, though they weren't really shadows any more, not to him. He could effortlessly see the things trying to hide there; massive beasts, the sorts that had chased him in the nightmares he was beginning to remember now with more and more clarity. He shivered to himself again, only the cold wasn't the culprit this time.

Attempting to ignore these monsters, who for some reason were ignoring him, Vincent simply concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, knowing the stairs weren't that far ahead. But dammit, he wasn't even sure if he'd be able to climb them now, as messed up as he was.

What was going on?

No matter the other things he tried to focus upon, this question of course kept ramming itself into his thoughts. He didn't feel like himself, he felt like someone had taken a xerox copy of a man called Vincent Valentine and then watercoloured over him. That coffin... was he sure he'd come out of there? And this thing on his arm, and the way he could see so well in the dark and hear the monsters and the rats and the bats every movement, even hear the calls of the bats which he was sure people weren't supposed to be able to make out... why? Since when could he do these things? Since when had he felt like this? Never. This was all strange and new and more unnerving than anything that had happened to him before. It had to be a dream! Just some fucked-up alcohol-induced dream and he'd be waking up any minute in Nibelheim's bar, next to Jimmy who'd be passed out on the floor.

"Wake up, Vincent," he muttered desperately, "C'mon, wake up..."

The stairs.

They were there rising up before him suddenly, a corkscrew structure of bristling plank steps leading up to the mansion proper. They looked as they always did, as they always had, except maybe a little higher now since he was so damned tired. Still, he went to work climbing them, knowing that he was going to go off on the first person he came across. Being confused made him angry. Something was going to pay for this confusion.

Step, step, step, step... he was only a quarter of the way up and already his lungs were burning. He was either desperately out of shape or ill, Vincent wasn't sure which. Hojo would probably know. Hojo had probably been the one who'd fixed him up after shooting him, how else had he lived through those wounds? Even though most of what had happened was hazy, he remembered knowing he was dying. Someone had treated him, saved him, there was no other explanation. He fingered the healed scars on his chest, wondering where the extra ones had come from. They looked a lot like his appendectomy scar, only bigger, which was just weird. Weird that they looked like surgical incisions that had been stitched.

"Quit imagining things..." he scolded himself, panting between syllables and half way upstairs now. The more he thought about them, the more clueless he became and the more uneasy. But fuck it, this was all a dream, soon enough it wouldn't matter anyway. Except maybe later when he was trying to remember it all to tell Jimmy, who'd wind up laughing his ass off.

No, that rotted, dusty skeleton in the casket hadn't been Jimmy. No, it hadn't been.

A sudden movement to his left snapped Vincent out of his delusions and he whipped about, instinctively raising his claw and slashing out. In only half a second, he saw he'd pinned a small furry bat on the end of his wickedly pointed fingers. He shook it off the claw in disgust, wiping the little creature's blood on his pants.

"Least my reflexes are still all right," he said to himself a little shakily. "Actually, that was pretty damn good."

Someone had left the door to the second floor open and Vincent could easily make out the bedroom beyond. Empty, from what he could tell. Just a moonlit room full of dusty, disused furniture. He doubled his pace, the simple sight of something besides the macabre basement managing to cheer him up a bit and soon he was in the doorway, looking down on the stairs and amazed that he'd made it. He gave the upstairs room a quick once over with his mysterious new eyesight and saw how strange it seemed. Everything was in place and just as he remembered, nothing was different, but it all looked so old. There was a layer of thick dust covering everything, cobwebs stretching from every surface, mildew caking the windowsills. The place looked positively ancient. He touched the dust to be sure it was real and it was. His fingers left distinct prints on the tabletops. Okay. Okay, fine, just another weird aspect of this insane nightmare he was having, he'd ignore it.

Feeling somewhat desperate and decidedly unhinged, Vincent approached a crumbling old dresser propped into a corner of the room, then dropped to his knees and pulled open one of its sticky drawers, knowing they kept spare clothes for visiting scientists in here. Not too much to be found inside really, just standard Shinra-issued uniforms. Black plain things with high collars but they were warm enough, designed for this unforgiving mountain climate. Heh, a little musty, a little moth-eaten but so was he. He pulled a uniform out and slid the top over his chest, sliding the fabric carefully over the claw, then exchanging his torn blue pants for a pair of loose black ones, digging a belt out of the bottom of the drawer to keep the too-big garments from sliding down around his ankles. Seemed he was losing weight.

Okay, fine. Not going to question it.

Shoes, shoes, shoes...

Standing again, Vincent scanned the darkness for something to cover his painfully numb bare feet with but all he could come up with were a pair of thick socks. Okay, beggars can't be choosers. He slipped them on and felt a little better, a little more confident. Walking around half-naked had had him feeling rather vulnerable, at least now he wasn't freezing his ass off.

Before leaving the small, dusty bedroom, he snagged a long red bandanna from a hook on the wall, and tied his lengthy hair up in it. He found it was already starting to get in his face and knew that little novelty would get old really quick. It wasn't exactly practical either, he'd seen women fight, you could definitely use someone's hair to your advantage in a good old fashioned brawl. How embarrassing it would be to have the stuffing knocked out of you because someone had trapped you by your hair and shoved your head into the ground? Almost as embarrassing as being shot by a Shinra scientist. Yes. Almost, but not quite.

He didn't bother looking for a mirror to check himself out. He was avoiding them actually. He wasn't sure why.

Dressed. Fine. Now, if he only had a gun. There was a showdown coming, there had to be. He wasn't going to let Hojo get the better of him this time. He was going to find the sniveling little fuck and then he was going to blow him a third eye. And then he'd fetch Lucrecia and they'd carry out their plan of leaving all of this behind. His icy arms longed for her warmth. Just the thought of being near her made his chest constrict in desire, made the chill in his limbs that much more bitterly cold.

"I'm sorry," he whispered aloud, ignoring the pains in his head and lungs, "I'm sorry I tried to make him pay." Vincent laughed weakly to himself, leaning in the doorway of the quiet bedroom. "But you know what a hothead I am, I couldn't let us leave without taking a bit of his pride with us, right? He struck you... the bastard hurt you and all you wanted to do was defend him! Oh God, maybe that was why I had to go down there, maybe it was because I was mad at you. You always defended him and you never gave me a straight answer about how you felt for him. You probably still love him. But I don't care, I'll take what I can get."

No time for that now though. No, he'd discuss all of this with Lucrecia when he found her. Vincent flung his thick black hair back behind his shoulders and stepped out into the hallway of the second floor, leaving his finger-pointing behind. This hall looked ancient and ruined too, like some remnant from another time. Yet... it seemed not that long ago he'd stood here with Jimmy arguing. It couldn't have been that long ago... but it all looked so old. Maybe it was just the moonlight playing havoc with his eyes, just a cruel trick of the light. He moved down the dusty floorboards of the mansion and tried to ignore his foreboding suspicions. Suspicions...

What frigging suspicions?!

That a lot of time had passed? How in the hell?

Again distracted, Vincent quit his advance for a moment and stared into the darkness, teeth grinding behind tightly pursed lips. What had Hojo done to him? He'd shot him... he'd shot him and that was all he remembered! Why was his memory so useless? Why now of all times?

The gun, the coffin, the claw...

Think like a Turk, dammit, what does it all add up to?

It adds up to this is a fucking nightmare!

He nearly screamed aloud in his frustration, but instead slammed his back to the crumbling plaster wall of the hallway and beat his fist once savagely against it.

"Hojo... Lucrecia, where are you? Damn it all to hell..."

There were voices coming.

Vincent blinked hard, the sound of two men talking snapping him out of his fury and helplessness, and he slowly leaned forward off the wall, lips parted in surprise. He didn't recognize the voices. Not Turks, not scientists. Who else would be in the Shinra mansion, especially at this late hour? He didn't care who it was, he was tired of Shinra. Whatever had happened to him was a result of that company. He'd been planning to quit his job before this had all happened and all the weird shit hadn't done a thing to make him change his mind. Shinra... they could keep it all, he wanted out.

Think like a Turk.

It took a large amount of self-control, but Vincent managed to make himself go into action. He straightened as best he could, taking a long, shaky breath, then stood against the wall and waited for the owners of the voices to appear. He could hear them coming up the staircase from the foyer, two young men, their voices so clear to him it was uncanny. He heard and positioned the sounds they made so well that he could mentally picture their actions and their path as they came nearer and nearer to him. This was new, a new ability, and while it was strange and unexplainable, it was also useful. Vincent was so caught up and entranced by his amplified hearing that he forgot what he was supposed to be listening to. He stood in the hall with an expression of complete amazement on his face, his body embedded almost entirely in the rich black shadows, his attention focused on the sounds coming to his ears. The more he tried to refine this power, the more he heard. The breathing of ten men, six of them asleep, he could tell by the slowness of their respirations, and then a symphony, a veritable chorus of animals and monsters, every living thing in the mansion, each with its own sound, each

adding to the richly layered cacophony. He discerned the muffled roar of the air conditioner, the grinding of the generators, the shifting of the foundations. The entire mansion was like a living thing and it spoke in a somber, groaning language of creaks and cracks and whispers. It was beautiful in a way, but horrifying too, like the sounds of a winter storm. It hurt his ears the more he listened because then the louder it grew. And for a moment he was afraid it would never stop. Suddenly, everything was shouting at him, everything was grinding nails into his ears and mind and he shot a hand to one side of his head to try and stifle a bit of the noise, afraid his very head would crack open if it didn't stop.

He was in such a sudden panic that he didn't notice when the two loudest noises suddenly stopped.

The scientists were clad in dressing gowns and slippers. One man was lanky, almost like a ferret in human form, the other was Dr. Waters, his massive frame barely covered by his threadbare white pajamas. They'd been discussing Hojo in the Mansion's parlour, a sort of midnight pow-wow which would have meant immediate dismissal for the both of them from the Project if it were ever discovered. Hojo wouldn't have liked to know two of his own were plotting behind his back. Not that they'd been plotting actually, more like discussing their leader's lack of sanity and how much the little guy really annoyed the both of them. Waters especially had gone off on his friend and lost his cool, lost his sophistication, and thought for a moment he was in the locker room of the Shinra building, getting ready to tackle something and shove his face to the ground. If Waters had his way, he'd mix football and science and see what he came up with. The thought of spiking a pigskin down Hojo's throat made him grin.

At least, that's what he'd been thinking in the parlour. When he and his associate had heard a very faint scream coming from the basement, interrupting their conversation, they knew something was weirder in the mansion than Hojo's nutty aspirations. And so they'd headed upstairs.

"Who's there?"

Silence. Waters wrapped the flaps of his robe further around his torso, shivering in the chill. His friend, the skinny little scientist he'd been talking with, hung back near the stairs but Waters got brave and took a step forward. There was something fluttering in the shadows at the end of the hall. Something white, almost like a face. And then something else that glinted like gold. And the shine of two red eyes? No, they couldn't be eyes, Waters thought to himself, unless this mansion has a problem with monsters.

"Who's there?" he demanded, "God dammit, whatever you are, I'll kick your ass if you cause any trouble. We heard a scream... you wouldn't have had anything to do with that, eh?"

"Roger..." the skinny scientist called to Waters' back, "Don't threaten the thing for God's sake."

The creature in the shadows neither moved nor responded and Waters took another step forward. But then with a little gasp, he shrank back in sudden fear. All the disjointed pieces of what he'd been looking at suddenly came together and he realized what was before him. The white he saw was a face, all that was visible of the black-shrouded creature in the shadows, the rest of him covered by dark clothes and a river of thick black hair. The creature blended with the darkness as though he'd been made to do it and his only visible parts were those supposed to strike fear within any who gazed upon him; a claw, five-pronged and vicious; two blazing red eyes, glowing brightly with a smouldering, depthless fire.

"It's a fucking monster..." Waters muttered, "You one of Hojo's little experiments? I had a feeling he was keeping things hidden here... looks like one of those secrets has decided to step out."

Vincent barely understood the words spoken by the tub of fat and muscle standing before him. He had to concentrate hard and shove the noise of the rest of the mansion away before he was able to concentrate on Waters enough to comprehend. But already he sensed hostility. Already, he didn't like this little maggot's tone.

Waters slowly reached a hand around to his back and Vincent had a fairly good idea what he was doing. Ah... yes. So that was why the little maggot was so brave. The little maggot had a gun.

Waters hefted his silver semi-automatic and made sure Vincent could see it. The gun moved in the limited moonlight and sparkled yellow. "That claw of yours won't do you very good in a gunfight," the scientist remarked, grinning with power. Vincent was silent, assessing the situation.

"... who are you?"

"Ah! So you talk! Well! Professor Hojo has outdone himself! A talking monster!"

"Watch your mouth, you walking bag of shit," Vincent said evenly, never batting an eyelid, "I'm no monster. And I have nothing to do with Hojo. Now. Who the hell are you? What are you doing in the Mansion?"

"Excuse me!!" Waters roared, charging a few feet towards the shadows, gun level before him, "You call me anything else and Hojo will have a dead specimen on his hands! Do you understand me?"

"Calm down..." the quiet scientist behind Waters pleaded, "Roger, just be calm, it doesn't know what it's saying..."

"Yes, Roger," Vincent agreed, teeth flashing white in a grin, "Do calm down."

"Where are you from?" Waters demanded, not lowering his weapon, "Were you the cause of that cry we heard? Did you crawl out of a tank in the basement or something? What the hell are you?"

"I emerged from a coffin actually," Vincent replied softly, any humor in his voice disappearing, "Perhaps you might know why I was in there..."

"Go ask Professor Hojo," Waters sneered, wiping a thick hand across his forehead, "I'm sure you belong to him. I must say, just knowing that makes me want to end you right here. What do you think, Aaron? D'you think Hojo would miss another little toy? Perhaps this would make me feel better about what the little prick said to me in the Library this evening..."

"Just let it go back downstairs," the skinny scientist said hopefully, "Why make a mess and a lot of hassle?"

Waters apparently saw the wisdom in this and lowered the gun to his side, not putting it away but perhaps trying to let Vincent know he could leave. But Vincent had no intentions of going anywhere. He wanted Lucrecia, he wanted Hojo's head on a platter, and he wanted answers. None of those things were downstairs. He stood his ground, realizing he must surely be nearly invisible in these shadows he'd unconsciously cloaked himself in, and then practically dared either of the two little worms before him to make him do anything he didn't want to do. Strange though. Something inside of him wanted them to try something. Something inside wanted a confrontation.

"Where is Dr. Hojo?" he asked calmly, claw twitching at his side.

"Why? Are you on a vendetta?" Waters laughed, "Turning against your master?"

"Hardly my master," Vincent growled.

"You going to kill him then? Heh heh heh, I'm half-inclined to let you do it. But no. No, I think you should head back to your little cage now. I'm sure this big bad world must be frightening you."

"What the hell are you babbling about?"

Waters lost his furious attitude and a sudden aura of casualness crept over him. He rolled his eyes towards his scientist friend and shrugged. "Sometimes I forget myself," he said smoothly, not looking at Vincent as he addressed him, "Arguing, threatening, and just generally paying any attention to specimens and experimental subjects such as yourself is such a waste of time. You never understand what I'm saying, you're not like normal people. You are animals, guinea pigs, simple physical material here solely as conduits to scientific theories, trials, and aspirations. You cannot reason, and if you can, those reasonings are wastes because they can never mean anything. You are like an animal. I feel silly now for acknowledging you at all. Please do go back to your cage. I hope you are tame. I'm not sure Hojo tames his pets..."

Vincent stepped forward, unsettlingly angry, yet it didn't show in his expression. His face always hid his emotions, he'd conditioned it to do so. It was safer that way, especially for a Turk. Yet his advance on Waters lasted only a few footsteps, as the scientist raised his gun again, almost as an afterthought. Vincent froze in his tracks.

"What was that scream I heard, you son of a bitch?" the man demanded, wide jaw jutting through the gloom as though cut from stone. He saw the claw and felt the power in this being before him. No chances. If this was a monster of Hojo's, it was most likely dangerous, "I heard a man's scream, we both did, only minutes ago. Was it you?"

Vincent's blood-red eyes flickered with thought, barely visible beneath half lowered eyelids and thick black lashes. There was no expression on his face, though behind it all, his mind whirred with ideas. Was he a murderer? There'd been blood on his claw when he'd awoken in the crypt. And that young man... that young man dead on the floor in his pajamas. No... no he wasn't a murderer, not this time. How could he be when he didn't even remember attacking anyone?

"I imagine..." he began after a few long moments of thought, "That the scream you heard belonged to a man I saw laying dead downstairs."

"Someone dead downstairs?!" Waters echoed in surprise, "What the hell!!!"

"Yes, what the hell."

"Don't mock me, you fucking monster!" the scientist demanded, "You little animal! Get back downstairs now!"

Vincent blinked his large eyes slowly at the words. "Don't give me orders. I'm a Turk, and sure I outrank you."

"Crazy!" Waters squeaked in a high-pitched little whine, "God damn crazy!" And he leveled the semiautomatic in line with the red-eyed man's head, both hands wrapped tight about it. Nothing would piss Hojo off more than if he shot this nonsense-spouting little toy of his. Hojo put such stock in his specimens, maybe killing this one, just as Sephiroth had been killed, maybe doing so would snap the little bastard's brain and he'd leave the Science Department in peace for a while.

Vincent couldn't believe it. This man was going to shoot him in cold blood. But then maybe he did believe it. It had happened before. He pointed his gaze at Water's forefinger, watching it pull the trigger back with remarkable clarity and calmness, ready to send a bullet from the chamber and into his head.

"You shouldn't have gotten involved, you miserable cretin. You've brought this on yourself. She cannot leave. I won't allow it. And I'm sorry to say, Mr. Valentine, that you won't be leaving either. You think you can have her? That you can take her because you want her like a child wants his candy? Your looks can't get you everything, your eyes can't buy love and your skills are worthless here. Ha..."

"You're clueless... you don't know what we have and you don't really know what I am."

"Why don't you fucking tell me then?! Tell me, Valentine, wow me with the depths of your soul, and make me into a believer!"

"I'm just a Turk. Just a nobody."

A shot broke the uneasy silence and Waters took a step backwards, unnerved by the kickback and bumping into his skinny scientist friend. But an immediate sharp sound followed the blast and Vincent lowered his claw from his face, momentarily glancing at the new dent in the bronze. No, his reflexes were just fine. And maybe this claw wasn't so bad. Waters fired again, a volley of bullets all screaming to burst his head open, but Vincent swatted them away like flies, sending a bullet flying back towards the gunman. Waters gave a stifled curse as a bit of lead grazed his left cheek, burning like hell and drawing blood. He shot a hand up instinctively, then fell back towards the stairs, gun dropping from his fingers.

"Roger!" his friend called, grabbing his right arm and pulling him along, "You idiot!"

Waters scrambled to his feet and put a hand out to knock the other man away. He looked up and saw Vincent approaching, his lithe form leaving the shadows and revealing itself to horrified eyes. "What the hell are you?!" he demanded, fists up and ready to defend himself. Vincent shook his head.

"Just a Turk," he muttered, "Just a nobody."

"Stay away from me!"

Vincent darted forward and shot his good hand out, grabbing Waters up by the collar and then kneeling him in the stomach to shut him up. He pushed him roughly against the hallway wall, holding him by his shirt and by the firm knee he now kept buried in his gut. Blood dribbled down the scientist's face from the small bullet wound and ran into his eye. Vincent tried to ignore the red and concentrate on things that mattered.

"Where's Hojo?" he demanded, spitting his words in Waters' defiant face, "Where's his wife Lucrecia? Give me answers, you fat sack of shit, and maybe I'll consider forgetting how you just emptied a clip off at my head."

"I don't give answers to mindless experiments!" the scientist bellowed, struggling futilely against Vincent's superior hold. "I don't listen to lab rats!"

"Where is Lucrecia? You'll tell me or by God I'll rip your heart out!" He couldn't keep the desperation from his voice. Vincent couldn't hide the panic.

"Why do you want to know?" Waters laughed, and his captor tightened his hold on his collar, allowing the fabric to cut into his throat and strangle him, "How long... ach! how I-long has he kept you here that you don't know th-the answer to yer own question?"

"Answer me! Where is she?"

"Lucrecia Hojo died years ago, died giving birth! Daaaah... died making a k-killer! She's dead!"

"YOU'RE LYING!!"

The choked words rang in Vincent's ears, and his red eyes burned with unshed tears. "LIES!! Sh-she'd never leave without me!" Roaring his anger, he jerked Waters from the wall then slammed him back into it ferociously, relishing the hollow sound his head made when it connected with the plaster. "I'll cut out your tongue for such a lie, I'll send you to hell with my name carved into your forehead--"

"Let go 'a me, ya monster--!"

"Stop it! Stop calling me that!" Again Vincent slammed the scientist into the wall, sending a reverberation echoing throughout the entire mansion and a shower of plaster dust raining down from the ceiling. Waters called him every insult he could think of, vision darkening even as bright rainbow explosions went off behind his eyes. "Did ya I-love her or somethin'?" he whispered mockingly, not caring that his words made that mask of hatred poised above him grow fiercer and fiercer with loathing. "You moron... she was Hojo's..."

All Vincent saw was red. And he had only one desire in the world at that moment. His claw shot back in a flash of gold, fingers spread wide and trembling with potential and the force behind them knew only that he must shut this liar up. The claw came down as he gave a yell but was halted midway when something slammed into him from the side. The force of the attack threw him from his purpose with little more than sheer surprise and Waters used the free moment to rip Vincent's hand away from his collar. Vincent never actually fell to the floor though and he was focused on the situation again in mere moments, looking up to see two men running for the stairs, the skinny scientist who apparently had had a moment of bravery in halting his attack, and then Waters, rubbing his throat and wiping blood from his eye. They dashed through the darkness for their lives. But Vincent was faster.

After only seconds, Waters was in the lead, leaving his trembling friend in his wake and whimpering in fear. Vincent descended onto the man from behind, shooting a foot into his back that nearly cracked his spine. As it was, the scientist crashed to the floor with a holler that made his retreating comrade look back. Waters shuddered at what met his eyes upon turning. That creature from downstairs was perched on his friend, claw above his head and glinting faintly in the moonlight. It descended again and this time there was nothing to stop it.

"Roger!"

"Get offa him!" Waters ran forward, cheeks paled to the color of dry sand but he drew back almost involuntarily as the claw gashed a clean tear through his friend's exposed throat. Bright blood flew in a glittering arc from the wound,

hitting the wall and floorboards in a line of red and Waters' thin friend gave a great gurgling sob. Eyes and mouth opened wide, nausea settling in the pit of his stomach, the uninjured scientist couldn't help but stumble backwards towards the stairs, desperate to retreat. But he froze stock-still once his hand touched the banister. That thing... that monster from downstairs... anything human that had been in its blazing red eyes before seemed to have been smothered beneath some intense passion. It wasn't the heartache and the fear that had been there when it had demanded to know of Hojo's dead wife, nor was it the grief that had replaced it when he'd answered. Those eyes that watched him were blank now, like a predator's, blank like a wolf's eyes with a lack of soul. They glittered at him through the darkness like two perfect red rubies and there was a flashing white smile beneath them and then...

No. No, Waters was sure he was crazy. There were fangs in that smile. Fangs in that human face beneath the inhuman eyes. The smile lasted another second and then the monster's entire face vanished, black hair coming forward as his head lowered over his victim's gushing throat, mouth closing over the wound.

Waters was beside himself with terror; he was going to cry. His trembling hand grasped a hold of the banister as though it were the only thing real and then he slid backwards, descending the stairs as fast as he could, knowing he had to get away from this evil, this nightmare, this murder. He heard his friend crying for help but those cries were so weak they seemed little more than whispers. And Waters knew he had to get out of earshot before they stopped. Because when they stopped, he was certain he was going to scream.

~\*~

"...Sara!"

"Sara, you in here..?"

Chet held his breath, listening for some sort of response, a cry for help, anything. But he got just the opposite; a big fat nothing. He let the door click softly shut, stepping out of Random Darkly Lit Room # 49 and back into Random Darkly Lit Hallway #5. He'd been in this mansion for half an hour and had yet to come up with squat, his sister Sara or otherwise. He hadn't come across a single living soul except for a room harboring a couple of snoring scientists which he'd quickly fled, random assortments of rats and bats and a monster or two. He was almost beginning to lose hope. And he was definitely beginning to get tired. His short-lived alcohol buzz was turning more and more into a headache each time he opened a door and didn't find his sister behind it. And as the remnants of his drinking spree faded away, Chet found himself getting just a little scared. Not necessarily scared of the things creeping and crawling around the mansion, but scared of someone waking up and finding him snooping around in here. He'd broken a bloody window! What had he been thinking?! A rational guy right about now would turn straight around and head out of here, hoping to God that no one awoke to watch his exit. But much to Chet's dismay, he knew quite well that he was far from a rational guy. He was a brother with a missing sister. And he wasn't going to be able to get a drop of sleep until he'd found her, thrashed her soundly, and made sure she got to bed.

"...Sara! Hey, Saaaaaraaaaaa....!"

His hissed plea went unanswered yet again and Chet swore to himself lustily, closing another door. He absently heard the floorboards creak beneath his weight as he turned a corner in the empty hallway, and then winced as a bat shrieked shrilly above his head, disturbed by his presence. "Sorry, sorry, geez calm down," he muttered, hurrying by. The hallway around the corner greeted his eyes when he looked up again and Chet saw another long aisle of unmarked doors. The place hadn't looked nearly this big from outside, maybe it was built into the ground too. Yeah, no windows, he was pretty sure he'd stumbled onto floors beneath ground level. There was a lot more to this place than he'd ever speculated and he didn't even really apply that to its size. He'd come across some strange things as he'd wandered around, things he would of wagered the Shinra corporation would rather he not have seen. Not that Chet was going to go to the newspaper or anything if he ever got out of this mansion. He was technically a Shinra employee after all, he wouldn't betray the company. Not even over corpses and illegal documents. Nope, Chet wouldn't be a narc. Unless... unless he found Sara as a corpse... No! Chet immediately shoved that disturbing little idea out of his head, cursing his overactive and decidedly morbid imagination. No, she was around here and he was going to find her, alive, and that was that.

He continued his sojourn, searching with a bit more desperation now, and thinking he heard voices not far away. He listened to them carefully, but they all seemed pretty masculine, probably more scientists. He found a short set of stairs leading up and ascended them quietly as the voices grew louder. Maybe he could listen in on their conversation and catch a little inside info. There were more bats in the stairwell but Chet ignored the obnoxious little pests, slowly peering around the doorway once he'd reached the top.

The hall was too dark to see much but he could make out the silhouettes of three guys off at the end, all of them in a state of agitation. Or well, maybe just two seemed that way. The third was just kinda standing there, swaying a little as though he'd only just learned to walk. Chet still couldn't make out their words, just the random snippet from the biggest of the three, who seemed like he wanted to smack the unsteady guy, the way he had his finger pointed at him. Oh, no

way! That wasn't his finger, the big guy had a gun out! Hmm... interesting. The unsteady guy didn't seem too concerned about the potential threat though, he hardly seemed to care. Woah! Strike that! He cared now. Chet leaned forward eagerly, eyes squinted, as the one dude pushed the other dude against the wall and drew some sort of knives in his left hand back, as though to cut the big guy's throat. Oh! but the skinny guy who'd been quiet 'till now bashed his hand away and he and the big scientist took off running. Chet couldn't help himself. He tip-toed quietly out of the doorway, glad the hall was so ill-lit and the moon finally gone from the sky and took off at a steady clip after the retreating three. This was just too strange to let get away.

And it got stranger. In fact, strange turned into frightening pretty damn quick.

When Chet caught up to the men, there were only two left and one was dead. The actor looked around, standing at the top of the mansion's main stairway, sneakers planted on faded but plush oriental carpeting. A picture window was to his right, the black prickly shapes of blowing trees visible against the dark blue tapestry of the night sky. The tall, muscled scientist was no where in sight and Chet ducked back into the shadows as the two remaining people stirred a bit on the floor.

All color drained from his face when he realized that really, only one of the figures was moving. The other... the other was....

Vincent's vision cleared slowly and the first thing he did was quickly sit up, knowing he was practically collapsed upon the floor and in a very vulnerable position. His head throbbed steadily, the headache he'd had before now spread through his entire body so that he gasped with pain. He blinked oblivion from his eyes and rubbed at his face, trying to remember where he was. Everything that had happened since he'd awakened immediately rushed back at him and he got shakily to his feet, reeling like a drunkard, feeling barely alive.

The top of the stairs, the second floor... the mansion looked as it should, the scenery as familiar to him as it had ever been, just looking older, seeming dirtier. He put a hand out to steady himself, rest it on the banister, but then slipped when something wet on his fingers met the smooth varnish of the railing. He caught himself before he could fall, panting into his chest. When he opened his eyes, he stared down at his sock-covered, shoeless feet. But something seemed wrong, the carpet was too dark for this part of the mansion. It was wet. In the bitter lack of light, he couldn't really tell what it was wet with, even with his enhanced vision, he just knew it was warm and wet. Then he turned, a sinking feeling in his stomach, and he saw the dead scientist he'd made sprawled on the carpet just behind him. He lay with his back arched and his head practically severed from his body. Everything rushed back to Vincent like a punch in the face. And he couldn't keep himself from falling this time.

To his knees he sank, trying to put his face in his hands, but both were dripping with blood and one was a claw, the very thing he'd murdered that man with. He dropped his arms to his sides and clamped his eyes shut, grinding the backs of his teeth together until his head screamed pain. He gasped aloud as though he couldn't find the air and all Chet could do was stare from the shadows. The evidence was plain enough that this man had just killed the scientist, Chet knew it even though he'd missed the actual deed (thank God for that) but for some reason, he knew there was really nothing to fear from this creature right now. Despite the fact that he was covered in blood and possessive of a lethal claw, his brilliant red eyes were obviously so guilty over what they'd done that Chet, even though he wasn't about to run out there and comfort the guy, didn't really see any reason to run.

But Chet was mistaken in thinking that he saw guilt in Vincent's eyes. No, the man was a Turk, he'd murdered dozens of people in his career and this bastard on the floor, while not the worst man he'd ever come across, was very doubtfully innocent. He was a Shinra scientist and in Vincent's opinion that was nearly enough to condemn him to Hell. No, what was really in his eyes was fear. Fear because when he wiped his chin on his sleeve, blood came off. Thick warm blood was running from the corner of his mouth but it wasn't his own and Vincent didn't even bother trying to convince himself that it might be. He untucked his shirt and wiped the red and bits of flesh from around his mouth onto the black fabric. He wanted to try and throw up. He got onto his hands and knees and rested his head against the railings of the second floor, sweat standing out like condensation on his brow but he wasn't in the least bit queasy. This realization disgusted him. He wanted it out, he could still taste salty blood in his mouth and he wanted the shit out! What the fuck was wrong with him? Why had he latched onto that man's bleeding throat like some blood-hungry little worm? Was this just another aspect of his screwed-up nightmare, the one he couldn't wake up from?

"Wake up you son of a bitch!" he demanded, grabbing onto a pillar of the railing and squeezing the worn wood until it snapped in his hand, "I'm not Hojo's monster! I'm not! I will not be! I'm a Turk and nothing more!" He roared his words through clenched teeth, spit and blood spattering on the railing bars before his face. That man... that man who'd had the gun... he'd said he was a monster, that he belonged to Hojo. But it had to be a lie because he'd also told him that Lucrecia was dead and Vincent positively knew that was false. He wasn't a monster, he was Vincent Valentine of Shinra, a top notch Turk feared by anyone in Midgar who knew what the hell was good for him.

But the blood on his tongue, on this claw that wasn't his... the blood he saw in his eyes when he looked at his reflection in the bronze... what was he? He didn't feel like his old self, but rather like a copy of the man as he'd thought

before. And something was in his head because he'd never consciously decided to put his mouth to that man's throat. No! He would never, that was ridiculous, disgusting, and horrible. Vincent smeared his lips across his sleeves blindly, gagging on the taste of blood. Oh, Gods, he couldn't stand to be around himself, around this dripping claw but he couldn't get away! That body, that body that was so pale because he'd stolen so much of its blood, he could get away from it, he had to. The sight and smell of it was too much for him to endure unless he wanted to go insane. Insane, maybe that's what he was. Maybe this wasn't really a nightmare, he was just crazy.

Chet watched the man stumble to his feet, his bloodied right hand entwined in his black mess of hair and clutching at his head, and then the actor pushed himself back deeper into the shadows as he swept past him, too wrapped up in his own grief to even take any notice of him. He could hear people stirring in the bedroom down the hall, awoken by the little struggle that had taken place. Tired, pale faces peeked around the door frame, trying to see what the racket was all about. But it was too dark. Chet could hear a fist being banged on a door downstairs, a deafening, persistent fist that rattled the whole mansion, and then a voice sobbed, "Hojo! God dammit, you've made a vampire! How in the hell could you ever make a vampire?" The pounding didn't stop and suddenly Chet was amazed at how the slumbering, deathly quiet mansion was now buzzing with chatter and questions and voices. The sounds of the clueless scientists echoed off the building's high, vaulted ceilings and the padding of their slippered feet was a soft sound coming at him from the gloom.

Chet turned around to look back down the dark hallway, but the man with the claw was gone, disappeared back into the blackness he'd first seen him in. Well, Chet knew he had better follow his example, the mansion was too crawling with Shinra creeps now, if he kept snooping around, he'd be caught for sure. But damn, he still didn't know where his sister was... Oh well, he could lay low until the scientists went back to sleep and then keep up his search. It was only about twenty after two, there was no way they'd all stay up the rest of the night. But then... one look at the corpse still laying like a broken doll upon the carpeting, and Chet knew he wouldn't stay in this mansion tonight if he was one of them. And the guy who'd had the gun, he knew for sure, he'd seen the man who'd killed the one scientist, he'd surely spread the word to all the rest. Damn, of all the nights for this to happen, it had to go down on the night Chet was inside the mansion. The young actor from Wutai cursed his rotten luck. Then he gave the silent corpse on the carpet a last helpless glance and took off down the hallway, his heart hammering in his ears.

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It seemed he'd pound on this door for the rest of his life and never get an answer. But he had to have an explanation for this! Those things he'd just seen, what the fuck had it all been?!? The red wouldn't leave his mind, the blood burned in his eyes like an afterimage, and that figure bent over his friend and the fangs in the smile... fangs in that human smile!

"Hojo!" he bellowed, his full weight pressed against the Professor's door, his beefy right fist hammering without pause on the worn wood. He could feel reverberations throughout the entire wall as he pounded away, old dust falling from the rafters and dirtying his messy brown hair but he didn't lessen his assault on the door. He drove his fist in harder, glancing quickly over his shoulder and up the stairs he'd just descended, eyes wide as frisbees and rimmed with red. Sweat stood out and ran down his bright pink face, little wheezes popping from his throat with each one of his breaths. He was so scared he could barely remember his name. But at the same time, he was so pissed he couldn't think of anything but revenge. "Hojo! Where in God's name do you get off playing with something as dangerous as vampirism and then leaving the little monsters you make as free as the wind and able to come and go through the mansion as they wish?! Professor Hojo! Aaron's been murdered! Murdered by some creation of yours! You'll not cower in this room, you'll come out and bear the responsibility for this! You'll suffer for your carelessness, I swear it!"

As though through a fog, Aaron suddenly heard assorted gasps come from behind him. For the first time in ten minutes, he let up on his pounding and whipped about, bloodshot eyes scanning the now brightly illuminated Mansion foyer. The entire Project staff suddenly stood before him, each man clad in his pajamas, confusion on every face, horror on some, anger on others.

"Aaron?" one asked, a candle held close, the flickering light casting strange shadows across his thin face, "What are you going on about, Dr. Waters, it's almost two-thirty in the morning."

"There's a specimen of Professor Hojo's broken loose from the Library. Aaron and I confronted him in the halls. He attacked me but I managed to escape. Aaron wasn't so lucky."

Claw shining gold as a small sun through the darkness. Falling down like a phoenix into pale flesh, only to rise again drenched in blood. Fangs then, descending on that bleeding throat. Waters violently shook his head to clear it of the images. "He's--"

"Over here!" a horrified voice called without warning from the second floor and every scientist in the foyer jerked his attention that way. Another man of the team stood at the top of the stairs, his hand to his mouth. He gestured to a

crumpled thing on the floor that no one could quite make out but they all understood his horror nonetheless. Aaron. "His throat's been slashed... oh my god, there's blood everywhere..."

"A specimen of the Professor's?" a scientist asked suddenly, soberly and Waters turned his attention to him, "What sort?"

"That's the worst of it," Waters replied, grinding his teeth and then kicking backwards with his right foot to pound the door again, "The worst of it. Professor Hojo's known for his unorthodox aspirations, his love for the bizarre, the hideous, but this thing he's made... it drinks blood! It looks like a man but it drinks blood and has a claw at the end of his arm to help him in the task! A monster, a freak! Hojo's jeopardized each one of our lives and caused the death of a human being simply because some freak of his was roaming these halls and he didn't care enough to let it be known! Hojo!" And again he was banging on the Professor's closed bedroom door, "Hojo, you can't hide from this! You cannot hide from this!"

A small calm voice from inside suddenly answered.

"I have no intention of hiding."

Waters stepped back from the door, hand still poised in mid-air to strike again, but it was unnecessary. There was the rusty sound of unclasping locks and the portal swung gracefully outward. Hojo stood in the doorway, fully dressed and impeccably groomed. He stepped slowly from his room and clasped his arms over his chest, giving Waters one of the most disgusted looks he'd ever graced a human being with. "Fanning the fires of rebellion, Dr. Waters?" he asked imperially, "I assure you I always take my teams' safety into account. I am not to blame."

Hojo stood among his scientists, the shortest of them all but somehow, he was still easily the most intimidating. There was something wrong with his eyes however. Behind his polished spectacles, they darted from right to left, from ceiling to floor, looking for something; fearful, suspicious, somewhat humbled. He did not meet the gazes of the other men, he was too preoccupied with looking for other things, for woman-shaped ghosts perhaps. There was nothing out of place in the foyer though. The mako-powered lights had been switched on and everything was well-lit and completely normal. Winds could be heard blowing down from the Nibel mountains, wailing in the mansion's eaves, but there were no sounds save that. Maybe just the breathing of the scientists as they watched their leader and wondered what he'd do next.

Hojo did his best to stay cool. He was a master at it, really. As furiously as his mind was racing with thoughts right then, none of the turmoil was visible on his pale face. Maybe he was just too tired. Maybe staying up all night staring at his bedroom door had taken its toll. That hallucination he'd had, that he'd seen Lucrecia's ghost, it had worn him out and left him more terrified than he'd felt in years; those old dead days back here had tackled his mind with little mercy and he'd found himself lost in the past, lamenting his deeds, saying he was sorry for it all over and over into the empty air. He needed to see Jenova for a bit of peace of mind. But not yet. Tomorrow. He had to wait until then. For now, he must deal with these things he thought he'd killed thirty years ago.

Hojo smiled to himself quite suddenly when something sparkled in the corner of his vision. He shoved his way past the younger scientists who parted before him as though stalks of grain, letting their leader march towards the front of the foyer, brush past the main door and then kneel down stiffly to examine something on the marble tiles. Waters was wordlessly furious at Hojo's calm and he stalked after him, murder on his face.

"You're responsible for his death," the scientist hissed, standing over his superior who never bothered to glance up, "I'll see you're fired for this, dishonorably sacked from the company and you'll never work in the field again. You're crazy and now you've finally killed someone with your craziness. You'll pay for it, you'll--"

"Shut your mouth, Dr. Waters," Hojo sighed, rubbing his forehead as the beginnings of a stress headache began throbbing in his skull, "Are you so terribly stupid? Do you see this glass on the floor?" Hojo rose quickly and gestured to what he meant, a lot of sparkling fragments scattered over the tiles. The scientists stared at him blankly and he sighed, marching towards the nearest window and flinging the shutters open. A nasty wind immediately slammed the shutters against the wall, and the foyer went from cozy to cold in seconds. "Something obviously broke in," Hojo muttered, kicking at the broken glass, "Most likely your 'phantom vampire'," Dr. Waters. Now, perhaps I should consider having you fired for wrongfully accusing me before my entire team. I would never experiment with something as ludicrous as vampirism. Such things are a myth, they can't exist and there would be no scientific purpose in any attempts to create one."

"You're lying," Waters growled, knowing the moment the words escaped his tongue that they were dangerous, "He was asking for you, he was asking for your wife--"

"My wh-what?"

"Your dead wife, Professor, he demanded I tell him where she was."

Hojo looked away, expression troubled. "And did you?"

"Once he was nearly strangling the life from me, I had no choice. When I told him the truth, he nearly killed me for it."

"What 'truth' did you tell him, Doctor?"

Waters sneered darkly. The story of Lucrecia Hojo's death was well known throughout Shinra. But the details had always been very sparse. She'd died shortly after giving birth, complications from the experimentation was the excuse. Cremated. Private ceremony. But some, no, most of the people in Shinra didn't believe a word of it. Some said that Hojo

had killed her. No one knew why, but the rumors were there, just as they always tended to be after a sudden death. There was no proof though, President Shinra kept his employees safe from the long arms of the law and Hojo was no exception. Yet, Waters was so disgusted and pissed at that moment, he didn't care about the Professor's power. He only knew that he'd just seen his friend murdered and was convinced the real culprit was the scientist now before him. "I told him your version of the truth," he snapped, not hiding his hatred, "I told him she was dead. He didn't like to hear it."

Hojo frowned to himself, eyes suddenly going distant. "So I would imagine..."

"Sir!"

The curt call made Professor Hojo snap back to the present. He glanced to his team and saw that one, Miller by name, had stepped forward respectfully to speak. "If some monster has broken into the mansion from outside, sir, I would recommend we take action at once. We should evacuate this building and call Nibelheim's watch out. Or even summon Soldiers from Midgar. But sir, surely we can't stay here, not with a murderer on the prowl."

The words were wise and Hojo already saw the agreement in the faces of the others. No one wanted to stay here tonight, it wasn't safe.

He's more dangerous than any of you know, Hojo thought to himself darkly, More dangerous than even he knows. Damn it. I thought for sure he'd died. Damn you, Lucrecia... it seemed your threats last night are coming true. But he won't get me. No, he never will.

Hojo turned to his scientists quite suddenly, his features set in stone. Waters watched his every movement through narrowed eyes. "Nibelheim's watch consists of three men with rifles. Scary. And it would take days for Soldiers from Midgar to assemble and arrive. As for how 'dangerous' this creature is, I don't think that's anything we should become overly concerned about. I've been in these mountains many times before and I know the monsters that inhabit them. The thing prowling around now is more frightened of us than we are of it. But you're right, it can't be allowed to remain free within these walls. I say we hunt it out. Monster or not, a bullet or two will halt its rampage."

"Sir, we're scientists, not bloody vampire hunters," Waters snapped irritably.

"So you always say," Hojo countered, "You're always setting us up with limitations. 'We can't climb to the reactor, we're only scientists', 'We can't kill a simple monster, we're only scientists'. Well, try speaking for yourself, Dr. Waters. I'm sure these men feel very capable of killing a killer. What do you say, boys?"

Hojo winced when he didn't get a response. The scientists were just staring at him in their usual, "Are you crazy?" way. Well, so much for playing up on their pride, he thought, they obviously had none. Oh well, as Waters might say, Hojo was a scientist, not a psychiatrist. He'd have to try a more direct approach to keep his men here. "This is our business anyway," he said, "And we'll deal with it. There's honestly nothing to fear, in such large numbers, this thing won't try anything else against us. It caught what's his name--"

"Aaron."

"Yes, it caught him alone and that was unfortunate. But stay together and you're fine."

"But why was it asking about you?" Miller wondered aloud, "I mean, seems a little strange, sir."

"I'm not sure I believe Dr. Waters," Hojo said, trying to look angry, "Perhaps he was just desperate to incriminate me after I proved this monster of his came from outside and not the labs."

"Professor Hojo--!"

Hojo held up his hand and Waters immediately shut up. The scientist backed away, feeling the distrustful eyes of his fellow employees. None of them liked Hojo, but none of them liked Waters either. And they definitely didn't like liars.

"So you think we should hunt it out?" Miller asked skeptically. It seemed he'd become the speaker for the rest of the group. Hojo grimaced in his general direction.

"I don't know. Go back to sleep, if you think you can. Ignore the problem, perhaps it will go away. It's up to you all. I for one, am going back to bed. I want that body up there taken to the Library and put in cold storage. We'll have it taken away tomorrow, I'm sure this backwater village must have some sort of undertaker. Other than that, do as you will. I just advise you all to be very careful."

As though impatient with the entire ordeal, Hojo then turned sharply around, shoving his way past Waters to re-enter his bedroom. He felt the stares at his back even as he reached a long, pale hand for the doorknob. He couldn't deal with them right now though, he just couldn't deal with them, he had to calm down first. The door crashed shut behind him and Waters snarled to see him so casually brush off the events. His large, calloused hands balled into fists but only hovered at his side, denied of a target to vent their frustration upon, only able to beat at the air.

Hojo was unaware of the scientist's rage though. And he wouldn't have cared, even if he'd realized it. Breaths tearing painfully from his throat, he wrapped himself in the quiet blackness of his bedroom, back pressed against the door, and stared at nothing, seeing everything. He cursed himself and he cursed his past and cursed those two people causing him so much grief after lying dead and quiet for so long.

"He's going to come after me," he muttered to himself, "That of course is why he asked about me... and asked about her... god damnit I should have taken care of him when I had the chance! What stopped me? The same thing that always

stops me, the same thing that always brings me down... I have to put the poetry in blood. Revenge is so ugly, but I sweetened it and made sense out of that chaos, I recycled the Turk into something better, sure that what he became would torture him in his dreams as he slept the longest sleep science and chemicals would allow... but he woke up. He's awake and I wonder what he is? What has Jenova made of him? She does not discriminate, doesn't care that he's my enemy, she'll make a god out of him just because she likes him. But he'll be a god of death, my own 'improvements' are seeing to that. He'll be the same vicious bastard he was inside thirty years ago when he stole her away from me. He didn't look like a monster before, he only acted the part. But now... now he has a body to match the evil inside."

Hojo raised his head, scrutinizing the inside of the dark room. His nerves were getting to him, he kept thinking he heard things scuffling around in the shadows. Rats and roaches, most likely, but who knew? Maybe Valentine was in here right now. Ach, not a worry really, Hojo had tucked a pistol inside his jacket, he was sure he could blow a hole in the monster's head before he could ever get close enough to rip his throat out with that claw. No, he wasn't as scared of that man as he was of Lucrecia. He was scared that vision he'd seen would return, that that ghostly woman in white would come back and sob in his ears and say that name again. His fingers trembled just to think about it, his heart aching after such a long time of lying still and silent and frozen. What right had she to come now and disrupt his orderly work and research? Hojo was almost angry at the intrusion. Dead people were supposed to stay dead, otherwise what in the hell was the point of killing them?

Not that he'd killed her, of course...

No.

No, of course not. That had been an unfortunate side-effect. An accident.

It sure was pissing Valentine off though.

Hojo giggled weakly to himself, sinking down to sit on the floor, back against the door. He let his head clunk down on the worn wood and closed his eyes, trying to calm himself. If only he could talk to Jenova, just for a moment, just see her, he was sure he'd regain his courage and his confidence. He was sure he could still this irrational fear he suddenly had of Lucrecia.

"She's going to make sure I pay..." he whispered into the darkness, "I hope Jenova thinks enough of me to protect me. The last thing I want are Valentine's teeth in my neck..."

This thought was hilarious. Hojo rocked with choking laughter, falling over onto his side. He laughed into his shirt, remembering that mad night when he'd decided just how to repay Valentine for his thievery. Ah, so fitting, so perfect. The Professor laughed harder, laughed until tears rolled down his cheeks and he couldn't breathe. It had been dangerous. Stupid. And yes, quite insane. But aw hell, *Ars Gratia Artis*. And Hojo truly did consider himself an artist.

After a few minutes, he was somewhat confident again, somewhat his old self. Wiping the mirthful tears from behind his specs, Hojo slid his back up the door until he was standing firm and straight in the darkness of his bedroom. The mansion's little creaking noises still made his heart skip a beat when they came, but Hojo was convinced he was calm again, he could deal with this. Black eyes darting about like little rolling wet marbles in his head, he scanned the darkness, just waiting to see some woman in white step from the closet, or float up from under the bed, or skip out of the bathroom and say "boo".

"Damn you..." he muttered, tip-toeing around the room and keeping his fists balled up in case he needed to use them in self-defense, "I don't have time for this. I barely have time to finish the Project before I'm too old and senile to work it anymore. Don't have time to deal with ghosts and vampires. Shit..."

But still, he was going to beat this. After carefully surveying the room, Hojo returned to the door and pressed his ear firmly against it. Sounded like the scientists had dispersed. Good. If he was going to beat this thing, Hojo had a few tricks up his sleeve he needed to bring out, an ace to play, so to say. He laughed nervously to himself, quietly unlocking the door then opening it just a crack. Damn, the lights were off again. Swallowing hard, some of the confidence dying, he stepped softly from the room, eyes wide and expectant. She was going to make sure he paid, he was so sure of that. Lucrecia wasn't going to disappear with a whisper or a sigh. No, just as she'd died, she was going to go out screaming. Damn it. Hojo silently prayed he wouldn't have to confront her again. And Vincent the vampire? Hell, Hojo'd made the freak. He could unmake him too. Or kill him anyways. Yeah, put him in his coffin for an eternity this time.

Hojo smiled weakly and crossed the foyer, hands in his pockets to keep them from trembling. Why the hell'd they turn the bloody lights off?!

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Chet thought he could hear the clawed man but he wasn't sure. Probably just the wind through the eaves, making the old wood creak and his ears play tricks on him. He should probably get the hell outta dodge now, while he had the chance, but not without Sara, never without her. So Chet was now creeping down another one of those windowless subterranean hallways, his heart roaring in his ears like a tormented lion. He was slowly but surely making his way for the Library,

gathering from the scientists' discussion that that was where the crux of their research and experimentation went on. He didn't like to admit it to himself, but he thought there might be a helluva good chance he'd find her there. Of course, the moment he found out that any of these slimy Shinra bastards had laid a finger on Sara, Chet knew he was going to blow a gasket and hurt them. And the clawed guy, he wasn't scared of that freak, not if Sara was involved, he'd take him out too, no problem.

Still, he hoped whole-heartedly that that wouldn't have to happen. He hoped he'd find her and she'd grin at him in her stupid, "please don't be pissed at me" way and they could head home. Chet didn't want a confrontation.

And really, honestly, he'd rather not see the red-eyed guy with the claw again. Anyone looking that dangerous, that unhinged, that plain freaking scary just seemed a good idea to keep away from. Chet had lived the last year in Nibelheim without hassle simply because he knew who the hell to approach and who the hell to stay away from. Guy had a knife and a bottle of Jack out? You didn't go near him. Guy had a fat wallet and a stupid look on his face? Then you went near him and you swindled him outta all the gil he was willing to part with, using your finely honed acting abilities to look like a poor kid in need of bus fare. Yeah, Chet thought to himself, stepping slowly down the threadbare carpeting and towards the darker abyssees of the hallway, I'm a survivor. This isn't anything else but surviving in slightly more interesting conditions than usual. No problem, no sweat at all. Avoid the red-eyed man, avoid the Shinra scientists, find the library, get out.

Chet had a feeling there were things going on that he neither knew nor wanted to know about. Shinra could keep their dirty little secrets to themselves though, he wasn't interested.

That skinny dude with his throat cut open, he had probably been very interested in what had been going on. And his interest had gotten him good and dead and gone. Eyes wide and staring out at nothing... Chet recalled that vivid image of just a few minutes ago with a little shiver, an electrical tingle of dread that ran up his spine. Dead guy, carpet full of blood, monster with a claw poised over him, warm red dripping from the corner of his mouth carelessly. Wasn't going to happen to him though, Chet swore silently. No way in hell was he gonna die in this place. He doubled his pace, a single dribble of cold, nervous sweat running down the back of his shirt. When he whispered his sister's name into the darkness now, his voice wasn't quite so confident.

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Waters was glad most of his fellow scientists were scared of him. They didn't question his order to clean up Aaron's remains. They worked and Waters stood by, slightly green, arms crossed and expression grim.

"Almost looks like an animal did this..." a pajama-clad scientist commented, unfolding a large plastic sheet they'd pulled from a storage closet. They'd wrap the body up in that.

"It may as well have been an animal."

"Hmph." The scientist gave Waters a quizzical stare, head cocked, then turned back to join two other men in the dirty, grisly business of disposing of the corpse. "Well, what are we going to do about it?" he asked, not looking up. His question sparked his three cohorts' attention and they too looked to Waters for an answer.

"I don't know," the Doctor said gruffly.

"What do you mean you don't know? Shall we truly just wait around? We're neither properly trained nor equipped to handle this situation. Why don't we vacate at once? We're only inviting catastrophe by sticking it out here. Pride? Is that what it is? Damn it, Dr. Waters, why won't Professor Hojo let us leave?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. I don't know, I'm sure there's more going on here than we know though. I'm sure the Professor has secrets."

"Of course," the young scientist replied, wrinkling his nose at the blood that oozed up over his slippers as he stepped in the carpet surrounding the body, "He does have the upper hand. He knows this mansion and this village better than any of us. This is his base, so to speak. The rest of us are clueless as far as this mansion is concerned. Most of those who were involved with the beginning of the Jenova Project thirty years ago are... er..."

"Dead?" Waters finished, leaning back against the banister. His large brown eyes scanned the surrounding gloom, sure he hadn't seen the last of Vincent. "And doesn't that just make you want to snuggle up real close and warm to Professor Hojo? Hmph. Personally, makes me want to get as fucking far away from him and his blasted mansion as I can."

"Shuttup," one of his co-workers sighed, the vocal man Miller from before, "Everyone knows you hate him, we can hardly take your opinion on his character at face value."

"He's a liar," Waters stated simply, "And he's a lunatic. The only reason he's still working for Shinra is because he's the only one who can give President Shinra what he wants. But Hojo doesn't have any loyalty to him. Nor any loyalty to us. He'd let that monster kill us all in a heartbeat. Perhaps that's exactly what he wants, what he's doing now..." Waters put two fingers to his chin, thoughtful. That thought hadn't occurred to him.

"You're paranoid," Millar snapped, wiping Aaron's blood from his hands. He was astoundingly glad he hadn't known the dead man very well. Just a colleague, a guy you smiled at and exchanged a word with in passing, but nothing like a friend. "But I do agree that Professor Hojo cares very little for any of us. Which is why we should take this matter into our own hands. It obviously doesn't interest him."

Grimacing, Waters remembered how distracted his superior had seemed. Distracted that is, until his wife had been mentioned... then Hojo'd actually looked scared. "He killed her, you know."

"What?" Miller glanced up. The other two scientists did the same, interests perked. Waters almost laughed.

"His wife. Her death thirty years ago wasn't so 'accidental'. Heh. No wonder the little scumbag is scared. My my, that's almost funny."

"Watch your tongue," Miller muttered, looking quickly around, "The wrong person hears you saying that and you'll be out of a job. Professor Hojo's on old man Shinra's "God, I love you" list. He'll protect him at any cost. He'd never get his precious 'Promised Land' otherwise."

"All that Promised Land nonsense is just that: nonsense. Hundreds have died in the name of that foolish dream."

"And do you want to add another name to that list?" Miller asked anxiously. Waters shrugged, somewhat defiant. Screw the danger, he wasn't afraid. He did look down at Aaron for a moment though but Aaron's eyes weren't open anymore. They'd shut them as was proper. Waters' friend wasn't there to back up his arguments.

"Looks like another name's already been jotted down there," the scientist said sadly, "Right next to Lucrecia Hojo's. And Sephiroth's. Aaron Baid. Rest well, my friend." Waters, Miller and the rest fell into a respectful silence after that. Mountain winds raged like caged monsters outside the walls, clawing to get in and roaring as they were denied. The trees rattled with their struggles, filling the air with disjointed sounds, like clacking bones and chattering teeth.

"... a monster..." Waters growled, approaching the plastic-wrapped body and looking down scornfully, "And why'd it kill him? I was the one who mocked it. I was the one with the gun. But Aaron was slower. Aaron was easier. Aaron died and not me."

"Calm down," Miller insisted, "Don't get yourself upset, there's nothing you can do. What's done is done."

"But should it be allowed to happen again? We have to go after that thing. It's descended again into the Library, it's gone downstairs again at any rate. You can see the bloody footprints in the carpet. If we're to stay in this mansion, at least until morning, let's clear it of monsters first, make this a house for humans once again. But I suppose that's the thing right there. This never was a house for humans. It was built above the dead, made into an image of fear, walled with riches bought with dirty money, and designed by a man who'd kill anyone, do anything, to further he and his company's riches. There's nothing human about this place, nothing at all. Perhaps we are the intruders."

"Yet Professor Hojo won't leave," Millers said with regret, "He'll never accept it."

"Damn him, why should he? How frigging human is he anymore? No. No, I won't be like him. I'll make this place fit if I'm to be imprisoned here. I'm going downstairs. I'm going to kill that freak with the claw, that... that vampire. There'll be a penalty he pays for this. There'll be a price. His misbegotten life. I'll deliver him up to Hojo then, and the two freaks can have each other. Because Hojo made him. I've never been so sure of anything in my life. They're connected. Those two and that Lucrecia woman."

"Are you sure you're not turning a simple monster attack into something it's not?" Miller asked. There was a bit of concern in his voice. He was a pleasant man and he had a conscience, a heart. He didn't want to see Waters hurting himself with fruitless thoughts, even if Waters was a loud-mouthed jerk.

"Simple monster attack my ass" the bigger scientist spat, "If a man hadn't been killed, maybe it would be different, but --"

"Pepper's gone!"

There were pounding footsteps against the creaking upstairs floor suddenly and Waters, Miller, and the other two scientists turned to see Bier, a bio-technician from Kalm, running towards them with a look of horror creeping over his face. "Pepper's gone!"

"Who the hell is Pepper?" Dr. Waters snapped, looking irritated. He'd been scared for a minute.

"Er... the intern, you know? What's his real name...Wuppingham? You know, the squirrely guy with the goatee? He wasn't there when I woke up and I went looking for him and, well, quite frankly he's disappeared."

"Oh, God," Miller stated quite sincerely.

"Are you sure you're not turning a simple disappearance into something it's not?" Waters muttered to the man, mocking him with his own words, "I'm going down to the Library. If I see Pepper... I remember him now, the skinny man, the guy who mentioned the hallway rooms at the meeting this evening... if I bump into him, I'll send him up with a good scolding. Now, out of my way."

Waters pulled his gun out and checked the clip. Eight rounds, yee haw. He'd see every bullet planted in that monster's head.

"Why do you carry that thing around?" Bier asked, looking with disgust at the semiautomatic. Waters shrugged, smiling darkly.

"I've known too many men like Hojo in my life. And so I know what this version's capable of. I insist upon being ready. But perhaps I should take a wooden stake. Isn't that how it works? Stake through the heart to kill a vampire?"

"You're a scientist, you great lumbering oaf," Miller said, gazing warily at the gun, "Talk like one. Act like one too. You're not going down there alone."

"Oh aren't I? I'm not afraid of that monster. Not anymore. I don't know why... perhaps because now I'm convinced it cannot think, that it isn't human. Humans are by far the most frightening things on earth. But this monster... it's only an animal hungry for death. I'll hunt it and kill it and then this mansion will be a safe place again."

"I can't let you go alone."

"Oh stuff it, Miller. You can't keep me from doing anything."

"Then I'll go with you."

Waters looked the man up and down. Miller was nearly sixty with a kindly face and watery eyes. His dark hair was turning silvery around the edges but he didn't really look his age. Though he certainly didn't look fit enough to take on something like the man who'd killed Aaron. "You stay here," Waters commanded, trying to sound intimidating. He honestly didn't want the older man to get hurt. "I'll go and be back in no time. This Pepper person does need to be searched for, we can't have our only intern getting himself killed, who'll make the coffee?"

"I'm going," Miller said firmly, and the man Bier stepped forward and said the same.

"But why?" Waters demanded. He tucked his gun away again and looked from man to man. Bier threw his hand towards the plastic-wrapped body.

"He was one of us, whether I knew him or not. And we're all in danger here. I for one would rather jump into the heart of the fire than cower against the walls, waiting for it to burn its way to me."

"I think you all chose the wrong profession," Waters muttered, "But as it is, you're scientists. I have a gun, I'm quarterback for the Shinra Stingers. I can kick ass."

"Egotistical bastard," Miller chuckled, but there was a bit of a sting to the words. Waters shrugged his broad shoulders and headed down the hallway at a brisk clip. He'd changed his pajamas and now wore his standard choice of jeans and polo shirt. The shoulder holster strapped around his torso stuck out black and obvious against his chest. The gleam of his gun was threatening. The deadly gleam in his eyes was worse.

"You're going to get us all killed," Miller shouted, chasing after him. His lab coat trailed like a white shadow. Bier followed too, along with another man named Vanswith, a friend of his, his hands still stained with Aaron's blood.

"I want you to remember one thing," Waters said loudly as he tramped down the hallway, never taking his eyes from the blackness spread open before him. His gun was out again and clenched in his fist. "Remember just one thing. Whatever happens, I never asked any of you to come with me."

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This room had a very crude feel to it. It was circular but in a rough way, a circle shaped by flat walls and joined by dusty corners, sealed with cobwebs. The slightest breath sent up a swarm of black dust and it billowed before the chamber's lone window, shafts of starlight breaking through and illuminating the crude furniture; three-legged stools, rough-hewn tables that seemed they'd been put together only that very night, and cast iron lanterns, oil gone, wicks rotted to nothing. Roaches and vermin had inspected every feature in the room for years and years and yet even now they weren't tired of their explorations. They skittered over the rough stone floor, moving themselves through fissures and cracks and knowing there would be no human feet to crush them into the very ground. They'd claimed this simple room and they ate at the wood and slept in the open with reckless abandon. A single skylight was embedded in the center of the ceiling but the window had long ago been covered by fallen leaves and black mildew; no light shone through the glass. A spider made its home in the space, a queen of the grotesque, a slithering Black Widow whose red hourglass-shaped mark almost looked like a skull shining through the darkness. No one would have been able to see it, the room was too black, the starlight too hidden behind the veil of clouds in the restless night sky, but Vincent could see it. He watched the spider wrapping an unlucky moth in strands of silk and the red hourglass was all he allowed himself to stare at. That hourglass mocked him. Because how much time had passed?

He didn't know and he wouldn't ask.

So Vincent hid in this room, feeling almost safe within its gloom, its obvious age. And it was dark and he refused to turn the lights on. He could see everything very well but if he turned the lights on, he'd be able to see the dust, the decay, the rot that hadn't been here last time he had. This had been a little supply closet and he and Lucrecia had snuck in here on occasion, when they'd been so desperate to be alone together the place it had to happen in didn't matter. He reached his good hand up and touched the wall. It was small enough that he could do so without leaning up from the doorway he

was slouched against. His name and her name were written on the stone with lipstick. Something stupid she'd done and he'd laughed at her then but she wouldn't let him smear it away. "Because it'll last even if we don't," she'd said somewhat sadly, "It'll be here and this night will never end if it's here to keep it alive." And then she'd laughed at herself and fallen into his arms, unable to believe that Vincent and Lucrecia could ever possibly be kept apart or ruined. It hadn't seemed possible then. The very idea had seemed ridiculous.

But where was she now?

The ancient writing flaked away beneath his fingers and Vincent pulled his hand back, balling it into a fist. He sat for a long time in the room, letting absolutely nothing cross his thoughts. He stared at the roaches as they went about their business, then turned his soft red eyes up to the round window, looking out towards the Nibel mountains. A wolf was howling far away, and Vincent suddenly smelled the scent of a fresh kill, of blood and fur floating in from outside. He got up stiffly from the floor and closed the window, stopping the influx of freezing air and death. He turned slowly back around and saw that his movement had sent all the vermin into hiding. Only the Black Widow in her web was still spinning, indifferent to him. The moth beneath her slender legs had stopped its struggling and Vincent watched numbly as he was covered with the sticky white, glistening wings bound, never to taste sky again.

Why had he killed that man? He'd never had any intention of it. He'd attacked the man with the gun out of self-defense, he'd tried to shoot him! A Turk never stood idly by while a guy was popping off caps at his head. No, he'd pinned the fat son of a bitch with the gun and demanded answers. Because he'd smelled like Shinra, he'd had that arrogant as hell look and Vincent had known he would have the answers that a Shinra scientist always had. He'd know things, he'd be able to tell him why he'd woken up in a coffin, where Hojo was, where Lucrecia was. The things he needed to know. But the bastard had only spouted lies. And no real surprise there, Shinra was all about lies. Vincent instinctively lied himself. Safer that way, harder to be incriminated. But such a lie he'd told. . . it had been the last load of shit Vincent had needed to hear at that moment. What else could he have done but pull this new claw of his back and let it fall into that fat bastard's throat? It had been unfair that the murder had been denied to him. But the other man, he'd never done anything. He'd been running away and Vincent had cut him down like an animal. Rage? Maybe it had only been rage. He could almost accept that answer but he knew that it was more than that. He actually couldn't remember the act. He couldn't recall killing the scientist except in strange blurs of memory, quick fleeting pictures. Really, the last thing he recalled was giving chase. And then suddenly he'd been on the floor, the strange salty water taste of blood in his mouth and a dead man beneath him.

The more he tried to remember, the more it seemed it hadn't really happened. How could it have if he really couldn't remember? How could he be a murderer if he'd never decided to do it? Murders weren't accidental. No, they weren't. And Vincent decided at that moment he wouldn't feel guilty over something he'd never consciously decided to do.

And besides, as horrible as it was to admit, the man had been of Shinra. And Vincent was having a hard time shedding a tear for him. One more killer gone. One more perverter of nature dead.

A gunshot drew Vincent's attention from his thoughts. He straightened soundlessly and saw with distant interest that his claw raised of its own volition at the sound. It was an instinct that could not be natural since the claw itself was unnatural. What was powering these murderous tendencies and the murders themselves? It was a frightening thought, the idea that there was something else inside of him, something making him into someone he wasn't. Not even the Turk anymore, not really. The Turk had been a killer but it had not been a hunter. Killing to survive, not hunting. Killing in defense, not to... not to feed.

"Listen to me," he thought aloud, "I'm talking about myself in the past tense. Perhaps I know more than I'm giving myself credit for..."

The gunshot came again and Vincent stepped towards the door. A 9mm, he could tell just from the sound of it. His new abilities didn't reveal that to him, Vincent just knew. He wasn't a bad ass Turk for nothing. The man from before had been flaunting a 9 at him, it was probably the same gun and the same man.

Trying to scare me out? he wondered, Trying to flush me out like a rabbit from his hole? It's going to take more than a gun to scare me away. A lot more.

Vincent ran his tongue against the two small fangs in his mouth. He was amazed he hadn't noticed them before. They were small though, he doubted they were even visible unless someone looked very closely. Still, the feel of them made him shiver. They came to a needle's point and if he wasn't careful, he could bite right through his lip with them. He wasn't going to do that though. In fact, the first chance he got, he was going to file the little fuckers down. They weren't his, he had no plans on keeping them.

Another series of gunshots. They really wanted him, didn't they? And they should, they should be trying to kill him, he was dangerous, like one of those Nibel mountain wolves let loose, like that Black Widow, drinking the blood of that moth. Vincent stared at the spider, wondering if it would speak upon recognizing its own kind. It didn't and Vincent grew suddenly impatient. He stalked towards the web, shot his metal hand out and crushed the eight-legged anthropoid so quickly it had no chance to dart away. He squeezed the life out of it then threw it to the ground.

"You see that? I'll do the same thing to whatever's inside of me. To hell with Hojo and all it seems he's done. . . I know it could have only been him. That gunshot, that time in the coffin, no one else would have found such a poignant way to kill me--"

Oh, God, I'm dead, aren't I?

Vincent had to reach his hand around and feel his heart beating in his chest for a moment. What an insane thought. Dead. No, just hurt and wronged, not dead. He wasn't that lucky.

Gunshots again.

But he wasn't going to go to those scientists. Heh. He had bigger fish to fry.

Vincent threw the door to the closet open and his naked feet carried him from the room, out into the hallway. Soft, worn carpet beneath his toes. He headed for the basement.

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Something was chasing Zack in his dreams. Large, obscured and blacker than a viper's throat, he was always in front of it, always just a little bit faster, but he could never quite get away. He was running and running and he thought his chest might burst open, his heart jump out and beg for mercy, beg that it be allowed a moment to rest before it had to stop its beating altogether. But he couldn't quit running. Four years, maybe longer, yes longer than that, he'd been running. Because that Black was Death and Zack wasn't about to let the thing sink its fangs into his neck. This Soldier boy was way too strong for that.

But still, he felt its cold breath on his back and the colder and closer it came, the more he knew how little time he had left. Even though he was dreaming, lost in sleep, Zack knew this with all his heart. Funny thing was, he tried not to think about it when he was awake. But when he was asleep, Death chased him until he cried out for mercy that never came.

You couldn't keep running for so long though, he knew. Being a Shinra Soldier, death had been part of life and you didn't really think about it much. But being locked up as a Shinra specimen, where you were completely expendable, Death suddenly became rather prominent in all your lonely, bewildered thoughts. One day he'd get outta this cage. He'd die and he'd be out.

Zack inevitably reached that point in his dream where he knew he was dreaming. He knew that the thing chasing him wasn't real. But he kept running just as he always did. The cold breath sure felt real, the fear was real. He hazarded a look behind and the skull painted black with the glowing yellow eyes that was chasing him seemed real enough. But hell, you couldn't keep running, you couldn't be afraid all your life. If you'd been fated to be a guinea pig, then you might as well accept the fact and die in the lab, right? Running made you tired. Death and peace went well together. Life and exhaustion were terrible.

Zack halted at last and turned. Death roared in his face.

"Zack! Zack, wake up, you're dreaming again..."

He opened his eyes and saw Cloud sitting beside him, young face drawn and pale with worry. Of course it was Cloud, his weary mind logicked, who the hell else would care enough to wake you up from a nightmare?

Zack swallowed bitter fear, seeing skulls when he closed his eyes so he kept them open and sat up.

"You all right?"

"Stupid dream. Should've eaten dinner, I always have stupid dreams when I sleep on an empty stomach."

"Try sleeping on an empty head," Cloud teased and Zack could see his friend grinning through the darkness of the small room.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing," Cloud said with a faint shake of his head, "You've just been thinking too much about our situation lately. Live with it, that's what you always tell me. So I just don't think about it. I fight, I curse them, but I deal with it all."

"Ah." But of course, Cloud, of course you can do that. I don't get to slip away into memory-free dreams like you do. I don't have mako to help me forget, or make me just crazy enough to deal with being here. I'm just Zack, Soldier First Class. And I'm tired of being in a cage. And I have a feeling that something very bad's going to happen in the mako reactor tomorrow. But I'd die before making you worry. I'd die before putting any of this on you. "Still seeing ghosts?" Zack asked, a little bitterness slipping into his voice. Cloud dismissed the sound as exhaustion and ignored it.

"Don't tease me, I really did see a ghost. And I heard a scream. Gunshots too not long ago but I didn't even bother waking you up for those. You seem to think I'm totally delusional. So ya might as well keep it up."

"We're both going to be two tired, miserable SOBs tomorrow morning, ya know that?"

"Puh. 'Bet no one up there's getting any sleep either. I've heard some damn strange things."

Zack scooted away, found a wall, and put his back to it. Whatever his friend had thought he'd heard was quiet now. All Zack could make out was silence. "I hate this mansion," he said at length, "Why didn't Sephiroth burn it down too?"

"Dunno. You said he told you it felt like home."

"Nah, he just told me he felt like he'd been here before, that's all. Doubt that had anything to do with it though. I dunno, pretty pointless to analyze a nutball."

Quiet descended like a ratty blanket and Cloud shut his eyes beneath it. They were tired, his eyes. Staring through the barred window in the door for too long, he supposed. And nothing had come, just the pictures in his head that sprang from the screams and the gunshots and the clatter he'd heard. Sitting alone in the darkness a few minutes ago, he'd seen Tifa flash through his mind. That ghost woman he'd seen, for some reason, she'd brought Tifa to him again. Now the girl danced in Cloud's head and Cloud's bare fingers itched to reach out and grab a hold of the phantom. That had been nice, while it had lasted. But then a man's scream and something less pleasant had shoved Tifa from him. Sephiroth. He'd screamed like that as he'd fallen into the mako pit. And Cloud had screamed a similar anthem with Masamune twisting through his stomach. Thoughts always turned to his past. Insignificant things triggered the memories but Cloud indulged them. Of course he was stuck in the past, where else was a person with no future to go? The present? This stinking cage? Ha... no, better to burn in the past and bleed again. Better to scream.

"You've pretty much decided not to sleep tonight, eh Cloud?"

"In this place?" the man answered listlessly, "No. I'd rather be awake for the nightmares."

"Yeah... heh. Probably a good idea. I'm too tired to sleep. All I do in my sleep is run from things that are going to catch me someday."

"Having that dream again, man?"

Zack shrugged, forgetting the gesture was useless in the darkness. "I have it a lot. It's less a dream than a routine. Hell, it's getting boring, I wish the damned thing would catch me, chew me, and swallow me. Pointless dreams... why do we dream at all? You know what they do, don't you? We dream and it puts the notion into our heads that there's more to us than meets the eye. It convinces people they must have souls, that they must really be something more than a scientifically explainable hunk of human being. Dreams just give us false hopes. And make us think we're something we're not."

"Aw, you sound like Hojo."

"That isn't even funny."

"Sorry."

The generators kicked on outside, and a muffled humming broke the stillness. Cloud listened for the sounds he'd heard before but there was nothing now.

"I don't mind dreams really," he said, "Sometimes I dream of Tifa. Stupid dreams, where we're at a party or something, or I'll take her to a dance in Midgar, which ya know never happened. But the dreams are nice. It's almost like they give me memories of things that didn't happen but I can pretend they did and the frigging dreams wind up better than the reality. All you ever told me about yourself, and about that night... sometimes I have dreams where I'm you, I see everything you told me about. You're just bitter, Zack, because you're not having the kind of dreams you wish you were. Have a dream about your old girlfriend or something. Cheer yourself up."

"Huh, no thanks. I'm horny enough as it is without dreaming about chicks. Ya know, after four years, I still don't get it, man. Why the hell'd you ever leave Tifa to go to stink-hole Midgar, eh? Man, you lived in like, practically heaven, and you give it up to try and become a typical Soldier grunt."

"It wasn't heaven. Nibelheim was never heaven. And Tifa? Well, she was the goddess that I could never get to pay any attention to me. I talked to her before I left, waiting for her to say something, to release me from the mission I'd given myself. But never a word. She made me promise to come back some day, but she didn't do anything to keep me from going. S'because she never really thought much of me, I understand that. No one in the village did, I think sometimes I was even a disappointment to mom. In Midgar... in Midgar at least I learned to fight. Yeah... at least I learned that."

"You'd have made a helluva Soldier, man," Zack said kindly, "Better than me. You killed General Sephiroth at least. I just laid on the catwalk and bled. You can go to your grave saying you were the one that did Sephiroth, you were the victor of the Nibelheim catastrophe. Heh."

"Believe me," Cloud sighed, eyes dulled over and staring at nothing, "Believe me, hearing that does very little. I wish I had my sword."

Zack laughed. "You wish you had my sword!"

"Heh heh, right."

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Vincent was surprised that he had no qualms about darting into the crypt again to find a pair of shoes. He was in and out in two minutes flat and never once did he shudder at the bones, the roaches, or the rats. Cobwebs mixed with strands of his own hair as the top of his head brushed the low ceiling but he combed them out with a quick swipe of the claw and thought nothing else of them. The only shoes he'd found that would fit were a pair of worn leather boots, reaching up to

his knees and covered with steel-plated spats, obviously gotten off the body of a dead masonry worker, maybe a miner of the Nibel mountains who'd used the steel plating to keep his feet protected from falling rocks. They only fit tolerably well but Vincent wasn't going to be picky. He knew only that he was tired of stepping on bugs. The bottoms of his feet were slick with slime. His patience was wearing thin.

He kicked absently at the air in his new stolen shoes once he was in the hallway again. They were heavy but they were wickedly pointed and wonderfully solid, great weapons in a fight if for some reason he found his claw hampered. And the skeleton he'd gotten them off of obviously wouldn't be needing them anymore. The little subquest had taken his mind briefly from his terrors and Vincent almost smiled in satisfaction. But of course it all flooded back without mercy and without warning and he found his heart racing again, his mind humming questions. He resumed his journey down the crudely shaped hall, making his way through yellow-lit rock. The electric light was still burning from whomever'd been down here last, most likely the man still laying dead and getting colder by the second inside the crypt. Vincent shoved that pleasant little image out of his head and focused on his surroundings. Nothing changed from the last time he'd been here. Only he was different.

Twenty-seven, devilishly handsome, black-haired and brown eyed, Vincent Valentine of the Turks had made his way through the world as though he'd owned it. It hadn't been his attitude, no, he'd always been quiet and modest, but he'd also been a loner. He'd ignored everyone all his life, just as though he were the only man on the planet that mattered, that were real and worth acknowledging at all. He could count the number of real friends he'd had in his life on one hand. He was an island and content enough to stay that way. Funny thing was, last time he'd been in this particular hallway, he'd felt like anything but an island. He'd been angry, angrier probably than he'd ever been in his life. And it'd been because someone he'd loved had been hurt. Someone he'd loved... a random intruder on the island whom he loved. Hell, he'd already been a changed man then. Lucrecia had altered the very fabric of his being, had screwed up his list of priorities until everything he'd ever thought was truly important had turned to insignificance. He would have died for her. He would have. He'd only fought for his life while bleeding to death on the Library floor because he hadn't been certain she'd be okay without him. But he would have died for her safety that night.

A strange thought but full of more truth than most of the ones he had.

But now he looked at himself and Vincent had to wonder if she would recognize him at all once they were together again. Would she be able to love him even if he wasn't the Turk anymore? Ah, but that was the thing... she hadn't loved the Turk. She'd loved the man behind the suit and gun.

"And that man's still here. Right?"

Vincent quit his advance for a moment to glance down at himself. He'd gotten the blood off, cleaned the claw on the bedspread upstairs, but he still looked and felt so different. He sighed quietly and shook his head. He'd make Hojo fix him up. He'd hold this claw to his throat until the scientist took it off and got rid of the ridiculous fangs for him. And then he'd make him say where Lucrecia was, Vincent would go to her, and they'd leave Nibelheim. The mansion wouldn't be anything but a blotch in their memories then. Yes.

Vincent had been telling himself this since he'd woken up. His inner voice wasn't quite as sure of itself as it had been.

The library glowed suddenly from the end of the hall. He'd surely come upon it quickly. The entrance was a rough wooden door frame embedded straight into the living rock and the lumber had been almost new last time he'd seen it but now it had darkened and began to rot a--

Never mind. Fine, just ignore it.

Vincent held his breath and stepped through the portal, reminding himself that this wasn't like last time, he wasn't going to get shot and stuck in a box again. Still, he was almost quaking with fear as he entered. Better to focus on his surroundings than his fear though.

The ceiling rose to twenty feet high, the top disappearing immediately into a dimness that even Vincent's altered eyes had a hard time sounding. A sterile yellow light lit what there was to see; walls composed of stacked granite slabs, divided with girders of solid oak and lined with bookshelves. Shelves and shelves filled to overflowing with books of all sizes, shapes and colors; a priceless collection of knowledge that invariably was perverted and put to the most ludicrous of uses. But time had made its presence known here too and the volumes were rotting away. Vincent breezed by the bookshelf nearest the door and gold leaf flaked from the bindings, swirling in the air like glittering little autumn leaves. He put his good hand out and caught a few pieces, grinding the gold to dust on his fingertips. The rotting oaken shelves rose almost to the ceiling and he craned his head back to take in all the books. There were files here too... files on everything the Shinra Science Department had ever tinkered with. They occupied a shelf all their own and were in an even worse state of disrepair than the books. Mildew had blackened the rows and rows of manila folders and papers lay scattered on the floor, caked with mud from careless shoes and careless time. Vincent kicked at a few of them with the toe of his boot but the ink had run and dissolved into indiscernible blotches. As for the files still safe on the shelves, he simply wasn't interested. He never had been.

Past the immediate entrance, the rest of the Library was quickly recognizable to his eyes. More shelves, these storing jars of things he couldn't identify and didn't really want to be able to. Chemicals too, in rows on the walls, things preserved in formaldehyde, things pinned to boards and covered with cobwebs, things laying between the floor and the wall, wedged into the cracks and grimed over with mold. A massive desk was to his right and still stacked with papers and research and devices, only all were basted with a thin, fine coat of dust. Vincent wrote his name in it, then smiled to himself, as though he were having the last laugh after all. He moved his hand and a few roaches scuttled away off the desk's surface, letting the man see the documents they'd obscured with their shining black bodies. Vincent lifted a paper covered in calculations, snorted, then wadded the thing up and threw it into the shadows. It had been in Hojo's handwriting and touching it sent a shiver of disgust mixed with nerves up his spine.

With the stealth of a Turk, he walked about the rest of the Library, rather sure the entire place was abandoned. He circled a long table set up near the operating area and saw signs that people had very very recently been here; the entire table was cleared of dust and scattered with a few freshly-typed sheets of reports. Half-emptied styrofoam coffee cups too, Vincent swept more roaches away and saw there wasn't even mold yet in their bottoms. Interesting. The soles of his stolen shoes made a gentle metallic noise against the stone floor as he approached a massive silent machine and examined its knobs and control mechanisms. This was the power generator. Someone had switched it on only recently, he could see fingerprints through the dust and the machine was still only at half-power, it hadn't had time to warm up entirely yet. Very interesting.

It all made sense though, when he put it together. The mansion had been abandoned, abandoned for a long time by the signs of decay and disuse everywhere. Only recently, perhaps only in the last couple of days, had people, scientists, returned to make use of the facilities again. The purpose of the Mansion's occupation before had been the Jenova Project and little else. Perhaps they had finished that ghastly thing finally and then moved out and --

No, that was impossible, he thought suddenly, because they would never have finished the Project, Lucrecia had withdrawn herself from it and without her, there could be no specimen to use for the experiment. So no, they'd probably just realized the entire Project was a failure, scrapped the whole idea, then left for Midgar. Yeah, that made sense. But where did Vincent himself fit into the picture?

He figured Hojo would fill him in when he found him.

Distant gunshots reminded him of the situation. Vincent went back to his examinations quickly. They were going to come after him for killing that man, and he really didn't know what he was going to do when they did. Gunshots though... as though he were some animal who might be afraid of the noise and come dashing from hiding in fear. "Idiots..." he muttered aloud, then turned for the back of the Library.

'Hallway of Hot Air' is what the Shinra Scientists and Turks had christened the place Vincent now found himself in. This was one hell of a collection of information. Entombed here in immortal black ink was every scrap of knowledge the Shinra Science Department had ever owned, all transferred here from the Shinra building when the mansion had first been constructed. It was a treasure trove of academic information and research and there were people who'd sell their soul just for a few moments to browse among these confidential files. A lot of people had died in the name of these findings. A lot of hearts had been broken just to type up a few facts. Vincent ran his claw over the aisles of ordered information. It had been so carefully arranged, so artfully preserved here in bound colored leathers... but now tomes lay open on the floor, pages had been ripped from spines and trampled underfoot, and everywhere... through the shelves, through certain books, through scraps of paper, savage sword marks had cut things to pieces. Vincent inspected the gashes, gashes made with a blade as sharp as a honed razor, slicing a solid oak shelf to splinters.

"I suppose someone read something they didn't like," he whispered.

Stepping over fallen books, Vincent entered the Library office on muted feet. More research, shelves overflowing with more Shinra Science garbage. A huge desk, documents piled atop it, half-finished experiments spilling from the sides, acid that had been left to eat through its test tubes and chew holes in the wood. Either the scientists had been total slobbers or they'd left this place in a helluva hurry. Vincent found a light switch on the wall near his right side and flipped it on.

There was a moment of utter stillness but suddenly Vincent knew he wasn't alone in the Library. He'd thought he'd heard two men breathing before but he hadn't been sure. Now it was unmistakable. Because their breaths had quickened in fear.

"Who's there?" he questioned in a soft but firm tone. Anyone he met in this place was most likely an enemy.

"Who the hell are you?"

There was no mistaking the hostility in Zack's voice. He'd seen Vincent's entrance into the office from the window of their cell door and been suspicious, knowing immediately that it wasn't any one of the scientists. When Vincent had switched the lights on, it had done anything but ease Zack's fears.

Vincent turned and sought out the voice. He saw the prison door immediately, nestled between two shelves. But he did not approach it. The pair of blue mako eyes glowing at him from the darkness put him on edge.

"It's impolite to answer a question with a question," he said evenly, "Who's inside there?"

"A coupla guinea pigs, little more. But what are you? You look like something that would have Hojo's name tattooed on its ass."

"Cute."

"Aw, you think so? Thanks."

"Who the fuck are you?" Cloud shoved Zack aside and Vincent saw another, different pair of blue eyes behind the bars of the window. The other had seemed easy-going enough. This new man made his claw twitch.

"I'm a Turk," Vincent answered after a moment. What harm could these things be? They were Shinra specimens, obviously. Here to be pitied, not feared. Vincent had seen his share of lab rats in his days with the company.

"You don't look like a Turk," Cloud snapped, suspicion in his eyes. He pressed his face to the bars. "Who's your leader?"

"Levy, though it's hardly your business."

"Ha, knew you were lying, asshole. You're lucky Tseng isn't here, impersonating a Turk will get you killed."

Before Cloud could blink, he suddenly found he couldn't breathe. And there were a pair of blood red eyes in his face, a growling voice muttering before him. Vincent had darted to the door of the cell so quick the men inside hadn't seen. He tightened his fist around Cloud's collar and made as though he'd pull him straight through the bars. "Watch your tongue, you little piss-ant. I've had a bad day and am in no mood to deal with an insane little prick such as yourself. Now. Where are all the employees? What's happened to this mansion? You'll tell me everything you know."

"Let 'im go!" Zack grabbed his friend's shoulders since Cloud was blocking Vincent's hand, and he yanked him back. There was a short rip and both men wound up dazed on the floor of the cell. Vincent tossed the scrap of blue fabric in his hand to the ground.

"Calm down, Cloud," Zack ordered in the sanest voice he could manage. He was curious about this intruder. He was curious about anything that broke the monotony of their captivity, "Yo," he said, addressing Vincent after getting to his feet again, "Yo, if you watch your manners, I'll make sure Cloud watches his. What's your story? What are you doing wandering around the mansion at this time of night? Who are you?"

Vincent narrowed his eyes at the man, but Zack's reasonable tone of voice seemed somewhat trustworthy. And besides, as he'd already observed, he had very little to fear from men in a cage. "I told you," he said, taking a careful seat on the lip of the desk behind him, "I'm a Turk. Name's Valentine and I'm looking for a scientist named Hojo but I'd rather find his wife Lucrecia if she's in this building... I... I'm a little confused on a couple of points though..."

"Join the club," Zack sighed. He darted a look behind at Cloud who'd recovered himself and was now glowering against the back wall, "What points though? Maybe I could help you out... Hojo... he's here somewhere. I don't know anything about him having a wife though..."

"He's in the mansion?" Vincent asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, saw him this evening actually. Skinny old guy, kinda short, specs and a ponytail, a look on his face that just makes you wanna hand him his balls. Oh, I know Professor Hojo too well."

"A man in your position would, I suppose," Vincent answered as tactfully as possible. A gunshot again, way in the distance. Still above though, he thought smugly, but getting closer. They'd work up the nerve to come into the basement for him soon. He'd allowed himself to be cornered without really thinking about it.

"You'll forgive me for saying so, but you really don't look like a Turk," Zack was saying suddenly. Vincent blinked hard and turned his attention back to the man behind the door. "You look more like a test subject than Cloud or I do. Is that... is that why you're after Hojo--?"

"Watch it," Vincent growled and Zack winced, mentally noting how easily upset this guy could be. He seemed distracted then, sliding forward off the desk and pacing the small office, kicking books from his path. Zack got sudden flashbacks of Sephiroth. He'd paced the same way as he'd read down here for days, a book in one hand, Masamune in the other.

"We've been prisoners for years," Zack said conversationally. He didn't want to lose this guy's attention, "Cloud here, he's Hojo's own little pet, and I'm the spare. It's a fucked up little arrangement but that's how our lives work. We haven't been in this mansion for years though, nah, mainly the Shinra building, we have cozy little quarters there--"

"What the hell are you doing?" Cloud hissed in his friend's ear suddenly. Zack shoved him away.

"--This mansion's been abandoned for a long time, it was abandoned when we first came to Nibelheim on a Soldier mission and that was probably four years ago. Hence the dirtiness of the place. Something big's gonna go down tomorrow though, that's why we're here. Something with the reactor on Mt. Nibel, something with mako, I don't know. It won't be anything good though..."

"It's none of my concern," Vincent said curtly, only looking up from his thoughts for a brief moment. But then Zack's words registered and he swallowed down a nervous lump in his throat. "Abandoned?" he asked, and his voice was hollow and choked, "What do you mean 'abandoned'? Choose your words carefully."

"I mean that Shinra doesn't use it anymore, usually it sits empty. This place is old anyway, kinda outdated, I guess that's why..."

"But it's almost brand new!"

Zack and Cloud exchanged looks behind the door. Cloud spoke. "So not only are you a Turk, but you believe this thirty year old mansion is brand new. You really are screwed up in--"

"Thirty?"

Hell, but how could he go on the words of a couple of Hojo's brain-dead, psychotic little animals? Thirty years... "Don't talk to me," he sighed, turning away. He heard footsteps on the spiral staircase. Three... no, four men... his heart beat faster in a mix of anticipation and fear.

"What's the matter?" Zack saw the pale guy turner paler. A bead of sweat rolled down the side of his face.

"I won't kill anyone else..." he whispered, and Vincent meant the words. He looked down at his claw and saw the blood caked into the crevices. He curled a lip up and stared at his reflection in the bronze. There was the tiny fang, a point of white with a mate on the other side; needle sharp, and he touched the tip with his tongue. Ridiculous and disgusting. "I'm not his monster, I won't do this."

Zack saw the fangs but kept his cool. He understood. "You're not Hojo's monster if you don't choose to be," he said. He had a feeling something was coming but he wasn't afraid. As long as it wasn't that thing that chased him in his dreams, he saw no reason to be. "Cloud and I have been here for four long years and we still don't belong to him, no matter what he says." Zack touched a forefinger to his brow. "It's all up here, man. You are whatever you tell yourself you are up here. Up here, I'm free as hell."

Vincent had little use for Zack's words. He took a step towards the door and kicked it. His metal shoe made a very satisfying clunk against the wood. "But you're not really," he said darkly, "You are really just a man behind bars, despite whatever immature delusions you may have."

Zack smiled, hiding his anger. "But you could change that. Hey, the key's in the desk drawer. Let us out."

Vincent ignored him. He listened to the pounding feet reach the bottom of the staircase. Another gunshot then. Voices. They were trying to decide whether to go into the crypt or not. They saw the smashed door, they saw the bloody footprints. They were scared though, even that man Waters.

"We know this mansion," Zack said, trying to hold Vincent's attention, "Let us out and we'll help you find Hojo. Hell, we'll help you kill him, if that's what you're aiming to do. We're both fighters. Slap a sword in my hand and I can cut anyone down."

"You are not my concern," Vincent answered in a distant voice, "I'm sorry, but I don't need any distractions. Thirty years... you're lying. Of course you are. That's just ridiculous."

"Believe anything you want," Zack said easily, "But if you're a righteous man, you have to realize the kinda position my friend and I are in. You leave us here, we'll wind up either dead or worse'n dead. Just let us out, the key's in the drawer."

Zack held his breath, waiting for a response. The red-eyed man with the claw seemed deep in thought but was he contemplating helping them or something else? Was he listening at all? Yes... actually, Zack suddenly realized he was listening to something very very carefully. He shut his eyes and tried to hear it too. Cloud babbled in his ear.

"I won't go with this psycho," he said softly but adamantly, "All the things I heard, the things I saw tonight that you don't believe me about, and then this freak pops up? I'm not stupid, he has something to do with it. There's blood on his claw, in his clothes, his hair... has desperation made you blind? You wanna let this fucker kill you or Hojo? I'd rather stay with the freak I know than the freak I don't know!"

"Shut the hell up, Cloud," Zack hissed at his friend. He shoved him backwards and away so that he wound up on the ground again. "You gotta make angels outta devils in this world if you ever wanna get by. Hey! Hey, listen to me, Valentine of the Turks! You don't wanna be hassled by us? Fine! Let us out, you'll never see us again, I swear! Listen to me! Don't let us rot in this cage if you know just what Hojo's capable of! He fucked with you, made you into a monster and you know he'll do the same to anyone who strikes his fancy--!"

Vincent turned slowly around and he wasn't sure why, but he smiled. They'd found the dead man in the crypt. The man in the pin-stripe blue pajamas.

Oh my God...

Is is him? The intern? Pepper?

Close his eyes, I swear to God he's looking straight at me...

Ripped apart...

Yes, Vincent thought, I suppose I did rip him apart, just like that scientist in the hallway. I wonder if I drank his blood too... I don't remember. I don't remember any of it.

"What is it?" Zack asked. Vincent was staring straight through him with his blood-red eyes.

"Something's wrong with me," he answered simply, "And I wonder just how much control I have anymore."

“What d’you mean? Man, just let us out. Just that one thing, and we’ll be indebted to you!”

“Zack!” Cloud threw himself against his friend, convinced that he’d gone absolutely out of his head. Didn’t he see how dangerous this man was? Hadn’t he heard the screams? Didn’t he hear the gunshots now? Something was chasing this freak who’d stumbled into their domain, the scientists most likely, and the wise thing was to let them catch him, not to side with the freak who’d be either dead or recaptured so soon. Again Zack shoved him away. Again, he pleaded to Vincent. But Vincent’s attention was elsewhere.

“They’re coming,” he said softly and he stared through the hallway and back towards the front room of the Library. Zack followed his gaze.

“Yeah. Those guys chasing after you, right? You’ve done something, or maybe you’ve escaped, maybe you were a prisoner like us? Man, I don’t know, I don’t care, and I won’t ask about your past if you don’t feel like telling me, but you gotta realize the kinda position we’re in! They’re gonna come through that door any second, I hear their footsteps in the halls--”

Yes, Vincent heard them too. They were furious. The sight of the corpse had pissed them off instead of frightening them. Vincent could almost smell their anger. And he certainly could hear it in their voices.

The gun again, with Dr. Waters’ shouts behind it. They were just outside the doorway now.

“I’ll prove it,” Vincent whispered, and Zack barely heard him. He strained his ears. “I’ll prove it to myself and to her. I can’t face Lucrecia like this, not like this with this doubt in my mind. I’ll prove it.”

“Prove what?!” Zack snapped, teeth grinding with an audible noise inside his mouth.

Vincent took a step backwards.

“That I’m not Hojo’s monster.”

~\*~

Hmm. It got really weird really quick, eh? Huh. Well, yeah, I made Vincent into a vampire and originally that’s what this whole fic was gonna be about but now the vampire thing is sorta just a side-issue. But it’s there nonetheless and Hojo’s going to explain the deal with that very shortly. Umm... but yeah, damn, not sure what to say. Er, Poetry in blood’s just a romp through the gross and I’m having fun writing it (because I’m a sicko that way) and I hope y’all have fun reading it. Next chapter watch the Shinra scientists go for a good old fashioned vampire hunt, see what Vincent does about it (you’ll be surprised), and find out just what Hojo has up his sleeve as we learn the fate of Chet’s sister Sara. Gya ha ha ^\_^ Oh, comments are good too... umm... not sure if I’m being too mean towards Cloud or not. You guys think I’m writing him too crazy-like? It’s kinda fun making him act like such an ass ^^