

FFVII Too Much In The Sun by Glass Shard

Part Six: NOW WAKES THE OWL, NOW SLEEPS THE SWAN



Note: My roommate insists that I slap a SFU (seriously fucked up) warning before this chapter. I personally, don't think it's that bad. Just keep in mind that I am a gore hound and slightly twisted to boot and then proceed with caution.

A strange sensation passed over him, as though he were falling. He didn't necessarily feel wind rushing past his face, only that falling feeling in his stomach, that nauseous, dizzy, butterfly feeling that stretches all the way up the chest and throat. He tried to open his eyes but couldn't. Strange noises came to his ears, ones he couldn't quite place. There was a dripping sound, a steady rhythm of liquid hitting something solid with a pebbly noise. Shuffled feet moving about on a floor. His own breathing sounded in his ears, sounded too loud so he tried to turn his hearing down but found he couldn't.

"Usually in the morning, I'm filled with sweet belonging. . ."

Gods, he hated that song. He remembered in Nibelheim before being altered Professor Hojo would always sing it in the shower, annoying the piss out of him and the other scientists. Vincent had been certain he'd sang it solely for that purpose.

"And everything is beautiful to see. . ."

"Pass me the number 8 razor, please."

Muted colors swirled hypnotically in his vision as he again tried to open his eyelids. So tired. The colors were soothing, like a light display. Maybe he'd slip off back to sleep now.

"Even when it's raining, the sound of heaven singing,
Is simply joyful music to me. . ."

"Neto, I see why you prefer to work with circuits and wires and not flesh. You're hands shake much too much to ever be a surgeon. I guess everyone has a different calling."

That voice. Vincent recognized it, or at least he thought he did. He tried to move a hand up to forcefully open his eyes

but he felt totally disconnected from the rest of his body. He couldn't even feel his face. But he had to see because that voice. . .

Swallowing hard, he summoned every ounce of strength his will had left to offer him and opened his eyes, the glaring white light flooding his vision immediately blinded him.

"Whoops. I forgot about you. Neto, send Mr. Valentine back to sleep, would you?"

Once his vision had adjusted somewhat, Vincent saw he was on his back on a table. He couldn't move his head to see himself, he could only attempt to move his eyes in their sockets. He seemed paralyzed and had to fight down panic. His vision was blurry, everything was a fuzzy shape that moved too much and was too bright and immediately gave him a throbbing headache. Blinking slowly, he moved his eyes to try and see down the length of his reclining body. A figure met his gaze, a curiously-shaped man wearing dark gloves that stretched up to his elbows. They were bizarre gloves, colored bright crimson-- but then no. They weren't gloves. The man stood over him with arms bloodied up half their lengths. Maybe not blood though, Vincent thought, feeling light headed. He clutched shining silver things in his hands, maybe they were brushes, maybe all the red was paint. Maybe he was an artist.

Dizzy and tired, Vincent noticed movement to his right, some other figure doing something he couldn't see. The artist-man moved a bit closer to Vincent's face, peering carefully into his eyes, and suddenly Vincent saw it was Hojo. But that couldn't be. Not Hojo, because Hojo had died thirteen years earlier on the platform of the Sister Ray. It had been raining and Vincent had been with Cid and Cloud and the three of them had cut the scientist down. And Vincent had planted a bullet in his brain. This was a dream then, it had to be. Just another nightmare. He'd wake up soon and find himself alone in his cottage in Icicle Inn, the noise of the chocobos in his ears as they cooed for their morning greens. It would be pure white outside, the white of forgiveness, of redemption, of forgetfulness.

The artist-man backed away from Vincent's face, curiosity satisfied, and renewed his singing, the song erupting from his lips in a cheerful, mumbled voice. The figure to Vincent's right suddenly moved off, task completed. Warm colors mixed with warm blackness snapped at his vision, got a hold of his mind and swallowed Vincent's consciousness quietly. His eyes slipped shut, the artist, the gloves, the dripping, all draining into a soft oblivion.

~*~

Through the feathery brown bangs in her face, Tifa stared out into the rain, sleep eluding her. She'd been battling to grab the slippery stuff for hours but had finally surrendered, too damned tired to fight for it anymore. The clock behind her shouted, "It's three am, retard!" but she simply flipped it the bird and then continued her staring contest with the Shinra building.

The sight of two dark figures outside suddenly rounding a corner and making their way down the street towards her, had Tifa blinking in surprise. Not only was it the middle of the night, but it was still storming quite fiercely out, for there to be anyone outside her window right now was pretty odd. The two men didn't seem to mind the weather, or at least the taller of the two didn't. His shorter, red-haired companion kept turning his face to the sky and mouthing curse words at the clouds. After a minute or two, they'd walked right past her window and down the block to the all night cafe. Tifa'd crept down there a few hours ago to grab a donut but had to creep back when she saw Reeve still inside, on the phone and speaking belligerent Spanish with someone from the Shinra base in Costa Del Sol. She just didn't want to have to talk to anyone tonight. She'd already made an ass of herself with Reeve, letting her feelings of how she thought their rescue attempts were futile slip out. The president probably hated her guts now and she didn't want that. What she wanted, she couldn't have, so she was making everyone else miserable right alongside her. Tifa hated the way her sick little mind worked.

"Reeve! You still on the phone?" Reno asked, entering the cafe like a whirlwind and slapping his wet overcoat on a peg by the door.

"Reno! You still an asshole?"

"Ooh, snippy I see."

Reeve shot his friend a glare and returned to yelling in Spanish at the phone. "Verdad? Pues, es una idiota arrogante, Senor. La compania de Shinra no va a perder. . . Ya lo creo! . . Si. . . Que?! Como se dice? Miro. . . si, manana. Adios." Reeve slammed his cell phone shut, then dropped it furiously on the stained wood of the table he was seated at. "That man, "he said, turning around and eyeing Reno and Rude with red eyes, "That man has got to be the biggest ass to ever come out of this corporation!"

"I could probably argue that statement with you, "said Reno with a grin.

"He wants us to evacuate Midgar, he's convinced this is Meteor all over again. . . what an idiot! People panicking like this is not helping the situation. What's he think I'm gonna do, just leave my building and my employee in the clutches of an alien? Idiota!"

"You're not Spanish, are ya, Reeve?"

"No, but Senor Hape is, and for some unforeseen reason he refuses to learn English. Or he knows it and is trying to drive me insane. One or the other."

The president sighed and laid his head heavily in his hands, looking wearily at his two employees. Crumpled coffee cups surrounded him, as did practically the entire contents of his briefcase. He was trying his damned hardest to convince Shinra's scattered Heads not to panic but the minute he mentioned the name "Jenova" to them, blood pressures skyrocketed and heart beats quickened. No one wanted a repeat of thirteen years ago.

"So what's going on?" he asked Rude, trying to force a friendly smile on his face. The Turk had taken a seat at the table and now stared at him with crossed arms, ignoring his drenched clothes and the water beaded on his bald head and glasses.

"The plan now is we meet here tomorrow morning, oh-eight hundred hours. Miss Marlene and the rest are supposed to bring a revised edition of Dragon Weapon which hopefully will punch a hole in the energy barrier. As I'm sure you've assumed, Cid Highwind has flown to Wutai to retrieve the Weapon from Mayor Kisaragi. He claimed he'd be back by midnight but we've yet to hear from him."

"The storm," said Reeve nervously, "The kids are with him, you know. God, let's not tell Tifa, alright?"

"Don't worry about it," Reno said carelessly, "That Highwind is a goof, but he's a good pilot. He's probably sitting in Turtle's Paradise right now with Kisaragi, trying to see who's a bigger drunk."

"Well, if that isn't the pot calling the ke--"

"Shaddup, Rude."

"I don't know about that," Reeve chuckled, "But there is a good chance this storm has him holed up in Wutai. I doubt he's very happy with the situation. In fact, I'll bet CJ comes back with a few words in his vocabulary that Tifa won't be too thrilled with. But anyway, now we're waiting on him, right?"

"As far as I know. We can't act until that Weapon gets here," Rude confirmed briskly. There was a flash of sudden lightening that made all three men turn about and stare at the street. Almost simultaneously, sheathes of knife-like thunder fell from heaven. "Wicked weather."

"That's the understatement of the year," Reeve said, getting to his feet and stretching his cramped legs. He waltzed towards the cafe's front window and gazed out into the dark street and the blue building beyond. His building. "This is annoying as hell, you know that? Stupid storm. It hasn't rained for nearly a month, and now bang! right when we need dry weather. The gods hate me, I swear. So now all we can do is twiddle our thumbs and wait for Cid while who the hell knows what's happening up there."

"Wanna go to my place and play some PlayStation?" Reno asked cheerily. Rude and Reeve looked at him like he was nuts. "No, really, we can go kick each others' asses in Ehrgeiz or something, take out our aggravation."

"Reno, don't take this the wrong way, but you're juvenile. We big boys don't play video games."

"That's why you "big boys" are always walking around with your shoulders up around your ears. There's no better stress reliever than punching out Yuffie Kisaragi's pixelated face. Technology is a great thing, my friend. Although I'd like to know why the hell they didn't put me in the game."

"I'm gonna go get some sleep," Reeve said, totally ignoring his friend. He turned to Rude and added, "I advise you two do the same. AVALANCE will call when they hear from Cid."

"Want to share a cab?" Rude asked, rising from his chair. Reeve rarely left his office on the seventieth floor, usually sleeping on a little pull out sofa in the back, but when he did, his humble, neglected mansion was only a few blocks from Rude's apartment.

"Thanks but no. I'm going right down the block to that inn. I checked Tifa in there earlier. I honestly don't feel comfortable leaving her alone right now, I get the feeling she'll do something stupid if I'm not here to keep my eye on her. Besides, if I leave the Shinra building, I'll come back and it'll have imploded or something. Or grown fangs and claws and devoured the city. Damned if I know how a seventy-floor concrete box manages to make me so nuts."

Reno had drawn his nightstick and was slamming it in one hand impatiently. Leaning back in his chair he said, "I'm too wired to sleep, Reeve. Let's go do something. C'mon, let's go play Ehrgeiz, I'll let you be Sephiroth."

"That's just sick, Reno. I refuse to play that game. I keep meaning to call the legal department and get one of our

lawyers to sue them for making it. It's almost as tasteless as that role playing game they put out a few years ago. Ugh, some people are so tacky it pisses me off. Anyway, go the hell home and sleep. Or go the hell home and get drunk off your ass, it seems to be your new hobby."

"What?"

Oops, Reeve was letting his aggravation with the situation get the better of him. He put a hand to his face and moved towards the door while Rude shrugged at the questioning glare Reno shot his way. "I don't understand why my sobriety is everyone's new favourite concern. Passel of no-life losers."

Frowning, the president averted Reno's eye and stepped out into the storm, preferring the wind, rain, and lightening to his friend's wrath. The two men inside watched him walk past the window and down the street, hands in his pocket, eyes to the ground.

"One of these days, Reeve and I are going to go at it," Reno said irritably.

"Let me know when so I can be there."

"Yeah, you'll have front row tickets, Turk. C'mon, let's follow him."

They caught up with Reeve half way down the block, the president walking with his head down, eyes on the sidewalk. Grinning like an ass, Reno put his arm around his shoulder obnoxiously, moving a bottle up to his mouth with the other. "Reeve!" he called, raising his voice over the rain, "Wanna have a sleep-over? I've got new pink fuzzy slippers in my back pocket! It'll be fun!"

"What the hell are you talking about?" The Shinra president shook his friend's arm away from him and shot him an "are you crazy?" glare.

"Let Rude and I bunk with you! I wanna be here when AVALANCE shows up tomorrow without Dragon Weapon."

"Would that be a good thing then?"

"Mission-wise it'll suck, but I wanna see how Barret Wallace manages to blame Shinra for it! 'Cause ya know, we do control the weather and all!"

"You're fucked in the head, Reno. Heh. Got any fuzzy slippers for me?"

"You can have Rude's pair. Rude's fun at a sleepover. He lets you paint his head and toenails."

"That's enough."

Without another word, Rude socked Reno square in the jaw with a rock hard fist, sending the man stumbling back a few steps. Reeve looked on in shock as he slumped to the sidewalk, still grinning but doing so through a split lip, eyes sliding shut.

"He was just joking. . . "the president said meekly as Rude hefted his fallen friend over his shoulder and stepped inside the inn they now stood before, rain sliding down his face. "I mean, really, Rude. . . "

Reeve followed him in, nervously shaking water off his shoulders. Walking through the warm hallway, yellow lantern light glinting off his hairless head, Rude turned briskly about and held a half-emptied bottle of Jack towards the Shinra president, which he'd gotten out of Reno's drenched overcoat.

"He's a walking liquor cabinet, isn't he?" Reeve asked with a sniff. Rude pegged the bottle in a nearby bin and sighed quietly.

"Yeah, he is. And I'm getting sick of it. He thinks I can't tell when he's wasted. But I can, he does certain things, acts a certain way, it's like a damned beacon. It doesn't take a lot to send him flying into a bottle. And all the shit that's been going on the past week has him ready to drown in one. He's trying to drown, stupid bastard. But I ain't letting him. If he's unconscious, he can't drink. If he's dead, he can't either. Reno keeps this up, he'll be dead in a year. And I'll have to start eating lunch by myself."

Reeve shrugged, realizing he'd never heard Rude speak so many words all at once. He banged fiercely at a bell on the counter to summon the innkeeper, wishing the rotten day would end. At least he knew he wasn't the only aggravated person in Midgar. It seemed everyone had more than their fair share of problems. Everyone just had different ways of dealing with them.

~*~

With a strange feeling in his stomach, Neto looked down at his hands. He'd scrubbed at them for the last half hour in the lab's cold metal sink, but he couldn't get at the stuff caked beneath his fingernails. Blood. Vincent Valentine's blood.

Gods, I'm going to be sick, he thought faintly.

Black stretched around him. Darkness, chaos, the roar of the storm outside. It pressed against either side of his body like two fat palms. He sat shivering, looking at the thing on the examining table. But then he had to look away and shudder. He'd helped do that.

"Don't look so frightened, this is just a passing phase," Hojo sneered, "One of his bad days." The professor laughed uproariously, tentacles flailing about him madly. He'd shut the lab lights off, and the entire room was cloaked in a blackness that kept Neto shivering. Shivering and scared but grateful too because in the dark, it was harder to see it. That thing he'd helped bring into existence. The young tech was crouched against the wall, as far from the table as he could get. Hojo stood just a few feet from him, gazing off into the dark, carefully cleaning the last of his tools which were laid out on a tiled counter. He swiped a bloody rag at one last scalpel, then stuck it and the rest away in a drawer.

"Well, my part in all this is over. . ." he said softly, not talking to anyone in particular, "I've done what was asked of me. The rest is up to her. Or rather. . . up to them. I wonder if I'll ever use those razors again. Heh." The scientist looked up with a queer expression on his face that Neto didn't entirely know how to interpret. A character-defying blend of regret, anxiety, and fear. He suddenly felt hopeful. Perhaps Hojo was finally coming to his senses. It was a little late for Cloud and Vincent, but maybe the young tech could take advantage of this brief moment of clarity.

"Professor. . ." he began hesitantly, "If you no longer need my assistance, sir, could I maybe. . . could I maybe take my leave?"

"Oh no, Neto my boy. . ." Hojo responded flatly, not even looking at the man, "You're in this now too. You're a part of it. And your hands can never be as white as they were before you entered this laboratory. Attempt to get the blood off. I've seen many men try. But it never fades." Hojo smiled smally, then sighed. "I'm tired."

Turning suddenly, he began moving off towards the back rooms, leaving Neto cowering against the wall. The WDD Head watched him go, cringing at the sight. He'd never even washed the blood from his arms. It was caked there, streaking nearly to his chest. In the frequent flashes of lightening, Neto could see the man rather easily as he slithered off, his tentacles nearly downcast, they dragged behind him lifelessly. The young tech wasn't sure if Hojo was guilty over what he'd done, depressed because the operation was over and he'd been enjoying himself, or wishing that he'd never dragged Neto into the whole mess. The young man was inclined to go with the second choice. Yet, he really didn't know. No use trying to judge the emotions of a madman, he thought darkly. He heard the door to the hidden menagerie open, then shut violently.

And then he was alone.

Alone with them.

Neto picked feebly at his fingernails some more, knowing the time for action was at hand. This could be his last chance to leave that god-forsaken building with his life. If his theory worked, escape would be easy. When the barrier came down, he'd simply haul ass down the stairs, knowing he'd probably run into the rescue team on their way up. He was sure that entire crowds must be gathered around the base of the Shinra Towers, just waiting for their chance to barge in and do their job. At least, that's what Neto figured, that was what he paid frigging taxes for. He thought that then that team could fight their way up here and deal with Hojo, Chieko, and . . . them.

Neto wasn't really sure what was wrong with Cloud. He understood that the man must be devastated over the murder of his children, hell, even Neto himself was still shaken up about that, but he didn't understand exactly what Hojo had done to him. Materia infusion. Even after the professor's explanation, he wasn't too clear on the connotations of the procedure. He only knew that Cloud was in a mako induced coma. He hadn't awoken from it or even showed signs of life. The trembling that had racked his body had subsided a bit, and the green haze that'd seemed to rise from his very flesh was no longer visible. Neto was glad for this, it'd given him the creeps. Not that it was the most frightening thing about the Security Head's sickness. No, that would have to be the fact that Cloud wasn't breathing. At all. He hadn't been since earlier that evening. This really bothered Neto. People that didn't breath were dead, right? So it had said in his health book in high school. Cloud's pulse was strong, fast as hell and strong. But as close as he'd looked he'd been unable to detect even a hint of movement from the man's chest. Trembling, shaking, yes, but there was no rise and fall as there should have been. It was damned uncanny, yet it assured Neto that his escape plan would work. If Jenova was breathing for Cloud, keeping him alive herself, it must take a lot of her power. The creature could only have so much to give and then still keep the energy barrier intact, right? He crossed his fingers and hoped so.

Steeling his courage, Neto tiptoed quietly towards a line of cabinets mounted on the wall a few feet away. Opening one of them, he reached his pale hands inside and pulled out a hulking piece of weaponry. It was heavy and he nearly dropped it, awkward too and he had a hard time getting a good grip on the handle. He'd stashed it there earlier during a convenient moment and now thanked every god he could think of that Hojo hadn't found it. This gun was his ticket to freedom. If only. . . oh Shiva above, would he be able to do it?

Frowning, the young tech hefted the weapon in his hands, gazing down at all 32.5 pounds of it in anxious fascination. He noticed strange slots in the thing and wondered what they were for. What does it matter? he wondered bitterly, Stop stalling.

One hand gripping the muzzle, the other the handle, finger wavering near the trigger, Neto walked slowly towards the center of the lab. He would have to pass Vincent to get to Cloud. He'd already decided who his victim, er. . . no, not victim. He had a hard time thinking of another word. Target. Yes, he'd already decided who his target would be. Cloud was in a seemingly incurable coma. Vincent was merely drugged. So Neto picked Cloud. If for some reason Jenova's power failed and the man he shot did actually die, Cloud was in a coma anyways. He'd probably never come out of it, not with as much mako as he'd been exposed to. Those eighteen empty materia seemed testimony to that. This left that much less guilt on the young tech's conscience. Not that that's going to happen of course, he thought nervously, This Jenova creature has gone to too much trouble to get him here, she won't let him die if she can help it. What I'm doing isn't anything at all. It'll be like in the movies, where the wound just heals up by itself, zippy-quick easy.

The WDD Head was only a few feet from Vincent's table. He was so glad it was dark. But it couldn't hide everything. No, not everything. Again Neto looked at his hands, then brushed them hurriedly on his pants and averted his eyes from the thing on the table. The blue of the electrical barrier showed its faint outline to Neto. A sudden flash of lightening lit him fully, lit the creature in stark shadows, and he couldn't help but gasp and step back, clutching his weapon tighter. He half expected the thing to sit up and stare at him, stare straight into his soul. But it didn't. It only lay there, softly breathing, eyes shut for now. He'd helped Hojo make it. He'd helped. . .

No! he spat to himself, I was forced, I had no choice, he would have had that Chieko monster kill me! I can't go and blame myself for what happened to Vincent Valentine. It's not my fault.

Eyes to the ground, he passed the table, but even there there was no safety. Dark human blood was pooled on the tiles. It had made a constant, steady drip-dripping noise throughout the entire procedure as it had drained from the incisions. Drip drip on the floor. Neto regulated his breathing, trying to keep from throwing up. He took a few more shaky steps forward and was grateful to finally see himself standing beside Cloud. He knew Cloud, he was a coworker, one of the few employees at Shinra who outranked him. Neto'd seen him laugh, seen him with his kids. There was nothing to fear from Cloud Strife. He'd understand what had to be done. Neto's actions were brave, witty, and resourceful. He was about to save all of them.

Steadying himself and taking a deep breath, he raised the barrel of the heavy rifle and rested it on the man's exposed chest, right atop his heart. A shaking finger on the trigger, he looked at Cloud's face, seeing the J there, seeing the strain, the fever, the pain in his features. Gods, he looks so pathetic, Neto thought in slight aggravation, And so damned young though he's older than me! I have to be tough, I have to be strong! This is going to free us!

"Hear me, Mr. Strife? This'll get us out of here. Then you can grab your sword and get revenge on Professor Hojo, just like years ago. It won't bring your kids back, but it'll make you feel better. At least that's how I think it works." Neto looked away momentarily, licking his lips and feeling slightly panicked. He didn't want to die in there. He didn't want to be like those kids, or those guards and just be flung out screaming into the void. Cloud lay there, lines of sweat streaking down his face and chest. God dammit, why isn't he breathing? the young tech snarled.

"Fuck it."

He tensed his muscles, pressed the muzzle of the rifle into the man's sternum and pulled the trigger, sweet freedom on his tongue.

~*~

"Hey, Tifa, you ever wonder about Midgar?"

"What d'ya mean?"

"Aw, I dunno. Sometimes when I'm sitting outside at night, when it gets real quiet and the day noises shaddup for a while, sometimes I think I hear something . . . something, oh, I dunno, bad. Like something foreign buzzing behind all the regular city noises."

"That's it, I'm calling a shrink. Cloud's hearing voices again."

"Heh heh, funny. I knew you wouldn't get it."

"I'm a shallow wench, love, you know that. And you seem to think you're an ancient or something. Hearing noises. A foreign buzzing. . . elaborate O spiked one."

"I'm gonna slug you. . . I just meant sometimes it feels like Midgar's not supposed to be here. It's an old city, ain't it?"

"I dunno, is it?"

"Two hundred years or so, I think. Mayor Domino used to know. A lotta the city's records got burned up in the fires."

"So you think after two hundred years Midgar still hasn't staked it's claim on the land it was built on? Better not tell Reeve that, love."

"Yeah, he's paranoid as it is. Nah though I mean, Tifa, maybe Midgar lost it's claim when we began sucking mako out of the Planet. I mean, we've stopped now, but still trees won't grow for a mile radius around the city. The place is still an ugly scar in the countryside."

"Well isn't that what we're trying to fix? And we're doing it, have faith, farm boy."

"Yeah. . . just sometimes I wonder, if maybe, the city wasn't meant to have a second chance. If maybe we should have learned from Meteor. . . moved on afterwards, left this spot to the Planet so it could heal it. I dunno, just morbid, I guess. . . "

"Yeah, just morbid. . . "

Tifa opened her eyes lazily, the dream slipping away as the blackness of the inn room met her vision. It hadn't been a dream so much as a memory of a conversation she and Cloud had had once. For a moment she thought she was at home, but that fantasy didn't last.

"Ow. . . "

She'd fallen asleep with her chin pressed against the window sill. Tifa rubbed the spot, feeling where the wood grain had left sharp little indentations. She turned and stretched and glared at the clock and wondered if Reno, Rude, and Reeve were still around. She'd watched them enter the inn, Rude for some reason carrying an unconscious Reno over his shoulder. She figured they'd rented a room. Nice to know I'm being babysat, she thought darkly. Eyelids falling halfway over her dry, weary eyes, Tifa turned absently back to the window, noticing it was still drearily raining away outside. It's like they think I'm going to just run out and try to do something on my own, Tifa complained to herself, I am a grown woman. I do know how futile and pointless that would be. I don't exactly want to die. I'd prefer not to, if given the choice, I have a hell of a lot too much to live for. I wish I could tell Reeve that. That I'm not about to just go crashing off through the storm and fry myself against the barrier. Even though every part of wants to. Puh.

Tifa yawned, eyes straying outside towards the Shinra building. Then she gasped, staring like a sheep startled by the rising sun at the sight that met her eyes. Shaking it off, she was out the door like a flash.

~*~

"There's nothing on. . . " Reno sighed, flipping back and forth between the wide selection of three channels on their tv. A test pattern, a nature show about mating chocobos in the wild, and another test pattern. He left it on the latter and stared at it intently.

"What are you doing, dammit? Go to sleep."

Reno watched the colored bars on the screen. "Nah, something interesting's gonna happen. I think I've seen this episode before." There was a nifty buzzing noise that accompanied the test pattern, the sort of buzzing that can make you rip out your ears. "Man, I didn't know this kinda cool stuff came on at night. I'll have to start watching tv more often."

"I think you hit him too hard, Rude."

The Turk mumbled something, his face stuck in a pillow on the floor. Of course, he'd given Reeve the second bed, he was the president of Shinra and obviously needed a good night's rest, and Reno, since he'd been bleeding and unconscious and all, had gotten the first one. If Rude was nothing else, he was logical.

Reno sat up against the headboard, bare-chested and slightly irked. It wasn't so much that his split lip stung as it was boredom. Sitting around, planning, getting foiled time and again by the Jenova bitch, well, the man was ready to kick some ass and take names. Just the first one of those would've done actually. Now he probably wouldn't even get to live that dream the next morning. Who knew where Cid Highwind was with that inane Dragon Weapon? Reno thought it all a rather stupid idea, but he knew they had to try something. They had to get in there. He had to get in there and kill their enemy. Then maybe things could go back to normal. He flipped back onto the chocobo show, got grossed out, and returned to the test pattern. Smiling smugly, he held his thumb on the volume button until Reeve threw a shoe at his head. The test pattern's buzzing filled the room.

"It's got quite a beat, doesn't it?" Reno asked, beginning to tap the remote against his bony knee. He had to get revenge

on Rude somehow. It was just unfortunate that the Shinra president had to be in the room. "Why do they only put the cool shows on at night?" Reeve pegged the shoe's mate at him and Reno swerved backwards to avoid it.

"If you don't turn that god damned television off right now-- "

"Turn it down, Reno. Do you hear that?"

All three men were silent for a moment and Reno hit mute on the remote, a skeptical look on his face. In the sudden silence, they heard the faint sound of a door opening down the hall, then soft footsteps running out of the inn. Tifa's footsteps.

"She could just be using the bathroom, "Reeve said quietly.

"Yeah, sure. The bathroom outside the inn. In the rain."

Grinning, Reno flicked the tv off and hopped from the bed. He threw his black coat over his chest, not bothering putting his shirt on. His hair was down and in his face and he gave himself a once-over in the dirty mirror hung above the cheap, particle board inn dresser. Donning his sunglasses, he nodded at his reflection. Acceptable. Like a flash, he was out the door, immediately shadowed by a jacket-less Rude. With a heavy, tired sigh, Reeve followed, barefoot and cursing because he couldn't find where his damned shoes had landed.

The sound of distant thunder rumbled in his ears as he jogged down the inn hallway. The worst of the storm was over, it sounded like. But then this could just be the eye or something, Reeve thought bitterly, knowing that his rotten luck would allow little else. Brows lowered at Tifa's actions, the Shinra president pushed open the inn door and stepped out into the cold November drizzle.

Reno and Rude were on the sidewalk with their backs to him. Tifa stood in the flooded street, water up to her ankles. They all were craning their necks up to look at the Shinra building.

"Dammit, why does everyone find that thing so interesting? Yeah, it's blue, yeah, it's killed some folks, but get the hell over it people!" Reeve stuck his hands irritably in the pockets of his slacks and then shivered in the winds kicked up by the storm. Teeth clenched, he looked up, following their gazes.

"Oh."

The curling, concealing blue barrier was gone. The raindrops splattered against bare concrete, steel and glass, running down the building's gray side like a million sliding worms.

"I'll. . . "Reeve's voice trailed off in surprise, "I'll go call the others."

Tifa stepped closer to the building, her right hand held out as though to touch its sides. She moved closer to the entrance and climbed the stairs rising from the rainwater, glass crunching beneath her boots. Rain fell upon her, sliding down her thick hair, drenching her thin green jacket but she only brushed the drops from her eyes absently. "No, Reeve. I don't know why it's gone but we don't have time to wait for the others, "she said forcefully, not turning around, "It could come back any minute." Without another word, she'd leapt through the broken entrance doors and disappeared into the dark lobby within.

"Tifa!" Reeve cried out, beginning to run after her. Rude caught the sleeve of his shirt roughly and pulled him back, the president glancing at his employee in surprise.

"Time-and-a-half?" the Turk asked stiffly.

Reeve looked at the man with blank eyes, swallowing hard. But then he smiled weakly and nodded. "Time-and-a-half."

It only took Reno and Rude a minute to dash back inside the inn and retrieve their weapons, the red-haired Security Head grinning like a demon. Then they too disappeared into the hungry blackness of the Shinra building, leaving Reeve to stare after them. A terrible feeling washed over his heart as his towers glared down at him. He shouldn't have let them go alone.

~*~

Cloud awoke only to die.

Neto lay on the floor in shocked stillness. Death Penalty's kickback had knocked him off his feet. The entire front of his shirt was covered in blood, bits of flesh and Cloud's decimated rib cage. His ears buzzed with the noise of the gunshot. Leaving the massive rifle on the ground, the young man stood up shakily, unable to keep from looking at the mess he'd just made.

"Oh, Mr. Strife. . . "

The force of the blast had nearly split the man in half. Neto felt sick and turned away, putting a hand to his mouth. A hand that was dripping red. Oh gods, the stuff was everywhere. He wiped at his pants, stepping away from the table, from the man with the hole where his chest used to be. Neto saw him laying there with his pupil-less green eyes wide open, frozen, locked in surprise.

"Oh, gods. Oh gods. . ." Neto repeated the words over and over until they formed a sort of choked chanting. He looked up, desperate to see anything but red, anything but gore and shattered flesh. The sparkle of rain from outside caught his eye. The barrier was gone. Freedom was at hand. It had worked. Neto half stumbled, half ran from the mako room. His footsteps sounded loud down the hallway leading to the rest of the labs. He was in the stairwell and practically falling down the stairs before he'd even realized he'd started running.

Hojo heard the shot and his head jerked up. He'd been sitting in a small, dark chamber that branched off from the main cage room. The entrance to his space was concealed, even Chieko couldn't get inside. It was dark, dank, and smelled of dripping pipes. Old mildewed books lined the room's walls, stacks and stacks of notebooks filled with his scribbles and notes lay everywhere. There was a small bed against the wall but it hadn't seen much use. Jenova often didn't let him sleep very well. He'd been writing his notes for the day when he heard the noise. Frowning, he dropped his pencil and stood, feeling a sudden pain in his chest.

Chieko was laying in the menagerie feeling sorry for herself and crunching on any roaches unfortunate enough to scuttle her way. She was rather hungry and wishing she'd saved a few of those security guards. She didn't particularly care for the taste of humans but food was food and after thirteen years of feeding herself, she wasn't too picky anymore.

A sudden sharp burning in her chest made the creature look up from her thoughts, brown mako eyes bright in curiosity. There'd been the sound of a gunshot from the labs. Standing slowly, she began making her way towards the door leading out, her footfalls muted on the dirty tiles. She was getting sick and tired of laying around. She wanted her father's plans to hurry and be realized, she wanted out. With her only friend, the mako beast, gone, there was nothing to do but pace about and watch father as he worked, doing things she didn't at all understand. She felt all of a sudden like the older sister who was being ignored for two younger brothers. In a sick, twisted way, this was mostly true. Chieko had neither the intellect nor the strength to interest Jenova very deeply. Even the cells in her body were of a small amount. She was controlled mainly by the fact that she considered Hojo to be her father. The observation that they were both entirely different species seldom crossed her mind. She knew that he did things to people's bodies, perhaps he'd done something to hers. If that was the case, she certainly didn't mind it. She preferred her sleek, massively muscled frame to that of a stupid human's any day of the week. They had to balance along awkwardly on only two legs while she could stretch her four limbs carelessly, always sure of her footing. She knew that she had a brother somewhere, Hojo had told her so once. A brother named Nanaki who had tried to kill her as a cub, insisting she was evil, but father had saved her and cast the wicked creature out, disowning him entirely because he said he loved her much more. Whenever she thought of him now, it made her uneasy. Another brother who had tried to kill her, who had betrayed the bonds of family. She was beginning to get used to betrayal. First Nanaki, then the mako beast. Then Cloud had run her through, a man supposed to be her new "brother". Well, Chieko had had enough of that. If that's how brothers treated their sisters, she didn't need it.

She stood before the door and pushed it open with her snout. Suddenly she felt her father's presence behind her, and one of his tentacles on her back.

"Hold off, Chieko," he said in a strange voice. She glanced back at him but he was staring through the door off into the mako room. She followed his gaze but her night vision saw nothing out of the ordinary. Then a slight movement caught her sharp eye and she froze, suddenly staring.

~*~

Tifa ran as fast as she could. Adrenaline was fueling her strides and she was glad for it. A few floors below her she could hear Reno and Rude puffing along, their steps loud and reverberating against the stairwell's cold walls.

Eleven. The door to the eleventh floor flew past her vision and she swallowed hard, picking her legs up, putting them down again in desperation. She had to get upstairs. She had to get to Cloud.

"Tifa! Wait up!"

It was Reno's voice and she promptly ignored it. He was one of them. One of the many who'd started her and her friends down this dark path of death and insanity thirteen, no eighteen years ago. He'd pushed the button. He'd destroyed Sector Seven. He'd killed Biggs, Wedge, and Jessie. He'd worked for a company that'd made a man who'd killed more people than a plague, who'd nearly destroyed them all. He had no right to tell her anything and she didn't need his help to

free Cloud and Vincent. No, she didn't need any of their help.

Gritting her teeth, she picked up speed, her breaths ragged and tearing painfully from her throat. Dread pressed on her from all sides. She had to hurry.

~*~

It was dark before his eyes. But his eyes were open, that was weird. Cloud frowned deeply, brows lowering black and dangerous over his green gaze. He lifted a hand and rubbed his face, feeling decidedly strange. His body tingled everywhere and his chest hurt. It didn't hurt badly but he knew something was wrong. Dizzy and weary, he tried to take a breath and warm blood immediately gushed from his mouth. He hadn't any lungs to breath out of. Sputtering and trembling, he lowered his right hand and let it drop onto his chest. Only problem was, it didn't drop on to it, rather than in to it. His vision cleared with a snap and he jerked the hand away, feeling as though he'd like to pant but knowing it wouldn't be air that escaped his mouth and nose, just more of his own hot blood. He could feel it bubbling at the base of his throat. What was wrong with him?

He was too scared to let himself look down at his body. He turned his head and stared out the gap in the wall instead, out at the gently falling misty rain. Lightening flashed far away and stung his eyes. It was really starting to hurt now, whatever was wrong with his chest. He gritted his teeth as sweat beaded out on his forehead, running cold down his cheek and over the mark on his face. He touched the mark with his bare fingers, feeling the upraised scar tissue. Soft voices whispered in his mind, the voices of everyone he'd ever known, it seemed. He could make out his mother's voice, his fathers, Tifa's, every friend he'd ever had. CJ and Ifalna's little squeaks were in there too. There were no words, only mumbles of sound and memory that made no sense to him. A tear slid from his right eye, rolling down the side of his face and hitting the surface of the steel table.

He was soaking wet with sweat and something sticky he didn't want to name and the air conditioning blew cold against his skin. Wiping his eyes, he sat up, feet dangling off the edge of the table. With every movement, there came a gushing from his chest and a warm thick splattering onto the tiles below. The pain was nearly unbearable now. But why, what was wrong with him? Steeling his courage, he looked down. He looked at the gaping hole that'd been blown straight through his body.

We all are born in blood and pain.

The sight didn't quite register at first. He glanced quickly behind at the table and saw there was a crater there too, where the metal beneath his back had torn and sunk inwards underneath the force of the shell, crimson pooled in the indentation. Looking back around, he saw a gun on the floor by his feet. Death Penalty. Vincent's rifle. Vincent had shot him.

Slowly, deliberately, Cloud scanned the area around him. There was another table near his but there was only some large, slumbering creature upon it. The man didn't know where Vincent had gone. Perhaps after shooting him he'd fled. Yes. There were bloody footprints leading off out of the room, he could see each one quite well though the lights were off and the room practically pitch. He stood from the table suddenly, ignoring his wound. He could somehow feel it closing and didn't care how this was possible. The healing hurt, burned intensely. He began pacing slowly to put it out of his mind, trying to remember just what the hell was going on. It seemed he'd just woken up after the Apocalypse and everyone was dead. As though he was the last person in the world. This thought brought him a lot of pleasure.

Voices whispering in his head, Cloud approached the other table. Not everything was dead, the thing there was breathing quite well. He gazed at it curiously. The creature was something like eight feet tall, with skin as black as wet tar. Structurally, he was put together almost like a human; two arms, two legs, a somewhat humanly proportioned torso. The face was twisted like a gargoyle's but was quite noble, almost reptilian. Cloud saw small fangs sticking out of its slightly opened mouth. Bat-like wings were folded at its back. He nearly looked like Chaos. Only bigger, blacker, stronger.

Eyes shutting, squeezing the sight of the monster away, Cloud was on his knees as sudden pain tore at him, a white hot sizzling torture that made him cry out. He thought that maybe he'd never been in so much pain, not even when the Masamune had pierced him in the same place years before. Not even during his years as a test subject in Hojo's lab. He couldn't think straight, it bore into his brain, made his arms and legs weak until he was rolling around on his side, fists clenched, arms wrapped around his torso.

And then it stopped.

Panting, yes, he could pant now, Cloud got to his feet shakily, sweat dripping from his chin. He was shaking everywhere, he tried to hold a hand steady in front of his face but the limb wavered and trembled, pale as death, powered by some

energy that screamed to be let loose. Absently he glanced down and saw that there was no longer a hole in his chest. Just a lot of blood that when smeared away revealed whole unmarred flesh. He giggled for no apparent reason, wiping recent tears of pain from his eyes.

"Cloud."

He didn't look up as Hojo called his name. He looked instead at the blood on his bare chest and hands. He swirled the warm, sticky liquid between his fingers, watching it as though it were fascinating the hell out of him. The red he was covered in made his mako green eyes glow that much brighter.

"Cloud, how are you feeling?"

He didn't seem to hear the words at all. The whispering voices in his head spoke just a little louder. So many mumbles all swirling together into one low song. Then screams, two little screams that never stopped. But that was okay, because if they did stop, it was bad, he thought absently, Let them scream, scream forever, never stop. When you stop, that's. . . that's when. . .

"I asked how you were doing, Cloud. Can you hear me?"

He felt so strange. Wiping his bloodied hands on his bloodied pants, Cloud put two fingers to his temple and rubbed. There was a throbbing there, a single ache in the center of his brain. A throb in his chest too, and he could tell it was something different than the recently cured bullet wound. It was a warm dull ache right around his heart.

"Father!" Chieko hissed fearfully. Cloud looked up, seeing the fiery-furred creature off in the darkness. "What's wrong with his feet?"

"Shush, Chieko."

Cloud glanced down and saw nothing out of the ordinary. His boots were neatly tied, though the sole of one was flopping around a bit. He'd have to get himself a new pair soon. There was a pale illumination coming from the gap in the wall and it let some of Midgar's nightlight shine through. The scant light threw Cloud's long shadow out in front of him. He looked at the shadow and noticed something odd. It was more than just the fact that his hair was a mess, sweat soaked, blood-flecked and swept back starkly from his forehead. For some reason his feet weren't throwing proper shadows. After a moment of staring he realized this was because he wasn't touching the ground. He was hovering an inch off of it pretty as you please. He giggled again, lifting one foot, then the other, testing out this strange new phenomenon.

"Cloud, do you remember me?"

He looked up, saw Hojo and frowned, indescribable hatred in his green eyes.

"Yeah," he said quietly, "You're Hojo. That thing's. . . I forget her name."

Kill them.

"How do you feel?"

"Pretty fuckin' weird."

Hojo chuckled, a hint of nervousness behind it. He wished that Neto was there so he could throw the cowardly WDD Head out of the building. Cloud wasn't supposed to have woken up yet. And he wouldn't have if someone hadn't just shot a frigging .50 caliber rifle into him. The scientist wondered briefly how much of the bullet wound had been healed by Jenova and how much by the materia. He knew that her and the Planet's power must be fighting a veritable war inside Cloud's body. They were two contrasting forces caged in one shell with two entirely different ways of doing things. He then wondered how badly it was eating away at Cloud's already grief-weakened mind. Hojo smiled momentarily in sick, sadistic pleasure at the thought. Perhaps he should go find Neto and thank him. Waking up to a gaping hole in his chest probably had only added to the swirling insanity already raging in the man.

"Where. . . where's Vincent?"

Cloud put a hand to his head, suddenly dizzy. He gripped the edge of a counter to steady himself. God, he felt strange. As though every particle of his body had a mind of its own and was trying to break free and skip off. Hojo watched him with one eyebrow raised.

"Vincent's--"

"He shot me. Why'd he shoot me? He musta had a good reason. . ."

"Cloud, he's--"

"I'm gonna kill him. I don't care what his reason was, no one tries to kill me. If I'm gonna die, I'm gonna be the one to do it. Where's Vincent? Backstabbing bastard."

Hojo blinked hard, muttering, "Uh. . . Vincent left." He shot an eye towards the creature still breathing peacefully on the

operating table. He wondered how much longer the drugs would keep it asleep. He had a feeling all hell was going to break loose whenever it awoke. Of course, all hell breaking loose was part of Jenova's plan, Hojo just wanted to be sure he wasn't around when it happened.

"Vincent left. . ." Cloud repeated the words as though saying them himself would make them untrue. If Vincent was gone that meant he was alone. . . and. . . was that. . . bad? The man looked around in confusion, the whispers mounting to moans inside his skull. Their words tickled his synapses, making thinking difficult, making it hard to hear anything, believe anything, remember anything. Hojo saw him struggling and suddenly experienced flashbacks from eighteen years before. Mako had horrible effects on the mind, as he'd discovered with so many of his test subjects. It had made Sephiroth forget his mother and his childhood. It had made Cloud think he was something he wasn't. What was it doing now? Any melancholy Hojo might have felt earlier left him as scientific hunger took its place.

"What do you remember, Cloud?"

The scientist stepped forward suddenly and Chieko had to suppress a snarl. Her father was taking unnecessary risks. She knew how dangerous Cloud Strife was, no matter how hurt he now seemed to be. Though he certainly didn't look dangerous. He glanced up at approaching Hojo with deep hatred, yet with utter confusion, utter sadness in his snapping green eyes. Twin lines of tears rolled from each, dropping pitifully to the floor.

"My son. . . and daughter," he began but could go no further. He slumped to the floor, sobbing openly. Hojo looked upon him in cold curiosity.

"What about them?"

Cloud lay with his shoulders shaking, breaths tearing from his throat for a few minutes, thoughts in a turmoil, voices whispering, that unnamed buzzing power ringing in his ears. An image of the two children flung into the icy void spun in his mind. And those screams. Those screams that had suddenly died away. He clenched his fists against the hurt, feeling like his heart had been ripped from his body. He couldn't breathe.

Hojo frowned at his actions, thinking a sedative might be in order. Hands on his hips, he asked his question again. After a moment, Cloud whispered, "They're gone."

"Do you remember how?"

The man wracked his brain, trying to think, unable to come up with anything but the picture of them falling from his sight. Had something thrown them out? Had they slipped? Had they tripped? He didn't know. He seemed to remember not being able to get at them, he remembered a barrier of some sort, or, or a window he'd looked out of. Everything was so difficult, so fuzzy and unsure. Just that pain was real. The pain of losing them after only just finding them again. He would've sold his soul to stop it.

"I don't remember how. . ." he said, raising his head slightly, stumbling to stand though neither his feet nor his knees ever actually touched the tiled floor. He seemed to remain balanced on an invisible cushion of energy which radiated from his body. "They fell," he said softly, suddenly calm, "They fell from that hole. I-- why can't I. . ."

His voice died away in confusion and another savage fit of crying. But then suddenly, something within him snapped. Gritting his teeth he looked up slowly at Hojo, the scientist unnerved by the intensity of his tear-filled green eyes; eyes without pupils, without a single mark or imperfection to mar the purity of the green. Hojo took a step backwards on instinct.

"I can't remember just what happened," Cloud said in a thick voice, "But whatever it was wouldn't have happened if we all hadn't been up here to begin with. If that bitch cat of yours hadn't taken them to begin with!" Every muscle tensed as a twice-wrapped rubber band, Cloud looked left and right for a weapon. Good Gods above, he wanted Ultima Weapon, but it was no where to be found. Instead, Death Penalty glinted at him from the floor, muzzle still warm. Eyes locked on Hojo's face, he reached for it and slowly hefted it in his yet trembling bloodied hands.

"Now, Cloud," Hojo began, trying to smile reassuringly though sweat was forming on his brow, "You're not thinking straight. You've been infused with eighteen separate materia, you have the power of a god moving around in your veins right now. It's affecting your mind. You're, you're just not quite sane at the moment."

Cloud chuckled, shaking his head.

"I don't know what's going on," he said through laughs, "But I'm tired of it. Do you hear me, Hojo? I'm sick and tired of it. Unless you can produce my kids for me right here, I'm going to blow your head off."

"Blow my head off?" Hojo echoed, laughing himself only his were filled with nerves as opposed to insanity, "You know that won't work. Vincent blew my head off thirteen years ago. See this scar right here, Mr. Strife? You'd be doing nothing more than giving me another one."

"Whatever works."

Barrel aimed point blank at the scientist's smiling face, he pulled the trigger. Of course nothing came out. There was only a mocking click.

"Guns, "Cloud snapped, flinging the rifle away, "That's why I like swords. A gun without a bullet in the chamber is nothing more'n a fancy club."

"Eloquent."

Without another word wasted, Hojo took off for the back rooms at full speed. He didn't consider himself a coward, he considered himself a smart man. And that was why he ran. Not fleeing, he told himself, a tactical retreat. Cloud watched him go with lowered brows, shoving the deep hurt of loss down into the pit of his stomach. His children kept screaming for him to help them. Inside his head, they just kept screaming. He would avenge them. He would avenge them and then he would keep his promise to the mako beast. He remembered that clearly enough.

He winced suddenly as pain shot through him, a numbing throb accompanied by louder renditions of the whispers that had filled his ears since awakening. He wavered on his feet, clutching at his hair and pulling on it in pain. Strands of blonde fell away, slipping between his fingers.

Blue Flare.

Blue Flare? The two words were screamed into his thoughts suddenly. And then, somehow, for a reason he couldn't comprehend, they made sense.

Eyes shining with a madness he no longer cared to fight, Cloud felt his muscles tense, arms raising slightly out at his sides. His feet rose a little further from the tiles, and foreign energy crackled about his body, energy pouring from his own inner spring, one that now seemed filled and inexhaustible. The power rushed dizzily into his head, blasting away all emotional pain, all the tears, the hurt. There was only this nearly tangible power that left him breathless. He had to release it, before it burned him alive.

"Blue Flare!!"

Hojo heard the words and stopped running, turning around and letting the scientific curiosity within gain precedence over his own safety. "Blue Flare. . ." he murmured, eyes bright. Chieko was at his side, urging him to flee and let her handle the man, but he waved her away, watching Cloud as he cast the spell. The very air seemed to reform for him, his bare hands throbbing green as the mako in his blood rose to the surface. A faint smile on his tear-streaked face, he summoned massive coils of blue fire which hovered, flickering at his side for a moment, then shot forward, incinerating everything they touched, the physical embodiments of their master's pain.

"Marvelous, "Hojo breathed, watching the power slide towards him. Chieko pushed him from their path just as they rolled by, burning the walls behind the two into a black soot. Bursting apart into fiery shrapnel, the magic immediately set the debris in the lab alight, and the fires burned an uncanny mixture of orange and bright, blazing blue.

Panting, Cloud lowered his arms, looking down on himself in disbelief. But that emotion soon faded as a feeling of inevitability set in, a deep peace that nearly made him drowsy. This was natural, wasn't it? Yes. Blue Flare. It was his. This power was his, and always had been.

"Hojo. . ." he called in a sing-song voice, stepping forward on his two feet that just wouldn't quite touch the ground, "Where are you, Professor Hojo? Don't you want to see 'how the mako juice is reacting'?" He laughed quietly and began to walk slowly among the flames. Their heat was a part of him, his will had summoned it, so it didn't affect him at all. The warmth felt almost good against his pale, trembling flesh. He held his arms out into the blaze and let the caked blood on his hands smolder away, leaving his skin clean. The burning blood smelled awful. A wisp of it snuck up one nostril and he shook his head in aggravation, like a disturbed mustang. These flames were almost familiar to him, almost horrifying, but a wall in his mind kept too many memories from surfacing.

Hojo was crouched in the doorway of the menagerie, gazing out with barely contained rage at his burning lab. The sprinklers kicked on suddenly, but they could do nothing to quench the magical fires. Cloud walked with one hand to his head, letting the water slide down his chest and back. He stumbled without warning, skidding to his knees, as pain shot through him. To be so powerful, yet be in such pain, it seemed unfair. Countless voices, full-fledged screams now, no longer just disturbing whispers, bore into his thoughts, stripping his mind bare. Colors exploded in front of his eyes, each hue like real fires blazing bright needles of pain into every point of his body. He prayed to go unconscious, to slip away to death if only it would end it. He felt as though he was being ripped apart.

"Hurts, doesn't it?" Hojo asked, stepping from the darkness suddenly. He approached Cloud with slow, cold steps, deep lines across his brows as he watched his precious laboratory burning away. "That is Jenova and the Planet battling for control of your body, Mr. Strife. I know it is not a pleasant sensation, my son when he was younger often told me of the pain. Screamed to me of the pain, actually." Hojo smiled weakly in remembrance, looking away as he put a hand on Cloud's

obliviously shaking shoulder. His other hand was loosely holding a rifle. "Cloud, as he did, you need to learn that you were created with a purpose. These powers were not free. You must pay the piper."

The scientist frowned grimly, stepping back a pace and raising the rifle to get a shot off into the man's exposed neck. He had to keep his little pets reigned in. He had to restore scientific order to the chaos. Eyes half shut with the pain shooting through his head, Cloud looked up at him pitifully, not really comprehending what the rifle was or even able to guess what was going on. Gods, there was only that pain inside of him, that gnawing at his mind, his heart. He clutched his sides, gasping for breath as Hojo fired. The tranquilizer dart entered his throat cleanly but he didn't even feel it. That small sting was nothing compared to the fires inside.

Get up.

Much to Hojo's surprise, Cloud stood, groaning, and plucked the dart from his skin with trembling hands. He threw it irritably into the fires burning all about them, the light of the blaze glowing uncannily on his marked features, the J on his face nearly seeming to slither across his skin like a snake. The scientist stepped back in mild alarm, as instead of keeling over, Cloud seemed to gain strength, coming towards him with malice in his strides. He wasn't holding himself in his pain anymore. Instead that pain flared in his green eyes and he embraced it.

Gut him, Cloud. He deserves to die, he did this to you. He put these things into your body that you don't want. He's caused you this pain.

Jenova spoke to Cloud but Hojo heard it easily, her dark voice ringing in his mind.

"Bitch, "he snapped aloud, letting the rifle fall from his grasp. He swiped at a few stray hairs before his eyes with his flickering tentacles. "You'll have your new puppet kill the old, eh? Exchange the scarred old man who gave you his fucking soul for this green-eyed lunatic? Fickle fickle bitch. We were supposed to go down in history together."

So stupid, Professor Hojo. For all your genius, you are so stupid. Your race has no future. So it has no history. And you shall die like all your kin.

Narrowing his eyes, Hojo shook his head, backing away from the dark mako energy already beginning to crackle at the tips of Cloud's fingers.

"Father. . ." Chieko snarled, padding from behind on silent paws, "You cannot control him. Let me kill him now. Mother Jenova, let me kill this man. You've never given me anything in my entire life, so please, grant me this one request." The beast lowered her head, lips curled and fangs slipping out menacingly. Cloud watched her with a slight smirk on his face, arms tensed and rigid at his sides. His fingers were waving slowly back and forth, green slivers of power stitched between each one. He wasn't sure why he was waiting to strike. He didn't think he needed anyone's permission.

I chose you for a reason, Professor, for a trait in you that I noticed the moment you stepped into the room where Dr. Gast had stored the remains of my physical form: you are easily controlled. It is humorous, my dearest Hojo. You laugh at the unfortunate humans of this Planet because you think you are better than they are. In all actuality, you yourself are simpler to manipulate. I needed only offer you raw power and you jumped at the chance to do my bidding. Sephiroth struggled far more persistently than you, my son. You nearly offered.

"No, "Hojo said calmly, ignoring her words and concentrating more on the deadly energy building up in Cloud, "You need me. You need all of us so that you'll have a group of cells large enough to allow you to manifest as you were thirteen years ago. You can't dispose of me, Jenova. You need me, all of us."

There was a sickeningly cold female laugh suddenly. It echoed off the walls of the burning lab, lingering, playing in the flames."

Is that what you've told yourself all these years? Egotistical human. I need no one. You yourself should understand that well. When have you ever let loyalties stand in the way of you conquering your desires? The pain you caused, people you killed, hurt, broke, they were all nameless casualties in your eyes. My love, you would have made an excellent disease, an excellent virus. Even for a human, you killed like a master. But I now have all the murderers I need. And soon, I shall be whole again. Goodbye, my dearest Hojo. You served your mistress well. Cloud. Ultima Battalion.

Hojo looked on in unadulterated horror as a wicked smile spread out on Cloud's face. Cloud hadn't understood what Jenova was saying, he'd only heard those two sweet words, those words that somehow seemed to complete a hole in his soul. The scientist watched as he let his own power play pleasurable over his fingers. He took a step backwards. But there was no where to go. And Jenova was laughing. Laughing at him.

"Father. . ."

Hojo heard Chieko's frightened voice in his ear. She could only watch as the energy quickly built in Cloud's body, not truly understanding what was happening. Chieko, his only companion for thirteen years, the only one of his creations to ever be faithful to him, to ever love him. Run, he told her, pumping the lone command straight into her mind, Run.

The scientist heard a sudden snort escape Cloud's throat. He saw the man grinning crazily, drunk with his own power. Those moans and whispers screamed in his head, his heart roared in his ears, his flesh tingled. He slowly lifted a full foot from the lab's cold blue tiles and snapped his hands into fists. The still-burning fires illuminated his face in stark oranges and blues as he uttered those two words he found so beautiful.

"Ultima Battalion. Heh heh heh. . ."

The power inside spilt from his chest, forming into a dozen green wheels of pure destructive energy. Each twirled in the air around his head like the blades of a buzz saw, crackling, snapping loudly. And then, with the slightest flick of his will, he sent them hurdling towards Hojo, who could only scream, blinded by their light, listening in horror as Cloud and Jenova laughed at his pain, just as Hojo had laughed himself much too much in his life.

Stairs, stairs, stairs, stairs, stairs. . .

. . . And Neto found he couldn't descend them fast enough for his liking. Even after ten minutes, his ears still buzzed from the noise of the rifle going off in his hands. He wondered absently if the damage done to his hearing was permanent but didn't really worry at the thought. He had to get out of that building. Outside and to some water so he wash the smell and sight of Cloud Strife's blood from his skin. Vincent's blood too, it still was on his hands. It didn't matter that he couldn't see it anymore, it was there all the same. He had to cleanse himself, he had to save them all, he had to keep Hojo from going through with what the scientist had told him he was planning to--

Before he could stop himself, the toe of his left shoe hooked the heel of his right and he plummeted forward, tripping over his own two feet. He cried out as he fell into space and down the stairs, shutting his eyes and whimpering, flailing out with his arms in an effort to break his fall and keep from breaking his neck.

When he landed, it was on something soft and pissed.

"It's only Neto," he heard a voice say. Then he found himself shoved away by petulant arms and looking into Reno's dark cyan eyes. The man's gaze softened once he saw all the blood on the young tech's clothes and face. "You alright? You hurt? What the hell are you doing here anyways?"

The WDD Head jumped to his feet and looked around wildly. Rude was there with a shotgun pointed straight at his head and Tifa was beside him, fists up in an attack stance. Reno, though on the floor, had his glock in one hand and his softly humming nightstick in the other. They'd heard his clattering steps and been anticipating his approach, not sure whether he was friend or foe. Neto looked around, eyeing the stairs leading down greedily. It felt wrong to have stopped running, the only action that'd been keeping him from panic.

"I think the little dweeb's in shock," Reno said, getting to his feet, "Anyone home in there?"

"Dr. Neto," Tifa said with a bit more patience though not much, "What are you running from? What's up there? Are Cloud and Vincent alright?"

Rude lowered his shotgun, sheathing it again at his back and crossing his arms. He watched the young man nearly gibbering, constantly looking back up the stairs as though fearing pursuit.

"Pur-pur-professor Hojo. . ." Neto sputtered, inching closer to the next step, eager to leave, "He's there with, with Chieko and. . . Valentine. . . and. . ." He looked into Tifa's anxious eyes unable to say the last name. Absently, he picked at the dried bits of flesh on the front of his shirt. "Go help them, Mr. Reno, Mrs. Strife, Mr. Rude. Because I. . . I can't. . ."

"Hojo?" Reno asked, eyebrow raised skeptically, "You've definitely snapped, Neto, you're about thirteen years off. That freak's dead as dead as--"

Before he could finish, he swore fiercely as Tifa took off up the stairs, energy renewed along with her dread. At the same instant, Neto began practically falling down the stairs again, movements jerky with fear and guilt and his desire to get the hell outta dodge. Reno looked to Rude who shrugged, eyes hidden behind his shades.

"Neto's like a rat fleeing a sinking ship," he growled, holstering his gun, "Though he has a look on his face almost as though he was the one that sank it. Hmph. C'mon, we can't let Tifa have all the fun."

He took off climbing, black trench coat and red ponytail streaming behind him. Rude frowned but followed, shaking off the foul premonitions humming in his mind.

There was that falling feeling again. He wished he'd hit the ground sometime soon, he was getting bored. Deja vu washed over Vincent's weary mind. Everything before his eyes was dark. Warm, and dark. Maybe too warm. He would have raised an arm to loosen his collar, wipe the sweat from his brow, but he couldn't. He didn't know why, but he couldn't.

So tired. The drugs nipped at his consciousness but he shoved them away in aggravation, wishing he could see. Wishing

even more that he could move. He wasn't in any pain. He felt indescribably odd, but otherwise he felt nothing else at all. He picked his memories apart, trying to recall just where he was. He wasn't in his home in Icicle Inn, that was for sure. He seemed to feel a hard, cold surface beneath his back. He observed this nearly joyfully, glad to find he did in fact have some feeling, he wasn't paralyzed. He impatiently bid himself to calm down. He wasn't in the cages, he was rather sure. He listened closely for CJ and Ifalna until he recalled with a painful burst of emotion where the two children were. This memory made him swallow hard, gazing into the blackness before his eyes and seeing their trusting faces looking to his, feeling so safe after he'd assured them he'd never leave them, that they'd all get out of there together. A waste of a tear fell from one of his sightless eyes. He could feel it rolling ticklish down his face and he cursed himself for his weakness, trying to wipe it away but he still couldn't control his limbs. What was the last thing he remembered? More and more of the past week flooded into his mind as Hojo's sedatives wore off and he could again think somewhat clearly. The last thing he remembered. . . he'd been sitting on the floor of the mako radiation chamber, staring at the muzzle of a rifle. Who'd been the gunman? Hojo, he recalled with almost a laugh, too tired to curse him anymore. He'd shot him with something and then everything had gone black.

Am I dead then? he wondered, muted colors bursting through the darkness before his weary eyes. He supposed he couldn't be, not if he could feel a cold metal table beneath his back, not if--

A cold metal table. An operating table.

Oh, god.

Dammit, no! his mind screamed furiously, desperately, It's not happening again! It can't! He could recall this same dizzy, tired feeling in his head from over forty years before, when he'd first woken up and found himself sealed in a coffin. Sealed alone with nothing but guilt and a self-loathing that had ripped him apart, fresh from Hojo's operating room. His body had been altered, reformed, his very genetic structure played with as though it were nothing at all. There'd been drugs floating around inside of him that'd slowed his heart, slowed his breathing, sent him into a perpetual state of something between waking and dreaming and the years had begun to slide past. And those nightmares. . . those horrors. Lucrecia had screamed in his ears for thirty years, her death replayed before him endlessly and with each repetition there was nothing he could do but watch her die again and again and again, leaving nothing behind but agony in her lover's heart and a silver-haired bundle crying for his mother. Whenever the woman he'd let Hojo murder would leave him in peace, those other monsters that Hojo had cursed him with, they'd clawed at his soul.

So now he'd killed someone else, was that it? Cloud's children, dead because he hadn't been able to save them. It didn't matter that there'd been nothing he could've done, his mind and heart poured blame his way regardless. Another thirty years now. Another thirty years to tear himself to pieces for the blood he'd allowed to be spilled.

Suddenly, his eyes snapped open. He thought they had been open but no, they'd been closed, covered by thick black eyelids that weren't his. And these. . . these weren't his eyes. He found himself looking up at the ceiling of the mako room, the ceiling tiles scorched with fire, beginning to crumble away and reveal the wiring behind them. The lighting in the entire room was wrong, he now noticed, it all flickered with firelight. His eyes showed it to him in the hue of red. Everything was red, as though he were wearing tinted glasses. He heard voices, people moving not far from him. The words were low though and spoken in strong emotions. He couldn't make them out.

A low, pebbly growl rolled in the air. Vincent heard it in alarm, it sounded too close, sounded wrong. Sounded nearly as though it'd come from him. But he couldn't make noises like that, and he wouldn't anyway. A barrage of observations flooded him suddenly. His breathing was too loud, much too loud and feral to have come from a human. His heartbeat as well was beating with a fury that a regular man wouldn't be able to stand. It roared powerful and rapid like a hawk's. For some reason, his head turned and he saw that whatever room he was in was on fire. He hadn't turned his head. And even though he was now hopping clumsily from the table, he wasn't. He wasn't because he had never commanded his body to do such an action. He never commanded himself to roar savagely, loudly, though he now was. Nor did he command himself to begin stretching out the wings at his back, flexing his claws, licking his long black tongue over his lips to moisten them. Even though, now, he was.

The thing that he wasn't walked forward a few paces, staring nervously at the flickering blue flames. Vincent was nearly screaming in frustration. He seemed caged again, when he'd thought he might be free. He could feel a primitive mind somewhere close to his own, though he couldn't read its thoughts. He could only get a vague sense of its emotions. He sensed its lust for blood and shivered. The creature approached the wall, searching for food in the cabinets there. It came upon a drawer full of scalpels and began examining each one meticulously in child-like fascination. The bottom of the drawer they were in was mirrored and as the beast stared at the razors, Vincent stared at his reflection. And felt sick.

Hojo. . . what have you done to me?

It wasn't a human who returned his stare. It was a horned, blackened devil gazing at the man trapped inside with

Vincent's own blood red eyes. It spread its wings and roared.

~*~

The force of the spell sent Hojo flying backwards. Sharp pain seared him as each wheel sliced into his flesh. He attempted to arch his body away from the shots but his efforts were feeble. He felt his skin ripped open, his own hot dark blood spilling out. He turned his head spasmodically as he lost an arm, the mako power slicing it clean, almost surgically from his torso. His tentacles were ripped away, separating in showers of crimson. A blunt bundle of magic grazed his head and blackness crowded his vision as laughter soured his ears.

Chieko saw him hit the ground in a wet heap but was too scared to approach. He skidded for a few feet, leaving a trail of red on the tiles. The creature turned to Cloud, wondering what he'd do next, watching her enemy through black slits for eyes.

Cloud stood still and staring for a few minutes, dizzy from casting such a powerful spell. Blinking hard, he looked down on himself, realizing he was nearly three feet above the ground. He hovered there in utter confusion, until he began to sink again, slowly, the energy retreating from the air and back into his body. He'd begun to be able to think clearly, if only for a second, but now the power of the Planet, of materia, and of Jenova that Hojo had infected him with, as it all regathered into his skull, the pounding pain resumed and he fairly tore his hair out in agony. Whispered voices assaulted him, and his eyes burned with green fire. The flames around him gathered closer to his trembling body, as though desiring to consume their master. He wished that they would.

The sound of a roar made him look up and attempt to focus on something real as opposed to the pictures and words in his head. There was something moving in the darker corner of the mako room, its form obscured by the fire flickering between it and Cloud. The man realized it must be that creature it had seen earlier on the table. A wavering smirk on his lips, he took a shaky step forward, the room grown suddenly silent except for the sound of the fire and his own rapid breaths.

"Who are you?" he asked in a voice choked with sobs. The sound of his own voice frightened him, it sounded so weak, so unsure compared to the power he could feel coursing inside of him. But did he feel so godly? He wasn't sure. No, he felt like a sniveling human who'd been given something he couldn't quite handle, given something he didn't really want. What he had wanted had been thoughtlessly snatched from him. His fists clenched, his fingernails digging into the soft flesh of his palms as CJ and Ifalna flooded his mind. The pain raged in his heart until he could barely breath, combining with the supernatural pain of fighting forces already tearing him to pieces within. The two churned and jabbed him repeatedly, until he had to smear the tears away from his eyes just to see straight.

"Who are you?" he asked again, his voice nothing more than a gasp, "Are you something else that wants to steal from me? What do you want? Do you want my life? It's all I have left." He laughed, clutching his head and sobbing, "It's all gone, all taken from me. I . . . I should've known, should've realized I wasn't a man who was meant to be a father before I even made the attempt. I put them through all this suffering, it was me. Why didn't I realize it before I married Tifa? I'm cursed, cursed to be the Planet's whipping boy until one day it beats me to death. I could've gone down alone, not hurting. . . not killing anyone else. But no! I had to drag Tifa and my children down with me. Oh gods! how she must hate me! Tifa. . . my love. That love's dead now. How could she love the man who killed her babies? If I-- if I wasn't who I was, if I hadn't done what I've done, that beast would have had no reason to take them. It's as she said, just as she said. All of it's my fault. . ."

The world swam before Vincent's eyes as the beast moved forward. He felt so dizzy, but he wasn't sure if that was the aftereffect of the sedatives or something else. He was so uncertain of everything. He didn't even know if he was really awake. He seemed to be living a nightmare that he'd often had, one where he became Chaos but could not revert to his human shape. He tried now, though he'd never had to actually try before. Chaos quickly tired whenever uncaged and usually relinquished control to Vincent after long enough, the man had never had to attempt to snatch it away. Such a thing would have been impossible anyway, he was always unconscious and oblivious whenever in the form of the demon. He didn't know how to fight it. He wasn't even sure if this was Chaos that he seemed to be trapped in. He didn't even know what the creature really looked like, he'd never seen himself as such with his own eyes.

"Do you want to fight? Is that it? Do you want me to kill you too? Apparently it's what I do best."

Vincent thought he recognized Cloud's voice. Chaos, he would think of it as Chaos until something told him different, moved forward but wouldn't look at the owner of the voice directly, staring instead at the burning orange-blue blaze around them. He didn't know that it was orange and blue though, everything filtered to his brain in monochromatic shades of red.

Chaos stepped forward a few more steps, looking up sharply with his gargoyle face as Cloud suddenly laughed, an insane chortle that soured the air. Vincent wished he could shut his eyes against the sight, his ears against the sound. But his senses weren't his to control.

"C'mon then, ya ugly bastard. You wanna go? Let's go."

Mako green eyes flaring, the mark of Jenova stark on his pale face, and his brightly blonde hair swept back from his forehead, Vincent thought Cloud looked like a monster. A murdering madman. And that's what he is, isn't it? That's what they've made him.

Some inner sense told Chaos that the strange man before him wasn't an enemy. Vincent could feel calmness, more like patience wash over the demon's mind. It approached Cloud slowly, red eyes never leaving the man's torn visage. It offered a friendly claw towards him. Cloud glared down at it with a sneer.

"What the hell do you think you are?" he asked brokenly, "Ya look like a refugee from a bad sci-fi paperback. Get your fucking claw out of my face before I tear it off. . . ." His voice died away into something like a moan as he slumped to his knees, holding his head and muttering curses. Vincent looked upon him with concern as Chaos dropped its claw and stared. He tried to ask what was the matter, but if the demon had any vocal capabilities to begin with, they certainly weren't accessible to him. It seemed all Vincent had to work with was his mind. Maybe that would be enough.

What is it, Cloud? What's the matter? he called, trying to keep his own fears from his inner voice, trying to keep it strong, calm, and anchoring. Chaos shifted uneasily at the sound but did nothing, standing by and waiting to see what the man on the floor would do.

"Vincent. . . ?" Cloud mumbled, blinking hard, blinking away pain and grief so that he looked up with blank eyes, "Where are you?" The throb in his head was like a chisel, chipping away, chipping away at reality.

Hojo's done something. . . something to me, I don't understand what. I don't intend to stay like this for long. I swear it seems I leave one cage only for another, heh. The laugh was a slightly unhinged one and Vincent tried to concentrate and stay focused. His words were rather unspecific and lost upon Cloud, who only continued looking around for the source of the voice in his head.

"Why did you shoot me?" he asked suddenly, fingering his healed chest, a dangerous tone creeping into him.

What are you talking a--?

"I woke up with a damned hole through me and Death Penalty on the ground. Don't act innocent, Vincent. Don't lie to me. Why? Why did you try to kill me?"

Cloud, I didn't--

"Is it because this is all my fault? My fault that Hojo brought you here? You were chasing my kids, weren't you? Yeah. I can understand. I can't blame you." Cloud looked down at his feet, a hand to the side of his head absently, rubbing his temple with shaking fingers. He felt suddenly cold despite the fires raging around them. The pain seemed to be dulling a bit, leveling off into an emotion he couldn't explain. "I'm sorry, but I killed Hojo already. If I'd known you were still around I woulda saved him for ya. Ya know, like I did years ago. I knew when we were up there on the Sister Ray, after hearing you argue with him, I realized then how he was the one who'd stuck ya down there in that basement. You never were too open with information in those days, Vincent, I more or less had to infer everything. Why should you have shared with us though? We were just some strangers who'd come along and spoiled your penance, dragged you back into the fray. I did it to ya again though. You were fine and happy and healed in Icicle Inn and now you're stuck here 'cause of me."

Chaos began to move away, bored by the conversation, but still Vincent spoke, a chill in his soul at hearing his friend's self-loathing. I chased them for myself. Not for you, for them and for me, Cloud. You are my friend, you and Tifa have been since you risked your lives freeing me from my prison thirteen years ago, but I don't come to Midgar to see you. It was always to see CJ and Ifalna. In this evil existence, children are the only things worth protecting because they are the only ones with fresh chances, with lives that haven't yet been tainted by the wickedness of the world. We are nothing compared to them. I chased after your children that night because I realized that long ago. I don't regret it. I only regret that it was they who had to fall and not I.

"They're dead and the Planet's just gonna keep spinning, isn't it?" Cloud asked, either not hearing Vincent's words or ignoring them, "The murderer's gonna get away with the crime. Dontcha see, Vincent? It was the Planet, the god damned, grinning, spittin' in my face alla my life Planet." Grinning, with a look on his face as though he was listening to something, he wrapped his arms about his bare chest, squeezing as though trying to keep himself together. "Yeah, yeah. Heh, it sent that mako monster out to kill em, the Planet did, life did. It tried to kill us. Big mistake. . . 'cause I'm, I'm tired of being screwed with. It thinks, the Planet thinks that life's just gonna go on? It thinks the sun's gonna just rise again and people will wake up to their happy little lives?"

Cloud's head snapped up, giving Chaos a quick glance, then he moved towards the glaring hole in the wall. He climbed the rubble at its base until he was standing at the very edge of the precipice, looking out onto Midgar and into the sky. The first traces of dawn were on the horizon, though most of the morning beauty was concealed by the thick thunderheads still polluting the heavens. Rain was drizzling down but the bulk of the storm was moving away. A few lingering sheets of lightening flickered distantly, but the thunder was gone. It knew something that the scrabbling humans didn't. It knew something that was making it retreat.

Wiping his eyes roughly, Cloud took a shaky breath, observing the skies. Vincent watched him through Chaos' eyes, cursing the cruelty of fate, feeling so helpless he wanted to tear himself apart. But he had nothing. No control, no hands to rip anything apart with.

"You see that?" Cloud asked, gesturing loosely to the pre-dawn sky, "It's beginning already. Vincent, Jenova says I should kill every last sonuvabitch down there. She says this is all their fault." His words weren't violent, but instead were suddenly sad. He began to cry again, shoulders shaking slightly, "I don't want to! But Vincent, I-- I don't think I have a choice! It just hurts so bad, everything does. . . losing them and, and this something buzzing around inside of me. This damned power! I have to let it out and Jenova says I should use it to avenge them. Avenge us! I'm dead. . . Cloud Strife is a dead man, a memory. But he'll be avenged."

Chaos approached him slowly, attracted for some sick reason by the tone of his voice. The man inside him fairly screamed out, tired of cages, tired of control. And tired of seeing the people around him suffer while he could only stand idly by. Don't listen to her! Never listen to Jenova! She's a liar and all she'll ever tell you are lies! He couldn't keep the anger from his voice anymore. Vincent fairly roared his words. Don't let her make you into someone you're not! Remain as Cloud Strife, hero to an entire Planet, a father, a husband, a man to be respected. Don't let her make you into a murderer!

Vincent lashed out, trying to overpower Chaos, trying his damndest to become human again. But no, because of Hojo, he was watching another friend die before his eyes.

"Look at that," Cloud said in a calm voice. His eyes were still turned up to the sky, watching the spreading blush of dawn attempt to dissolve the rain clouds. "The Planet shouldn't be so beautiful. Not. . . not if my kids aren't here to see it." The man took his hand from his head finally, the hurt there leveled off, the conflict within finally resolved. Pain burned over every inch of him but now he found that pain was something he wanted. It helped him think. Think about things that really mattered. "See that sun, Vincent?" he asked softly, smiling in anticipation through his tears, "It's not going to rise over Midgar today."

~*~

"God dammit, Tifa! Slow the hell down!"

She could barely make his words out through the huff in his voice. She would have yelled back that Reno could go take a flying leap but she knew her own voice would be no better. She felt nearly ready to collapse from exhaustion, her lungs bursting. Speech would have been a waste. Still, nearly there. Only a few floors away from a reunion with the only man in her life who meant anything to her, who she'd go to hell and back to save.

Hojo's up there.

She snorted as the stupid name jammed into her thoughts. Dr. Matsuo Neto was about as stable as a trapeze act in a hurricane. She wasn't about to get paranoid because he was delusional.

Sixty-Six! The numbers blurred past her eyes, blocky, black, promising. Two floors to go!

Reno saw the numbers and tensed, gripping his nightstick tighter. He could feel a smouldering battle fury beginning in his chest, one that had had a week's worth of fuel to feed off of. He'd wanted to make something, anything, pay ever since he'd heard that the little Strife kids had been kidnapped, ever since he'd had to see that look on Cloud's face. Something needed to atone for that. Something needed to be beat to a bloody pulp for it.

"Are you ready?" he heard Rude ask in his ear. Reno nearly snorted. Man thought he was leading a Turk raid.

"I'm extremely ready," he answered, just as the door to the sixty-seventh floor flew by. He put a hand out, grabbed the railing and swung himself around the bend in the stairs eagerly. He saw Howard's broken, bloodied face in his mind and nearly growled. He saw those sixteen body bags, lined up in a row on the sidewalk like loaves of black bread on display in the bakery and felt hot ire bubbling inside him. Jenova was gonna pay. Red could take his "natural force" theory and shove it up his ass.

"Reno."

The man snapped his head about and grinned. He'd nearly passed the sixty-eighth floor right up. He jerked to a halt and saw Tifa with her hand already on the knob, Rude with his shotgun drawn and ready. He flipped the electrical current into action on his nightstick, a thin blue line of electricity forming between the two silver prongs at its tip.

"Dammit, it's hot!"

Tifa drew her hand back gingerly off the doorknob, shaking it violently.

"Hot?" Rude asked, testing it for himself. He grimaced when it burnt his bare hands. "There must be a fire inside. Be careful." Wrapping his hand in the loose flap of his jacket, he turned the knob, inserting his key card at the same time. The door swung open silently, sending a blast of hot air into the three's faces.

The entire hallway was in flames. The sprinkler system was doing its best to extinguish them but Tifa saw with alarm that the fire was a magical one, one that wouldn't quit until it had burned out on its own. The flames flickered in eerie shades of neon orange and blue, throwing weird shadows on the walls. She stepped forward carefully, one gloved hand shielding her eyes. The two men flanked her, only a step behind.

"This is bizarre," she heard Rude say, "I've never seen fire like this."

"It's from a spell," Tifa remarked calmly, "Nibelheim looked like this when it burned."

Rude raised an eyebrow at her composure. She didn't even waste a second to look behind, but rather walked forward through the raging blaze, steps measured and even. Her eyes were on the end of the hall, staring unblinking at the door there through the heat haze.

"The old labs are at the--" Rude began.

"I know." Tifa cut him off sharply. After a minute or two the three stood before the rusted old door, staring upon it with sober eyes. They all had memories of the place. None of them were good ones. Tifa looked to Rude and he nodded, pulling out his key card again and inserting it in the slot in the wall. The old door cooperated, sliding open and revealing a veritable furnace. Tifa had been right, it seemed. Vincent and Cloud were trapped in hell.

"Can we get through this?" Reno yelled over the blaze, putting a hand on her shoulder that she immediately shook off. Scowling, she shot her eyes towards her right hand, where she'd strapped her Premium Heart. A few materia twinkled in the slots there. Not many, because the mako board had confiscated most of her stash years earlier, but she'd managed to secret a few away. She ran a finger over two orbs, blue and green, embedded there side by side. Without an answer to Reno, she whispered, "Wall" and a translucent field immediately shimmered into existence around the three of them.

"Yeah, I guess that'll do it. . ." Reno admitted.

Tifa ignored him and stepped through the door, the magical fires crackling against her shield spitefully. Rude and Reno followed, each man surveying the mako room carefully. The place came to their vision in a strange mixture of pitch black and bright vibrant orange/blues, keeping their eyes from adjusting properly. Blinking hard, advancing cautiously, Reno could make out rubble and debris scattered all about, chunks of wall and ceiling that rolled constantly underfoot. He saw blood on the tiles, a lot of blood around a steel examination table which he practically walked into, bruising his side. Ugh, then he saw the other table, and the rifle blast that'd made the entire thing implode in on itself, the crater in the middle pooled with shining crimson. He was beginning to get a really, really bad feeling in his gut. He touched Rude's sleeve and his friend glanced over towards the sight, frowning.

"Cloud!"

Both men looked up sharply at the sound of Tifa's voice. She stood a few feet off, glaring intently at the hole they now saw in the rear wall of the room. A man's figure was silhouetted against the turquoise glow of early morning visible from outside.

"That's not Cloud," Reno found himself muttering, "I don't know why, but it just ain't."

"Sure as hell looks like him. But then, you're right. No, it doesn't." Rude gripped the stock of his shotgun, moving his other hand towards the trigger and walking forward. Tifa was already only a few steps from the man but he didn't turn around. Reno could hear him mumbling to himself, speaking in an insane lilting rhythm that made his skin crawl.

"The sun ain't gonna rise today. I'm not gonna let it. It won't rise if they can't be here to see it. Jenova's right. As wrong as it is to admit it, she's right. I don't want to be a human if I have to fight and live on this selfish rock. It took them, took 'em after all I've done for it. Oh gods, it isn't fair. It's my fault and the Planet's fault and it isn't fuckin' fair."

Tifa looked with horror at the figure before her. A figure so strong it made him weak. He stood there blazing with power but he clutched at his sides in such agony that it broke her heart. It was her Cloud, her very own love, her other half. But he was different, she now saw. He was almost another man, almost a stranger.

"Cloud?" she breathed timidly, barely daring to move another step forward when only minutes earlier she'd thought

she'd have to fight to keep from clutching him tight the moment she saw him. Now she didn't know what to say. He turned to her slowly and she gasped. She gasped for fifty different reasons. She wanted to run forward and rip the mask off of this impostor, rip off the burning red J, the matted hair, the bloodied face, the insane smirk. But most of all those green mako eyes. Because those weren't the eyes she had fallen in love with. These were something else.

"I'm sorry," the stranger said quietly. The tears rolled down his cheeks as he glanced briefly into her face but then turned back around towards the sky guiltily. Without another word, he threw himself out of the building. Tifa nearly lunged after him but a strong arm around her waist held her back.

"Cloud!!" she screamed out, crumpling onto her knees. Her eyes wouldn't leave the spot where he'd been standing and after a few seconds, they were rewarded. Reno's arm slackened around her waist in surprise as his partner suddenly reappeared. Cloud was encased in a shell of crackling blue energy, not unlike the barrier that until only so recently had surrounded the Shinra building, his chin sunk into his chest, arms still wrapped protectively around his trembling frame. What really shocked Reno though, was the fact that he was more or less hovering in mid air. The position was one he held unconsciously, he was exerting no real pressure to remain suspended in the sky. He moved higher and higher as the three of them looked on, mouths hanging open, leaving their view as he disappeared above the building. Tifa stumbled desperately to her feet and grabbed a pipe sticking out of the wall, leaning far out into the whipping wind to follow his ascent with her eyes. Even then, he soon disappeared from her sight, moving far overhead at an incredible speed and melting into the darkness.

"Cloud," she whispered sadly, "Don't you realize who you look like? Don't you see?"

"Tifa, what the hell's wrong with him?"

The woman turned slowly around to confront Reno's confused gaze. She shook her head, tears welling up in her eyes, clenching and unclenching her fists in helplessness. Her own words were coming back to her. It all was futile. It could never be the way it was again. She'd been right, but the knowledge was no comfort.

A sudden black shape appeared from the shadows, brushing past her blindingly and hurling itself after Cloud. Tifa turned abruptly but only got a glimpse of a pair of blood-red eyes. She gasped at the hostility within them, but then her features softened as something else cried out behind the anger. Something familiar, something writhing in even more helplessness than she. "Vincent," she breathed, not knowing how but somehow feeling his presence.

The sound of a shotgun shattered her thoughts and suddenly Rude was at her side ready to fire off another round at the black beast already quickly disappearing into the dark sky. She knocked the barrel off target just as he pulled the trigger, and the shell sank harmlessly into the wall. The Turk glared down at her questioningly.

"Don't ask me how, but that was Vincent. C'mon, we have to get back downstairs. I think. . . I think Cloud believes that CJ and Ifalna weren't saved when they were flung out of the building." A tear slid down her cheek at how such a thought must be hurting him, and she wished she'd realized it sooner so she could have told him. "We have to, I have to tell him the truth. Then he'll be okay, I'm sure of it."

"Yeah, well I'm not. Didja see his eyes? I don't care how broken up he might be, something's screwing with his head. And something's inside him, giving him all of those powers. Unless of course, Cloud's always been able to fly and I've just never gotten him drunk enough to be able to see it."

Tifa glared at Reno who glared right back. "Fuck you," she snapped, eyes blazing angrily, "You don't know anything about him, or us. You're just a stupid Turk with the emotions of a damned statue. Outta my way."

"Oh, so the truth comes out!" Reno said mockingly, stiffening when Tifa shoved his shoulder and began walking back to the door through the flames, "Seems we have another little Barret Wallace in our midst, holding grudges and blaming Shinra for the woes of the world. I've just been waiting for you to say something. What I did happen thirteen years ago, girlie, and you need to get the hell over it. I was doing my job!"

"That's always your excuse. But it doesn't mean anything. Nothing except that you're too damned cowardly to apologize and admit to your mistakes! Blame Shinra, blame the Turks, blame Tseng for giving you the order! Blame anyone but Reno, isn't that how it is?"

Tifa had stopped in her tracks and whipped around to face him. The words she spoke came straight from her gut, she'd just never felt desolate enough to speak them. Reno stood with clenched fists, gripping his nightstick so tightly he could feel it's electricity humming all through his arm. "You want an apology?" he asked lowly, "Then you can dig up President Shinra and ask him for one. Because I got nothing on my conscience."

"Oh, children. . ." Rude called calmly, "We have a little friend over here." Tifa and Reno snapped about at the sound of his voice. He stood back in one of the darker corners of the mako room but they couldn't make out his face through the heat haze thrown up by the fires. Ignoring Tifa, Reno stalked towards him, feeling the wall still up around his body

beginning to buckle under the heat of the magical fire. He gave it only a few more seconds until it dissipated completely. Luckily, with its master gone, the flames were beginning to die down and the still raining sprinklers were having some effect.

Reno saw Rude standing over something dark and feebly twitching. He approached cautiously, though his friend seemed rather unafraid of the thing at his feet. He felt Tifa just a few paces behind him and frowned, wishing he'd decided to take his vacation that week and miss out on all of this shit.

"He's rather busted up," he heard Rude saying.

"He?"

"Oh my god. . ."

Reno looked to Tifa as she whispered the words, then looked at the thing on the ground, squinting to make it out in the weird firelight. He realized why she seemed so upset. Professor Hojo was lying there on the blue tiles of his lab, something between pain and elation on his face.

"Guess Neto's brain wasn't fried after all," Reno said, nearly laughing in shock. The thing feebly tried to lift its head and he saw a grin on the scientist's twisted features. He certainly didn't know why it was grinning. Hojo was missing an arm, had cuts in his torso that had practically sliced him in half, and was just generally surrounded by a widening puddle of his own dark blood. There were a lot of dismembered tentacles on the floor around him, and they wriggled in the way that a lizard's tail wriggles after being severed from the body. Reno looked down at his shoes, careful not to step on any of them.

"Well, good morning to you."

Reno nearly laughed again, this time at the just plain craziness of the observation. Hojo looked up at him with agonized eyes and a delirious smile on his face. Blood streaked over his lips.

"You'll have to forgive me for not being a better host. My old lady seems to have run out on me."

Tifa had never fainted in her life. It was something she rather prided herself on. But after seeing the man she loved fly off into the sky and then only minutes later seeing the mangled body of a scientist she'd thought dead for thirteen years cheerfully leering up at her from the ground, well, suddenly she found her knees buckling, her head swimming, and before she knew it, she was on the floor. Reno heard her go down with something like a sigh escaping her lips.

"Shiva be praised, do I look that bad?" Hojo asked weakly. Rude frowned and placed a foot on the scientist's chest, pressing down ever so slightly. Hojo gave a stifled cry, clenching his teeth against the shooting pain that accompanied the action. Reno stuck a quick two fingers to Tifa's pulse and decided he couldn't wait for her to wake up so he could antagonize the crap out of her for passing out.

"What's been going on up here?" Rude asked, pressing harder and harder on Hojo's chest, right atop a gushing wound that sent blood up over his shiny dress shoes.

"Well, nothing much, I suppose," the scientist gagged, shutting his eyes and fighting to stay conscious, "I was just tying up some loose ends, taking care of some business for my boss. I had work to complete from years ago. It's done now. And then some. Heh."

"Stop speaking in riddles, you loopy sonuvabitch," Reno growled, brandishing his nightstick, "What didja do to Cloud?"

"I'm a little short of breath to go into a lecture now," Hojo said slowly, "But all you really need to know is that Mr. Strife is now more mako inundated than the mako beast ever was. I would be careful going too near the man. . . heh heh, could be hazardous to your health."

"I'm sick of this conversation already. He's not gonna tell us anything. Ya know, I've never liked you, Professor. Not when you ordered me around years ago, not when you offered to remove these scars for me. Never. Hearing that you'd wiggled out and gotten yourself offed seriously did not bother me at all. It was almost a relief actually, I was sure I'd never have to see your ass ugly face at company meetings again." Reno flipped a few strands of hair from his eyes, looking bored. "Maybe that's why this conversation just isn't holding my attention. How 'bout you, Rude?"

The Turk shook his head and raised his shotgun in line with the scientist's face. Hojo looked up the barrel of the weapon, still grinning, sweat and blood pouring off his brow. "Professor Hojo, I do hope you're not too disappointed when we tell you we're not impressed by the fact that you're still alive," Rude said quite calmly, quite politely, "Because it is very easy to remedy such a situation. Shall I, Reno?"

"Blast him back to hell."

Hojo laughed as Rude's finger began to draw the trigger back. "No, gentlemen," he said through chuckles, "This world is the hell. But I'm not ready to leave it yet."

A flash of red appeared from the shadows, bowling straight into Rude with incredible force and an ear-shattering roar.

The Turk cried out as the shotgun was knocked from his hands and he flew backwards with something heavy on his chest. He opened his eyes and his vision was filled with fangs and a pair of brown mako eyes. Reno felt one of the thing's hind legs knock him a sucker punch in the stomach and the air whooshed from his lungs painfully. His legs gave way beneath him like a folding easel and he hit the ground, clutching his sides.

"Rude!"

He saw his friend beneath Chieko's claws, crying out as she raked his face and chest. The man squirmed out from under her and launched a savage kick into her jaw, sending the spittle flying from her lips, glinting brightly in the firelight. Blood dripping freely from his wounds, he scrambled for his weapon but Chieko was on him again in a flash, biting into his shoulder and picking him clean off his feet. Rude cursed in pain as she shook him violently in her jaws, then flung him away into the fires like a discarded doll.

"Rude, hang on!"

Reno was on his feet in an instant and moving towards his fallen friend. Chieko saw him and growled lowly, licking the fresh blood on her jowls and remembering how hungry she was. Tail flickering in anticipation she leapt between the two men and eyed Reno wickedly.

"What the hell are you?" he asked, drawing his pistol, "You ain't that "Cheeko" thing, are ya? You're about as ugly as the kids said you were. Huh. Where are the rest of the Marx brothers, eh?"

"Shall I kill him, father?" she asked, never taking her eyes from the man.

Reno heard Hojo coughing and then his weakening mumble. "Yes, Chieko. Kill them all."

~*~

He was so cold. The tips of his fingers and toes stung with the chill of the wind. Gods, why did it have to be November? He clutched his shirtless chest, laying his cheek against his own chilly shoulder, bending his knees and folding his legs beneath him. The icy blue air stretched all about his body, that rich brilliant blue of dawn that only lasts for a short while before the sun rises and blasts it all away. Watching the sky, he shivered as Jenova whispered nearly inaudible things into his head. She made him look around, look down on Midgar, leaving the calm of the sky behind. She didn't need her weapon calm, she needed him raging.

Cloud saw the Shinra building directly below him, stretching down to touch the ground as though it owned every life in the city. He wasn't sure how he could be looking down upon something so tall, was he in the Highwind? Blinking against the wind in his eyes, he guessed he wasn't. He guessed that somehow something was keeping him up. He felt the buzzing of energy coursing through his limbs, an energy that throbbed achingly with every beat of his heart. It throbbed cold, not helping his shivering. He could feel it building up inside of him again, crowding out his own thoughts and replacing them with the horrible whispering, mocking voices. He forlornly wondered where Vincent had gone. He thought he'd heard him earlier. But no, maybe he hadn't. Jenova said he hadn't anyway, and he was too tired and too hurt to argue with her. He distractedly saw that black, horned creature from before out of the corner of his eye. It was swooping gracefully far below him, in search of prey.

The Shinra building caught his attention. It was glaring at him almost. Floodgates opened and Cloud remembered all the things that had happened involving Shinra. Hell, everything, nearly all of his life had revolved around the company. SOLDIER and Nibelheim and the army and Hojo and Sephiroth and the experiments. They'd taken so much from him and left him with so much he didn't want, all the time sure that they couldn't be touched. "Because they're Shinra," Cloud said darkly, narrowing his eyes against the sight of the building and the pain in his skull, "They're Shinra, lords over the Planet, lords over us all. I think it's time this peasant rebels. Heh." His words floated away in the empty air and the end of his nose burned with cold, breath billowing out before him. He wanted heat, he wanted flames. He remembered the beauty of the fire inside the labs and suddenly wanted to see it again. The Shinra building loomed huge in his sight, standing straight up from the ground like an upraised middle finger. He smirked at the cocky bastard, feeling a heat beginning to burn in his stomach. The power filled him, warming him like good whiskey. And with his anger, it began to build.

~*~

"Tifa."

She opened her eyes slowly, blinking quickly to put things into focus. How'd she get on the ground? And why did she

feel as though her brain had leaked out her ears and been replaced by sand?

"Tifa? Miss Lockhart? Er, Mrs. Strife I guess it would be now. Unless you were smart and insisted on keeping your own name. I don't know many women who'd be too happy with 'Strife'. But then, I don't know many women."

Rubbing her head where she'd smacked it upon hitting the the ground, Tifa sat up quickly, the voice in her ear horrifyingly familiar. Turning in fear, she saw Hojo laying bloody and broken and everything flooded back to her. The scientist looked her way in what was almost concern. And then, though it made her want to slug herself in the jaw, Tifa thought she saw pity in his yellow eyes.

"I'm sorry about all this," he said in a flat tone, twitching uncomfortably in pain. His dismembered arm lay a few feet from him and his gaze kept straying towards it as though he'd like to snatch at the thing and reattach it, "We scientists aren't supposed to have consciences, or at least, aren't supposed to feel for the subjects we work with, and I suppose I don't, but I do feel a degree of sadness for you, Tifa. You shouldn't have had to see that. You shouldn't have had to see your husband like that. As for your children, well, you have my sincerest sympathies."

Tifa nearly grinned. Instead though, she kicked Hojo violently with the end of her steel-toed boot and he cried out but didn't try to retaliate. "They're not dead," she said joyously. "The Lifestream saved them. Just as it saved the world you tried to destroy thirteen years ago. Professor."

Trembling with agony, Hojo looked towards her with a smile that made her blood run cold. "You don't say? Well I'll be damned. This Planet we live on is an unpredictable little whore, isn't she? Well, well, let's see her try to save Cloud Strife. And Vincent Valentine. Heh heh heh. She won't though. Because she'll be too busy trying to save herself from them. Don't kick me again, Tifa. Or I might just tell you more. And believe me, you don't want to hear it."

Chieko in his face, a weapon in either hand, Reno decided things were finally starting to get interesting. Having his guards die, having an impenetrable barrier zap into existence around the place he worked, having that damned barrier finally dissolve for no particular reason then climbing seventy flights of stairs to find his partner mad as a march hare and floating around as though it were nothing at all, that, that all was just plain fucking weird. But not this. This was interesting.

Reno sized Chieko up. Ugly? Yup. Big? Yup. Tough? Yup. Was he going to tell her she looked like Red XIII even though he remembered CJ saying it tended to piss her off? Mmmm. . . yup.

"Ya know, sweetheart," he began, circling warily as she watched him, coiled to strike, "I know a certain kitty cat by the name of Nanaki who looks an awful lot like you."

She charged him, roaring, and he burst out laughing at her predictability. He then raised his gun and emptied it into the creature, throwing up a wall of bullets that she almost eagerly leapt into. With a small degree of satisfaction, Reno saw her fly back under the impact of eight hollow point .40 caliber rounds. Snarling, she crumpled to the floor and he lowered his glock, coldly watching her squirm on the tiles.

"I'm startin' to feel a little sheepish," he said in a strange tone, approaching her cautiously after reloading, "I mean, how did a pathetic little bitch like you manage to take out sixteen of Shinra's finest? Heh. I'm startin' to think I didn't train my guards well enough. Pathetic."

Chieko watched him through a slitted eye, breathing heavily, ignoring the fire in her chest, where most of the bullets were embedded. Reno laughed again, cocky.

"I think I've got some creme in my fridge at home if the Six-B squad wasn't enough for ya, you overgrown pussy cat. You walking pot of piss. What d'ya think? You still hungry?"

She listened to him mocking her, the hint of a smile on her black lips. Reno didn't see her lunge until it was too late. He cried out as she shot to her feet, clamping her dripping jaws around his right hand and then jerking away, taking his gun and two of his fingers with her. She spat the glock onto the floor distastefully, but crunched slowly on his fingers, grinning as Reno clamped his left hand over his right, gritting his teeth in pain. He eyed the gun on the floor, easily within his reach. But it didn't matter. She'd just bitten his trigger finger off.

He backed up quickly, nearly stumbling but managing to keep his head. Nightstick, he thought to himself, that's all I need anyway. Mr. Voltage. He clamped the weapon tightly in one hand, gushing blood over the handle. Chieko watched his actions and limped forward on three legs. The two wounded warriors glared at each other.

"Guess you were still hungry," Reno mumbled, smiling weakly. He twirled his weapon experimentally, ignoring the shooting pain in his hand. She ran towards him suddenly but the bullet wounds made her clumsy and Reno sidestepped, bashing expertly at the base of her skull but not having time enough to shock her. Chieko stumbled under the blow, blackness invading her vision but she shook it off and doubled back around, snarling bloody murder. He was ready. Falling to his knees, he let her sail over his head, then shoved upwards into her gut with both hands at the base of his nightstick, nearly impaling her with the end of it. His pinky finger strayed towards the trigger and he depressed a red button, sending

snaking blue electricity into her frame. She landed messily on the floor, convulsing.

"Burnt kitty cat," Reno remarked, getting to his feet. "Smells like barbecue. Heh."

He shoved her with the toe of one shoe, wrinkling his nose up, and brushed the dust from his trench coat. "Don't fuck with Shinra."

"Reno!"

He jerked about, flinging red hair from his face as Rude approached, looking like hell. Of course the fact that his friend was breathing at all relieved him more than he cared to admit.

"You alright?" he asked, trying to sound casual. Rude's jacket was off and it looked as though he'd worn a red dress shirt as opposed to a white one to work that morning, but he wasn't dead and that was enough for Reno. He was holding his left arm a little awkwardly though, where Chieko had bitten into him. He felt a fiery spreading burning there that was from more than surface wounds but he was a Turk and Turks didn't complain.

"Yeah. That's a damned big cat. We'll have to tell Red about her. Are you okay?"

Reno shrugged, looking indifferently at his hand. "I guess I'll have to learn to shoot southpaw. No biggie. Where's Tifa?"

"Still on the floor."

Rude noticed the fires about them were nearly extinguished. With the battle over, it was suddenly eerily quiet in the mako room. He stiffly made his way towards the woman, trying not to move his arm more than he needed to. She'd watched Reno and Chieko's little scuffle from afar, not exactly sure how to lend a hand without being a hindrance, Hojo babbling on in her ear about the complexities of the Planet and the LifeStream. She'd stopped listening when he'd become delirious and incoherent. Now she crouched on the floor a good deal away from him, his words making her nervous and slightly pissed.

"Are you okay?" she asked Rude as he approached. She didn't even look at Reno though his hand was gushing red. The Turk nodded and offered her a hand up, then grabbed his shotgun from the floor and sheathed it at his back, giving Hojo a quick glance.

"What do we do about. . ."

His voice was suddenly cut off by the sound of a helicopter roaring onto the scene. They turned and saw a Shinra chopper hovering just outside the gap in the wall, sending a gust of air into the mako room that blew the heat of the remaining flames painfully into their faces. Holding her unruly hair down with one hand, Tifa squinted and saw Reeve's face in the passenger seat. The President grinned at seeing them relatively safe and then moved towards the door, throwing it open and gesturing for them to get in.

"Hurry!" he shouted, slight panic at the edge of his voice, "There's no time!"

Tifa moved forward, eager to get out of there and to Cloud. Rude clutched at her arm and pointed to Hojo, who grinned at them with half-shut eyes.

"What about him?" the Turk shouted above the noise of the chopper.

"There's no time!" Reeve called again, "Whatever it is, leave it and get the hell in here now!"

"What's his rush?" Reno asked, walking forward and lowering his shades over his eyes. Rude shoved him forward, sensing something in the President's voice that made him feel the need to move. Besides, Reeve had given an order. As a Turk, he needed nothing more to spur him on.

"Don't worry about that freak," Tifa said coldly, jogging forward, "Whatever extra years he's managed to squeeze out of his life are about gone. C'mon."

Hojo heard her words and laughed silently to himself. He watched the three of them awkwardly hop into the unstable helicopter, Tifa first, then Reno, swearing blue fire as Reeve grabbed his injured hand trying to help him inside. Rude tried to follow, clasping his President's hand unsteadily and trying his damndest to swing a leg into the chopper, but sudden dizziness and a pain in his chest and shoulder made him bend over double, sunglasses slipping off of his nose and out into the void, swept away by the wind. Without a word, he slipped into unconsciousness, hanging dangerously from the chopper and kept from plummeting to the ground sixty-eight stories below only by Reeve's strong hand.

"Agh! He's heavy, goddammit, help me!"

Hojo thought the expression on Reno's face was priceless as he lunged forward and grabbed onto his friend's collar, helping Reeve haul him inside just as the chopper pulled away from the building and zipped off, the pilot spurred to near panic by the Shinra president's shouts in his ear to hurry.

After the noise of the helicopter had died away, Hojo was left to his own thoughts. It was suddenly very still. He could

hear his own heart beating feebly within his lacerated chest. What remained of his once beautiful laboratory lay in ruins around him, the fires out but heat still smouldering amidst piles of black ash. So long ago, so long ago he could remember first coming to Shinra straight out of medical school, a young man of twenty-three with a sallow complexion, thin black hair, and an expression on his face that made people not want to stay in the same room with him for very long. He remembered Gast's enthusiasm as he'd shown his new assistant around the facilities, pointing out the equipment like an excited little boy, giddy over every ooh and aah that Hojo threw his way. The place had been beautiful, talk about potentiality, Hojo had walked through the laboratory that day with such grand schemes in his idealistic young mind. He was going to be the best, he was going to silence the voices in his head by proving what an amazing mind he had. And hadn't he? Hojo looked around him now, nearly laughing at how much had changed. That beautiful laboratory was burning. And Professor Hojo was a mutated, mutilated pile of flesh and Jenova cells laying bleeding to death on the tiles of the Mako and Planetary Studies Department main room. It all was gone, wasn't it? He stretched his yellowed eyes around the place, looking over the radiation chambers, the shattered examination tables. The things he'd done there in the name of his dreams, in the name of the advancement of humanity and science. Screams echoed in his ears, old screams, old cries for mercy. He hadn't heeded them then, never had. The blood of countless had been soaked into his hands and he'd rinsed it off easily in the lab's steel sinks. Scalpels were effortlessly made clean again, tables could be disinfected and prepped for the next test subject, but what about his eyes? Could his eyes be scrubbed of the blood they'd been shown, the pain they'd watched inflicted? Hojo laughed, a noise that reverberated weakly off his empty, burnt out shell of a laboratory.

I'm going soft, he told himself. I don't regret what I've done. No. In fact, god dammit, I'm proud.

He feebly pushed himself up, leaning heavily against a few nearby crates. He didn't know what could be inside of them. Old experiments, he thought, things he'd never finished. But whatever they were, they didn't matter. They were inconsequential ideas, half-formed thoughts that had maybe come to him in a dream, or while in the shower, or eating breakfast. They weren't his masterpieces. So it didn't matter that he'd never finished them, brought them to a proper conclusion, and wrote a paper on his findings. No, they weren't important. Only his life's work was important and Professor Hojo had finished that today. After eighteen years, he'd finished his masterpiece. A smile broke across his face, lighting his eyes in genuine joy and satisfaction. He again saw Cloud Strife, that failed Sephiroth clone, he again saw him blasting those powers that Hojo himself had blessed him with. Hell, Sephiroth had been nothing, he'd been a maquette, a sketch, a model to work off of. It was Cloud that Hojo felt true pride for. He'd sculpted the man, and then he'd broken him, gluing the pieces back together into a far more beautiful work of art. Hojo looked down on his shattered body. Doing so had cost him this. Had cost him his humanity. Had cost him his life.

But science is sacrifice, he thought dismissively, Today I've unleashed the finest thing I've ever made out into the world. It doesn't matter that Jenova has abandoned me for him. I suppose all along I expected it of her. I would've done the same thing. Doesn't matter though. He may belong to her, but I, I was the one who made him and Vincent. And as long as there's a single person alive who knows it, she can't steal that from me. She stole my soul, but she can never steal my accomplishment.

"Hear that, Jenova? Hear that Gast? Hear that Mr. President? Professor Hojo completed the Jenova Project after all. Heh. How about you, Lucrecia? Our son was unable to be the one, but I've found another. 'Crecia, seems you died for nothing, doesn't it? I doubt your beloved Vincent would be too happy to hear me say that. I probably should have killed him. I probably owe you that. I should have put him out of his misery, like me asked me to. He knew what was coming. Whatever he's doing now. . heh heh heh, or rather, whatever he's watching that thing do right now, I'm sure he isn't surprised. Agonized yes, but not surprised. Oh, gods, another finished experiment. Seems I'm on a roll this week."

"Father. . ."

Chieko stumbled into Hojo's sight, wheezing and dripping dark blood from the bullet wounds in her chest.

"Who are you talking to?"

"Ghosts, Chieko, just ghosts."

"We should leave this place."

"Go ahead, you're free now, I can't keep you in here anymore. Go wreak havoc with your 'brothers'. Go play."

The lion-like creature shook her head adamantly and stepped closer. "I won't leave you. I won't betray you like I've been betrayed by everyone else."

Hojo nearly laughed, looking past Chieko and at the sky outside visible through the hole in the wall. It was the wrong color. Too yellow, too green almost. It was starting.

"Seems you've learned some kind of morals in this place after all. Rather amazing. But no, Chieko, thank you for the concern, but a captain never abandons his ship. Heh. I was a man who could do a lot of things. I was a genius. But I

couldn't fight, I wasn't handsome, I wasn't strong. I wasn't Vincent Valentine. That was why she didn't want me. Dammit, I didn't love her, mind you, but it stings a man to be rejected. It stings a man in his heart no matter how hardened he's made himself. I wasn't strong, handsome, or tough. I was a genius, with an intellect unsurpassed. Why then, god dammit, why then is this the only place on the Planet where I could rule? All my gifts and I was only accepted here? I don't know why. I don't. But this is my kingdom and I've ruled here for almost fifty years. This is where I'll stay. Till the end."

Hojo was silent a moment, contemplating some thought that wouldn't stop poking him. It jabbed at his conscience until he nearly swore. Too tired to fight it, he gave in. "Chieko, fetch that satchel for me in the corner there, the one with the yellow symbols."

Chieko quickly hobbled to do as he bid. Already she was starting to feel a great deal better as her wounds healed. She took this as a sign of love from her mother, like a gentle embrace, a kiss on the cheek. She dropped the brown leather satchel onto Hojo's lap and as quickly as he was able, he grabbed at the nearest piece of paper he could find, took a pen from his pants pocket and scrawled a hasty message down, folding it twenty times or so and sticking it in the satchel, which contained a rack of chemical-filled vials. He bid Chieko lower her head to him and he loosened the satchel's strap, slipping it around her large, furry head, sealing it tight. Then, he let out a sigh and a strange look passed onto his face. A look of nearly peace. She'd never seen her father look so at ease.

"That's for Vincent Valentine."

"The red-eyed man?"

"Yes. If you should ever see him again, him mind you, not the other, give it to him."

"Why isn't Jenova healing you, father?" With a look of concern, the beast eyed the man, seeing how hurt he seemed to be. Cloud's magic had cut him apart.

"Mom's got a new boyfriend, Chieko." Hojo leaned his head back, weaker than he'd ever felt in his life. Through the barely open slit of one eye, he saw in slight dismay the amount of blood spread around him. Swallowing hard, he tried to get to his feet but found that was about as futile as attempting to fly. This feeling in his chest was familiar. The feeling took him back to the Sister Ray. He'd been dying then too. He coughed weakly, suddenly frightened of the blackness creeping into his vision. He wanted to know what was coming. His scientific mind wanted to know what thing was clawing at his heart, clawing at his eyes, making his limbs so tired. What was this thing that longed to embrace him? And why, now, did he feel so ready to relinquish himself into its arms. . . ? Could all this blood be his? Had he ever had so much? His eyes closed, he couldn't keep them open anymore. Everything was draining away, draining away in sanguine-tinted shades of soft agony. Hojo felt sudden jaws wrapping themselves painfully around his chest. With the utmost amount of care to keep her fangs from piercing his flesh, Chieko picked Hojo up in her mouth, the man's blood running into her throat and nearly making her gag. He protested the action, threatening to tear her apart if she didn't put him down, but she ignored his feeble cries and made her way to the hole in the wall.

"Chieko, no! Dammit, don't deprive me of this. . . I want to die here." His words barely had the breath behind them to even form. His tongue felt heavy, everything felt heavy.

The beast looked down on Midgar, a place totally alien to her. All she knew was the lab, all she knew were walls and restrictions. Here, stretched before her was an infinity of freedom, more space than she could ever explore if given even a thousand lifetimes. It was hers now.

Stretching her wings out to their furthest length, something she'd never been able to do, Chieko, threw herself from the building and out into the empty air, jumping onto the back of a passing gust of wind and letting it carry her and her master far away from the only home she'd ever known, out into the city. Breezes played in her fur, tickling the sensitive whiskers around her pink nose and she giggled nearly like a child. She felt free and mighty like an eagle, like a cooped-up songbird finally let loose from her cage. It didn't matter that her father's plans weren't going quite as he'd explained them to her. That was all trivial. The only things that counted were the cool November breeze, the smell of wood smoke in the air, and her freedom. She glided downwards in a large, loose spiral, Hojo hanging limp from her jaws. About halfway down, he gave a long, shuddering sigh and died, a phantom smile on his bloodied lips. His eyes stayed open, never leaving the gleaming, smoking towers of his Shinra building and the burnt-out shell of his laboratory just visible on the Sixty-Eighth floor.

~*~

Onward to Part Seven: Dusk Over Midgar

Argh, don't think I'm a total freak, I know that Hojo's the nominated sick prick of the year and all, but golly gee, I kinda

like him. I'm gonna miss the little psychopath. ::sniff:: Anywho, if you're even still reading this, you're probably thinking, "Oh, my god, what have you done to the guys?!" Well, I'm keeping their lives interesting ~_^ Gotta feel sad for poor Cloud, he's blaming himself so badly and taking out his frustration on the world when we know that CJ and Ifalna are more or less safe (or are they, why haven't we heard from the Highwind this chapter? kya hah haa) and then our man Vincent is shut up in a walking, growling, Chaos-shaped prison that's only gonna get worse, I swear if I didn't like writing this stuff so much, my conscience would start getting to me after a while, heh heh.

Well, email me and let me know how much you love/hate/are able to tolerate the fic.

By the way, in case you're wondering, Hojo's singing John Denver's Sad Song when he's operating on Vincent, and he's quoting from Floyd's The Wall later on to Neto. Lastly, the title of this chapter is from Pink Floyd's A Pillow of Winds. I was feelin' musical. And it goes to show how screwed up Hojo is when he's singing Denver one minute and Floyd the next. It's like ying and yang, man ^_^