Splintered Dreams

by Szajnie

Summary

A retelling of FFVII in a "What If" story where it is Cloud that dies on that rocky hill en route to Midgar and Zack that survives.
Pain.
Excruciating in its intensity.

It permeated his mind and nearly collapsed his body. It was a gripping, relentless, agony that brought with it the urge to vomit or cry. He welcomed the sensations...because pain meant he was alive.

Pain meant he was aware.

Pain was his link to reality and the tether he'd used to pull himself up from his drug-like stupor.

Liquid all around me…but not drowning…Phosphorus green…swirling…

Unfocused, blue eyes blinked slowly. His fuzzy brain was still unable to process too much at once. He pressed his palm to his forehead with a grimace and tried to focus.

Mako.

Crawling over his skin. Seeping through his pores. Invading his body.

It was strong…but he was stronger.

He had to be.

He took a shaky inhale.

Air…no air in here, but still breathing…

He grit his teeth as a fresh wave of nausea rolled over him. He tensed, waited for it to pass, and swallowed the bile back. Another breath. Easier this time.

Where was he? He looked around--dark foliage, large trees--okay, yes, he remembered now. He was Zack Fair. SOLDIER. He was running. He was protecting...Cloud.

Zack pulled himself further upright, glancing down at the subdued blond near his side up as he did. Looking at Cloud gave him a sense of purpose."Just hold tight. I want to let you rest, but we just don't have time for that. Gotta keep moving. Don't worry, I'll take care of you." He sounded awfully confident, he thought with a rueful chuckle, considering their circumstances. Two experiments, recently escaped from a hellish laboratory--complete with a mad scientist, on the run from the most powerful and influential company the world has ever known.

Yeah. Okay.
He turned to his left, a bit too quickly and was assailed by yet another bout of faintness and the world tilted dangerously beneath his feet.

*Trapped inside. Like floating in a coffin. But I'm not dead...not yet...*

Zack's right knee hit the soft, rain dampened ground, but he held fast, refusing to fall completely. He grunted and shifted his weight to get a better position, as well as to more fully support the man leaning heavily against his side. Two heaving breaths later and the weakness passed.

A sound through the trees perked his ears, causing him to still his attempt at rising. He picked up the distinct thump of heavy boots across uneven terrain. Leaves were muted due to the recent rain, but Zack heard the footfalls none the less. Five men, by his estimation, coming up fast on the right, two directly behind and three flanking their left.

One gloved hand reached over his head, fingers curling with ease and familiarity around the hilt of the Buster Sword. He flexed his grip causing leather to squeak against the handle. Despite his weakness, he managed to hone his senses. *Focus.*

A shadow passed across the face of the moon, momentarily removing any vestige of light the forest had.

**Snap!**

Zack pushed up and whirled, one booted foot planted firmly in the muddy soil, while the other pivoted, allowing him to curve his arm and swing his weapon in a smooth arc, effectively stopping his would-be assassin dead in his tracks. Zack spun again, blade singing in the wind, a low whistle of warning, before it tore through the two men on his left, dropping them where they stood. Their lifeless bodies flopped to the ground with dull thuds, weapons laying useless mere centimeters from their hands.

Satisfied that the threat was momentarily neutralized, Zack slung Cloud's arm more securely over his shoulder and started his march again, only to be stopped short a moment later as a bullet plunged into the tree directly in front of him.

"Persistent bastards, aren't they?" Zack angled forward slightly, slowly lowering his human cargo gently to the damp grass. "Stay put, Cloud," he murmured, ruffling spiky hair. "Got some unwanted company to take care of, and then we'll be on our way." He hadn't expected a response from his dazed partner, and received none, save the slow blink of blue eyes.

Zack rose; waiting...calculating. From the shadows of the forest more soldiers appeared. Some lined the trees, others littered along the beams of the forgotten, decayed buildings that had been left to rot when Shin-Ra had bought them out. There were at least twenty armed men, ready to plug his body with bullets.

Violet-blue eyes hardened with determination. He hadn't made it this far to be taken now. He refused. He'd *die* before going back to that Hell.

With a scowl, he hefted the Buster Sword high, then brought it down fast, lodging the blade deep into the ground. The intentional angle shielded Cloud from any stray or directed bullets. "Won't be long, pal. Imagine the nerve. Sending regular Shin-Ra grunts after me," he smirked, his tone bordering on smug.

A rifle cocked directly behind him. "Don't move!"

A single dark eyebrow rose disbelievingly. Did they actually think that would keep him from...
moving? He inclined his head. Four other uniformed men burst through the trees to surround him, each with their guns drawn, laser lines flickering over his chest like swarming insects.

Another smirk accompanied by an open palm gesture of welcome. "Take your best shot," he offered, scant seconds before rushing the troopers.

The report of semi-automatic gunfire reverberated through the woods, causing large, black winged birds to screech and take to the night sky—their squawks holding evident irritation at being disturbed.

Zack reacted reflexively to the open fire, utilizing his enhanced skills like second nature. No thought required. Pure instinct. He bent, twisted, continued his forward momentum, narrowly avoiding bullets by hair's breadth. He swung his fist, connecting with the mask of the soldier directly to his right. The face-plate shattered upon impact, the force of the blow breaking the other man's nose.

Before the pain-filled, gurgled scream had a chance to escape the falling soldier's lips, Zack flipped over his shoulders, his booted foot snapping with deadly accuracy taking out another trooper, then another. A spin, an elbow, and another down.

He swiveled and maneuvered, placing the men in each others line of sight as he did. Let them kill each themselves, he thought grimly. Within minutes Zack stood alone in the center of a body made circle, hands clenching, his eyes flashing. It was terrifying how easy that was. Had it always been so easy? He wondered. What in the Hell had they done to him...?

The revving of a motorcycle engine turned his head away from his thoughts. Reinforcements were coming in fast. He glanced towards the Buster Sword and Cloud's slumped form. "Hang tight," he whispered, turning away from his companion and the littered bodies, and began to a run.

Over a loud speaker, Zack thought he heard: "Pursue him!" Underbrush snapped beneath his boots and mud sprayed along his pants as gnarled roots reached up from pockets in the ground to snag at fabric, but he didn't break stride. Focused now, and definitely alert, Zack ran. He ran hard and fast, purposefully staying in the less dense portion of the woods; purposefully making himself an easy target to follow.

Once he and Cloud managed to elude the Shin-Ra grunts following them, they could start new lives. Shin-Ra free lives. Free of the madness that shrouded that corporation and the people in it. Free of puppeteers using them to suit their own ends. Finally, free. That thought drove Zack onward, despite the ache in his body and burn of his lungs.

Eventually, the woods gave way to pavement, underbrush to asphalt, and Zack grinned. He was on a bridge. One leading away from Shin-Ra and towards freedom. Water slapped beneath his boot heels in steady splatters. Two motorcycles passed him, flanking him before skidding to a halt directly ahead of him. Headlights cast craggy illumination over cracked pavement.

The steady whump-whump of a helicopter rotor carried on the wind. Zack lifted his eyes, annoyed, as a Shin-Ra copter rose above the bridge, its spotlight fixed on him. He shielded his eyes with his hand and peered at the approaching helicopter.

Shit. The Turks.

Shin-Ra assassins. A group of select individuals that were employed to do the "dirty" work for Shin-Ra no matter what that may mean: be it a quiet assassination or the kidnapping of a corporate rival, the Turks got the job done. No matter what the cost. He supposed he should be flattered they were sent after him as well.
He wasn't.

"Surrender quietly and we will assure you your life!" A female voice—thankfully not Cissinei's—echoed over the helicopter's loudspeaker.

Zack snorted. "I don't need an assurance on my life. What I want is freedom!" He leapt, contorting his body as he did, enabling him to land ready to pounce—which he did. One foot to the rider on the left. He went flying off the motorcycle, landing hard against the other bike, knocking both men to the ground. Zack swung himself onto the riderless bike, lifted one hand in mock salute, before he revved the engine and veered back towards the direction from which he had run. He had a friend to pick up.

Two Shin-Ra grunts stood over Cloud's slumped form when Zack arrived. Neither trooper looked up at the motorcycle—probably expecting one of their own. Zack parked the bike, dismounted, and without preamble, shoved the face of one guard into a tree, knocking him unconscious. The other man tossed his rifle down and held up his hands.

"Sorry for making you wait." Zack ignored the trooper. "We've got to hurry now." He slowly helped Cloud onto the back of the bike. "The damn Turks are on our trail now, too." It took less than four minutes for Zack to hear the helicopter whirring overhead. Not bad, he thought, grudgingly. He tilted the bike, swerved onto an abandoned side street just before the bridge.

Shin-Ra like to move SOLDIERs and supplies covertly and Zack knew that there were a series of underground tunnels in the area. If he could get underground, then he could navigate their way to Midgar. He glanced over his shoulder once. The helicopter was close, but not so close that he couldn't shake them.

He swerved again, skimmed along deserted buildings edges, making it impossible for the helicopter to swoop in close enough to follow. He flexed his hand and gunned the engine, pushing himself and the bike. He only relaxed when darkness enclosed around them.

He'd made it to the tunnels.

They were safe.

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_Freedom._

Zack could almost taste it.

After driving through the maze of underground Shin-Ra tunnels he and Cloud emerged near one of Shin-Ra's abandoned desert outposts. Zack decided to ditch the bike in favor of another mode of transport into Midgar. The Turks were looking for two men on a motorcycle. Out on the sand they would have stood out like sore thumbs.

With no immediate vehicle available, Zack did what any trekker does on a long journey. He hitched.

Now, with eyes closed, sunlight on his face and the wind rustling his long black hair, Zack grinned. He couldn't help it. They were finally free. After four years trapped in a tube of Mako, experimented on and tortured, he and Cloud were finally free.

Thinking of the man beside him prompted Zack to open his eyes. He turned his head, regarding Cloud with a mixture of fondness and concern. It would take days, perhaps weeks or months, for the aftereffects of their experimentation to completely leave Cloud's system. _If they ever did._

Unlike Zack, Cloud had never been exposed to Mako before, and the treatments were usually
gradual so that the SOLDIERs could build up a tolerance and not become ill- or worse, die- from the harmful effects. Unfortunately, Cloud had been submerged and saturated without any prior exposure and with no tolerance. It was honestly a miracle that he'd even survived.

Zack could only imagine—with a fair amount of horror--the wretched way his friend must be feeling. "Hey, Cloud. We're almost there." Zack nudged Cloud's shoulder gently, affectionately. The other man lolled to the side, unresponsive. Ever the optimist, Zack pressed on regardless. "So, Cloud, what are you gonna do when we get to Midgar?"

Cloud's head dropped listlessly up and down with the truck's motions.

"Well, I plan on becoming a mercenary," Zack continued as though Cloud was an active participant in the conversation, "Y'know, taking jobs for money. No sense in letting these SOLDIER skills go to waste, right? Maybe I'll even look up a girl I know there..." A fleeting image of emerald green eyes and yellow flowers flashed in his mind's eye. He wondered if she even remembered him. So much time had passed... He was a different man now than he had been then.

Cloud's mouth moved, snapping Zack out of his reverie. He leaned forward, expectantly. Was Cloud finally trying to speak? After a moment, a rough breath and soft syllable escaped cracked lips. "Tiiiff..."

Zack angled his head so that Cloud could see his smile, encouraged by the minimal response. "Teef?" he questioned. Something tickled the back of his mind at that syllable. Then it occurred to him. "Oh, right. Your girl in Nibleheim." Zack didn't want to think about that--the flickering of memory reminding him that the last time he had seen her she had been a crumpled heap, sliced open and broken. But Cloud didn't need to know that. Cloud needed hope.

Cloud's lips parted once more and he exhaled the name again and when his bright blue eyes blinked again, Zack was certain they were less hazy than before.

Relieved that Cloud was showing signs of life Zack grinned. "We're friends, right? I'll...I'll take care of you. And when you're better, maybe you can stay in Midgar for awhile, help me with my business. We could be partners." He ruffled Cloud's hair. "Yeah, Cloud, things are starting to look up."

The abrupt splash of warm arterial spray across his face cut off the remainder of Zack's words. Splotches of crimson dotted his forehead and cheeks, ran down his nose. His eyes widened in shock as Cloud slumped forward completely; his body tipped to the side, unable to hold itself upright anymore and blood poured from an open wound in his chest.

"Cloud!" Zack clasped his hands over the wound. Blood pumped through his fingers.

*Shit, shit, motherfuckingshit!*

*A sniper. A godsdamn sniper!*

He had been so enamored with images of the life they were going to have that he had let his guard down. Zack swore, scrambling to cover Cloud's motionless body with his own as another bullet nicked the bed liner. He waited only a moment before risking rising enough to slap the top of the cab hard, demanding the driver stop. Tires locked, the truck slid. "Cloud? Cloud, can you hear me?" Zack jostled his friend, worry making his voice hoarse. "Cloud! We've got to move, buddy!" He hooked Cloud's limp arm over his shoulders and rolled them from the bed of the truck and onto the gravel with a thud. "Get out of here!" he ordered the driver.
The truck was off immediately, spitting up pieces of rock as it fishtailed away from the scene. Not that Zack could blame the old man. There was no need for a civilian, one generous enough to offer two unknown men—one with a huge ass sword strapped to his back—a lift, to get caught up in the crossfire of their private war.

Zack swung Cloud upright alongside of him, hustling towards an outcropping of rocks. If he could just get them to cover, then they'd have a chance. Zack spared a brief glance over his shoulder and felt his blood run cold. *Dozens upon dozens of soldiers.* They had sent so many men after them. Blue and white uniforms lined the outcroppings, the troops with weapons drawn and ready. An ambush. "Shit."

Zack swiveled his body, dropping Cloud down against a large boulder, his form shielded from the men lining the cliff and road by the overhang of rock. He gave Cloud a lingering look, wishing that his friend was cognitive enough to hear the words Zack wanted to say. They had a shared background of being country boys, a shared pain of being used by those without feeling and a shared pain of being disappointed by those they had come to admire and respect. He and Cloud were kindred spirits and Cloud's friendship—though brief and new—was the most valuable thing in Zack's life. He was grateful for it. He hoped the younger man was aware of it.

Zack knew, that in this moment, in their most dire circumstances, he wouldn't let Cloud down. He refused to be another failure on Cloud's list of those that had failed him. And when all was said and done, no matter his own fate, Zack prayed that Cloud could manage to get himself safely to Midgar and have the freedom he deserved.

Setting those depressing thoughts aside and with his familiar arrogant grin, Zack ruffled Cloud's hair once more and rose to his feet. Be well, he wished silently. He straightened his shoulders and strode out from behind the rocks into the open. If he was going down, he was going down fighting.

He stopped less than fifty feet from the Shin-Ra front line. A fly whisked past his ear, but otherwise the desert air hung still and silent…*waiting.*

"The price of freedom sure is steep," he broke the silence with a false laugh and a shake of his head. Weapons lifted, cocked, readied.

Zack sighed and lifted his hand, slowly and very deliberately, removing his sword from its holstered position against his back. He swung it out in front of him, upright so that the flat of the blade rested near his forehead. He closed his eyes, repeating the words his mentor, Angeal, had once spoke to him. "Never lose your dreams. No matter the situation, never lose your honor!" When his lapis blues opened again they were hard and glittering with menace. Zack hadn't made it into SOLDIER for nothing.

He was a warrior.

He would die a warrior's death.

"*Come and get some!*"

Bullets pelted the ground sending up plumes of dust and debris. Zack moved with trained precision, taking out the most immediate threats, turning their own weapons against them much as he had done in the woods. He lifted a fallen rifle, using it in conjunction with his sword, taking out soldier after soldier with terrifying efficiency.

Forty minutes later the battle ground was literally littered with bodies. Beige sand was now tainted by
crimson rivers and Zack could barely keep his footing. The afternoon sunshine had given way to heavy, rolling clouds. Darkness pressed at Zack, both from out and within. He was killing and killing...so many lives. So many unfulfilled lives. Dead by his hands. It hurt to breathe, his entire body ached. His soul ached.

Maybe Angeal had been right...maybe SOLDIERs were all monsters...

Zack winced as a bullet tore through his upper arm. One of several that had so far managed to hit their mark. He'd allowed emotions to distract him and it was a costly mistake. Another bullet took him in the calf. Another in his back, just above his shoulder blade. "Damn it," he hissed, blinking sweat from his eyes. When had these men arrived?

He straightened, hefted the Buster sword up. "Not today," he ground out, trying to refocus. "I will not die today."

Another bullet jerked his body back. Then another. And another. And another. So many tore into his flesh that he lost count.

"Not...today." He struggled to stay upright. His vision swam. Fat droplets of rain coated his head as the skies above let loose. Six men...no three... Three were all that remained. Did he have the strength to fight on? To finish the battle and kill these three? He had to.

A soft rustle from his left alerted him to motion. A shock of gold in his peripheral made him tense. Cloud! The cold rain must have roused him from his stupor, Zack thought worriedly. He needed to get to Cloud. He needed to protect him. He had to!

One heavy boot slid in the sand and his knees buckled the moment he tried to move. "No." Zack shook and tried to force himself back up. He leaned against the Buster Sword, panting and wheezing, with blood trickling between his lips.

"Hey! There's the other one!"

Zack's head snapped up. "Cloud! Run!" He knew he couldn't. Logically, he knew Cloud could not run, but he had no other words.... no other desire. Run! Gods, please...

To Zack's horror Cloud, who had begun crawling from behind the shelter of rocks, was riddled with bullets on sight."No!" Zack roared. Rage and Fury lifted him from the ground, his own tattered body screaming in protest but he refused to let anything stop him from reaching his friend. He swung his arm, the heavy blade singing it's death song, removing two heads clean off their shoulders.

The third soldier ignored the commotion, raised his weapon and fired--dead center to Cloud's chest. Once. Twice.

"Damn you!" Zack plowed the broad blade of his weapon into the other man's back, nearly severing the man in half. Bloody entrails fell to wet sand, but Zack paid the mess no mind. He slid through the muck, leaning over his friend.

"Cloud! Cloud, can you hear me?"

A grimace. "...Zack...?"

"Cloud!" Zack gripped his hand. "Hang in there, okay? I'll get us out of here." He coughed, swallowing back bile and blood. His own breathing was labored and weak.

Cloud blinked up into the rain. "Zack."
"I'm right here. I won't leave you." Zack watched with a sinking feeling of helplessness as the flickering glow in Cloud's youthful blue eyes waned to a dull sheen. The hand gripping his so tightly but a moment ago went limp and a trickle of crimson escaped between pale lips. A shudder and the glow dimmed farther. Cloud's life was being extinguished and there was nothing Zack could do to stop it. He wanted to scream in frustration and howl over his own helplessness. 

Cloud struggled to speak, his throat working convulsively. "Zack..."

"I'm here, Cloud."

"T-Tell...Tifa..." A spasm and another grimace. Once the pain receded, Cloud tried again. "Tell Tifa I'm sorry...couldn't keep our..promise...wanted..." His breath was coming in short bursts, quick and painful. "Tifa..." Fingers clutched at sodden ground. "I never forgot..."

Zack's jaw clenched, teeth grinding together as he fought down tears. He pressed his gloved hand to Cloud's head, ruffling the blood soaked blond spikes in a familiar way. "Easy. Take it easy."

But Cloud was determined, as relentless on the brink of death as he had been in full life. Zack still recalled with vivid clarity how strong and brave his friend had been in the depths of Nibleheim mountain, facing down the greatest warrior Shin-Ra had ever unleashed on the planet. He had done the near impossible and killed Sephiroth-after being fully impaled upon Masamune.

Cloud was too young, too strong, too vital to die!

With dwindling strength Cloud lifted his head, forced Zack to meet his gaze. Days of hazy stupor vanished and for that moment, Cloud's eyes were crystal clear. "Swear it, Zack...swear you'll tell her...protect her..." Cloud clutched Zack's hand. "Protect her."

Zack could in no way refuse Cloud's dying request. Nor would he. He blinked back tears. "I swear it, Cloud."

Satisfied, Cloud nodded and went limp once more, lying back into the mud. "Hnh... Not...cold anymore..." Cloud's lips quirked somewhere between grimace and smile. "Too bad...never made...SOLDIER..."

At this, Zack's carefully composed expression began to crack. He inhaled sharply, a choked sound catching in his throat. "SOLDIER's are monsters, Cloud. You... You're a hero. You're the best friend I've ever had." Zack couldn't finish. Didn't want to talk like this was the last time.

Cloud's smile was faint, but genuine. "Thank...you." He let out a slow breath. "Tifa..."

"I'll find her." Zack had no way of knowing if the girl had even survived the Nibleheim disaster, but if she had, he would find her.

Satisfied, Cloud nodded and closed his eyes. "I think...I'll sleep now..."

Zack's own eyes closed with regret and sadness; listening for that last tell-tale breath. "Goodnight, Cloud."

Chapter End Notes

Moving some of my stories over to AO3. Familiar readers may notice some changes
here and there. Story updates will happen here before FF.net.
Seventh Heaven

He'd mentally recreated her image in his mind at least a thousand times, until her face was committed to memory; he'd searched sector after sector and used every back alley snitch and source he knew of and after four long months of tireless searching Zack found himself nestled amidst chaos and poverty in the middle of the Sector Seven slums.

Dressed in mourner's black, Zack stood silent as his thumb worked the worn edge of an AVALANCHE flyer he'd picked up outside of the sector. He read, then re-read, the hand painted sign hanging crooked above the door: Seventh Heaven. A more ironic name he'd be hard pressed to come up with, he thought, and flicked a glance toward stilted buildings and dreary surroundings.

The Sector Seven slums were just as dark and oppressive as the other areas Zack had been through in his search. The slums, as a whole, were all strewn with wreckage, broken machines, and components of various dismembered buildings left behind after Shin-Ra's overhaul. The majority of the homes littered throughout the area were made of collected scrap, shaped into modest dwellings without any architectural stability. The poor making due with the waste Shin-Ra left them.

In stark contrast to the grim and depressing setting, however, thick, tempting aromas wafted over muted conversation and through broken slats. Zack's stomach clenched and his mouth watered. He decided he could find a hot meal here, if nothing else.

Before he could move toward the entrance, however, the double doors swung out and a swearing, staggering man emerged, holding his jaw. "Damn gun wieldin' maniac! All I said was she had a nice ra-!" The remainder of the sentence was cut short by face meeting dirt. The drunkard stumbled down the steps and landed with a huff and a groan on the ground at Zack's feet.

Zack tilted his head to the side, mildly amused. "Hey, pal, you okay?" No response. He nudged the motionless man with the toe of his boot in the same manner one might poke a dead animal on their lawn.

"Mmffrfcknn asshole…" Bleary, bloodshot eyes blinked up at Zack and a mouthful of dirt was spat through broken, crooked teeth. "S pro'lem? Huh? Guy has needs, y'know!" No, Zack didn't know. In fact, he had no clue as to what the sloppy drunk was rambling about, nor did he have the inclination to find out. The man was alive and thus Zack was alleviated of any guilt he may have felt over his amusement at his face-first tumble.

With a bubbling gurgle, the prolific ramblings became no more than a garbled retching sound. Zack made a face; scrunched nose and twisted lips. "Yeah…sure. Whatever you say." With a shake of his head, he stepped over the vomit, shouldered his way into the bar and stopped dead. Honey-toned walls and soft overhead lanterns blanketed the room in a dim, amber glow, and Zack, taken aback by the unexpected homey atmosphere, did a double-take over his shoulder. It was like walking into a completely different world than the one he'd just come from. Seventh Heaven, indeed.

Glasses clinked together, forks scraped against plates and conversation was animated. Given the lateness of the hour, he should have been surprised by the number of occupants still milling about, but looking around Zack understood why there were so many still there. The warmth of Seventh Heaven took the edge off the harsh gray of the outside; provided residents with a haven—a place of escape, a place of hope—however fleeting that may be.

Zack, due to training and habit, immediately began a mental inventory of the room's occupants: Two men in the corner, one swaying in his seat, the other doing an admirable job of keeping upright given
the amount of empty tumblers on their table; a middle aged woman with dirty blond hair and watery eyes heading his way, followed by a sullen faced man in a dark green tee-shirt and beaten leather coat; three more gents were chatting in a corner booth with a couple of doe eyed girls as they picked the last remaining bits from their meals; a short, balding man sat at the bar, and a behemoth of a man leaned against the back wall, near the restrooms, arms crossed over his barrel-sized chest, glowing intensely. Zack shifted his stance and scrutinized the man more closely. It wasn't his scowling face that gave Zack lingering pause, but the massive amount of metal being sported as limb.

Instead of two matching biceps, his right arm was covered by a piece of worn leather under twisted steel. The extremity was large and heavy looking; cumbersome even, but Zack knew it for what it was. A weapon. A gun. His jaw tightened and he looked away, continuing his surveillance.

So far, no sign of the elusive Tifa Lockhart. Unconsciously, his thumb began to play with the edge of the flyer in his hand. The past few months had been one dead-end after another, but this lead had seemed more promising than most. The snitch from Sector Five had informed him- for a few gil and a bottle of gin- that there was a knock-out bartender in the Sector Seven Slums that went by the name Tifa. She was rumored to have ties with some eco-terrorist group that was very anti-Shin-Ra.

Zack recalled, with a sharp stab of guilt, a broken voice, softly accusing. "I hate it. Shin-Ra, SOLDIER, and you too…" Carried with that voice was the remembered smell of scorched flesh and the screams of the dying. She had every right to hate Shin-Ra…and him. He shoved the memory to the back of his mind, the flyer to his back pocket and maneuvered toward the bar.

The clang of dishes and the indecipherable din of many voices quieted to a hushed lull as he went, the regulars casting curious glances his way, and Zack felt unwelcomingly exposed. He settled up to the bar, doing his best to ignore the way the hairs on his arm stirred and his muscles tensed beneath the questioning stares. He turned to the man beside him. "I'm looking for a woman-"

"Ain't we all, son." His chubby bar stool companion downed what remained in his glass with a satisfied belch.

"I'm looking for a particular woman," Zack continued and snatched some nuts from the bowl in front of him. He got the impression of a relatively tight-knit community and he figured nonchalance was his best in. If he appeared too aggressive they may close him out completely. "Tifa Lockhart. Know her?"

As though on cue, the swinging door that led, presumably, to the kitchen banged open and out she walked. Zack straightened abruptly and blinked in astonishment. She looked familiar and yet not. The youthful potential for prettiness she'd held at fifteen had blossomed into something far more substantial; something that couldn't be described in such fluffy terms as pretty. She was something unexpected.

She headed toward the behemoth against the back wall, a wad of towels in her hand, maneuvering around crates and upturned chairs with a dancer's grace. Long, well-toned legs flexed beneath a miniskirt the size of a placemat and Zack couldn't help but notice the pleasant bounce of her figure.

"Barret." There was a hint of exasperation in her dulcet voice when she spoke. "Let me see your hand."

Mr. Gun-arm himself, Barret, apparently, glowered down at the floor, unresponsive. Lines of contention were etched across dark skin, channeling deep grooves along a grim set mouth and between heavy, brooding eyes.

"Barret." She stopped in front of him, one boot tapping expectantly. "Now."
"Fuckin' bullshit, Teef." Barret grumbled, but obligingly lowered his arm.

She bent over his outstretched hand, examining it before placing the towel across scarred knuckles. Her long dark hair hung loose over one shoulder, the strands swaying as she shook her head. "What's bullshit is you nearly knocking some poor guy's teeth out-"

"He was trying to corner you!"

Her head snapped up and her mouth thinned. "I would have handled it."

"Well, now you don't have to. It's handled." He scowled, bottom lip jutted slightly.

Zack leaned his elbows on the counter, interested. Less than half of Barret's size and Tifa seemed to be the one doing the intimidating.

"Yeah well, I don't like the idea of people being hurt on account of me." She dabbed at his knuckles. "Okay?"

Barret seemed flustered by her concern. "I don't need ya babyin' me," he grumbled, but there was no heat to his words.

She nodded once and removed the towel. "And I don't need you knocking out any more of my customers. At least try, okay? For me?"

Barret mumbled something that Zack couldn't quite catch, but whatever it was appeased Tifa. She smiled then. It was a mega-watt smile that never quite reached her eyes. Finished with Barret, Tifa turned back to the bar and stopped abruptly. Her mouth parted on a startled gasp, and Zack was almost certain he heard his name. Her wide-eyed reaction wasn't one that he was entirely unfamiliar with; he'd received similar responses from the fairer sex his whole life.

A tall man, nearly six-four in his booted feet, lean of hip, and wide of shoulder, he radiated strength and confidence. His black hair swept dramatically back from a face that was said to be a gift from the gods. Strong bones beneath dusky, sun-kissed skin, dark lashes--the kind that every woman swore they'd kill for--framed rich blue eyes and glanced against arched brows. His nose was straight--despite being broken twice--and his mouth had been called sinful by the same women that had claimed willingness to do bodily harm for his eyelashes.

Despite his gifted features, Zack knew it wasn't his good looks that had stopped Tifa Lockhart dead in her tracks. Distrust and suspicion were evident by her stiff posture and clenched fists. He recalled, only too well, the circumstances that had surrounded their last encounter and he couldn't blame her for being less than thrilled at the sight of him. Not that this encounter was likely to shed any favorable light on him either, he mused.

She leaned to the side, scanning the shadows behind him, and he saw the unspoken question in her eyes. Where's Cloud? And at once his chest felt heavy and tight, laden with guilt.

He swallowed against the constriction in his throat and pushed himself away from the bar. He didn't bother with formalities or a cheeky, 'Hey long time, no see', but instead went for, "We need to talk."

Her brows drew together causing a crease to form between them. She looked ready to outright refuse him, until he added, "I have news of Cloud."

Whatever objection to his company she may have had vanished beneath her curiosity and concern for Cloud. Eyes, darkened with speculation and uncertainty, studied his face and Zack got the distinct impression he was being measured. He drew his shoulders back and managed to meet her
curious gaze without flinching. She nodded once, seemingly satisfied with what she saw, and motioned for him to follow her.

Barret glowered at Zack with open disdain when he and Tifa reached the kitchen doors. "Yo, Teef, you know this chuckle-monkey?"

*Chuckles-monkey?* Had Zack been there for any other reason he may have found himself amused at the other man's obvious protectiveness and odd choice of insults, but being that he was about to tell his best-friend's girl that she was never going to see him again, Zack found he didn't have the patience for amusement. He met Barret's hostile gaze with a cold one of his own, a silent testosterone battle taking place in the space between them.

"Yes." Tifa eyed Zack speculatively over her shoulder. "I know him."

Barret didn't budge. He leaned forward, peering into Zack's face. "Ya've got SOLDIER written all over you."

Zack didn't bother to deny or confirm that last remark. His eyes generally spoke for themselves with their swirling ring of green in the center of lapis pools, a dead give away to the treatments he'd endured. *Mako eyes*; a sure sign of a SOLDIER. He hated his eyes.

"Barret!" This time there wasn't just a hint of exasperation. "Let him by."

Barret glanced at Tifa. She cocked an eyebrow. Grudgingly, he took a step to the side but leaned closer to Zack before he could pass, his voice low and tinged with warning. "I'm watching you."

"You know, you're really not my type." Zack replied with deceptive calm.

"What'd you just say to me, boy?"

Zack sensed rather than saw Barret's arm come up and his own hands flexed at his side. He'd had no intentions of fighting here, or anywhere for that matter, had, in fact, left his Buster Sword in his rented room, but he wasn't about to back down either. He turned slightly offering Barret his profile.

A hand slipped between barrel and face, gently, but firmly, pressing downward. "Barett. Please." Gone was the irritation, replaced by a sweet cajoling that momentarily distracted both men. "Please," Tifa enunciated. "For me. Remember? Why don't you lock up?"

"Count yourself lucky." Barret jabbed a finger, blunted by years of hard labor, in Zack's direction before stalkling away.

Lucky wasn't a word he associated with himself anymore, Zack thought, but refrained from giving it voice. He watched Barret hustle the remaining stragglers out the front door with more force than was probably necessary, slamming the doors and banging trays together. "He's a charmer," Zack commented dryly.

She pushed through the door, careful not to let it swing back in his face. "You said you had news of Cloud," Tifa reminded him promptly.

Not that he needed the reminder. For weeks he'd lain awake at night playing this scenario out over and over in his mind. Staring at unfamiliar ceilings, in unfamiliar sectors, he had practiced and rehearsed--tried to pick and choose just the right words to break the news to Tifa Lockhart that she would never see Cloud Strife again. He realized now how utterly useless that exercise in nightly self-torment had been. There were no magic words that were going to make this any easier; for either of them. He cleared his throat. "Uh, you may want to sit down for this…” Oh, yeah, there's a great
At his words Tifa, who had begun to pile dirty plates and flatware into the sink, stopped. The look she turned his way was guarded, but searching, and despite the overwhelming urge to look away, Zack did not.

"Where is he?" she asked, voice tight. "Is he all right? Is he hurt?"

Zack shook his head and hoped he could have left it at that.

A clattering sound—dirty plates meeting the counter top abruptly—told him she wasn’t going to let him off that easy. "So, which is it?" she demanded. "No, he's not all right? No, he's not hurt? What?"

Gone was the softness from a moment ago. Her mouth was drawn in a tight, expectant line, as if she already knew and was daring him to lie. *I dare you.*

"He's dead," Zack stated bluntly. There it was; the truth in all its glory.

Time itself held its breath, waiting for her reaction. The noise from the other room faded into a muted thrum and his words hung in the air between them, heavy, but never falling into place.

She tilted her face away from him, hair crossing the threshold of her shoulders like a veil, closing off her expression. Finally, after what felt like forever, she whispered. "I see."

*What do you see?* Zack wondered grimly. Did she see Cloud, bleeding out, lying cold in the mud while he knelt there, helpless and useless? Because that's what he saw every time he closed his eyes—*every* damn time.

The clink of metal against cheap earthenware kick-started time again and drew Zack's gaze to the sink where Tifa, still turned away from him, recommenced her task of picking up the dishes and piling them. Pulling napkins from glasses. Raking forks into piles. Methodically stacking plate onto plate onto plate. One after another after another…

"How?" she asked, startling him.

Zack sighed and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. There were two answers he could give her. One was long and complex, one was short and blunt—and neither were pleasant. But the short one left the least amount of bile in his mouth so he said simply, harshly, "Shin-Ra." Then scowled. The word still tasted like shit.

Her shoulders tightened, the only response that she'd heard him. She bent to retrieve a red rag from beneath the sink. "Tell me what happened to Cloud."

His voice was as hollow as he felt. "I'm gonna need a drink for this."

She tossed the unused rag onto the pile of dirty dishes. "The bar should be empty now." She brushed past him, this time letting the door swing uncaught behind her.

Zack followed her out. He stared at her back, confused by her lack of response to the bomb he'd just dropped on her. No anger, no sadness. Just…nothing.

Barret was standing sentry behind the bar when they emerged, his gaze as unfriendly as before. He straightened to his full height, eyes darting between the two of them. "Teef?"

"Can I get a minute with… *him.*" She inclined her head in Zack's general direction.
Something like irritation flickered across Barret's face. "Wedge and Biggs will be back-"

"Just a few more minutes, okay?"

Barret gave a curt nod, eyes on Zack. "I'll be around."

Tifa motioned for Zack to sit and grabbed a tumbler from beneath the bar. She set it in front of him, waiting.

"Beer's fine," he answered the unspoken question. "Junon Ale, if you have it." Why it mattered, he didn't know. Nothing would sweeten his mouth after this.

Deft, agile, hands spun the tumbler back and replaced it with a beer from the mini-fridge in one smooth motion. She leaned back, regarding him in much the same way a rabbit watched a fox.

Zack said nothing for a long minute, then he spoke to the bottle in his hand. "Cloud died during our escape to Midgar."

Tifa shifted back away from him, crossing her arms over her chest. "Escape? From where?"

His stomach knotted in familiar pain. "Nibelheim."

An indiscernible emotion flitted across her features before she was able to school them back into placidity.

"After Sephiroth-" he paused; took a drink, swirled the beer around the bottle, watching, but not seeing the liquid inside. "After the reactor incident… Cloud and I were taken to a lab, beneath Shinra Mansion." He cleared his throat. "For what purpose, I'm still not entirely sure. After a time, I was able to get out of my Mako chamber."

She stared at him. "I'm sorry, you're what?"

"Mako chamber." He waved a hand. "Big tube-like thing full of Mako." He sent her a quick look. "It's hard to explain."

She didn't seem interested in his explanations anyway. "And Cloud?"

"In the tube next to mine," Zack sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "He had Mako addiction pretty bad. Too much Mako can poison the body, corrode the mind."

"And…this killed him?"

His mouth twisted bitterly. "No."

The crease was back between her brows. "Then how?"

"We were ambushed during our escape. Shin-Ra infantry." Zack swallowed the remainder of his beer in a long chug before he bowed his head, unable to meet her eyes. "He was shot. But, before he died, he asked that I tell you…" Ifrit, why was this so hard?

"Tell me…?" she gripped the bar top.

He had the hardest time meeting her eyes, but she should know. Cloud had wanted her to know, so he managed to raise his gaze. "Cloud wanted you to know that he never forgot you, or your promise." His fingers curved around his beer reflexively. "Never."
Tifa inhaled sharply and turned her back to him. The next few seconds passed in uncomfortable silence. Zack fingered the Junon Ale label, pulling it off of the amber bottle in jagged strips.

"Thank you," she turned and reached for his empty bottle. "For telling me."

Zack blinked at her composed tone. He felt like he was about ready to crack, raw and wounded, and here she was, supposedly the love of Cloud's life, taking the news of his death with no more reaction than a bat of her lashes. Anger, and the sting of betrayal for his fallen friend rose up in Zack.

"You can show yourself out, right?" She didn't wait for his reply. One moment she was standing idle behind the bar, the next the kitchen door was swinging back and forth wildly. Zack rose with a shake of his head. He reached into his back pocket. He dropped a few gil on top of the bar. He'd done his part, he'd told her. The fact that she was about as warm as an ice materia, well, that wasn't his problem.

Zack was halfway to the door when he heard a fractured sound followed by the shattering of glass. He stopped, startled. When he turned he was greeted with Barret's bulky chest, practically flush with his nose.

"Ok, Sparky, that's your cue," Barret jutted his chin toward the entrance.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm going." Zack shrugged, walking away. He cast a cursory glance over his shoulder when he thought he heard another strangled cry followed by the continued smashing of glass.

Barret waved him forward. "Don't let the door hit you on the way out!"

Zack didn't bother to acknowledge the last comment, instead opting to leave Seventh Heaven and the sounds of glass shattering like a broken heart behind him.

Barret shoved open the kitchen door, a worried scowl etched on his already grim face. "Teef? What'd that dumb motherfu-" he came to an abrupt halt, eyes wide in alarm. Standing amidst a kitchen littered with debris, with one hand pressed to her mouth, and the other flat on the counter Tifa's shoulders shook in violent jerks. "…Tifa?" Barret took a hesitant step in her direction.

With her head bowed low, her voice came out forced and wobbly. "Just…just give me…a minute," she hiccuped.

Barret's good hand folded helplessly in on itself. "If he said something to upset you-"

She stepped away from him, boots crunching glass from broken beer bottles. "Please…"

He nodded slowly. "All right. I'll be downstairs." The scene of destruction around him was unsettling. Whatever news the SOLDIER chump had brought with him had upset Tifa like nothing Barret had ever seen before. "If you need me."

Tifa waited for the sound of the door thumping back and forth before allowing herself the luxury of a sob. She took a stumbling step forward, then another. She turned, leaning against the wall, her world dangerously off center.

She had known four years ago that fateful night in Nibleheim, when life as she knew it had gone up in flames, that maybe she wouldn't see him ever again. But to know that she would never look into those blue-so very blue-eyes again, or see that timid half smile on his face… It was too much and so unfair. They never had a chance. Hadn't they deserved a chance?
Back pressed to the cold slats of the freezer, she sank to the floor with tears in her eyes and a fistful of apron in her mouth. Oh, Ifrit, not Cloud… She muffled a scream, rocked back and forth. When the worst of the tidal wave of grief had crashed over her, it left her trembling and weak, lost in a sea of despair. She had hoped… Planet, how she had hoped… Tifa folded her arms across her knees and buried her head in the darkness there.

Cloud.
Zack woke gasping for air, his throat raw and burning. His heart pounded and his chest throbbed with familiar pain as he shoved himself up and over to sit on the side of the small cot doing his best not to retch up the contents of his stomach.

He pressed the heels of his palms to his eyes and reminded himself that he should be used to this; the inability to sleep for more than a few hours at a time, waking up in a cold sweat, shaking and fighting the urge to vomit. Nightmares, graphic and vivid, had occurred every night since he'd escaped that torture chamber, and he didn't see an end to them coming anytime soon. Like the scars he carried on his skin, the scars on his mind were permanent.

Exhaling a nasal breath between thumb and forefinger, Zack rose from the cot the inn called a bed and made his way to the kitchenette area. Two metal tables were shoved, crooked, against one wall, offset by a lurid purple recliner and a small cigarette burned cabinet. He pulled a cold bottle of Junon Ale out of the fridge and downed half of it in three gulps.

Thirst quenched, for the moment, Zack carried the bottle back to the main area of the room. There, he stood looking out the cracked window that faced the street. Seventh Heaven stood on the opposite side, quiet and still.

Blue eyes strayed skyward, searching in vain for stars. Zack leaned his forearm against the windowpane, tilting forward slightly to get a better view. The upper plate of Midgar shrouded the sky in metal and smog, effectively cutting off any view of the stars, and often the sun. Oppressive was the word that came to mind.

He remembered stars. He missed the stars.

In Gongaga, at the end of summer, the Planet's tilt was just so, and the night sky was so clear you swore you could reach up and pluck one of those gems from the pool above. And every year, beneath those brilliant stars, the town threw its annual Celestial Festival. Dancing and food and fireworks...

A pang of longing hit him in the gut, acute enough to hitch his breath. Who would have thought it, Zack Fair missing Gongaga? He sighed, breath fogging the glass, and took another pull from his beer. He recalled how eager he had been to leave that small town, and his parents' small town dreams, behind.

He had left at fourteen. He'd made SOLDIER by sixteen and First by nineteen. He was gifted, they all said. A natural born fighter, was what they called him. He had grinned so proudly, preened himself so arrogantly. He had been a fool with a fool's unattainable dreams and impossible ambitions. I want to be a hero...

He ran a palm down his face; exhaled.

A sliver of amber light caught his peripheral and Zack's attention was, thankfully, pulled back to the present. Tifa Lockhart, dressed in black shorts and white tank top, stepped out of Seventh Heaven's front door, her breath pluming in the chilly pre-dawn air.

She closed the door carefully behind her and bent down to lace her shoes. One leg, then the other, stretched against the wood porch railing. She held herself with the easy grace and confidence of someone comfortable in their own skin. There was something about her, he mused as he finished his
beer, that would have been eye-catching even in a potato sack. She was beautiful, with her dark hair and almond eyes, but that wasn’t the appeal...at least not all of it. It may have been in the fact that she practically radiated warning signs. Not approachable was a severe understatement. Not like Aeri–He cut that thought off abruptly. Best not to think about her.

Instead, he watched Tifa bounce twice, crick her neck back and forth–jostling her loose ponytail-before she hopped from the steps. Her stride was smooth and even, her long, lean muscled legs propelling her over the uneven ground quickly. So quickly in fact that Zack barely had time to glimpse her veer right behind a fallen billboard sign and head into the thicker darkness of the slums before she disappeared from sight.

The fallen sign was an old Shin-Ra Electric billboard, left broken and discarded against a shack. Across the front of the sign, directly over the famous Shin-Ra insignia, in bold black, was the single word: AVALANCHE. He frowned, mulling the word over in his head. That was the name of the anti-Shin-Ra group the snitch in sector five had mentioned to him. Eco-terrorists, or some such shit. The group Tifa supposedly had ties to.

He wondered if it were true. She didn't seem the terrorist type. Then again, what did he really know about her? All he knew was that at fourteen years old she had been full of spunk and energy, energy that had nearly been snuffed out by the General, and her entire village had been consumed by flames. He knew parts of her history, but nothing of her.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. Cloud had loved her.

A chilly fog hung in the morning air, dampening the ground. It was the sort of morning, Tifa thought as her feet pounded the ground, that exactly reflected her mood. Lingering sadness twined its way around her heart, squeezing like a thorny vice. She exhaled purposefully, closed her eyes, re-opened them, and regained her footing.

She raced across the uneven terrain steadily, having run this exact route every day for the past two years. Normally she enjoyed the wind on her face and the burn of her muscles, but not today. Today, she felt hollow on the inside. She had sorely wanted to stay in her bed with the blankets pulled around her head and pretend that yesterday hadn't happened.

That wasn't an option, however. Not when she had a job to do.

She took a sharp left, climbing a small mound of dirt. Her muscles began to warm. A light sheen of sweat gleamed over healthy skin. She increased her pace, falling into a rhythm that was as familiar to her as breathing.

For the first few minutes she tried to keep her mind carefully blank and simply observe. A rock here. Broken crankshaft there. Old boxes. Scraps of paper. The area surrounding the Slums was not much more than vacant lots littered with unwanted remnants of machinery and trash. But soon enough thoughts of Cloud crept into her thoughts once more and her stride staggered a bit beneath the weight of it.

"He's dead."

Two simple words.

Common, uncomplicated words.

Yet they had the power to fell her. Her mind was suddenly filled with images. Cloud: fragile and thin, with his head too big for his body and bright hair sticking up and out. Cloud: quietly watching
her as he pretended to read beneath his window—book upside down. Cloud: gritting his teeth as he struggled to hold her hand and keep her from falling from Mt. Nibel. Cloud: solemn and open, vowing to always protect her. Cloud: walking away with his back straight, head high. Cloud: blurry and warped because of the sweat and blood in her eyes. Cloud: smiling, touching her face...

Cloud....

She stumbled, choked on his name, and fell, her knees driving divots into the dirt. Tifa inhaled a shaky breath, squeezing her eyes shut. At the midway point of her run, the ground shifted from soft and muddy to hard and rocky; dried up and without vegetation, so she knew that her skin would bear small wounds gouged by pebbles, but she couldn't bring herself to care. Her fingers curved, cutting lines into the soil. "Why?" she whispered.

Throughout the night she had wept into her pillow and asked that very same question, over and over. The smoggy air seemed just as reluctant to answer.

She didn't know how long she sat there, waiting for an answer that was never coming, before a low rumble of sound drew her attention. Swiped her hand across her eyes, recalling why she was out here before the rest of the sector was even awake. She shifted her weight, alert and listening.

Dangerous creatures slunk in the shadows of the sector, in search of food, and violence were never far from this area. Food was scarce and the dumping grounds provided ample scraps but sometimes the animals—if they could be called that—wanted larger meals. Just before dawn, when the night was about to break and give into the day, the monsters around the slums were at their most frantic. A couple of years back they had attacked a beggar woman. It was then that Tifa had decided the monsters posed too large a threat and needed to be driven back. She'd had only marginal success. It seemed the more she fought, the more there were.

She saw one of the more aggressive breeds now. A huge black canine-like thing in the middle of the trail, rounding the corner at break-neck speed. Its glittering eyes met hers and Tifa checked her back pocket for her gloves. "Okay," she said softly, shaking off her grief in favor of something else. Something burning. The leather slid along her knuckles."Here we go."

It leaped at her, a snarling mass of fang and claw. She danced lightly to the side and swung her foot around to catch the beast's distorted head. She missed. It snapped at her, droplets of saliva spraying her calf. Again she moved, lashed out and was rewarded when the toe of her steel-toed sneaker struck against something hard. The thing roared in rage. It lunged and she shuddered under the impact, using its momentum to flip it over her head. She spun, launched another attack and winced when the damn thing started to howl. Calling for others.

Zack froze as a piercing howl split the morning stillness, sending chills down his spine. He had just left his spot in front of the window, only to be drawn immediately back. He scanned the streets, and saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Another grating howl rent the air.

"Shit." He muttered, carding a hand through his hair. Tifa was still out there somewhere. He shook his head and stepped back. There was no need to go over-reacting, he told himself. She was probably fine. It was probably just a stray dog or something. Besides, it wasn't like it was any of his business, anyway.

The third howl decided it for him.
Tifa wiped the sweat from her brow with her forearm. Those damn things went down hard. She bent forward with her hands braced on her knees, her breaths coming hard and fast. A salty drop of sweat trickled off her chin and down her throat. She was really off her game today, she thought, eyes drawn to the burning red wound on her leg. She pressed her fingers to skin, winced at the rush of pain that brought. Yeah, that was gonna need a bandage.

"Tifa!"

Startled, she jerked upright. "What the-?"

Zack, with his broadsword hoisted in battle ready position, emerged from over the small hill. He was a black silhouette against the dreary ruins, but she knew it was him. She remembered that sword all too well.

Distracted by the unexpected arrival in front of her, Tifa nearly missed the hiss of sound behind her, but instinct, honed and polished on these very grounds, prompted her to react without thinking and her fist made a solid connection with a gaping muzzle, sending the monster careening across the rocky ground before it had time to tear into her flesh.

Zack skid to a halt. His vivid eyes flicked between her and the fallen monsters. "Well, damn." He said.

A reverberating growl alerted them that the beast wasn't finished. Zack immediately moved forward, "Tifa, get behind me!"

Ignoring him, Tifa jogged a few steps and spun, kicked--hard--and dropped the snarling creature once more.

Zack whistled, prodding the motionless heap with the tip of his blade. It didn't move. "I repeat...well, damn."

Tifa puffed out a breath, blowing a sweat damp strand from her eyes. "What are you doing out here?" she demanded. "Are you following me?" Tifa tilted her head, eyes narrowed, suspicious.

"What?" Zack glanced up from the dead things. "No. Well, not exactly."

"Not exactly," she echoed, her tone colder than the air. "Tell me, how did you not exactly end up out here then?"

"I saw you leave the bar." He made a thumb-jerk gesture over his shoulder. "Heard some weird howling..."

"Uh-huh," she didn't sound altogether convinced.

"And, I thought maybe you might be in danger." He shrugged.

"And you what? Decided to come rescue me?" She gave his sword a pointed look. "Or finish me off?"

Zack's eyes went wide. "What?"

She just stared, hard and watchful.

He housed his buster sword behind his back with a sigh. "Of the two options, I'd say rescue you."

She snorted. "I don't know what kind of women you usually hang around, but I don't play damsel."
"I can see that." There was a hint of admiration in his voice.

She bent over the beast. "So, you can go."

Her dismissive attitude seemed to irritate him. "I didn't come here to hurt you," he stated sharply. He waited until she met his eyes. "At all."

Tifa sighed heavily, painting the air with her breath. There was sincerity in his steady gaze, and she suspected that he was indeed there to help her. "Well, then, thank you...for coming to my rescue."

He smirked at that but the humor didn't reach his eyes. "Not that you needed it."

She straightened, arched her back and studied the downed creatures "There was fewer today." She nodded, satisfied. "That could be a good sign."

Zack turned towards Tifa, narrowed his eyes. He counted five dead carcasses. "Fewer?"

"Mm." She wasn't really paying him any attention, instead perusing the horizon. Her head was heavy all of the sudden, her vision swimming and an acidic fire lanced through her limbs making her entire body feel like lead. She stumbled.

"Tifa?" Zack moved a bit closer, concern drawing his brows down.

A choked gasp was all she managed. The pain was hideous.

"Tifa!" Zack scrambled to catch her as her knees gave way. He grunted when she fell against him. Beads of perspiration dotted her pale face but her skin was clammy to the touch. Her breathing was labored and raspy.

She couldn't speak. She could only clench her teeth and ride the waves of agony. Behind her eyes, her world exploded in red, and she wanted to scream. Then, thankfully, all was black.

Zack clutched her around her shoulders. "Tifa!" He shook her gently. What the hell had just happened? One minute she's standing there fine and dandy, and the next she's passed out, shaking in his arms.

Her teeth were chattering. Her lips had a faint purple tint to them. She looked like death.

He swore, skimming her body with his eyes, honing in on the inflamed wound across her calf. Shit. Splotches of red and gray puss surrounded the area, poison veining out into her system. Zack hoisted her in his arms, cradled to his chest. "Hold on," he told her. He sprinted the distance back to Seventh Heaven. The door was locked when they arrived. "Hey!" He hollered, uncaring that it wasn't yet five in the morning. "Hey!" He hollered, uncaring that it wasn't yet five in the morning. "Hey!" He kicked the door. It swung open, more crooked than before with the hinge busted. He strode across the threshold, and yelled again.

"What in Shiva's name is all the damn yellin'-!" The swinging door bumped open and Barret stomped out. Dark eyes flashed at Zack when he spotted the woman in his arm. "What the fuck did you do?" He moved to take Tifa.

"Careful." Zack eased her into the other man's arms. "And for the record, I didn't do a damn thing to her."

Barrett held Tifa gently, laying her head against his shoulder. "Yeah, then what happened to her?" His voice was laced with suspicion and anger.
Zack supplied what information he had. "She was out jogging and got attacked."

"Damn it. I knew something like this would happen," Barrett swore.

Tifa spasmed, her head thrown back, muscles tightening into what looked like painful stiffness. Barret held her as she convulsed, sweat breaking out on his own face as he watched her writhe in agony.

"She needs medicine." Zack told him. "She's been poisoned."

"Yeah, no shit, pal." Barret seemed at a loss.

"You have antidote, right?"

"Fuck, no." Barret's Adam's apple rippled as he took a hard swallow.

"Potions?"

"We used them on the last-" he seemed to catch himself. "No."

Zack ran a palm down his face, exhaling between thumb and forefinger. "I'll be right back," he said.

"What? Where you goin'?" Barret demanded.

Zack didn't provide an answer, instead he ran out the front door and jumped the steps. Across the street, back in his own rented room, he made his way to his cot. He reached beneath the loose springs until his fingers scraped across the strap of his duffel bag. A leather case, full of glowing green vials, sat atop his folded boxers. An extremely concentrated form of potion was held within. It tasted like shit but had ultimately helped save his sorry ass.

He had barely made it three miles in the desert when the blood loss and bullet wounds had finally dropped him. He had no idea how long he had lain there, caked in sand and blood, baking in the sun before he had been found, but he recalled with vivid clarity the garbled *Wark! of a chocobo in his ear. The damn bird had nearly pecked his skull in two. The breeder, a farmer named Bill, had been out training the bird when he stumbled upon Zack. It was Bill that had initially given him the bitter potion—chocobo potion, as it turned out—and hauled him out of the desert, draped like a sack, over the ass-end of Charlie the Chocobo. Not the most glamorous of rescues, but Zack wasn't complaining. He was alive and he was grateful.

He had stayed on with Bill for just over three months, worked to earn his room and board, plus some extra gil to fund his trip into Midgar. Upon his departure, Bill had insisted that Zack take a generous amount of Choco-potions with him- and Zack was once again grateful. He doubted his body would be nearly as healed now without the added help the potions provided.

He hoped it would help Tifa. Normally, an antidote was the preferred method to combat poisoning, but he had no idea what type of poison she was infected with, nor did he have a ready stash of antidotes nearby.

The busted door was open when he returned, but Barret was nowhere to be seen. "Hey!" Zack called out.

"Back here!" There was an frantic edge to the booming voice that responded.

Zack slipped past the kitchen and through a separate door he hadn't noticed the first time he'd been back there. "How is—Oh, shit."
Barret knelt beside a bed, presumably Tifa's, holding her shoulders down as she thrashed. Her face, pale when Zack had left, was death white now, and blood trickled from her nose.

"Keep her steady," Zack ordered, as he popped the cork off the glass tube in his hand. He grimaced at the acrid smell, so bitter it threatened to singe the hair from his nostrils. He slid his hand beneath Tifa's head, clutching her nape and tipping her head back.

She choked on the first dribble, gagged on the second, but stopped shaking on the third. Zack didn't release her until all of the potion was swallowed.

Once the thrashing stopped, Barret leaned himself back and wiped his face with his good hand. "I told her." He shook his head, inhaled a shaky breath. "I fuckin' told her one of these days..."

Zack tossed the empty vial into the trash beside the dresser. "I take it she's done this before?"

A light blanket was drawn up over her torso. The reply was softly spoken. "She does it every day. Fights, every day."

"What? Why?" Zack wanted to know.

Barret seemed to realize who he was talking to in that moment and his defenses rose again. "Ain't none of your fuckin' business SOLDIER-boy."

Zack, not one to be cowed, gave Barret an even look. "Tell me anyway."

Barret's eyes remained glued to the woman on the bed. "Her reasons are her business."

"But you let her."

"No one let's Tifa do anything," Barret snorted, mouth curved.

Tifa hissed a breath between clenched teeth, eyes fluttering, effectively silencing any further commentary between the two men.

"She'll still probably need some form of antidote," Zack lowered his voice. "And some water. Those potions leave a nasty aftertaste."

"Don't touch anything." Barret pushed to his feet, headed for the kitchen.

Zack heard the distinct sound of glasses tinking together and the running of a faucet. He was a bit baffled at Barret's willingness to leave him alone with Tifa, but figured since he'd just saved her life and not let her die—as he could have—the other man probably assumed him to be safe enough company.

On the bed, almond shaped eyes opened, curiously dark and glassy from pain and potion. They fixed on Zack and a smile graced her blue tinted lips; a smile so soft and tender that Zack was helpless against it. He lowered himself onto one knee, placed a hand on her brow. "Hey. You're gonna be okay."

She sighed, those dark eyes luminous. Had anyone ever looked at him with such emotion before?

"Cloud...I've missed you."

He flinched. What the hell was he supposed to say to that?

He was saved from responding when she blinked twice and scrunched her nose. "Ow." This time
when her eyes found his, there was reservation in her gaze. "Zack?"

"Hey." He nodded.

She took in her room and frowned. "What happened?"

"Poison, looks like."

She shifted her wounded leg slightly. "Stupid," she muttered. She coughed, gagged a bit. "Oh, Ifrit, what is that awful taste?"

"Hero, here, gave you some nasty ass potion." Barret told her, re-entering the room. He nudged Zack out of the way, handing her a glass of water.

Zack rose, stepped back. Barret carefully wiped the blood trails from beneath her nose with a damp cloth and helped her sit up. Zack felt very out of place, and very in the way.

Tifa placed her hand over Barret's stopping his ministrations. She leaned to her right, so that Zack was in her line of sight. "Thanks for getting me back. I owe you one," she said.

Zack shook his head. "No, you don't." After everything he'd brought into her life, the score card was still heavy in her favor.

She considered for only a moment before nodding. "Alright, then."

Barret raised a brow, glanced between the two of them, his look speculative.

"Excuse me."

Zack turned, narrowly missed jabbing an elbow into the petite redhead coming up behind him. She was short, maybe five foot three, with wavy locks and moss green eyes. She walked briskly into the room, all energy and bounce.

"I heard the commotion," she said by way of greeting. "What's going on?"

Zack wondered. "How many people live here?"

"Tifa was playing beast slayer again," Barret supplied, resident scowl back on his face.

"I thought we agreed to let me design some traps," Jessie admonished gently. Concern turned her bow shaped mouth down. She sat on the edge of the bed, grasping Tifa's limp hand.

"We did," Tifa acknowledged, still pale, still weak, but the fighter glint was back in her eyes. "But until they're up and running we're vulnerable."

"Okay, fine. I'll have them finished by tonight, after I finish with the reactor blueprints-.

Barret aimed a narrow look at her. "Jessie!" His gaze flicked back toward Zack.

Zack may as well have been wearing a neon sign that read: OUTSIDER on it. He shifted, moving towards the door. "I'll just see myself out."

"Goodbye, Zack." Tifa's voice paused him. There was finality in those words.

He turned and acknowledged it over his shoulder, "Goodbye, Tifa."
The promises he'd made to Cloud were kept. He had delivered the message, and he had witnessed first hand the care Tifa was surrounded by. His being there was a constant reminder of what she'd lost and Zack didn't want that for her—or for him.

He lifted his face to the sky when he emerged from Seventh Heaven, and glared at the plate above. Shin-Ra had taken so much of his life already, it was time he tried to get some of it back.

"Wow." Jessie fanned herself with one hand. She waggled her arched eyebrows at Tifa. "So, is that him?"

Tifa inclined her head, her brain must still be fuzzy she thought, because she was not following. "Who?"

"Mr. Mysterious. The guy from your past."

Tifa swallowed the lump in her throat, chased it with some water. "He's from my past, yes."

"But not Mr. Far-away-look-in-Tifa's-eyes?" Jessie's giggle was light. Her laugh was one of the things Tifa liked best about the other girl, but this morning, it grated against her already raw nerves.

"No."

Jessie paused, really looking at Tifa. "Did something else happen?"

"Her nearly gettin' eaten ain't enough?" Barret demanded.

He was angry, Tifa could tell, but so was she. "I didn't nearly get eaten. I was poisoned," she corrected him. She took the water in her hand and drank it straight down. "Not the same."

"You were just lucky that ass was there to save yours!"

Tifa sighed, pressed two fingers to her forehead. "If your finished yelling at me, I'd like to lay down. My head is pounding."

He rubbed his jaw, and she could tell he was debating with himself. Lecture or leave. Leave won out. "Yeah, fine. Get some rest, Teef. I'll grab some antidote for you from the shop when it opens. Come on, Jessie. Let's go wake up Biggs and Wedge. We got work to do."

Tifa fell back against her pillow, asleep almost instantly. She slept for the better part of the day and when she woke hours later it was without pain. Not even on her calf, now healed smooth.

In the bar, she was informed by Jessie that Zack had stopped in on his way out of the Sector to check on her, but hadn't wanted to wake her.

His departure was expected, but that didn't stop the pang she felt. Her last connection to Cloud was gone.

"He left this for you." Jessie handed her a scrap of paper.

Written in bold scrawl was a phone number and the short message: If you need anything.

Tifa folded the note--reluctant to toss it away--and even more reluctant to keep it. She decided for a relatively neutral solution and stuck it in the till, before turning to Jessie. "So, how big can we make these bombs of yours?"
Jessie blinked in surprise. Tifa had been the most reluctant to their plan of bombing of the Mako reactors. Not one to question a good thing, Jessie did some quick calculations in her head and said, "Big."

Tifa's mouth was a hard line. "Good." She thought about Cloud and what Zack had told her. How Shin-Ra had killed him. "I want to make them hurt, Jessie. I want Shin-Ra to bleed."

"Then we'd better start planning."
The SOLDIER and the Flower Girl

Chapter Summary

Trying to move forward brings Zack to a face from his past.

The towering doors opened easily beneath the flats of his palms, surprisingly silent on rusted hinges. His footfalls, slow and uncertain, echoed over aged wood and along mortared walls. Made of wood and stone, there was nothing spectacular in either construction or design of the church, but there had always been something about it that fascinated him, nonetheless.

At one time, before the corrosion of war and violence had changed it—shattered it—it must have been beautiful; full of light and song, people and prayer. Now, it stood silent beneath the plate, more broken than whole, with fractured windows of painted glass poised to dance in sunlight that never came.

A sweet scent hung in the air and drew from him a memory of flowers and falling. He pushed his hair back with one hand and exhaled slowly, his wary feet carrying him past broken pillars and shattered pews. Beneath the open ceiling, a small, wooden cart sat beside a bed of lilies. His lips curved at the corner, the tug of fond memories pulling him to the wagon. He crouched down and jostled it, testing its stability. He smirked when it held fast. Built sturdy, even after all these years.

A voice, smooth as top cream and just as sweet, caused his hand to freeze. "Excuse me. Is there something I can help you-" The rest remained unfinished as he stood.

Zack turned and his breath lodged painfully in his throat. Every single witty line he'd rehearsed on the way there vanished beneath the soft moss of her eyes. Her hands, as delicate and slim as the rest of her flew to her mouth, concealing the lower half of her face, but he knew it by heart. Soft, bow shaped lips, that could form a pout so sincere it made the hardiest of men weak, above a gently rounded chin and a dimple right beside.

She lowered her hands to her chest where they cupped together, out of habit or need for prayer he couldn't say. "Zack...?"

He cocked his head, and the half-smile he offered in return was crooked and cautious. "Hey."

The air between them hung thick with questions, but then she took a hesitant step toward him, paused, then took another, and another. And suddenly, previously indecisive feet knew exactly where to go, and he was moving toward her. They came together in an awkward collision of tears and limbs; her arms around his middle, her head in his chest; his hands on her shoulders, his nose in her hair. He felt her shudder—or maybe it was him.

She leaned close, her fingers clenched tight in his shirt. "Zack? I can't believe...I was told—I thought you were dead!"

"I'm not." He pulled her tighter, held her closer. "I'm not." He repeated. A reminder to himself. He had survived, and he was here.

The harsh edge to his voice brought her head up. She studied his face for a long moment before she
noticed she was still wrapped in his arms and took a small back-step. "I can see that," she murmured with a blush.

Zack cleared his throat and let her go. "You, uh, look good," he commented after a brief, awkward silence. This was true. She held the same ethereal beauty she'd had over four years ago when he'd mistaken her for an angel.

She lifted a hand to adjust her hair and lowered her eyes demurely. "Thank you."

He followed the motion and his heart gave a swift kick when he spotted the ribbon. So much unfulfilled promise tied up in that knot.

"I missed you." Her voice was quiet and sad as she played with the pink silk.

"I missed you too," he told her. And he had. He had missed her light laughter, her shy smiles and warm touches. He had missed the way she looked at him and the way her scent lingered long after she'd gone. He missed a million little things that he wasn't sure he could ever adequately explain.

"I wrote you." Soft accusation.

"I know. I didn't get the letters. None but the last." Unconsciously his hand strayed to his pocket.

She turned toward him. "You didn't?"

"No."

She frowned at that, her gaze darkening. "Okay, but why didn't you contact me? Call me? Write me? Send me smoke signals? Something-"

"I couldn't," he cut in sharply. He sighed when she flinched, feeling guilty. He began to pace, his hand in his hair. "I couldn't," he restated, less harsh. "Believe me when I tell you that had there been a way to get word to you, Aerith, I would have."

Something on his face must have given hint to his inner pain because the next moment he felt petal soft fingers on his arm. "Your eyes are as beautiful as I remember."

Instead of a smile, he flinched and turned his face away, revealing the criss cross scars on his cheek. "What happened to you, Zack?"

So much. Too much. "I was betrayed."

She shook her head; moved around him so that he was forced to look at her. "No, it's more than that. You're... different... somehow."

"I told you once that I wasn't normal." He chuckled, a dark sound that startled them both.

"...Zack?"

There was a space between them, he realized, a gap that had little to do with physical distance. He could feel it there, a void filled with shattered promises, broken dreams and wounds that time had scarred over, but never could heal. From the gentle apology he saw reflected on her face, he knew that she felt it too. "I'm sorry." He met her eyes squarely for the first time since she walked in, his own gaze earnest. "For a lot of things."

"Yeah," she echoed softly. "Me too."
"So..." he managed a convincing smile. "Tell me everything. What's been going on in your life?"

"Motherfuckin' shit! Motherfuckin' bullshit!"

"You know, I believe you covered that one already," Tifa commented dryly as she pushed herself to her feet and wiped her hands against the black of her shorts.

Barret sent her a withering glare, which she tactfully ignored with a hint of amusement and waited patiently as he set the timer on the bomb.

Ten minutes.

Ten minutes to haul their collective asses out of the reactor core and back up the ladder, across the catwalks, into the ventilation system, through the security gates and out to the train station where Wedge, Jessie and Biggs were set to rendezvous.

"Ready?"

She nodded once and pulled her brown, beaten satchel up over her shoulder and when she raised her eyes again she met the grim countenance of a man who'd become both father and friend to her. "Ain't got time for sentimentality or mistakes, now. You understand?" His voice was gruff, firm, but with that underlying tenderness that was reserved for her and one other.

She nodded again. He was worried she was going to change her mind. "Don't worry. I'm with you, Barret."

"Alright then. Let's go!" He took point as they headed back across the piping, his gun-arm at the ready. He was an impressive figure, she thought, following behind. Barret often used his size and fierce features to his full advantage, but for Tifa, his wide expanse and brooding expressions only offered comfort and familiarity.

She lifted her satchel higher and felt her nose twitch. Her footsteps faltered a bit and she turned back towards the reactor's control panel. She saw nothing out of the ordinary but couldn't shake the sense of wrong that hovered in the air. She took a deep breath to steady her nerves and that's when she realized what it was. Smoke. Faint, but there. It tickled her nostrils and snaked against a memory.

Her hand rose unconsciously and unsteady fingertips pressed between her breasts as an old ache seared to life. The pain was sudden like a vicious violent rip inside her head and heart.

*Her eyes stung and the sounds of agonized screaming echoed in her ears. Flames licked against wood and flesh; scarring, scorching, destroying. She was surrounded by blood and death and heat and she was so lost...*

"Dad! Dad! Hold on..."

Pain and rage and agonizing grief.

"Sephiroth!"

*His smile was sick and perverse. It followed her down the steps as she fell. Twisted lips and glowing eyes.*

*Helpless. Bleeding. Cold and alone...*

"I'm sorry...I'm a little late."
Eyes so blue they burned and gentle fingers on her face.

"Cloud..."

"You say something, Teef?"

She jerked as though struck, and her hand fell back to her side. Her throat was tight and it took effort to croak out, "No." Doubt showed on his face but Tifa waved him off. "We should hurry."

They moved quickly up the ladder and Barret re-opened the door to the catwalk. They were halfway across the metal dived when the side "EMERGENCY ACCESS PANEL" opened and Shin-Ra troopers poured out, weapons drawn.

"Shit," Barret swiveled around. "A trap!"

Footsteps echoed in the silence following that proclamation and Tifa's eyes widened as a familiar, and much loathed, figure emerged from the shadows behind the troops, his expensive shoes making a sharp clack with each step.

"President Shinra!" Barret angled himself between Tifa and the guards.

She scowled at his back. She hated the way he did that—always putting himself in the line of fire.

"So you're the ones causing all the fuss," President Shinra's voice was amused as he rubbed his chin. "Landslide or something."

"It's AVALANHE," Barret snarled. "And don't you forget it."

The President chuckled and shook his head. "You think I care what you call yourselves?"

Barret smirked. "You'll care soon enough."

"Let me guess, another bomb?"

Tifa and Barret exchanged a look. If the President knew about the bomb, then why was he there?

"Such a waste of good explosives. But if it serves the purpose of getting rid of vermin like you..." he shrugged.

"Vermin!" Barret's voice raised to a near shout. "You're the vermin, you fuckin' jackass! Killin' the planet! Suckin' it dry!"

Once more Shinra's padded shoulders lifted in an indifferent shrug. "You bore me. If you'll excuse me I have a press conference to attend, denouncing Avalanche. But no worries, I've brought a playmate for you." He snapped his fingers and a moment later the catwalk rumbled beneath their feet.

Tifa nudged Barret, her features hard. "What's that noise?"

"I have no idea, but it's Shin-Ra, so it can't be good."

The rumbling intensified and the loud shriek of metal grinding metal announced the arrival of a mechanical behemoth, the likes of which Tifa had never seen before. It's frame was enormous, taking up the full width of the opposite end of the catwalk. It whirred and clicked noisily with battle armaments at the ready. Steel blades spun from two gun arms and targeting lasers danced out from red eyes and along the ground. It was a machine designed specifically for war and death.
"Enjoy our Techno-Soldier, Airbuster," President Shinra stated with a curve of his lips before he motioned for his guards to follow. "He's the latest in technological weaponry. I'm sure the data he'll extract from your dead bodies will be of great use to us in future experiments."

Barret rushed forward - a second too late - and the security panel hissed shut. He slapped his palm against the cold steel. "Motherfuckin' shit!"

At that moment Tifa seconded the sentiment. She glanced at her watch. Seven minutes. Either they defeated the metal monster closing in on them, or they incinerated with the rest of the reactor. Neither option was particularly appealing.

However, she wasn't the type to back down from a fight. She swung her pack to her front and pulled out her fighting gloves. "Barret, heads up!" She slid her hands into the well-worn leather.

Barret whipped around and fired, his aim dead on. The robot whined in response. The spinning blades whizzed faster, deflecting a majority of the bullets, but several had found their mark leaving a number of pock holes in the metal. Targeting lasers converged and swarmed like insects over Barret's chest.

Tifa was having none of that. She leaped forward, her fist connecting solidly with the Airbuster's faceplate. She planted her feet against it's shoulders and back flipped away, using her momentum to shove the machine backwards a good five feet and knock it's lasers askew.

When it fired again Barret was able to dodge and roll across the catwalk so that he came up alongside Tifa.

Ramrod straight, eyes narrowed and focused on the robot, Tifa formulated a variety of attack options in her head. Her gloved hands clenched and unclenched in anticipation. Airbuster rolled forward and fired, bullets spraying the space where she and Barret had stood a moment before. The damn thing recovered fast, she thought angrily as she shoved herself up to her knees. There was no way to take it down while they were standing directly in front of it. It was too massive, with too much firepower.

"We need a plan!"

"Ya think?" Barret swore. He took a couple of shots, and motioned for her to move closer to him. "Get behind it," he ordered. "Maybe we can confuse it. I'll cover you."

She nodded once. "Okay." The heel of her boot struck the railing and she launched herself up and towards the Airbuster. Lasers honed in on her but quickly scrambled when Barret opened fire. Tifa hit the ground and pivoted on one leg, the other lashed out, slamming into the back of the robot and sending it careening forward. She crouched down and gave her watch another glance. Four minutes. "Barret!"

"We gotta take this thing down now!" Was the response.

Yeah, no shit. She dove forward, so that her feet landed between the treads and she thrust up. Off balance, the Techno-Soldier whined, arms spinning wildly to right itself.

"You see an opening?" Tifa flinched and turned her face away, avoiding a fatal bullet from a rear turret. She relaxed her legs and rolled out from under the machine. "Damn."

"Teef, heads up!" The air crackled and popped. Barret was pulling together all the energy in his arm cannon for what he liked to call his Big Shot.

Tifa rushed Airbuster and drove her elbow into its back with enough force to wish she had brought
her pads with her. Using the rear turret as a springboard, Tifa flung herself away. "All clear!" She covered her eyes as bright orange flames shot up over Airbuster's head. The robot screamed and shook, blue sparks traveling over it's frame and a moment later the guns lowered uselessly to it's sides.

"Take that, asshole!" Barret sounded smug.

"Yeah!" Tifa grinned. She stepped around the still smoldering hulk of metal and offered up a high-five. "Impressive," she said with a wink. Their victory dance was a bit premature, Tifa realized with an alarmed gasp when a second later blue sparks appeared and the robot began to smoke. "Oh, fu-!" The world exploded in a fireball of pain.

Zack reached out one hand to steady Aerith as the ground rumbled beneath their feet. A blaring siren wailed piteously in the distance.

"What in the planet's name was that?" Aerith sounded as shaken as the ground.

"Sounded like an explosion," Zack commented, his gaze speculative. Earlier in the week he had caught the tail-end of a newscast recounting recent 'terrorist activities' against the Shin-Ra corporation, including a bombing of the Sector One Mako Reactor. AVALANCHE was the suspected group responsible.

Zack wondered if it were true, and if it was, was Tifa involved?

Aerith placed a hand to her chest and shook her head slowly, a sad expression crossed her face. "More violence."

"Sometimes violence is the only resort left."

She glanced up at him from beneath a veil of thick lashes. "SOLDIER talk?"

He shrugged easily, but the smile had left his eyes. "Fact of life."

"There's always a peaceful way," she disagreed quietly.

Zack didn't want to ruin the comfortable mood they had established a few minutes ago, so he refrained from argument. The steady thump-thump of helicopters sounded overhead. Whatever was going on, the Shin-Ra troops were mobilizing. "We'd better get you home," he told Aerith. "I'll walk you."

She smiled. "I'd appreciate that, thank you. Let me just gather up my things."

Zack nodded in the affirmative, crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

"Tifa! Hold on!"

Tifa winced against the white hot stab of pain in her shoulder. The damn robot had exploded, taking out half the walkway with it, and now she was left hanging by a piece of broken metal over smog and slums. Her hand ached like a son of a bitch from the death grip she had on the twisted steel.

"Tifa!" Barret's voice was hoarse from smoke and more frantic than she'd ever heard it before. He knelt on what was left of the walk with his good arm stretched towards her.

Tifa gasped when the bridge gave a shudder and pitched down."Barret! Go! The bomb!" She
struggled to pull herself up, but strong as she was, the pain in her shoulder refused to let her do anything but dangle.

"Just...a little...more..." He was on the flat of his stomach now, extended as far as he could. At least fifteen feet separated the two of them and Tifa could see lines of exertion on Barret's face. The corded muscles in his arm and neck stood out. He was barely holding on himself, and if he inched any farther out there was a good chance he'd fall as well.

Tifa looked down and swallowed. It was a long way down. She looked up at Barret. His eyes were wide but determined, his jaw set in that defiant tilt of his. He wasn't going to leave her there. Typical Barret, she thought, giving his all for the people he loved. But there was someone waiting for him at home, and Tifa refused to be the reason Marlene grew up without a father.

She said his name and he looked at her.

It was there on her face. He could see it. "Tifa...no."

"Tell Marlene I love her." She closed her eyes. She smiled. She let go.

"Tifa!"
Instinct, more than actual sound alerted him to trouble and Zack spun around, hands going up just as the large beams overhead snapped, raining jagged splinters down at him. Acting on that same instinct, Zack plowed into Aerith, his arms outspread, sweeping them both to the ground and rolling, in one smooth move, coming up on his knees a few feet away just as a body tumbled through the busted ceiling with enough velocity to launch clumps of dirt and petals into the air like small missiles on impact.

Aerith gave a soft shriek into his left shoulder. When he glanced down, her face was sheet pale. He held up one hand and motioned for her to stay where she was. She nodded once, her eyes wide, but steady. He set her away from him and approached the flowerbed cautiously. Somewhere in a dim part of his mind Zack half expected to see himself lying amidst the blossoms courtesy of some weird dimensional time warp.

The body groaned. It wasn't him. But who was laying there was no less shocking.

"Tifa!" Zack dashed forward and lowered himself down beside her. He hadn't honestly expected to see her again, at least not so soon, and certainly not under such bizarre circumstances. He placed his hand on her arm carefully. "Tifa?"

Twisted on her side, she lay at an impossibly awkward angle. Dark lashes feathered pale cheeks and he could hear her breaths coming, too fast, too quick, in shallow pants that occasionally hitched in her throat. He looked up through the open ceiling and cursed under his breath. He knew from his own past experience how nasty that fall was, and how easily it could kill someone not Mako enhanced.

"Tifa, open your eyes!" he ordered. Nothing. Zack moved his hand behind her head and lifted, jostling slightly. "Tifa!" Her eyes remained closed and her breathing labored. He shifted his weight to hoist her onto his lap to better assess her injuries. Her head rolled to the side revealing a jagged scrape that ran along her cheek and down her neck. More scrapes and scuffs traveled the length of her toned arms and he spotted several cuts on her already discolored midriff. There was a good chance a rib or two had suffered some serious damage as well.

Pastel pink edged into his vision as Aerith settled herself beside him in a crouch. "You know her?" she asked softly; concerned.

Not sure exactly how to explain his relationship to Tifa, he went with, "She's an old friend."

Aerith placed her hand firmly over his forearm when he jostled Tifa again. "Be careful of her shoulder." She pointed to a smoldering piece of metal buried deep behind the juncture of arm and back. "That needs to be removed and cleaned."

Sirens wailed. Zack swore. No doubt about it now, whatever had went down, Tifa was involved.

"One second." Once more on her feet Aerith hurried to her cart and returned a moment later with a watering can. "We can use this." She bent to tug at the hem of her skirt.

Out of the corner of his eye Zack watched her tug at her skirt. "What are you doing?"

"That arm will need a sling." A small grunt and the silk gave way. She straightened the strip and held it out to him.
"Smart girl," he commented as he took the offered cloth.

Zack maneuvered Tifa so that she was propped up against his chest and curved the material up under her elbow and tied it securely at her nape. It wasn't the best sling he'd ever seen, but it'd have to do. That done he lifted the watering can and drizzled the contents along the wound, cleaning it up some.

He took a deep breath, gripped the end of the metal, grit his teeth and yanked. It tore free with a spray of crimson and a short, sharp cry from Tifa, who immediately fell back, still unconscious. Zack hated having to hurt her any more than she already was, but it couldn't be helped. Had he left that strip in it could have easily become infected.

Zack tossed the offending metal aside and scooped the watering can back up. He dipped it forward, coating Tifa's forehead and cheeks.

After a minute her lashes fluttered.

"Finally." Relief washed over him. He had promised Cloud that he'd keep her safe, and yet here she was crumpled in his arms like a broken doll. Guilt balled tight in his gut. "She's coming around. Come on, Tifa," he urged. "Wake up."

Arms flailed and her fist glanced against his forehead.

"Ow. Stop. Stop. Easy." He did the only thing he could think to do and wrapped his arms around her, using his strength to steady her. "It's okay. You're okay."

She stilled. "...Zack?"

"Yeah. Hi." He gave a short laugh and pushed her hair back from her face. "Nice of you to drop in."

Her eyes were hazy from pain and it took her a moment to focus on him. She searched his face warily and he met her examination with an open, unguarded expression. She had beautiful eyes, he thought unexpectedly. Warm and rich and deep.

She broke their staring contest and tried to sit up. A sharp breath hissed through her clenched teeth.

"Where are you hurt?" he asked, all joking aside.

"Everywhere." She skimmed over her surroundings, her brow creased. "Where am I?"

"You're in a church," Aerith drew their attention and Zack felt oddly flustered to realize for a moment he had completely forgotten she was there. "In Sector Five." She pointed up. "You fell." She flashed Tifa a sunny smile. "I'm Aerith." She made the introduction casually, as if people falling from the sky into her flowers was a common occurrence. Then again—this wasn't exactly the first time for it either, Zack thought with a half smile.

"I'm Tifa," Tifa made her own introduction with a small nod. She pushed herself to her feet determinedly, seemingly unaware—or uncaring—of the blood trickling down her arm and over her gloves. Zack gripped her elbow to help her stand. "Take it easy," he warned.

His words were muffled, then cut off completely by the loud thrum of helicopter rotor blades thumping and slowing. Someone was landing just outside the church. Zack turned towards the doors, then back again. "What exactly did you do?" he asked, very quiet, very serious.

The look on her face was unapologetic and stubborn. "Broke some Shin-Ra toys."
"Shit." Zack ran his hands through his hair. "We need to get you the hell out of here."

"The back door." Aerith motioned toward the rear of the church with one hand.

Zack was already moving Tifa. "Aerith, come on."

It was too late. The front doors swung open and two Shin-Ra troopers marched in.

"We're here to conduct a search. No one move!" The closest soldier barked.

Zack snorted. Like he hadn't heard that line before. "Aerith, get down!" he ordered, already moving.

She dropped to one knee and tucked her chin to her chest.

Zack leaped over her back with ease and tackled the closest trooper with brutal force. Both Shin-Ra men were momentarily stunned, obviously not expecting any kind of resistance. The first landed hard upon the wood floor with Zack's fist in his face. The second recovered quickly enough to lift his rifle and point it at Aerith's head.

"Zack! Help!" Aerith backed away, holding her hands up as a shield.

His assistance, it turned out, was unneeded as Tifa came from the right, her forearm driving the other trooper back. The guard tried to grab her, but Tifa spun, lifted her slung elbow and caught the larger man in the jaw, followed by a jab to his nose and a palm thrust. With the quickness of a street fighter she snatched his gun from his hands as he fell to the floor and rammed the butt up into the soft spot under his chin, knocking him out cold.

"You ok?" She asked over her shoulder.

Aerith's mouth was parted and her eyes were wide. "That was... just wow!"

Zack removed his knee from the first man's trachea leaving him in a similar state of unconsciousness. He wiped his hands on his pant legs and gave the half open front door a sideways look. "There's sure to be more men on their way. We should hurry." He approached Tifa who was whiter than before with fresh rivulets of blood trickling to her gloves.

Tifa shook her head at him, her pony tail swinging with the motion. "I'm fine. There's no need for you to get involved."

"We're already involved," Aerith spoke briskly. She linked her arm through Tifa's good one and walked toward the back exit with quick steps. "Come on, Zack."

Zack stepped over the fallen Shin-Ra troops and followed a befuddled Tifa and determined Aerith through the back door of the church. Petite, slim and frail were accurate descriptions of Aerith's physical appearance, Zack observed, but not her personality. She was vibrant, lively and full of spunk. It was one of the things that had attracted him to her. He was glad to see the years hadn't changed that at least.

Outside the sky was darkening with shades of gray and muted black washing over the slums. Light was scarce to begin with, but when the sun went down above all that was left to illuminate the lower sections were the lights of Midgar.

The air was heavy and smelled of decay and waste. Trash littered the entrances to the crumbling buildings. Cardboard and tin were stacked around the alleyway to shelter bodies with nowhere else to go. This was where the dregs lived, the homeless, the drunks, and the predators. He knew eyes
were watching him and the girls as they made their way along the church wall. Sector Five was as
depressing as Sector Seven, minus the haven of Seventh Heaven.

"Going somewhere?" A voice, smooth and slightly mocking, spoke from the deeper shadows of the
church's overhang.

The tone instantly grated on Zack's nerves and he bristled with recognition. When he turned, he
found himself glaring at a lazy grin and a shock of redder than red hair. The Turk trademark dark
blue suit- meant to be worn pristine pressed and immaculate- hung wrinkled and loose over a thin
frame and a lethal EMR hung in a loose grip so that it tapped against scuffed shoes.

"Reno!" Aerith's voice was strained with a hint of fear and...irritation? "What do you want?"

He'd almost forgotten, Zack realized. The Turks- Shin-Ra—had been watching Aerith before
everything that had happened. Something to do with her being the last of her kind. Given the
familiarity in Aerith's tone, it appeared they still were.

"For once we aren't here for you," Reno stated, confirming Zack's suspicions. "I'm looking for
someone," he cocked his head to the side. "And considering that my scouts aren't answering their
two-ways, I'd say there's a good chance that someone is right here."

Zack felt Tifa stiffen beside him and he stepped forward, his stance defensive. "We don't want any
trouble."

"Well, that's just too bad," Reno smiled. He swung the EMR up in a wide loop and rested it in the
palm of his opposite hand. "Because you found some."

"Reno, go away." Aerith glowered.

"No can do, sweetness. Tseng ain't calling the shots on this one. I'm here on direct orders from the
President."

The tread of heavier boots intruded on them. Zack's fists clenched. He knew what was coming now.
Two scouts, two infantry, and two Turks. The usual Shin-Ra response team; the thugs of Shin-Ra.
He wondered if any SOLDIERs were left, and if so, would he be facing any?

Reno leaned to one side, his light blue gaze inquisitive as he adjusted his goggles and the other Shin-
Ra men flanked him minus the second Turk, who was probably still in the chopper. "Hey... don't I
know you?" Reno asked Zack.

Before he could answer Tifa was in front of him, her hand pushing him back toward the darker
shadows. "Go!" Her voice was low, the warning clear. She faced Reno. "I'm the one you're after."

The last thing Zack expected was for Tifa to attack, so when she hissed, "Run!" and launched herself
at the Turk, he was slow to react. She went in low and mean, sweeping legs out from under the other
man so that Reno landed on his backside. She kicked him hard, using the edge of her foot to try and
get rid of the EMR. Reno yowled when she connected with his wrist and the weapon went spinning
out of his hand. She kicked the EMR again, sending it skittering over the sidewalk then down into
the gutter.

"Come and get me," she taunted, and Zack knew it was pure bravado. She was in no condition to
lead a merry chase through the slums, but before he could stop her she was gone, running swiftly
down a darkened alleyway, melting into the shadows. Her footfalls were light, almost a strain for
even Zack's acute hearing.
Reno rolled to his feet, gave Zack an angry glare and turned to his men. "Don't just stand there, yo! Get her!" They pursued, leaving Zack and Aerith forgotten. Reno pointed his finger at Zack. "We'll meet again." Then he too was gone.

Zack glared at the Turk's back. "Count on it." He didn't want to lose sight of Tifa, knew she needed him, but he couldn't leave Aerith alone. He was torn.

She saw it. "Let's go! We can't let them catch her!"

He swore, grabbed her hand, tugged on it. "Come on." There was only one route to Sector Seven. He knew where Tifa was headed.

Tifa raced through a darkened entryway into an abandoned apartment building with crumbling walls and a caved in roof. She ran hard, her breath harsh in her ears. She was woozy and weak from her fall, but she still had her fighter instincts, and considering that it was the Turks that were after her, she would need every one of them.

She jumped over a pile of rubble and ducked through a narrow opening that took her to a stairwell. She took the stairs two at a time, going up to the next story. There was a hole in the wall, large enough for her to shimmy through, that enabled her to take a shortcut through two apartments. She pushed through a broken door and out onto a balcony where she caught the lowest rung of a rusted ladder and dragged it down.

Tifa went up the rungs fast, but without her usual ease. Her shoulder burned and throbbed in protest, as did her sides, but she continued on, determined. She had scoped out a hundred escape routes in these slums, knowing it would be an essential part of AVALANCHE's plan should anything go wrong—as it very much had.

Once on the roof, she ran swiftly, not even bothering to pause before launching herself onto the roof of the next building. She landed with a bone-jarring thud and forcibly held a scream in check as she wobbled back to her feet. Sweat beaded on her forehead, trickled into her eyes. She leapt a small, broken fan and skirted around a pile of decaying wood to jump to a third roof.

This time she landed on her feet already running for the stairs. She didn't bother with the rungs of the ladder, but instead slid down the poles to the first story and ducked inside a broken window. A skinny man lolling on a broken down couch in his underwear and stained tee shirt looked up from his drug induced fog and stared at her. Tifa gave him a nod as she hopped over his outstretched legs. She was forced to avoid two puddles of unknown origin on her way out the door. Across the hall the opposite apartment's door was barely hanging on its hinges. She went through it fast, avoided the startled occupants as she crossed the floor to the opposite window.

She had to slow down to climb through the broken glass. The splintered remains caught at her clothes, so that she struggled a moment. She tugged at the torn fabric, her heart pounding and her lungs screaming for air. Precious seconds were wasted as she tried to drag her tank top free. The jagged pieces of glass scraped across her hand, sheared off skin, but she thrust her way outside into the open air.

Outside she tried for a deep, calming breath, but that failed when she saw the flickering of flashlights in the alley across from her and heard the steady 'whump-whump' of the helicopter nearby. She went very still, every muscle locked; frozen. A terrible shiver went down her spine. Damn they were fast, she thought. Faster than she had anticipated.

Tifa tasted the bitter tang fear in her mouth and silently cursed it. She had to escape. She hadn't
survived the fall only to get captured by Shin-Ra. She had brains, skills, she knew the area, had helped Barret plan for this. She would elude them. She would!

She wiped grimly at her forehead with the cuff of her glove before setting off again. She moved quickly, working harder to keep her footfalls light, her breathing soft and controlled. She ran on the balls of her feet through a narrow corridor between two buildings, ducked around the corner and just barely avoided being struck by a bullet.

She didn't bother to look behind her. She knew they were close. Chips of mortar flaked into the air as two more bullets lodged themselves into the brick. She ran into the street, running now with long open strides, arms pumping so that her heart was beating loudly, wildly. She stumbled, but didn't fall. Blood loss was making her light headed and she was certain she had a broken rib, but she continued. Pushed past the pain. Pushed past the burn. Past endurance. Past her normal limits. Past it all until she was numb with only the mantra of "Don't get caught" pounding in her head in time to her footfalls.

She followed the vacant streets until they widened and she was in on the fringe of the slums. She was still in the older part of the sector with its century old buildings, all decayed and left to rot thanks to the plate hanging like an omnipresent black cloud overhead, but she knew she was close to the outskirts. She cut through abandoned parking lots, avoiding the dancing flashlight beams with near balletic grace. Her lungs felt scorched, the pain forcing her to slow to a jog. She stopped to lean against the bricks of the nearest building, exhausted.

Oh, Gods, her side! She clutched at it, each breath a sharp, blinding pain. The terrible tension was beginning to leave her body now, and she slid forward, her forehead pressed to the cold stones. She blinked rapidly, tried to focus. Stay conscious, Lockhart.

From somewhere came the impression of a yell. She lifted her head. Shit. Tifa forced her body to continue forward, moving through the twists and turns of the unfamiliar neighborhood until the broken pavement gave way to rocky ground. Her knees felt like jelly and her heart thudded painfully in her chest. She fell, got up, fell again.

Footfalls were coming towards her. Faint at first, but getting louder. Closer. Behind her the Turk and his men were closing in.

"Tifa!"

She lifted her head from the dirt; blinked. "Zack?" She struggled back to her feet, took two staggering steps in his direction.

He emerged from the shadows.

This time when her knees gave out it was with relief.

Strong hands gathered her up. "I've got you."

Tifa didn't resist as he swung her up to cradle at his chest, but simply let her head rest against his shoulder. As the gray fog at the edge of her vision began to close in and turn black she heard Aerith's soft, pleasant voice.

"Hurry Zack. This way..."

Tifa had no idea how much time had passed as she faded in and out of consciousness, but when she
opened her eyes again it was as the three of them approached a small cottage. It was a lovely home, she noted absently. Nestled back away from the slums, shrouded with bushes and trees that gave it a semblance of privacy.

She shifted her weight, silently urging Zack to put her down. He did so gently... and reluctantly.

"You're very pale. Come inside so I can tend those wounds." Aerith wore a worried frown.

Tifa felt uncomfortable intruding. Bringing blood and the ugly darkness into such a quiet, homey place.

As if he sensed her hesitation Zack urged her forward. "It's late. You need to rest up."

Aerith opened the front door. "You can stay here for the night." She ushered them through the threshold. "Mom! I'm home!"

"Aerith! I was beginning to worry..." The woman that came down the stairs was as lovely as the cottage, with chestnut hair, only flecked with a few strands of gray, tied up in a tidy bun and sparkling hazel eyes. Her pale blue dress was neatly buttoned beneath a floral apron. She looked like a Mom. She paused at the foot of the stairwell, her hand on the banister.

"Sorry to make you worry," Aerith said quickly, smiling so as to relieve her mother's tension. It failed. "Uhm, you remember Zack?"

The older woman nodded, her eyes widened in surprise at first, then narrowed. "Indeed I do."

"Ma'am." Zack rubbed the back of his neck. His cheeks, Tifa noted, were a dull red.

She glanced between the three, and knew that she was obviously missing some shared history. She didn't have time to ponder it because the next moment Aerith was gripping her hand and pulling her towards the stairs.

"This is Tifa. She was hurt by the Turks and she and Zack need a place to stay for the night so I told them they could stay here."

Tifa's mouth fell open at Aerith's rushed explanation. She looked at Aerith's mother, expecting panic or censure but all she saw was concern.

"The Turks? You were followed again? Are you hurt?" Worry caused lines to form around the corner of her mouth.

"No, I'm fine." Aerith reassured her. "They weren't after me. Besides, I had Zack with me."

Hazel eyes returned to Zack. "I see."

He shuffled his feet, stared at a spot on the wall.

Aerith continued, apparently oblivious to the odd exchanges between her mother and Zack. "So I figured that Zack could stay in the guest room and Tifa could bunk with me, alright?"

"I don't want to be any trouble-" Tifa quickly interjected.

"Nonsense." The older woman took a breath and plastered a too sweet smile on her face. "I'm Elmyra," she held out her hand.

Tifa glanced at her bloodied gloves and back up. "Uhm..."
Elmyra also glanced down, then, "Perhaps you should take your guest upstairs, Aerith, and help her freshen up. I'll fix you something to eat." She gave Zack a look. "I'm sure Mr. Fair can help me."

Zack looked like he had just been optioned out for a root canal. "Uh, sure."

"Okay. Come on up, Tifa. I'm sure I have something that'll fit you."

Their home was as charming on the inside, Tifa decided as she followed Aerith across the neat kitchen and up the stairs. She glanced at the photos on the wall as they walked the hallway. A vase of flowers stood on a small hall table and candles flickered softly from votive cups along the wall.

"This is my room," Aerith opened a closed cream colored door.

It suited her, Tifa thought as she stepped inside. Delicate, lacy pillows and soft fabrics covered the plush bed, and small stuffed toys lined a dresser. Aerith, following her gaze, gave a small, embarrassed laugh. "Gifts," she murmured, blushing.

"They're cute." Tifa reassured her.

"Thanks."

Tifa strolled the room while Aerith hunted in her closet for clothes. Knick-knacks, doodles, and trinkets dotted the nightstand. A photograph of her mother sat beside Aerith's lamp and a few scraps of stationary lay on the bed. All in all a very normal, very feminine room.

Tifa quelled an unexpected flare of resentment. She must be tired, she thought.

"I think these will fit." Aerith turned from her closet holding out a pair of drawstring pants and a pale green shirt.

Tifa took them with a nodded thanks.

"The shower is right through that door," Aerith pointed. "Towels and soap in the closet beside the toilet. Will you be okay?"

"Yes, thank you." Tifa felt weariness sinking in.

"Okay. When you're finished I have some medicine for you." At the door she turned. "What you did was very brave."

Tifa felt anything but. "Or very stupid. Depends on who you ask."

Aerith gave her a hesitant smile and closed the door softly behind her.

"Who's your new girlfriend?"

Zack grimaced, his back to Elmyra as he filled the tea kettle. "Tifa's a friend," he informed her, impressed that he'd managed to keep his tone neutral.

Elmyra opened the cupboard, retrieved some plates, closed it, before she asked, "Then I suppose you have your sights set on Aerith again?"

He sighed. It was no secret—well, not to him anyway—that Elmyra disliked and distrusted him, and given the fact that he was a former SOLDIER that used to date her daughter, he couldn't really blame her. But that didn't change the fact that her condescending tone chaffed his already frayed nerves.
Zack turned now and faced Elmyra. "Wouldn't that be between me and Aerith?"

"Humph." She set the plates on the counter with a bang. She scowled at him with one hand on her hip, her mouth thin. "It took her a long time to get over you. A long time, and I refuse to see her heart broken like that again."

He felt both guilty and angry. "It wasn't exactly voluntary," he stated. "I never meant to hurt her."

She shifted her position, aimed another narrow look at him. "Maybe not, but you did."

He really didn't want to be having this conversation. "And for that I'm sorry," came his terse reply.

"Be sorry all you want, but that doesn't change what is. What you are." She pointed her finger at him. "You're trouble. You lead a life that lends itself to tragedy. Look at that girl upstairs. She looks like she was mauled by a pack of wild animals."

Zack didn't point out the fact that Tifa's state of disarray had nothing at all to do with him. In fact he didn't bother to try and defend himself against Elmyra at all. He knew it was futile. She was a mother with a mother's concerns, and having been raised right, he knew better than to try and interject any comment anyway. It was hard to bite his tongue, but he did.

"Mom? Zack?" Aerith called from the stairwell.

Elmyra dropped her voice to a low whisper. "Aerith doesn't need that kind of trouble. It would be best all around if you and your friend left here and never came back."

A moment later Aerith stepped into the kitchen. The tension in the air was thick. "Everything okay?"

Elmyra brushed her hands on her apron. "Everything's fine, hon." She gave Zack a meaningful look. "Right?"

He reached for the sugar container. "Yeah. Right."

Aerith hardly looked convinced. "Mom, can I talk to Zack alone please?"

Elmyra hesitated for a brief second, then nodded. "I'll get the extra blankets from the attic."

Once they were alone, Zack slid his hands into his pockets and waited for Aerith to speak.

"I'm sorry about my Mom." Obviously she had heard more than she let on.

"Hey, no worries." He said, and meant it. "It's me that should still be apologizing, and thanking you. I appreciate you helping Tifa."

"Of course," she said easily, and Zack was reminded of just how generous she really was.

They stared at one another in the awkward, heavy silence following, and Zack made painful note of the absence of the familiar kick in his gut. She was still beautiful, still kind and warm and all the things young, foolish Zack had fallen in love with. But he was older now. Changed. So was she. And she knew it too. He could see it in the way her eyes drifted away from his each time they met. He sighed and decided to shoot the elephant in the room. "Things are never going to be like they were, are they?"

Aerith lifted her eyes to finally meet his. It was a rhetorical question, but she answered regardless. "No...I don't think they can be."
"I didn't think so either." He gave her a half-smile, all apology and regret. He stepped toward her. "It was good though."

Her eyes glittered. "It was," she agreed with a watery smile.

He opened his arms. She stepped in and they held one another. "So...where does that leave us?" she asked hesitantly, her voice muffled by his chest.

"Friends?" he was hopeful.

She flashed her sunny grin up at his chin. "Definitely."

Upstairs in the bathroom Tifa, now stripped of her wet, sweaty clothes, watched her skin turn pink under the hot water. She sat in the shower stall with her arms hugged around her knees, trying to wipe away the guilt and the fear and the anger that seemed to bleed from her pores as the adrenaline left her.

She could feel the tears on her face mingle with the water pouring over her body. It was wrong to cower in her shower like a child, she thought with an angry swipe of her cheek. She knew it did no good. Someone had to face the monsters of the world and do something about them; otherwise they would swarm everything and suffocate everything and everyone, and Shin-Ra was the biggest monster of them all.

Slowly, she drew herself reluctantly to her feet. She washed the fear from her body along with the sweat of running. She closed her eyes and dropped her head forward. It felt as if she had been running for most of her life.

Since Nibleheim.

Since HIM.

Once upon a time she had thought that she was running toward something. Toward a future. But that was gone now. Taken away by Shin-Ra...

She ran her fingers through the knotted strands of her thick hair in an attempt to untangle them and her depressing thoughts. She turned off the tap before she stepped out of the stall to wrap a thick towel around her.

At the mirror she hesitated. The ghostly outline of herself shifted behind a veil of steam and Tifa frowned. She was tired of hiding. With a grim look, wiped one hand in a circle through the steam. The woman staring back at her was virtually a stranger. She was all enormous eyes; so dark they were nearly black now with smudges beneath them. Light skin was drawn tight and shaded white with loss of blood. Her hand was throbbing and she looked down at it with surprise. The skin was shredded from the top of her hand to her wrist, and it stung like a bitch. Fresh blood was oozing from it so she wrapped it in the towel and padded barefoot back into Aerith's bedroom. She pulled on the drawstring pants and shirt.

She took a breath, and on the inhale caught the scent tea. Her stomach growled.

"Looks like I'm just in time."

Tifa gave a start.
"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you." Zack inclined his head apologetically, one dark lock of hair falling into his impossibly blue eyes. He gestured at the tray in his hands with his chin. "Aerith thought that you looked tired, so I thought I'd bring your food to you instead of making you climb those stairs again."

Tifa raked her uninjured hand through her wet hair. She wasn't sure how to take his kindness. It wasn't overt or flirty like the types of niceties she was used to, or fake and put on. Zack Fair seemed to be a genuinely nice guy.

He was still a virtual stranger, yet every time she looked at him something stirred in her and she felt a jolt of connection that she had only ever felt with one other person. She shook that thought free. "Thank you. You didn't have to do that."

He set the tray on the bureau before turning his blue-violet eyes on her. "Lemme take a look at that."

Tifa cocked her head as she flexed her hand. "What?"

"Your hand."

She shook it out. "I'll be fine."

Dark brows lowered to form a groove just above the bridge of his nose. "Are you always so impossible?"

"What do you mean? I'm not being impossible."

"You aren't exactly being cooperative."

"Oh, fine." She held out her hand.

His was warm when he took hers. Solid. Strong. She felt a subtle shiver travel along every nerve ending and it startled her.

He seemed unaware of it as he made a tsk sound under his breath and he examined the cut. "What were you thinking, Tifa?" he asked, so soft she thought maybe the question was in her head, but when he looked at her expectantly she knew he had indeed voiced it.

She didn't pretend ignorance. "I was thinking that I've had enough. Enough of living under Shin-Ra, in the shadows. Enough watching them roll over people like their lives are meaningless."

Zack was silent as his thumb traced the meaty part of her palm absently. He seemed to be studying her, and Tifa got the crazy idea that he could see straight through her, into and past all the dark shadows she tried to hide, even from herself.

"It won't bring him back," he commented quietly.

"Don't you think I know that?" Her voice cracked and she was forced to clear her throat. She took a steadying breath.

The door creaked. "I brought an extra pillow." Aerith slipped into the room. She stopped, her gaze darting between the two. "I'm sorry; am I interrupting?"

Tifa slid her hand out of Zack's. "No."

He stared at her longer than was comfortable before he turned to Aerith. "Her hand needs your touch," he said.
"I'll do what I can." Aerith replied. "There are blankets for you in the guest bedroom."

"Thanks." He bent toward her cheek out of habit before he remembered himself. When he retreated her cheeks were pink, and he rubbed his neck and gave an awkward laugh. "Uhm...yeah. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Aerith echoed.

"Night," Tifa murmured.

After he left, Aerith gestured towards her bed. "Have a seat, and let me have a look at you." She pulled a small tube of lotion from her pocket and settled herself in front of Tifa.

Tifa held out her hand.

"That's a nasty cut." Aerith squeezed some lotion into her palms, rubbed them briskly and placed her hands over Tifa's.

Immediately Tifa felt an easing in pain. Her eyes widened as she watched her skin knit itself back together. She looked at Aerith, who had her own eyes closed, her mouth moving silently. It looked like she was chanting.

"That's some gift you have there." She flexed her healed hand.

Aerith blushed a bit. "It's mostly the lotion. It's a special blend of healing plants that I grow."

Tifa didn't think it was mostly the lotion, but didn't say so. Her shoulder, cheek, sides and stomach were next, and all healed up just as good as new beneath Aerith's ministrations. When she was nearly finished Tifa felt fingers in her hair and she drew back, startled.

Aerith apologized instantly, embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to feel—it's so pretty. I'm sorry. I don't have many friends and I...I'm just going to shut up now."

Tifa, ashamed of herself for her abrupt behavior, softened. This girl owed her nothing yet had shown her kindness and hospitality. The very least she could do in turn was offer her friendship. "No, it's fine. I'm the one sorry." She smiled reassuringly. "You have very pretty hair too."

"You think so?" Aerith touched her ringlets.

"Very," Tifa emphasized, adding, "I like your braid."

"I could braid yours. That is if you want."

Tifa got the impression that Aerith was probably lonelier than she was, and nodded. "Sure."

Aerith rose and tossed her lotion onto her dresser. She opened a drawer and pulled out a blue ribbon and a hairbrush. "So you know Zack—she began.

"No, I don't." Tifa cut in.

"But—"

"We've crossed paths a couple of times but I don't really know him."

"Oh." Aerith digested that. "Well, then how did you two cross paths?"
"It was a long time ago." A time Tifa didn't really want to recall at the moment. "How do you know Zack?" She changed the line of questioning.

The answer was immediate and laced with tenderness. "He was my first love."

Tifa didn't miss the *was* but refrained from asking for elaboration. It wasn't any of her business, not really.

Aerith returned and motioned for her to turn around. The bristles along Tifa's scalp were soothing, and Aerith's voice nearly lyrical. Tifa found her heavy eyelids drooping before too long. The last thing she recalled was a soft ribbon being tied to her hair and a blanket being tucked over her shoulders.

It was completely dark when Tifa opened her eyes again. She sat up slowly and allowed her vision to adjust to the darkness. Aerith was asleep on the opposite side of the bed, her pink lips parted as she emitted the daintiest snore Tifa had ever heard. Careful, so as not to jostle the bed too much, Tifa swung her legs over the side. She eased her way off the mattress and picked up the stationary and pen beside the bed. She quickly scratched a note: *Thank you for all your help. Tifa* onto the paper and tiptoed to the door.

She winced as the door creaked, but a one eyed look over her shoulder revealed that Aerith was still sound asleep. She retrieved her boots from the hall and headed for the stairs. She felt bad about sneaking out without a proper goodbye, but she had no right to involve innocent people in her mess. Chances were that the Turks were still looking for her, and the last thing she needed was for them to trace her to Aerith's home. It was bad enough that Aerith was already implied, but perhaps if she left, Aerith could say she was coerced.

She took the stairs lightly, her bare feet near silent. In the kitchen she paused to slip her boots on. A hand on her arm caused her to reflexively strike, but Zack sidestepped easily. He didn't, however, release her.

"What are you doing?" He hissed, hand tight on her arm.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" she whispered back. "I'm leaving."

"Shin-Ra is all over the place out there, looking for AVALANCHE," he pointed out.

"Exactly. Nice people like Aerith and Elmyra don't need to be drug into this. They've risked enough just by allowing me to be here, and the best thank you I can give them is to leave. Besides, I can take care of myself, Zack." She removed her arm from his grip.

He stared at her and his eyes seemed to glow in the shadows. "Fine." He said after a minute. "Let's go."

"What?" She couldn't have heard that right. "Where do you think you're going?"

"With you." He picked his own boots up from the floor. "Someone needs to keep your ass out of trouble."

She rolled her eyes. "I've been taking care of myself for years-"

"And I am totally amazed you've survived this long. In the past few weeks you've been poisoned,
involved in an explosion, crashed through a church and been shot at. I'd say extra protection isn't a bad thing."

She gave an indignant snort.

"Look, either I come with you, or I follow you. It's not like I don't know where you're headed. Besides, I make a much better partner than stalker."

Tifa shot him an incredulous look. "Walk away, Zack. This isn't your fight."

"What if I want to make it my fight, huh? You telling me AVALANCHE doesn't have room for one more? You think you're the only one Shin-Ra has ever fucked over? Well, you're not, and I want in."

So it wasn't just about him wanting to protect her, she thought, but about his own need for revenge. That much she could relate to. "You'll have to be cleared by Barret," she answered.

"He'll clear me." He flashed her a wicked smirk.

Hand on the knob Tifa asked him over her shoulder. "What about Aerith?"

His voice held a hint of melancholy and a wealth of determination. "She'll understand." He leaned past her and turned the handle, his fingers meshed over hers. His hair brushed her cheek and his breath tickled her ear. "Let's go."

They stepped out into the night together.
A chilly breeze hung in the pre-dawn air as Zack and Tifa made their way through the maze that was the Sector Six slums. Every now and again, as they followed the twists of the path, Zack would catch sight of searchlights or hear the thrum of motor vehicles, but those were becoming fewer and fainter. It appeared that the search was slowing. He had expected as much.

Shin-Ra didn't delve too deep into the slums.

Pulling his attention away from the diminishing search effort and back to the narrow dirt trail in front of him, Zack neatly sidestepped a pothole. He held out his hand for Tifa, who, as he suspected she would, ignored it and stepped around the hole unassisted. He gave a small sigh as she passed before following her up the incline.

He was a fairly good judge of people, and based off of what little Cloud had told him, what he'd seen with his own eyes, and the general vibe Tifa radiated, Zack knew she wasn't a cold or unfriendly person, yet he could practically see the barriers she threw up between them. Logically, he knew trust was probably a factor, but there was something else too. Something intangible, yet there, skirting the edges of the invisible walls. Something probably best left alone, Zack reasoned, even as he found himself initiating a conversation.

"So," he began, "how long have you been part of AVALANCHE?"

Tifa tossed him a glance over the curve of her shoulder and kept walking. "Awhile."

It was short and succinct, but it was the first she'd spoken to him since leaving Aerith's house and Zack had the urge to hear more. "How'd that come to be?" he inquired as he climbed behind her over a small outcropping of rock. "It's not like there are recruiting fliers hanging on poles."

One pale hand pushed her long spill of dark hair back to wipe the sweat off her brow. They'd been walking for hours and despite the fact that no direct sunlight ever filtered below the plate, heat rose and simmered in the air, trapped and sweltering early on and through the day for lack of anywhere else to go.

He didn't expect her to stop, so when she did he almost bowled her over. He caught himself before he did so and hastily backed up so he wasn't crowding her. He got the impression that she liked her space, and if she was going to ever open up to him he needed to stay in her comfort zone.

She cricked her neck, stretched down to touch her toes and then back up to level him a speculative look. "What does it matter?"

Zack shrugged and kept his tone nonchalant. "Just curious. What made you want to join?"

"I wanted to make a difference," she finally answered in a manner that suggested she was weighing out exactly how much to reveal. "I wanted to fight back. I met Barret and he recruited me."

"Just right up off the street?"

"No. He came to my bar. We started to talk more and more to each other...we became friends. We share a common goal."

He didn't press for elaboration on their common goal—he had a pretty good idea what it was. So instead he went for more personal conversation. "Seventh Heaven is yours?"
She nodded once. "Yes."

Zack digested that bit of news. By his recollection Tifa would have to have been very young to have opened a bar those years ago. She must have read the question on his face.

"Property is sold cheap in the slums and no one really cares how old you are so long as they get what they want."

This was true. "But still, you must have been what? All of sixteen and running a \textit{bar}."

She looked up at him through lowered lashes and Zack thought he caught the hint of a smile flirting with her lips before she turned away. "It was supposed to be a diner," she informed him. "But every time someone came in all they wanted to do was drown their sorrows. So...my diner became a bar."

"Probably a sound economical choice," Zack murmured thoughtfully. "Easy money to be made off of misery."

And as quick as that Tifa's face closed up and her smile vanished. He could feel her reinforcing the imaginary walls. Too late he realized his mis-step. He had made it sound like she had taken advantage of those suffering, when he knew from stepping foot in Seventh Heaven that she had done just the opposite. He decided to tell her so. "But, I've been in your bar, and you offer more than a way to drown sorrow. You built a place of hope in a hopeless place; where a few gil can buy a warm meal and a misery free hour. That's commendable."

Tifa blinked a few times, clearly flustered by the unexpected compliment. Her face warmed to a light rose hue, Zack noted with some surprise and a bit of that something \textit{else}... that something he didn't want to acknowledge, so he ignored it.

"Thank you."

Beneath a fringe of black lashes his violet-blue eyes sparkled and his grin was affable and immediate. He was a man that liked to laugh and the easy way his mouth slid into smiles only emphasized that. "Just callin' it like I see it," he told her.

She began walking again."We're almost there. Only another mile or two."

"Yippee." Zack marched beside her. "Well, now you have my interest, so, tell me more about yourself."

She shrugged. "Not much to tell, really."

"I find that difficult to believe."

"How about you tell me about yourself," she countered. "After all, you're the one tagging along."

"Okay." Zack agreed. "What would you like to know?"

She made a face at his easy acceptance. "Hmm...anything?"

"Nearly."

"Okay." She thought for a moment with her lower lip tucked beneath her front teeth. "What made you want to be a \textit{SOLDIER}?" Although her tone was neutral, there was a tension in her posture that spoke of something deeper.

Zack gave the question genuine consideration. "I suppose it was because I wanted to be a hero," he
answered finally, taking an interest in his boots.

"Like Sephiroth?" Her voice was definitely tight now.

"Yeah, in a way." He rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. "He was a legend. I wanted to be a legend too."

A low sound came from Tifa that set Zack's teeth on edge. It was mournful.

"So much alike," she murmured, whisper soft.

Zack felt his own chest constrict, knowing full well who she was referring too. He turned his head toward her, the twinkle now absent from his eyes. "I'm sorry."

She sighed, her own eyes closed. "So am I." She took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders, and steadied herself. When she opened her eyes again there was a steely resolve in them that impressed Zack.

He leaned in just as she turned and their chests brushed. Her face tilted up, filled his vision and he thought to himself how easy it would be to get lost in her eyes. Look away, he told himself, but found it impossible to tear his gaze away from hers. There was something, just beneath the surface of her dark brown; glimpses of crimson and hidden emotion, that held him fast...pulled him in...

"We should get going." She turned her face away from him, but didn't move away.

Zack shook himself; nodded. They began walking again, but this time, when Zack held out his hand to help her over some tangled scrap, she took it.

The next mile and a half passed quickly, and Tifa found herself oddly disappointed to see the outskirts of Sector Seven as they rounded the final bend. Zack was a talker by nature, so the lapses between conversation were few and his penchant for storytelling made the journey almost enjoyable. Tifa now knew that Zack had loving parents, a "boring" childhood, a fondness for Chocobos, and a severe—yet comical, so he said— allergy to locoweed.

He was also hungry, if the rumbling growl his stomach just emitted was any indication. He rubbed one hand over it in a broad circle and let out a long, pitiful sigh. "Man, what I wouldn't give for some jelly donuts and peanut butter right now."

That little craving earned him an incredulous look. "When we get inside I'll make you some real food."

"That is real food," he argued.

"No; that's kiddie junk food," she argued back.

"What can I say? My stomach stopped maturing when I was ten."

"Just your stomach?" she quipped, unable to refuse the opening he'd given her.

Zack took a step back in mock dismay, hand over his heart. "You wound me."

Tifa rolled her eyes and bit back an answering smile. "Uh-huh."

He gave her a friendly shoulder bump and she bumped him back.
"TIFA!"

Both heads swung around as the door to Seventh Heaven banged open with enough force to completely dislodge the hinges. Tifa barely had time to brace herself before she was swung up and in a circle by Barret.

"Don't you ever, ever do something so fuckin' stupid ever again! You hear me?" He shook her once, then pulled her tight once more. "You can't..." His voice cracked. "I thought I'd lost you."

"Barret..." Tifa wheezed, touched, but genuinely concerned for the state of her spine. "I can't breathe."

He set her down and wiped the back of his hand over his eyes. It was then that he noticed Zack. "You gotta problem, princess?" he glowered.

Zack shook his head and held up his hands.

Barret flicked a look between the two of them. "What's up with you two? This joker's stuck to you like shit on a shoe."

Zack crossed his arms and rocked back on his heels. "Flattering."

"He saved my life." Tifa's soft spoken words brought Barret's head around. "After I fell from the catwalk-"

"You mean after you let go." There was an angry edge to Barret's voice and Tifa knew she was likely to hear a lecture at some point.

She huffed. "Alright, fine. After I let go, I landed in a church. Zack was there."

"In a church?" Thick brows met hairline.

"Yes. A church."

"Uh-huh." Barret shook his head as he eyed her narrowly. "And you expect me to believe that cockamamie story?"

Tifa crossed her arms and tapped her foot. "If you know what's good for you."

Barret snorted. He turned back to Zack. "She's home now. You can go."

"Actually," Zack replied with a slow roll of his shoulders. "I was thinking of staying on for awhile."

"Say what?" Previously raised eyebrows dropped to a straight line. Never a good sign with Barret. Tifa hastily stepped between the two men. "You're the one always telling me we need more people."

"Oh hell, You went and told him about AVALANCHE," Barret hissed.

"No, she didn't," Zack defended. "But since I do know about you, and you need help, who better than a former SOLDIER? Someone that has been on the inside?"

Tifa cocked her head. "He has a point." Then, softer, "And he did save my life."

"Fine." Barret snapped. "He can stay." One blunt finger pointed in Zack's face. "But I don't trust ya. If I so much as think you're spying for Shin-Ra I'll tear your arms off and beat you with them." With
that he spun on his heel and stomped up the steps. "Now get your asses in here."

Zack gave Tifa a look. "He just makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. You think he just needs a good ole fashioned man-hug?"

"Sure, try it. And you'll probably feel all broken and bruised on top of your warm fuzzies."

He shot her a quick charming grin. "Might be worth it."

Tifa shook her head but couldn't quite dislodge the smile that had crept over her lips. She was hard pressed not to smile with Zack, she realized, and for some reason that thought sent a shiver down her back. She hastened her steps and put some distance between them.

Inside of the bar Barret led the way to the old pinball machine that sat along the right wall. Tifa motioned for Zack to step closer and indicated the outline of a secret panel on the floor beneath them. "Be careful."

Barret pressed the flipper button. With a loud whine and grind the floor shifted and the trio was lowered, rather jerkily, to the sub-level of the bar.

"Tifa!"

Tifa opened her arms and caught the small bundle of polka dotted lace that flung itself at her from the back of the patch-work sofa. "Marlene!" she hugged the girl tight.

"You're okay!" Marlene squealed.

"Yes, sweetie. I'm ok." Tifa buried her nose in the girls soft hair and inhaled. Marlene smelled of sweetcakes.

"Papa's been letting you eat junk again." Tifa sent Barret a look over her shoulder. He busied himself with the computer.

Marlene nodded. "But that was only because he was too upset to cook. He was swearing an awful lot. He said you were a damn fool and-" her eyes widened and she stiffened in Tifa's arms.

Tifa angled her body so she could see what had upset the little girl so. Zack offered a toothy up grin. Marlene buried her face in the space between Tifa's neck and shoulder. "Oh, honey, it's okay. That's Zack. He's a friend."

Marlene shook her head, her fingernails biting into skin.

"Hey." Zack eased himself alongside of them. "Who's this lovely girl?"

"This is Barret's daughter Marlene. Marlene, come now. Don't be rude. Say hello to Zack," Tifa urged.

"Mmello." Tifa's shoulder received the greeting.

"Marlene, properly," Tifa scolded gently.

Marlene lifted her head, her eyes wary. "Hello."

"Hi." Zack nodded. "I'm Zack." Marlene studied him for a minute, her little face scrunched in speculation. "I'm always nervous meeting new people, too" he continued. "Especially pretty little girls, but Tifa told me not be scared."
Marlene's head rose further, her hazel eyes alight with intelligent inquiry. She peered at Tifa. "Is that true?"

"Uhm, yeah," Tifa said with a quick glance at Zack.

"Well, that's just silly. Why would you be scared of a little girl? You're much bigger."

Zack nodded solemnly. "That's true. I suppose it is silly to be scared. Tell you what, I'll make you a deal. I won't be scared of you, if you're not scared of me. Deal?"

Marlene thought this over. "Deal." She stuck out her small hand.

Tifa watched with mixed emotion as Zack shook it. He was so different than she remembered. So different than she assumed. It was disconcerting. She caught Barret's gaze on them as well, and she noticed that his scowl wasn't quite as dark as it had been a minute ago.

From the cellar stairwell a voice called. "Hey! Barret! Biggs just called. We're on the news! Quick turn on the—Oh my Gods! Tifa!" The door swung open and soft green eyes widened.

"Hey, Jessie," Tifa greeted.

Jessie let out a whoop. She turned and hollered back down the stairs. "Wedge, call Biggs back, Tell him Tifa's here!"

"Tifa?"

"Yes, Tifa!"

"Hell yeah!" Another joyful whoop from the wine cellar.

Jessie whipped back around, her smile brilliant. "We thought we lost you."

Tifa nodded, apologetic. "Sorry about that."

"Looks like you had your guardian angel with you again, huh?" There was an admiring gleam in Jessie's eyes and a flush to her freckled cheeks.

Zack cleared his throat and rubbed the nape of his neck.

Marlene gaped. "You're an angel?"

"Figure of speech, honey," Tifa corrected.

"All right, enough," Barret groused. "What were you yammering about?"

"Oh, right." Jessie nodded. "We're on TV."

All eyes turned to the mini-set above the computer.

On screen an overly made up blond was speaking with practiced enunciation, "Due to yet another terrorist attack by the group named AVALANCHE, parts of Midgar will be temporarily out of power, but should be restored momentarily. Following President Shinra's lead, Mayor Domino also spoke out today in public against AVALANCHE. He is asking for anyone with any information on the members or the whereabouts of the group to come forward. There is a substantial reward offered by the Shin-Ra Electric Power Company for confirmed members."
"Let the man-hunt begin," Jessie murmured. She gave herself a little shake. "We must be doing something right, if they want us that bad." She turned to Barret and Tifa for confirmation.

Tifa set Marlene on the ground, a frown on her face. She looked toward Zack. He shook his head immediately. "I don't want or need any Shin-Ra money."

Tifa felt like a cad for even thinking it, but he owed them no loyalty, had, in fact, been a member of Shin-Ra's most elite fighting force. Her concern was warranted, yet she still felt guilty for it. For maybe hurting him with the implication. She tried no to. She didn't want to care what Zack felt... but she did.

Tifa spent the remainder of the day setting up Zack's room and catching up with her companions while he and Barret returned to Sector 5 to retrieve Zack's personal belongings. He had said there weren't many, but there were a couple of items he refused to leave behind—for sentimental reasons.

Tifa hadn't questioned it.

Barret had.

Which was why he insisted on tagging along with Zack. He didn't trust him. He made no secret of it. And Tifa was surprised to find that she did trust him. It was part of that immediate connection she felt with him. The one she cared not to dwell on because it both frightened her, and reminded her...

The overhead bell chimed, pulling her from her thoughts. The regular patrons had begun arriving for the meal time rush and Tifa was thankful for the diversion. She found comfort in the familiar pacing. Greet, order, serve. Greet, order, serve. It was mindless and task oriented, yet fulfilling. Her tip jar tinked every so often as a spare Gil was tossed in, and she always smiled her thanks. Her tip money, usually sparse, was being put with the money Barret had hocked away from Marlene's education. It wasn't much, but it was something.

After a few hours the dinner rush passed and in came those looking less for a meal, and more for an escape began to trickle in. This was when her job wasn't only to serve, but to listen. Each problem laid at her feet, each tear slipped past bleary eyes, each lost soul was a reason for her to fight, and to keep fighting. She had enough reason on her own—with the life that Shin-Ra had demolished- but not everyone could fight like she could, and if able, she was willing to champion their causes.

It was nearing midnight when the door chimed again and she looked up to see Zack and Barret walk in. Both men wore scowls, and both men went their separate ways as soon as the door shut behind them. Barret toward the stairs—to go check on Marlene, Tifa was sure, and Zack towards the bar.

She had the Junon Ale on the counter before he sat down.

Zack thumbed the cap off. "Good memory." He took a drink, set the bottle down and proceeded to try and peel the label with his glare.

"So," Tifa leaned on the bar. "What happened?"

"Nothing happened." His answer was quick. Too quick.

"Something did," she countered. "You come in glaring like a devil and Barret is even more unpleasant than usual. So what's up?"
He frowned and took another swig; finished it off. "Another," he ordered. Then softer, "Please."

Tifa slid another across the chipped wood. "Zack...did Barret say something to upset you? Because I
know he can be rough sometimes-"

"He didn't say anything."

She cocked a brow. Now she knew he was lying.

"At least nothing that wasn't the truth," he amended.

"Ah." Tifa lifted her index finger. "Be right back." The couple at the end of the bar, whom she'd earlier served up a few shots of Cactuar Needles to- the house special- were merrily singing drunken ballads as she ushered them off. After seeing them safely off the porch Tifa made her way to the back booth to collect the empties before she returned to the bar.

By the time she got back Zack had polished off three more beers. "You want me to run a line right from the keg to you?" she questioned, crossing her arms.

"Can you do that?" He sounded entirely too hopeful.

She sighed. Before she could voice her next thought, however, Jessie rounded in from the kitchen.

"I'm going up now. The cellar is locked and the stock list is on your desk."

"Okay, great. Thanks, Jessie."

"No problem." When she smiled, Jessie was positively adorable, Tifa thought. Her red pony tail bobbed as she walked. "Glad your back, Tifa." A blushing pause. "Goodnight, Zack."

He lifted his bottle in salute.

Tifa began wiping the bar. "She likes you."

"That's her mistake," he brooded, finishing off yet another beer.

"Zack, what happened? This self-loathing thing you've got going on right now, it's really unbecoming." She took away the empty. "Not to mention punishing on your liver."

His smile was humorless and very un-Zack. "Mako body. Top-of-the-line Shin-Ra experimentation right here, baby. Beer can't hurt me."

"Zack-"

"I killed Cloud."

That stopped her. The bottle in her hand shattered. She shook the glass shards off, ignoring the sting of alcohol in cuts."What?"

He refused to meet her eyes. "I may as well have," his bitterness was directed at the bar top. "For all the good I did him."

She placed her palms on the wood to keep herself steady. "But you didn't...right?" She needed to hear the words. "You didn't kill Cloud."

"No," he answered after what felt like an eternity. "I didn't fire the shot." He swore, low and harsh.
"But I didn't stop it either." He lifted his eyes to hers finally and Tifa drew in a sharp breath at the pain reflected there. "But I would have. I wanted to. I tried, Tifa. I tried."

Her throat was tight. Constricting.

"I killed the ones that killed him though." His lips twisted in a sad mockery of his easy smile. "I killed them all."

Tifa felt a cold ball knot in her stomach. "How many, Zack?"

He shook his head, swallowed hard. "Don't know for sure. Could have been hundreds. I lost count."

_Hundreds._ Tifa took an involuntary step back, her mouth open in shock. She was speechless. She swallowed, found her mouth too dry, and reached for a drink. "They sent that many after you?"

He said nothing.

She couldn't even fathom that. How horrifying it must have been. "You were defending yourself, Zack."

He snorted. "Now you're looking for an excuse."

"No. You killed, because you had to. You had no choice. It was them or you."

"That time." He acknowledged. "But there were other times..." His sigh was rough. "I was a SOLDIER. First Class."

She nodded. She was used to her patrons unloading on her, but this was different. His words rang with a heavy sadness that was an echo of the pain she harbored silently in her heart.

"Do you know what you have to do to earn that rank?"

"No." She didn't want to know.

"You have to do a _lot_ of killing."

It unnerved her to think of funny, kind, affable Zack as a cold blooded Shin-Ra killer. Her hand fluttered to her heart. "Zack, please...enough."

He didn't seem to hear her. "Do you think a man is born evil, or is he made that way? Is it 'once a killer, always a killer?'"

She knew now what Barret had said. "I can't answer that for you. Only you can answer that for yourself."

His eyes seemed to glow faintly in the shadows of the bar. "I want to believe that I'm not what they wanted me to be. What they tried to _make_ me."

Following instinct, Tifa slipped her hand over his, giving it a quick, hard squeeze. "You are who you are, and no one can take that. Not even Shin-Ra."

Zack stared down his hand, still warm from her touch though she was already two feet away and headed for the stairs. "Thank you," he whispered to the shadows.

Upstairs in her room Tifa crawled into her bed, buried her face in her pillow, and tried not to cry.
Minutes later footfalls padded down the hallway. Tifa's head perked when the steps stopped just outside of her door. Her breathing paused and she lifted her face and waited—uncertain as to what she was waiting for exactly. A minute passed, and then the footfalls moved away. Tifa let out a puff of breath that she hadn't realized he was holding.

Not two seconds later she heard a mutter of something and the footsteps were headed back her way. Tifa watched the play of shadow beneath the crack of her door with mild confusion. It was Zack, she knew, and she should acknowledge him, but she didn't know if she could hear anymore of what he had to say.

"Tifa?" It was barely a whisper. "Are you awake?" He sounded like he half hoped that she was fast asleep. "I just wanted to say goodnight." He walked away again.

"Goodnight, Zack." She closed her eyes.
The door squeaked (thanks to newly busted hinges) when Tifa walked back into Seventh Heaven. She peeled her gloves from her hands and tossed them carelessly onto the counter. Her morning run had taken far less time than usual, due to the lack of beasts—a very good thing as far as Tifa was concerned—and she decided that she could spend the extra time preparing breakfast for her crew.

Hands washed and hair pulled back, she began rummaging through pots and pans. Within minutes she had a meal going. There was coffee for those that wanted it, and toast and eggs in the warmer on the sideboard, pancakes with chocolate chips and links of sausage. Enough to go around, but from the dwindling contents in the refrigerator Tifa knew she'd have to head into Midgar for supplies soon.

She tapped a wooden spoon against the plastic container in her hand and set Marlene's favorite juice aside. Like Tifa, Marlene was an early riser and would be up soon. Tifa's "boys", on the other hand, all liked to sleep in and she knew she'd have to practically bang the pans together to get them up.

She headed toward the stairwell, intending to do just that, but steady clacking from the small office she had adjacent to the kitchen paused her.

Jessie sat cross-legged in the low-back swivel chair, typing away. Her pony tail swayed as she bopped her head to some internal conversation.

"I didn't know you were up."

"Yup. Up." Jessie tapped a few more keys, then spun around. "Had some ideas. Wanted to get them down, run some numbers, before passing them onto Barret." She stretched her arms overhead and yawned.

"Have you been up long?"

Jessie wiggled in the chair. "Long enough for my butt to fall asleep," she grinned.

"There's breakfast in the kitchen," Tifa told her with an answering smile.

"Oooh, good." Jessie hopped to her feet, all energy and cheer. "I thought I smelled coffee."

Tifa nodded. "I made it strong."

"It's good."

The voice behind her, deep and slightly rough from sleep, caused her to start.

"Sorry." Zack smiled his easy smile. "Didn't mean to jump you."

Gone was the bitter and sad Zack from the night before, replaced now by damp-haired and clean shaven Zack, who smelled of soap and coffee, and looked far too good for the early hour.

"He could jump me anytime..." Jessie muttered under her breath and Tifa almost laughed at the slight widening of Zack's eyes. He sipped his coffee, and avoided her amused look.

"I'll go wake the others." Jessie folded her laptop.

"Okay, thanks." Tifa nodded with a step back so that Jessie could pass.
As Jessie disappeared up the stairs, Zack cleared his throat. "I don't think I was supposed to hear that." Eyes, the color of a cloudless sky, twinkled with mischief.

Tifa maneuvered herself so that she was facing him directly, arms crossed over her chest. The posture was automatic; she hated having her back to anyone. "No, I don't think you were," she agreed with a small chuckle. "I didn't hear you come down."

A spot on the wall over her shoulder seemed to capture his interest. "I've been up for awhile."

"Oh?"

Zack took another sip of his coffee and observed her over the rim of his mug. "Couldn't sleep," was all he supplied.

There was a heavy pause between them and Zack shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his eyes still not meeting hers.

"Did you eat?" Tifa switched topic.

"No. I wasn't sure-"

"Come on." She brushed by him and motioned for him to follow. "One thing you'll learn quickly here is that food and toilet paper go extremely fast."

She wasn't kidding, Zack found out. Within minutes the kitchen was bustling with activity. Hands grappled for spoons and cups while plates of eggs and pancakes circled the room and idle morning conversation filled the quiet.

"Wedge, how many of those damn things are you gonna eat?" Barret's rich baritone cut across the chatter. He squeezed a pool of syrup over his pancakes, and then onto Marlene's plate.

Wedge, a roly-polly type of guy with chestnut hair and gentle blue eyes, popped another sausage link into his mouth. "As many as I want. I'm a growing man."

"The only way you're growing is out..." Jessie placed her hands on her belly and waddled to the seat across from Biggs, who himself was busy wolfing down some eggs.

"Oh, har-har." Wedge cast her a mock glare. He waved a pancake dramatically. "I blame Tifa for my weight issues."

"Me?" Tifa laughed as she buttered a piece of toast. She held it out to Zack. "What do I have to do with how much you eat?"

Caught off guard by her thoughtfulness, Zack accepted the toast with a quiet, "Thank you." And watched as she then buttered one for herself. Others first; Tifa second. He was beginning to see a pattern.

Wedge bounced his head enthusiastically. "If you weren't such a good cook, I'd be svelte and sexy."

"I'm gonna need some vodka for my juice if I'm gonna believe you could ever pull off svelte or sexy," Biggs chimed, drawing Zacks' gaze. Biggs was a short man with an expressive face and a cleft chin. His eyes, a shade between brown and green were a bit on the dull side and Zack speculated he was probably a heavy drinker.
Both men seemed to be the easy-going and eager sorts, but Zack hadn't really gotten a chance to talk to them aside from the brief, cursory introduction that Barret had given late in the evening.

"What? Is it pick on Wedge day?"

"No. That's Thursday," Biggs spoke around a mouthful of egg.

Tifa plucked his dark hair as she made her way toward the coffee. "Be nice." At Biggs' low snort, she amended, "Or at least attempt to."

Conversation was light and easy with quips and laughter exchanged as frequently as the food. There was an easy camaraderie between the kitchen occupants that Zack found simultaneously enjoyable and uncomfortable.

"You wanna share my pancake?"

Zack looked down and found himself reflected in a pair of wide brown eyes. Marlene gazed up at him with sleep mussed hair and a forked pancake dripping syrup, held out like an offering.

"Thanks." He took the proffered pancake, syrup and all, between his fingers and added it to his plate.

"Welcome." She smiled bashfully at him before scampering back to her father's side.

"So, Zack, were you really in SOLDIER?" Wedge asked, his eyes wide with a mixture of awe and trepidation.

Zack allowed his gaze to touch Tifa's before he slid it away and answered in the affirmative.

"No shit, man." Biggs this time, nodding his head in a fashion that indicated deep thought. "I thought about joining once." He puffed out his chest, leaned back in his seat and winked at Jessie. "But I just couldn't give up the ladies."

Jessie rolled her eyes, apparently used to Biggs' blatant advances. "I was unaware that celibacy was a SOLDIER requirement." Then quickly to Zack. "It's not is it?"

Another glance at Tifa, this one lingering for a moment longer than comfortable, then back to Jessie. "No, it's not."

"SOLDIERs are like the elite, right?" Wedge wanted to know. "But even they have classes, right? So, uh, what class were you Zack?"

Zack watched the syrup from Marlene's second-hand pancake slide into his eggs in a slow roll. Funny how sticky, sweet syrup can look so much like bitter bloodstained memories...

"Zack?" Jessie hedged.

"First," he answered finally. "I was SOLDIER First Class."

"Hot damn," Biggs whooped with a clap of his hands. "We got ourselves a top of the line SOLDIER. Shin-Ra won't know what hit 'em."

Barret harrumphed. "Just 'cuz he's a Shin-Ra lackey don't make him anything special."

"Former lackey," Zack corrected. Although he made an effort to keep the comment light, there was hard undertone—an unspoken suggestion to let the conversation drop.

Barret didn't seem inclined. "Says you."
"Yes. Says me." Zack lowered his plate, met Barret's angry scowl with a frown of his own. "Problem with that?"

"No, so long as you remember you're scrawny ass is working for AVALANCHE now," Barret warned.

"Uh, guys-" Jessie flicked a worried glance between the two men, then toward Tifa for support.

Tifa finished her coffee and placed her mug carefully into the sink. "Marlene, if you're finished eating, how about you go get dressed, okay, sweetie."

The little girl nodded and hopped from her stool. "Thanks for breakfast, Tifa, it was yummy," she said and skipped from the kitchen.

"You're welcome, honey." Tifa turned back toward the table."Barret. A word."

"Uh-oh. I know that look. Someone's in trouuuuuuuul-"

"Biggs, shut it!" Barret snapped as he stood.

Near the stairwell, away from the murmurs in the kitchen, Tifa waited. She wasn't angry at Barret for his opinions of Shin-Ra, hell, she shared them. However, Zack didn't deserve to be the brunt of Barret's loathing...or hers.

Both Barret's posture and expression were defiant when he met her beside the banister.

"You think you could lay off?" she asked in a voice laced with gentle reproach.

"No," He didn't pretend ignorance to what she was referring to. Barret was too smart for that—and knew she was too. They'd been through too much together and knew each other far too well. "He was one of them, Teef. Not just a Shin-Ra grunt, but a fuckin' SOLDIER."

"Was being the word to remember here."

"What makes you so sure he doesn't have any ties left with Shin-Ra? That he gave it all up, no remorse, huh?"

"No, Barret, there's plenty of remorse..." Tifa pinched the bridge of her nose and took a calming breath. There was no easy way to explain things. There was too much convoluted history and emotional uncertainty involved. When she looked up, she said simply, "I trust him."

"But I don't," he countered.

"Then trust me."

There was no arguing against that. Tifa had proven herself again and again, and trust was never an issue between them. With a defeated sigh, Barret knuckled her cheek. "For your sake, kiddo, I hope your faith ain't misplaced." With that he walked away and followed his daughter's retreating footsteps up the stairs.

Tifa watched him, not oblivious to the fact that he had neither agreed nor disagreed to lay off of Zack. She sighed, but there was a soft curve to her mouth. Barret, often pig-headed and stubborn, needed to work things out for himself. She was confident that, given time, he'd drop his bias and
make an opinion based off of personal interaction. Whether or not he liked Zack...well, that was an altogether different matter.

She pushed herself away from the banister and started back toward the kitchen, only to have Zack himself step out into the hall a few feet from her. His eyes were a turbulent sea and a slow, but steady, tick thrummed in his jaw.

He made a vague gesture towards the stairwell. "I don't want to cause a rift between you two-"

"It'd take more than you," Tifa stated, waving off his concern. The remark wasn't snide or cold, but truthful. It would take a hell of a lot more than Zack Fair to come between her and Barret. They were family and for both of them family was forever. "Did you get enough to eat?"

To his credit, he took the comment and the topic shift in stride. "Plenty. Thank you. So, what are the plans for today?"

She tapped her index finger against her chin. "I have some chores that need to be done before we open tonight."

"Anything AVALANCHE related?"

"Not this morning, no. Meetings are generally in the evening, and assignments are handed out then."

She paused, studied him. His expression was serious and she found herself missing the cocky tilt of his lips.

Zack stared right back. Finally he asked, "What are you thinking?"

_How very much I like your smile_. She ruthlessly ignored her inner voice. "Nothing. Let's get going. There's a lot to do. Let's see how useful you can be."

Zack, as it turned out, was very useful. He helped paint the front steps, fixed the hinges and replaced two light bulbs before heading out to the old shed behind the bar to give Biggs a hand getting the antique truck up and running. That done, he returned inside and helped Tifa stock the bar, make a grocery list and do laundry.

She tried to shoo him away from the laundry, but he had steadfastly refused, citing his need to "pay rent" somehow and so he stayed. Tifa was less surprised than she would have liked to admit to realize that she was actually enjoying him. His quick wit and easy smile were refreshing and his thoughtfulness was endearing. He was good company.

She wished he wasn't.

That night, beneath the bar, after the last patron had been ushered out and Marlene was tucked in and checked on (twice) Barret and the others pulled out maps and schematics and rolled them out onto a makeshift table of crates and chairs. Some of the maps had red circles, and of those, a few had X's slashed through them.

"We've hit Reactors 1 and 5," Wedge told Zack when he caught the direction of Zack's gaze.

"So I've heard," Zack acknowledged as he swiveled a chair around, and straddled it with his arms crossed over the back. "What else?"

"And a few supply factories," Jessie filled in, setting her laptop on the table and taking the seat beside him. "But nothing really substantial. Shin-Ra is like a giant y'know, and we're just tiny pests
"nipping at its ankles."

"We're making a difference," Barret chuffed, his tone defensive. Jessie immediately looked contrite.

"Yeah, but she has a point." Biggs placed his flask onto the table as he took his seat. "All we've done so far is irritate them."

"And given them a scapegoat," Tifa added. She took her place beside Barret.

"All that's gonna change," Barret ground out, pressing the maps flat with his hand. "It's gotta change. If this Planet's gonna have a fighting chance, we've gotta find a way to hurt Shin-Ra."

Zack nodded slowly, his gaze pensive. "You ever thought about hitting the Mako supply lines?"

"We already hit the reactors," Biggs was quick to point out.

Zack shook his head. "I'm not talking about the reactors. May I?" He gestured with an open hand toward the maps.

"Go nuts, Slick," Barret leaned back with a scowl.

Zack stood, turning the papers so that he was better able to show them. "The Reactors are more like refining plants," he said as his index finger traced a circular path from reactor to reactor. "Each one designed for the specific purpose of filtering Mako."

"Yeah, yeah, we know this," Barret said impatiently. "What of it?"

"Well, you ever stop to think about where the Mako is coming from?" Zack tossed back.

"The planet," Wedge offered up eagerly.

Jessie, in line with where Zack was headed, began to nod her head vigorously. "Yes, but given how much Mako each sector takes to run, the immediate area would be sucked dry..." She began punching her keypad with earnest. "Within years."

Zack sent her an approving look. "Exactly. Which is why there's no vegetation in the slums, or in Midgar. The life has been sapped."

Barret shifted in his chair, his scowl deepening into creases alongside his mouth. "So, what? Shin-Ra is sucking up Mako from elsewhere and bringing it here?"

Zack nodded. "Many elsewheres." He picked up the red marker from the table and drew lines spreading out from each reactor and connecting to one another. "They use pipelines that work on a grid system."

Barret turned to him. "I ain't never seen any of these pipelines."

Zack shrugged. "It's not exactly something they go advertising. But trust me, they're there. I did enough patrols and security runs during my grunt days." He lifted the paper and fumbled around a bit. "Got another marker? A different color."

"Here." Tifa, who had remained quiet and contemplative thus far, handed him a blue marker.

"Thanks." Zack clenched the cap between his teeth and popped the marker free. "Along the same route as the pipelines," he sketched the lines in, "there are underground supply tunnels."
"Huh? But I thought these," Biggs pointed to a set of tracks on the map, "were the supply routes."

"Oh, they are," Zack agreed. "For the basic run of the mill stuff. *These* tunnels," an index finger along blue ink, "are for the stuff Shin-Ra likes to keep hidden."

"SOLDIERs," Barret muttered.

"A lot of the time, yeah," Zack confirmed. "But other stuff too. Weapons, ammunition, hostages--"

"Hostages?" Tifa's head snapped up.

Zack nodded. "Ugly stuff goes on in Shin-Ra." He still hated that he'd been a part of it for so long—had *aspired* to it. He shook himself, and brought their attention back to the maps. "If we get into the supply tunnels we can drill through and hit the pipelines." He X'd several juncture spots.

"And if we knock out the right pipelines, then we have the potential to wipe out an entire grid."

Jessie beamed, excited.

Biggs whistled. "That, sure as shit, would get Shin-Ra up in arms."

Tifa glanced at Barret. "What do you think?"

Barret, in turn, was looking at Zack. "You wouldn't be leading us into a trap, now would ya?"

Zack gave an irritated sigh. "I'm trying to help you. If you want to keep wasting time and energy and risking your lives on ineffectual plans, then fine, keep doing what you're doing, but if you want to hit Shin-Ra and hit them where it counts, then you do this." He jabbed the maps with his index finger.

Wedge and Biggs scooted their seats away from the table, prepared for Barret's angry outburst. Jessie slid her laptop off the table into the safety of her lap and Tifa placed her hand on Barret's arm.

Barret, surprisingly enough, simply leaned back in his chair and raised a brow at Zack. "Okay, Princess, we'll try it your way, but know this; if anything happens to my guys," he encompassed the group with a wave of his hand, "I'm holding *you* personally responsible."

There was something far more unnerving to hear the quiet threat in Barret's voice than when he was vein-bulging yelling.

"We're going up against Shin-Ra, Barret," Tifa said. Her voice was steady, strong, reassuring. "We all know the risks. No one is responsible for us, except us." She nodded towards each member.

"Anyone not want to try Zack's idea? No, okay then. We're all in."

The look Barret gave her was a mixture of frustration and pride, Zack noticed, and he knew Tifa was right in her earlier assessment. It would take a lot to come between the two of them.

Barret shoved his seat back and stood. "Jessie, you're on drilling and explosive design. Work with him," a thumb jerk in Zack's direction, "on coming up with points of attack. Biggs; Wedge, you two head to the Weapons Shop and see what you can find to fortify the truck with. Teef, you and I will scout the supply tunnels." At everyone's nods of agreements Barret held his hand over the table. "For the Planet," he said.

"For the Planet." Biggs put his hand on top of Barret's.

"The Planet." Wedge next.

"For the Planet." Jessie reached for Zack's hand, placed it over hers, sent him a reassuring smile.
Tifa placed her hand over his. Their eyes met and held across the table. "For the Planet."

"On three; AVALANCHE...one, two, three..."

"AVALANCHE!"

The next couple of weeks passed in an almost routine-like fashion. Tifa would wake early for her morning run, returning soon after, due to lack of monsters, usually to find Zack already up and showered. Breakfast followed, and then the group would scatter. Zack and Jessie would head to the office to continue their work on drill designs and explosive calibrations. Wedge and Biggs were busy in the garage fortifying the truck with armor plates and weaponry. Barret and Tifa scouted out patrol routines and schedules from the locations Zack had given them. Evenings were spent at the bar in order to maintain their front, as well as make what little gil there was to be made to support their plans.

The atmosphere was tinged with excitement and productivity. Zack's plan had revitalized the group in a way that they had desperately needed, Tifa thought as she flipped the "Closed" sign to "Open". Although steadfast and determined, their small group had begun to lose hope of making a difference as each attack they made left a dent but nothing significant; and as fast as they hit, Shin-Ra recovered twice as fast. Their collective hopes were now pinned on the plan to take out the pipelines. She hoped it worked.

The phone behind the bar pulled her from her thoughts as it began to ring and she hurried across the room to snatch it up.

She knew who it would be before she picked up the cordless handset. Zack had made it a routine to call his parents every night before opening since his second night. It was that very same night that Zack had handed her the phone and mumbled, "My mom wants to talk to you..."

Tifa, flustered, had taken the phone and been immediately barraged with questions. Is he eating right? Because he wouldn't tell her, at least not honestly. Did he look good? Was he behaving? How did they meet? Was she eating right? And so it began; a near nightly ritual of talks with Mrs. Fair. Tifa found herself simultaneously looking forward to his mother's phone calls, and dreading them. They served as a reminder that her own parents were long passed, but more than that, they reminded her that Zack had a family of his own. Every day that he was with AVALANCHE, he was away from Gongaga and his home. She wondered if he regretted that, if he felt guilty...if he wanted to go back.

Tifa had yet to brave that question. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear his answer--one way or the other.

She exhaled and answered the phone, "Seventh Heaven, this is Tifa, how can I help you?"

"Hello, Tifa. How are you?"

The voice on the other end carried with it a familiar accent and a hint of cheer. "I'm fine, Mrs. Fair. And yourself?"

"I have no complaints," Mrs. Fair replied. There was a smile on the other end, Tifa was sure of it.

"Have you seen my wayward son?"

"Uhm," Tifa glanced over her shoulder. "I think he's here somewhere. Can you hold on?"
"Sure."

Tifa put the phone on mute and walked the hall. "Zack?" She peeked into the office. Empty. "Zack?" The upper hallway was empty but she could hear Wedge and Biggs in their rooms. "Zack?"

"Be out in a minute." He was in the bathroom.

"Your mom is on the phone."

The door swung open. "Thanks."

Tifa handed him the phone and angled her head, studying him. He looked pale. "You okay?" she mouthed.

He nodded once and pressed the mute button. "Hey, Mom. What? No, no...I'm fine. Yes. Yes... Yes." He rolled his eyes.

The front door chimed. Tifa backed away, letting him have his space.

Zack angled the phone down into his shoulder. "Thanks," he whispered.

"No problem." She was half turned away when she saw him grimace, his left hand lingering at his side. She frowned. Peering past his shoulder she saw that toilet was closed, a wet washcloth on the sink, splotched with blood.

Deciding that her customer could wait, Tifa leaned against the wall, observing.

Zack eased himself down to the edge of the bathtub. He was nodding at something mother was saying, but his smile was tight and his eyes glassy.

There it was again. That almost imperceptible grimace of discomfort.

She stepped into the room, picked up the cloth. "Zack."

His head snapped up at her sharp tone. "Yeah?" He noticed what she was holding. "Uh, Mom, can I call you back? No, nothing's wrong...yeah okay. Good night then." He hung up, set the phone on the back of the toilet. His expression was wary. "What's up?"

"Show me," she said in a flat tone.

"Show you...?" He feigned ignorance.

Tifa tossed the cloth back onto the sink and leaned over him, poking his left side where she had seen his hand linger. His breath hitched and then hissed through his teeth. "Show me," she repeated.

With a grunt, Zack shifted, lifted the edge of his shirt and revealed a swollen, red gash that circled from navel to back.

Tifa glowered at him. "How did you get that?"

"Fell."

She poked him again and he grit his teeth. "Ow. You know, that kind of hurts."

"How did you get this?" she asked again. "And don't lie to me," she warned.
Zack sighed. He could tell from her expression that she wasn't going to let this go. "Before you go and get all offended, let me just say that I think you're a more than capable fighter and-"

"Don't patronize me!" Her eyes were full of ruby sparks. "You've been patrolling my running route. That's why there haven't been any beasts in the area. You jerk!"

Her angry tone caused his own brows to push together. "Explain to me how this is a bad thing?"

She threw her hands up and gave an exasperated groan. "It's bad because...because..." she floundered.

His pained smirk was triumphant. "Yeah? I'm waiting."

"It just is!" she snapped.

He rolled his eyes and sighed. "You're kind of overreacting here, don'tcha think? What are you so pissed about? Did I steal some of your thunder? Do you have to be the one that saves everybody--"

"You wanna know what pisses me off? The fact that you didn't trust me enough to carry my share!"

"It has nothing to do with that. Besides, what makes it your share? Huh? Why can't I help?"

"Because you weren't helping me, Zack. You were shielding me. I'm not some weak damsel in distress in need of saving! I can take care of myself!"

He pushed slowly to his feet, towering over her. "And to hell anyone that may want to try and help you." He was getting angry himself.

"I don't need another hero!" She all but screamed it at him, her voice breaking. And just as suddenly she went quiet, surprised by her own vehemence, her hands coming up to cover her traitorous mouth. She turned her face away but not before he caught the sheen on tears in her eyes. "There are bandages and potions under the sink," she told him quietly.

When she stalked out he stayed where he was. He felt shaky and raw and it had very little to do with the wound on his side. "Aw, hell," he muttered and ran his hand through his hair.

She was pouring drinks when he finally made his way downstairs.

"Thought I could give you a hand."

She barely glanced at him. "I can handle it."

"Because you're still pissed."

"No," she slid the mixed cocktail across the bar top and smiled her thanks for the tip in her jar. "I'm not mad anymore. It takes too much energy to stay mad."

"That and I'm unbearably cute and impossible to resist?"

She turned toward him, her eyes roaming his face. "You're not ugly," she conceded.

"You are tremendous for my ego."

"Your ego needs little help." She turned away from him, giving him her back.

He preferred her anger to this icy indifference. He moved to the other side of her. "Tifa." He waited
until she looked up at him. "Look, I'm not going to try and tell you what to think or how to feel, but
packing away your emotions into a tidy little box isn't healthy."

The set of her shoulders tightened. "What's it matter to you?"

"Because I care about you."

The frank honesty in his voice softened her. She tilted her head, her hair shadowing her face in a
manner that Zack had come to recognize as defensive. "I care about you too. And that--you--scare
me."

Shock was too mild a word for the jolt Zack got at those words. "What?"

She turned away, placed her hands on the back counter and took a breath. "You're the type of guy
that'd run into a burning building for a perfect stranger. You've had more than your fair share of pain
and trauma, and yet you're willing to take on more. What happens when you take on too much,
Zack? What then?"

He gripped her shoulders, turned her towards him. "Tifa, you can't keep shutting people out because
of the chance you may lose them."

"I can try," she mumbled.

"You can, but it's useless. Especially where I'm concerned."

"Oh?"

His smile was crooked. "Yup. I'm already in." He grazed the back of his fingers across her cheek.

The front door banged open, jumping both of them, and Barret plowed through the doorway, a large
canvas sack across his back. His dark eyes narrowed in a speculative look that flicked between the
two of them.

Tifa cleared her throat and stepped farther away from Zack. She could still feel the warmth of his
hand against her face.

"Ok, you two, no time for that shit." He glanced around. "Where the hell are Wedge and Biggs?"

"Here!" The two jogged through the swinging door.

"'Bout fuckin' time. Truck ready?"

"Yep." Biggs nodded.

"Good. Grab your gear," he told Zack and Tifa.

"What? Wait, why?" Tifa was confused. "I thought we were hitting the pipelines in tandem? We're
not even set up-"

"We gotta move tonight," Jessie, who had been shadowed behind Barret's hulking frame stepped
forward. "I intercepted a transmission that Shin-Ra is planning to double the production of the
Reactors."

"They ain't gonna be satisfied until they fuckin' suck the Planet dry," Barret swore.

"So what's the new game plan?" Zack wanted to know.
"We hit the pipelines likely to do the most damage tonight," Barret answered. "Reactor Six supplies Wall Market and Reactor One powers Shin-Ra HQ. If we can cut of the Mako supply there, then we can buy some time to hit the others."

Zack nodded. "Sounds solid."

"Biggs, Wedge and Jessie, you three focus on Reactor Six. Me, Sally and Tifa will hit One."

"Sally?" Wedge frowned.

"He means Zack," Biggs whapped the back of his head. "Ow! I knew that," Wedge grumbled.

"What about Marlene?" Tifa asked.

"Taken care of. Johnny's parents are going to watch her." He was already heading toward the stairs. "Get your shit, get to the garage, and get ready to make some noise!"

The group exchanged determined looks. "Let's do this!" Biggs shouted before running out the front. Jessie and Wedge followed.

Zack glanced at Tifa. "Ready?"

She removed her gloves from beneath the bar. She slid the worn leather over her fingers, clenched and nodded. "As I'll ever be."

Zack took his Buster Sword down from the hoist on the wall. Tifa had let him house it there, up and away from kid hands and clumsy drunks. He spun the blade, pressed the flat of it to his forehead and closed his eyes. "Never lose your honor," he whispered. When he reopened his eyes he found Tifa staring at him.

"Tradition," he murmured, embarrassed. "I know it may seem silly-"

"No, it's not that. I was just thinking it's not something you need to worry about."

"What?"

"Losing your honor." She slid past him and out the back before he could respond.
It wasn't exactly the way he had imagined spending his evening, Zack thought as he shifted against the bed liner of the truck. He'd expected the night to proceed the same as many others: talk to his Mom, get grilled about his eating habits, general health and Tifa, then pass the phone off and watch Tifa squirm under the same barrage of questions, then sit at the corner table- the one well in the back of the bar- and keep an eye out for any handsy customers or trouble.

But instead, he'd ended up crammed in the back of a truck, with four other people, heading for the train depot. At the station the plan was for the teams to split up. Biggs, Wedge and Jessie would take the number 17 into the Sector Six slums, and from there make their way toward Wall Market. At the juncture point- about four miles from the slums and a mile and a half before the entrance to the market- they would find access to the underground tunnels via the sewer.

Meanwhile, Zack, Tifa and Barret would take the truck away from the slums and into the desert, where they would strike the pipeline that Barret and Tifa had scoped out the weeks prior.

Each team was equipped with a back-pack sized drill and several packets of explosives. Timing was critical to the operation, but since Shin-Ra security prevented the use of two-ways or other communicators on the trains they would have to rely blindly on each other. It wasn't the best scenario, Zack mused, but it would have to do.

If Jessie's intel was correct, then they didn't have much time. If the mako supply in the pipelines doubled, then their bombs would be ineffectual at best—at worst they would cause mako to spill out in torrents. Either option was unpleasant and to be avoided. As it was now, he and Jessie had calibrated the explosives based on the cubic feet and current supply running through the lines. Any deviations could screw things up royally.

"What are you thinking about?" Tifa's voice, close to his ear, was muted over the rumble of the truck engine.

Zack turned his head and their noses brushed. "Nothing important," he replied.

She inclined her head, face skeptical. "You look awfully serious for nothing important." But she let it drop. She rose up on one knee and banged on the cab of the roof to ask Barret how much longer.

Zack jerked back at the sound, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It was inevitable, he assumed, that traveling in the back of a pick-up would stir up the memories of his and Cloud's escape, he just hadn't expected them to be so acute.

"Zack?" Wedge this time.

He opened one eye.

"Are you scared?"

Zack shook his head. Not of anything they were about to face. "No."

"Yeah, me neither." Wedge nodded, but his face remained pale. Then with an awkward sigh and a chubby hand through wavy hair. "No, that's a lie. I'm scared. I'm always scared." He laughed, self-deprecating and short. "Guess that's why Barret's always callin' me a coward..."

"The truest form of bravery is doing the right thing, even when you're scared." Zack stated, matter-of-fact. "A man without fear isn't a man." His head dropped back against the cab and his steady gaze...
They divided at the train station as planned with solemn faces and brief exchanges of "Good Luck". Tifa watched her teammates—her friends—board with a mixture of pride and trepidation. No matter how many times, no matter how well prepared, there was always the chance one—or all—wouldn't be coming back.

With a final look at the departing train, Tifa turned and resolutely walked back to the truck where Zack and Barret were already waiting.

"Good to go?" Barret asked as she approached.

Tifa nodded and swung herself up into the bed of the truck. "Good to go."

His dark eyes lingered on her a moment longer before he opened the driver's side door and slid behind the wheel. Immediately she heard a barrage of curses as his gun-arm snagged and grinded the gear-shift. Tifa smiled slightly. She'd offered to drive, but Barret—being Barret—refused, saying that he could manage "just fuckin' fine" without help.

Truth be told, he could. He was an excellent driver, even with only one good hand. Tifa firmly believed the grouging was more for show than any real frustration. If Barret wasn't blustering about something he'd be at a complete loss.

"Get in the truck, Princess, or I'm leaving your scrawny ass behind!" Barret grumbled, leaning out the window.

Zack obligingly hopped into the back. "What's so funny?" he asked Tifa.

She inclined her head, taking in blue eyes and a quirked set of lips. "Barret."

"Hm." He lowered himself down beside her. "Funny isn't exactly the first adjective that pops to my mind when I think about Barret."

She shrugged, not failing to notice how her shoulder grazed his with the motion. "You just don't know him well enough."

Zack propped one arm across a bent knee and regarded her. "Maybe."

"I know he seems like a hard-ass, but he's been through a lot."

"We all have," he reminded her gently.

His blue eyes felt heavy on her and she looked away, pretending to watch the scenery slip by. The thrum of wheels on gravel and the occasional bump was the only sound between them.

"That's a hell of a wall you have there." The comment was soft, deceptively casual.

Tifa slanted him a look. "What?"

He made a vague gesture between them with his hand. "You'll only let me so close-only so far in, and then... shut out."

Although his voice remained neutral, his eyes—to her—were accusing. She shifted and crossed her arms in front of herself, her chin tilted up defiantly. "What do you expect, Zack? We barely know each other."
"Bullshit." Now his voice matched his eyes. "Don't hide like that."

"I'm not hiding."

She felt the brush of his fingers against the back of her hand. "Yes you are. I just don't know if it's from me or yourself."

His touch sent a shiver along her arm. She snatched her hand away. "Please just drop it, okay?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose, reluctant, but he relented. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

She nodded once, accepting the apology. He meant well, she knew. But she had never been the type to open herself up and expose her inner-most feelings. In fact, she envied the easy way Zack seemed able to express himself. He smiled, he frowned, he swore and he laughed despite everything he'd endured. His heart was on his sleeve, and truthfully, she felt a bit protective of it.

"Now what's on your mind?" he asked with a half-smirk.

And with that cocked smile the tension melted away as if it never had been. "You."

His eyes widened. "Oh?" He leaned in closer, voice conspiratorial. "Anything naughty?"

She laughed and swatted his arm, welcoming back the easy banter between them. "No. Pervert."

He leaned back with a shrug. "A guy can dream."

"Yeah, well keep dreamin', lover-boy." Both heads spun toward the cab. Barret was half leaned out the window, giving them an odd—borderline hostile—look.

"What?" Tifa asked, confused.

"We're here," he stated.

When she blinked, surprised, his scowl deepened. "Keep your head in the game, Teef."

Feeling properly chastised, she pushed herself to her feet. "I'm ready."

"Good. Let's go."

They piled out of the truck and made their way along the previously marked trail that Tifa and Barret had scouted. The grounds had changed, Tifa thought, since their previous trip. Tracks, fresh ones, marred the gravel, and some areas were even slick with mud.

She placed her hand to her side, fingers curling around the soft leather bumping her hip. She hadn't donned them yet, but it was comforting to feel her gloves.

Zack gave her a pointed look. "You ok?"

"Yeah." She let go of the gloves. "Just on edge."

"Understandable."

"Hurry it up," Barret called over his shoulder, adjusting the drill pack he was carrying.

"We'd better get moving." She jogged after Barret.
Zack followed at a slower pace, watching their surroundings with a look on his face that Tifa had never seen before. It was cautious...and hostile.

He didn't like it.

Something in the air felt off and every nerve-ending in his body screamed for him to be on the ready. He caught Tifa's worried glance a dozen times, but he couldn't bring himself to flash her a reassuring smile.

Something bad was coming.

He could feel it.

"I think we should turn back." He hadn't realized he'd spoken aloud until the other two stopped.

Tifa looked skeptical, Barret looked disbelieving.

"Don't go all chicken shit on me, Soldier boy."

Zack narrowed his eyes, irritated. "The tracks here are fresh and the ground is wet. Someone transported through here recently. This tunnel was supposed to be abandoned," he pointed out.

"So what if Shin-Ra took some fuckin' supplies through? We ain't got time to baby foot this. We act now or we sit with our thumbs up our asses while the planet is sucked dry. See, Teef, I told you," Barret pointed at her. "He's one of them, and if his loyalty is to Shin-Ra then we can't afford to keep him around."

"Whoa," Zack shook his head. "I never said abort the plan. I just think that right now isn't the best time. Why do you have to be so damn pig-headed about everything."

Barret glowered. "She may trust you. I don't. You ain't proved shit to me. You could be a damn spy for all I know, or an assassin."

"Barret!" Tifa snapped her head up.

Zack's smile was dangerous. "If I wanted you dead, big guy, you would be."

"Oh yeah?" Barret took a threatening step forward.

"Yeah." Zack didn't budge.

"Enough!" Tifa stepped between them, her eyes accusing. "This isn't the time for your pissing contest. We have a schedule to keep. The others are counting on us." She turned toward Zack. "They are relying on us to do our part. We're going ahead."

At least she didn't say she didn't believe him, or didn't trust him. She waited for his acknowledgment with impatient foot tapping. Finally, he nodded. "All right."

"Pansy." Barret muttered and marched on.

Twenty minutes later, hole successfully drilled and bomb securely in place, Zack began to doubt his inner warning system. It had never let him down before, but maybe all the shit Hojo had put him through had somehow crossed his wires. Or maybe he was just a paranoid-delusional now. Anyway he looked at it, he felt a bit like a fool.

"See? Nothing to worry about." Barret was smug when they got back to the truck. "All that bitchin'
over noth-

The blast shook the ground. It knocked Zack off his feet and slammed him into Tifa, with her taking
the brunt of his weight as they went down. Head ringing, Zack turned to see the truck engulfed in
flames, flipped onto its side. Fire snaked through the roof and out the broken windshield and a
blooming cloud of black smoke rolled from the hood.

"Barret!" Tifa was up, running toward the truck, toward the blistering wall of heat with no regard for
the spitting flames or her own safety.

Zack tackled her, brought her down hard.

"Barret!" she swung out in blind fury and Zack had to lock his arms around her middle to keep from
being pummeled.

"Tifa, stop!" he shouted over the roar of the fire.

She gripped his shoulders like an anchor and her eyes were stark. "Barret!"

"I'll get him," he said, gently setting her aside. "I'll get him."

She nodded once.

Zack approached the flaming vehicle, wincing as the heat scorched against him and smoke burned
his throat and stung his eyes. "Barret!" he shouted. He thought he heard a low groan followed by a
few foul words. He lifted his arm to shield his face as sparks hissed past him and the engine sputtered
out another belch of flame and smoke.

Beneath the rear of the overturned hulk of metal Barret was slowly being crushed into the ground.
His gun-arm was the only thing preventing the flames from eating away at skin and bone. He
grimaced, swore and tried unsuccessfully to maneuverer his way out of the slick mud and from
beneath the flames.

Zack wasted little time. He unsheathed his Buster Sword and moved to stand beside Barret's left
shoulder, ignoring the pain as flames blistered the skin on his shoulder. He dipped the front of his
sword beneath the axle, angled it and pressed the handle down. Down...down... Fuck it was heavy...

He felt the truck shift.

Barret yowled.

"Move!" he ground out between clenched teeth. His eyes burned and he was sure he probably had
no eyebrows anymore.

Barret wiggled, his metal gun arm glowing red and blood oozing from his forehead and shoulder.
"Got no...room..." he panted.

Using the full weight of his upper body Zack pushed down on the handle, using his blade as a lever
and raising the rear. Barret swore, squirmed, and finally managed to get free. Once he was clear
Zack ripped the sword free and stumbled back.

Barret dusted off the front of his vest as he rose slowly to his feet. He glowered at the flaming
wreckage and swung that angry gaze back on Zack. "I coulda managed."
Zack shrugged and housed his Buster Sword behind his back. "Well, now you don't have to."

"Fuckin' show off." Barret shouldered past.

Zack shook his head in disbelief. "You're welcome!" he called after him.

Barret flung up his hand and gave Zack the middle finger.

"Ungrateful mother."

"Thank you."

Tifa's soft hand on his arm stopped him mid-rant. He looked down into warm, grateful eyes, and suddenly Barret's bad attitude was worth a few scrapes and bruises. He glanced at her fingers, stroking his reddened skin. "You're welcome," he answered.

And he knew then, quite suddenly, that for her, he would have rushed into the fire itself.

When had she come to mean so much to him?

"Heads up!" Barret's shout pulled Zack from his thoughts. When he reached their sides again he motioned in the direction he had come. "We got company!"

Sure enough a truckload of Shin-Ra troopers was coming down over the hill toward the tunnel.

"You think they knew we were coming?" Tifa asked as she fist her hands. The shift in her expression was subtle, a hardening of soft features.

"No," Barret answered. "But they know we're here now."

"But the truck...?"

Zack glanced at the smoldering metal heap. "No doubt about it that Shin-Ra blew it up, but I'm thinking it was that." He pointed.

Tifa followed the direction and noticed a missile turret rising up on the military vehicle heading their way.

"So they probably don't know of the plan." She sounded relieved. "And if we keep them focused here, maybe they won't discover it."

"You're worried about the others," Zack stated. Not herself.

"Of course."

"Of course," he repeated with a small shake of his head. That big heart of hers was dangerous.

Gravel and metal exploded from the remains of the truck, showering down on them.

"Thorough fucks, aren't they?" Barret snarled, covering his head.

From the back of the approaching vehicle soldiers, dressed in blue and gray fatigues, poured out—opened fire.

Tifa jerked back, struck. Zack instinctively covered her, pulling her into the protective shelter of his arms.
"Tifa!" Barret roared.

"Where?" Zack demanded, surprised by the well of panic he felt at the blood smearing her top.

"Shoulder," she breathed against his neck. "Just my shoulder."

Zack unsheathed his sword again and one-arm shoved Tifa towards Barret. "Get her outta here."

"Zack!" Tifa cried out as he took off towards the soldiers. Was he insane? There were at least twenty men!

"I got this," he told her—almost casually—over his shoulder. But there was dark retribution in his eyes.

Tifa could only stare as he ran through the smoke, and proceeded to tear through soldier after soldier with alarming ease. He was a killing machine. His weapon found purchase through protective vests, shredding tender organs, slicing through bone. She had never seen anything like him. The soldiers screamed in terrified agony and Tifa was forced to turn her head away.

So that's what it was to be SOLDIER. She shuddered.

Barret gripped her arm. "Let's go!"

"We can't leave him."

"We ain't." Barret assured her. "They got a vehicle. We don't."

She nodded. "Let's go."

Taking the truck was easy. The men had abandoned it. Seeing their comrades cut down was apparently enough to shatter their Shin-Ra devotion.

"They don't make lackey's like they used to," Barret commented dryly as he hefted himself up into the cab.

Tifa shot him a narrow look.

"What?"

"Let's get Zack."

Barret shrugged, leaned back in the seat. "Don't need to. Captain Bad-ass is headin' right for us."

Tifa peered out the windshield and there he was. Walking calmly, steadily towards them with his sword trailing beside him, leaving a line of blood in the sand. "Oh, Zack." she whispered. Behind him, bodies littered the ground.

When the driver's side door opened and Zack stated, "I'm driving." Barret shrugged and slid over.

Ten minutes later, as the army truck crossed the desert, the ground rumbled and behind them their bomb sent a stream of phosphorous green Mako straight into the air.

"Yeah!" Barret pumped his fist outside the window. He flashed Tifa a satisfied smile. "Feels good."

She sat silent, contemplating her boot laces.
"That was some cold killin' back there, Princess. You did good."

Zack was also silent.

Barret swore, shifted in his seat and crossed his arms. "Damn downers. I wonder how the others made out."

They had, it turned out, made off without a hitch. There was an unexpected train switch just outside of Sector 6 but otherwise, all went well. Two of Shin-Ra's largest supply lines were now out of commission.

Celebration was called for.

As shot glasses were passed around and triumphs toasted Zack quietly made his way up the stairs to his room. There he stripped down, removed his blood stained clothes, and crawled onto his bed.

His fingers curled into a fist and he beat the pillow beneath his head—once; twice—and flopped over onto his back. "Hello again, ceiling."

Silence.

"Yeah, I don't feel much like talking either..." He closed his eyes and inhaled a nasal breath. It had been so easy... so damn easy...

Fuck.

A soft knock on his door turned his head, but didn't prompt any further action.

"Zack?"

_Tifa._

"Zack, are you okay?"

_No._

"I'm sorry."

_For what? Not your fault I'm a monster."

"I...I'm here...if you need me."

He closed his eyes. _Don't tempt me, Tifa._

A longer pause, and then, "You're not alone."

He was up and moving before his brain caught up and the door opened in one smooth swing.

He didn't look at her.

"Zack..." She started towards him, stopped; swallowed. "Thank you for what you did."

This did bring his gaze to hers.

"For fighting when I know it hurts you."
That's just it, Tifa. It doesn't hurt me.

"For saving Barret. Me." She continued and gestured with an open palm toward her wrapped shoulder. "Thank you."

His voice was rough, low, and strained. "Please, stop."

Without a word she approached him, uncertainly put her arms around him. The hug was awkward, as if she was unfamiliar with the act.

At her touch Zack shuddered, his breath catching. He should tell her to go. Tell her to stay away.

His arms folded around her.

"I'm here," she whispered reassuringly. "It's okay."

She pulled him closer. He held on tighter.

They sank slowly to the floor and he let himself be comforted. If only for a little while.

The remainder of the night passed with neither one saying another word.
Complications

Zack couldn't say for certain what time they'd actually fallen asleep, but the thin stream of gray light leaking beneath the window blinds and the gods-awful kink knotting his shoulders told him that several hours had passed with him in the uncomfortable, semi-prone position he was currently in.

Experimentally, he rolled his shoulders, grimaced at the brief, shooting pain he felt at the movement. A soft breath puffed against his neck and drew his gaze down, causing his chin to brush against even softer hair. Slumped against his shoulder, with one arm draped across his chest and her hair spilling over his lap, Tifa was the human equivalent of a warm blanket.

Knotted shoulders immediately forgotten, Zack watched strands of dark hair sway up and back in time with her even inhales and exhales. She looked very young, he observed, brushing the strands aside to get a better look at her face, but where brows and lips should have been slackened by slumber, a subtle tension still tightened the corners, and where there should have been peace, there was still an undecipherable aura of sadness that hummed around her.

He brushed the hair at her temple as he studied her. Touch was something he knew Tifa would generally discourage from him, but right now, in the hush of his room, with the barest hint of morning peeking in on them, it felt exactly right. His hand moved down, hovered over the bare skin of her arm for only a moment before he caved to temptation and allowed the pads of his fingertips to smooth their way along her arm, over a stray freckle, and down her back. She had the smoothest skin, he thought with another idle sweep.

The sensation caused Tifa to stir against him again and Zack wondered how she would react to waking up in his arms. He could almost hear those stone walls of hers being erected. He didn't want to lose the closeness he felt with her now, but reason told him that forcing it would be met with not only resistance but distrust, and that was something he wouldn't risk. Tifa's trust and friendship were hard earned, but lasting, and he intended to keep them.

He knew that she considered him a friend. She had come to him when he'd felt alone—offered him a shoulder and a warm embrace. No questions, no demands. She had simply been there. Unselfish and open—like she was with the others, and for him to be included in that small circle, after all that had happened before... well, he wasn't willing to jeopardize it with demands for it.

She gave a small sigh and wiggled closer. The motion released some of the pressure the arm behind her and it became alive with prickly needles and pins. Despite that, he didn't remove it, or adjust his position. He sat, still and silent, comfortable in a way that had nothing to do with the physical and closed his eyes. He was reluctant to relinquish the night to day—reluctant to face exactly how much of himself he may have revealed in his moment of weakness, and more reluctant than he cared to admit to have that space between them again.

A sharp knock on the door jolted his eyes open.

The abrupt—unwelcome—noise was enough to rouse Tifa completely. Her head lifted slowly from the pillow of his shoulder and she wiped the back of her hand across her mouth before lifting her eyes to his.

Zack offered up a quiet, "Good morning." He didn't release her, not yet.

With face flushed pink—either from sleep or embarrassment—she smothered a yawn behind her hand. "What time is it?"
"Early, still."

Another knock—louder than the first—turned both of their attentions to the wood panel.

"Yo, Tifa!"

Barret. Zack ruffled his hair. _Perfect_. He glanced back to Tifa, half expecting to see mortification or alarm on her face, but was admittedly surprised when he saw neither. What he did see was a lingering concern; for him.

It touched him and made his chest feel heavy.

When she tilted her head just so, her eyes took on a crimson hue that he found so very compelling...

Sharp, more impatient rapping. "Tifa!"

"You should probably answer him," Zack leaned back with a wry tilt of his lips, "before he breaks my door down."

She gifted him with a small smile of her own and ran her fingers through her mussed bangs before pushing herself to her feet. She straightened her shirt, wiped her hands on her thighs and took a breath. "Yeah?" she called out.

"Breakfast."

"Be right down."

They heard him grumble something unintelligible, followed by the thump of his heavy boots as he marched away.

At the door she hesitated, turned back. "See you down there?"

Zack ruffled the back of his hair and shook his head. "Naw. What I need is a shower. I'm not very hungry this morning."

As abnormal as it was for Zack not to want to eat, Tifa seemed to understand. "All right." She gave him another appraising look, then with a quick nod she closed the door quietly behind her.

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Down in the kitchen Barret had done something fairly tasty with left over potatoes and sausage. The smell filtered past bleary senses and Tifa's stomach rumbled. When she ventured around the corner to find the kitchen she found it curiously silent, not its usual hub of morning activity. Curiously absent was Wedge's happy grin as he shoveled food into packed cheeks, and Jessie's welcome grin, and Bigg's bleary eyed, grumbled salute.

"Good morning, Tifa!" Two wide eyes peeked up at her from beneath brown bangs.

"Morning, sweetie." Tifa ruffled her hair as she passed."Where is everybody?"

Barret finished wiping down the counter and tossed the wet dishtowel over the faucet, turned to answer. "Downstairs."

"Oh." She opened the fridge, poked her head in and avoided the unspoken questions in his eyes. "Is there any apple juice left?"

A half-full glass slid across the sideboard toward her. "Finish mine."
Well, looks like hiding wasn't an option. "Thanks." She closed the door, drank the juice. She felt like she should say something, but didn't know quite what to say, so for the next few minutes she didn't say a word and Barret, who also seemed at a loss for conversation topics, gave her room for silence.

They remained that way until Marlene sprang up from her chair with a clatter of spoon to bowl and declared herself full before scampering from the room.

When it was just the two of them, he finally spoke. "How is he?"

It wasn't the question she'd been expecting. She'd been prepared to defend her spending the night in Zack's room, even prepared for rebuke or censor, but she received neither. Caught off guard, it took her a moment to find her answer. "As well as can be, I imagine."

"And you?"

She shook her head, placed her cup in the sink before she faced him. "I'm fine."

"Wanna talk?"

"No. Not really."

"Sure you do. Just not with me anymore—" he stopped, shook his head and turned away. "Never mind, Forget I said that."

Alarmed by the underlying sadness she heard in his voice, Tifa rounded on him. "Barret?"

"It ain't none of my business, I get it." Was that disappointed in his voice? Hurt? Either way it bothered her.

Tifa stepped to him, placed a hand on his arm. "Barret." She waited until he looked down at her. She saw it then, the reason for his uncertainty; his doubt. She gave his forearm a gentle squeeze. "Nobody can replace you."

He let out a chuff, ran one beefy hand down his face and attempted a smile. "Damn straight."

She chuckled, pulled him down to her for a brief, but heartfelt hug.

He hugged her back, made her grunt and cough once—ritual between them—and released her.

"You like him."

Tifa pulled a chair back from the table and sat. "Not like that," she stated, picking at the napkin in front of her. Even to her ears the words sounded unconvincing.

Barret took the seat opposite her. "Maybe not yet."

She lifted her shoulder. "Maybe not ever, Barret. It's not...he's not...I mean..." Why was it so hard to explain? She was fond of Zack, that much was certain. He had come to mean a great deal to her over the past few weeks, but anything beyond friendship was out of the question. As much as he sometimes reminded her of Cloud...of that unspoken connection...he wasn't him.

"Tifa."

She raised her head, met his steady, understanding gaze.

Barret edged his hand across the tabletop, placed it over hers. "Eat some breakfast."
She smiled in relief and did just that.

The water was scorching hot, nearly scalding; just the way he liked it. It sluiced over tanned skin, lean muscles and through untamed black hair. Steam rolled from the water and curled around his calves and snaked along the bathroom walls in milky white tendrils.

Zack rolled his head back, relaxed by the sting of heat on tired muscles. He closed his eyes, let out a breath, and enjoyed the hot cascade across his chest and shoulders.

The slums wasn't exactly a place abundant in anything, especially not water, but thanks to one of Jessie's clever inventions, the water from Seventh was recycled and re-filtered, allowing for multiple uses without abundant waste. Hot showers were a luxury, and one he certainly appreciated.

None of the AVALANCHE crew were the type to take what they had for granted, and they were eager to share with their friends and neighbors—as was evident by the custom plumbing systems most of the neighboring homes had. If they had extra food, they shared it. Extra time to lend a hand, they did. An ear to bend, a shoulder to cry on... they did as much as they could for their little community and then some.

In all his years with SOLDIER Zack hadn't seen Shin-Ra do half so much for the people beneath them. It made him sad and more than a little angry now to realize the difference he could have made, but back then he had been blissfully oblivious to the suffering. He'd been so blindly focused on becoming one of the elite, a first-class SOLDIER—a hero.

*A false hero.*

Heroes didn't want praise or glory. Heroes didn't receive awards and medals for their deeds. Heroes weren't ranked.

Heroes patrolled beaten paths and fought monsters with their bare hands while others slept safe in their beds. Heroes swallowed their pain and rose to fight for a cause. Heroes...held SOLDIERS in the dark.

Zack straightened and ran his hands over his face, slicked his hair back. He didn't remember the whole of the evening, but he did remember slender fingers scraping through the hair at his temple and soothing words mouthed against his ear.

Soft spoken and steady, they had anchored him through the night.

Zack looked down sharply, feeling his dick unexpectedly stir to life against his thigh. He inhaled a sharp breath, tried to reign in his body's response with little effect and promptly bit the inside of his cheek and focused on calming breaths. It wasn't right, he thought angrily. For her to give him trust and friendship and suddenly, because of one night of comfort he wants to fuck her? No. Just no.

He wouldn't let himself think of her like that.

Despite his self-proclamation, Zack found himself considering how soft her lips might be beneath his. Would she welcome a kiss from him? Would she taste as good as he thought she would?

"Damn it, no." He shook his head, pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. A deep breath. One more. Nothing. With a frustrated grumble he jerked the knobs of the shower and all hot water ceased. "Shit!" he hissed and shivered beneath the now ice cold spray.

Zack dropped his head forward, braced his hands on the wall and let the water run over his neck and
hair and down his chin. He watched it swirl down the drain with unseeing eyes. This was one complication their relationship didn't need. He wouldn't allow it.

After a few minutes beneath the frigid onslaught he turned the taps, body in now dutifully in check, and snapped his towel from the bar outside the shower. He drug it roughly over his face and hair, over his chest and arms, down his legs and back up before tucking one end beneath the other and leaning against the sink.

His steam clouded reflection stared back at him with accusing eyes. Unable to meet the censure in his own gaze Zack looked away. Behind his closed lids he was momentarily back in the desert, with Cloud's warm weight in his arms as he whispered, "Protect her..." in that low, pain-filled voice of his. That voice had haunted him nightly since their escape and it was that voice that plagued him now.

He couldn't escape it, especially not here, in the place where he should be, with the woman he'd loved.

Zack wondered if Tifa ever wished it had been him that died. She'd never blamed him, had never said anything of the sort, but still he wondered... and guiltily hoped that she didn't.

He shoved at his dripping hair with one hand and tried to convince himself that he and Tifa were friends and would only ever be friends and that was it. He'd had a girlfriend once, loved her and she him, but Shin-Ra had fucked that all up. If he was going to make an effort for something, with someone, shouldn't it be with Aerith? Hadn't she been the one he'd promised to return to?

Annoyed, he pushed himself back from the sink and began dressing. He knew, even if he left now, went straight to her and made the effort, they would fail. He wasn't the same man he'd been, and there was no unchanging that, even if he wanted to. And part of him knew he didn't want to.

He didn't want to go back to that oblivious optimism where the only thing that mattered was glory. He pressed his fingers to his eyes. He didn't want to be that guy again. He refused.

The hall was empty when he emerged. Not that he had really expected to see anyone. This time of day the others were most likely sub-level. He tossed the damp towel into the laundry basket outside the door and made his way downstairs.

As he predicted, the kitchen too was empty and the bar quiet. Deciding to take some of the quiet for himself Zack helped himself to the contents of the refrigerator and some lukewarm coffee. At the table he chewed slowly, his thoughts once more drifting.

Below the floorboard, just under Zack's feet, the rest of AVALANCHE sat watching a young, empathetic looking anchor woman, with pearly teeth and perfect blond hair, send out her condolences to the families of the men lost in the terrorist organization AVALANCHE's latest—unprovoked—raids.

"As a result of these latest attacks The Shin-Ra Electric Power Company must halt power production to several sectors while they undergo extensive repairs. This shut down will cause problems for many who will be forced to go without heat or water for several days." A picture of a mother with two young children and a baby in her arms flashed on screen. They looked sad, dejected and hopeless.

"Such lies," Jessie hissed with unexpected vehemence. Normally reserved, her anger drew all eyes. "Those supply lines didn't have anything to do with current power production. That Mako has
already been converted and stored. They're lying!"

"When doesn't Shin-Ra lie?" Wedge mumbled with a sour look.

"They're cutting off utilities needlessly! Why would they do that? Why make those poor people suffer for no reason?"

"To make themselves look like the fuckin' good guys." Barret's voice was tight with barely controlled rage. "If they can blame us, then they get to be the victims right along with those they're punishing." He made sound of disgust.

"Those miserable sons of bitches!" Biggs threw the flask in his hand against the wall hard enough to dent the tin, his unshaven face mottled with red splotches.

"Biggs, hush!" Jessie scolded with an impatient wave of her hand. She turned the knob on the television, increasing the volume.

"Damn it, Jessie, they're blamin' us for everything!" He shook his fist at the screen. "All the suffering—they're sayin' it's us! Our fault!"

The woman on-screen continued in her practiced, polished tone, "Shin-Ra is confident that the identities of the members of AVALANCHE will soon be revealed. A witness to the Wall Market bombings has come forward. As a result, President Shinra requests, as a preventative measure, that AVALANCHE stop their raids and ask that they consider the suffering of the people they are hurting and turn themselves in to avoid prolonging their inevitable capture."

"Inevitable capture my ass," Barret flipped off the television.

The anchor woman paused, glanced up at the monitor and gave her most sympathetic nod yet. "Today, in a new segment called: Salute to Soldiers we honor some of the men who have fallen defending our city from AVALANCHE."

From her seat on the patchwork couch across the room Tifa tensed and sat up straighter. Tinkering, sorrowful music filtered from the speakers and a deep, melancholy voice began narrating as soft, glow-diffused images appeared on-screen. "Private Marcus Harlow, age twenty-two. He is remembered by his sister and mother."

"Oh...no..." Tifa covered her face with her hands, took several deep breaths. She didn't want to see their faces. Didn't want to know their names.

The whir of machinery and the clank of gears dropped her hands and her head snapped towards the drop-down pin-ball machine. "Jessie, turn it off," she said quickly.

"Huh?" The other girl blinked, eyes still glued to the screen.

Tifa didn't bother to ask again. She hopped up from the couch and hurried to the table to snatch up the remote. The television blinked out just as the elevator plank stopped.

"What the hell?" Biggs shot her a confused look.

"Biggs," Tifa lowered her voice. "Shut up."

"Geesh, what's up your ass? You'd think after getting some you'd be—"

"Biggs, enough!" she snapped, brandishing the remote like a sword.
Zack strode into the room, hair still damp from his shower, his deep blue gaze resting heavy on Tifa. "Everything all right?"

"Yeah, everything's just fine," she nodded and lowered her arm.

Biggs chose the same moment to respond with, "Tifa hijacked the TV."

She tensed, wanting very much to kick Biggs. Zack was at her side in a moment, a hand on her shoulder as he peered down into her face. She couldn't meet his eyes.

"Tifa?" Concern edged its way into his voice. "Are you all right?"

The room was watching her. Her teammates clearly baffled by her behavior. She didn't care. She wasn't about to let Zack suffer anymore than he had already. She shook her head resolutely. "I'm fine. It's just that we...we have other stuff to do." She was trying to edge him toward the door.

Zack frowned. It wasn't like her to be so abrupt or evasive. He scanned the room and took note of the confused expressions on the others faces. His gut told him that whatever was on the TV had to do with him-and it had upset Tifa. It bothered him to think that she was upset for him. "What's on the TV?" he asked.

"Nothing." She shot Biggs a sharp look before he could open his mouth.

Zack sighed at her refusal to tell him before he gently wrested the remote from her hand.

"Zack, wait." Her fingers curled helplessly into her palm.

He pressed the button.

The television flickered to life and the narrator was still speaking in his low, melancholy voice, but the picture on the screen was no longer Marcus Harlow. "Private First Class Nathaniel Blake, age twenty-six. He is remembered by his wife and three month old daughter." An image of all three, presumably from a family photograph, faded in over his Shin-Ra picture.

Tifa finally looked at Zack and wished she hadn't.

His face showed absolutely nothing—which for Zack showed absolutely everything.

Her hands worked agitatedly at her sides—clench, release, clench, release. Her chest constricted into a painful knot and she found her throat too tight to speak. This was too much for him—for any of them. But what could she say? What could she possibly offer as condolence?

"They all knew what they were getting into."

**Barret.**

Tifa turned, her eyes meeting his from where he stood, propped against the door jamb. He had remained mostly silent during the newscast but the grim set of his features had said more than words could have. He pushed himself off the wall and made his way toward them now with that same grim look.

Zack still hadn't acknowledged his presence, hadn't taken his eyes from the images on the television.

"Whether we like it or not, this is a war, and in war there are casualties," Barret's normally booming voice was less intense now; a softer version of his deep baritone. His hand came up to rest on Zack's shoulder, the one closest to him.
The weight of it was heavy, solid, strong. It drew Zack's gaze away from the television

"It ain't ever easy to watch another man die... To know you're the reason behind it. But what we're doing...it's bigger than that." Deep-set, solemn eyes turned toward Zack. "You gotta believe that, kid, or this will eat you alive inside. I don't wanna see that." He let his hand drop. He encompassed the whole of them in one sweeping gesture. "What we do, we do for something greater than ourselves. Greater than them." He pointed at the screen. "If we don't fight, no one will, and that, that is where the real tragedy would be. You get me?"

Tifa saw the others nodding, even though the question wasn't directed at them, saw their faces morph from appalled to determined, and she felt a stirring of pride for Barret, for his ability to realign them when they fell askew.

"That bein' said," he continued, not allowing for a real response, "Tifa's right. We got other shit to do." He nodded at her once and moved toward the pinball machine. "Let's go."

"What're we doing?" Wedge asked, huffing to his feet. Biggs and Jessie followed.

"We're gonna go bottle some water, get some generators and do what we can." Barret adjusted the settings on his gun-arm. "And we're gonna keep doing what we have to to stop Shin-Ra, squeeze a few people and find out who their fuckin' witness is." He looked at Zack. "You in?"

Tifa drew in a breath, waited for his reply.

Zack straightened his shoulders. Was there ever really any doubt? "In."

"Good," Barret smirked. "Then stop bein' a Princess and get your ass movin'."
The bar was empty and quiet when Zack returned from his errands. The trip had been more fruitful than expected, and quicker. In the item shop he'd had to rifle through unmarked bins for supplies, but he'd found a number of usable ones and, after storing those, he had taken water, batteries and blankets to some of the other sectors, leaving them with families he knew were in need. Another quick stop at a weapons shop and then he had headed back home.

Home.

He wondered when he'd come to think of this place as home. Part of him knew that it wasn't so much the place as who else resided in it. But he didn't want to dwell on that—wasn't ready to dwell on that.

"Hello?" He shouldered through the door and set his bags onto a nearby table. No answer. He moseyed to the back room and found it vacant as well. "Hello?" He poked his head into the kitchen, then the office. No one. "Tifa?"

"Tifa's downstairs," a giggling voice informed him. Quick, light footsteps pattered down the upper staircase. With a juice box in hand and a toothy grin on her face, Marlene stopped a few stairs from the bottom so that she was nearly eye level. "Hi, Zack."

"Gonna go play outside."

"Sounds like fun. Stay close to the bar."

"Duh." She bounced off the steps, then paused and looked up at him with wide, interested eyes. "Zack?"

"Yeah?" he glanced down.

"Can you really kill people with your smile?"

That made him blink. Could he do what exactly? "Huh?"

Marlene angled her head, took an unhurried, gurgling sip from her straw—complete with satisfied belch—and repeated the question. "Tifa said that you have a killer smile. So can you?"

Double blink. "Wait, what? Tifa told you I had a killer smile?" His ego shot up with his eyebrows. "She told Jessie." And back down went the ego.

"She told Jessie." And up. "I just overheard them."

Interested, Zack dropped to one knee. When he spoke, his voice was conspiratorial. "On accident, I'm sure."
"Oh, no. I was listening on purpose," she stated, unapologetic.

Zack snorted. Leave it Marlene to just lay it out there. "Oh, I see."

"Jessie said you looked delicious and Tifa said that Jessie had drool on her chin and then Jessie said something about biting you and then Tifa said that Jessie's hora-horra-horrarmoans were acting up—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Zack cleared his throat, choked on a laugh. "I don't think you were supposed to hear all that."

A dainty shoulder lifted, Marlene apparently unconcerned with that trivial little fact. "But I did."

"I know you did, but maybe you shouldn't repeat it, okay?"

"Ok." She was agreeable.

Then—because curiosity was eating at him, "So...what else did Tifa say about me?"

She finished her juice, narrowed her eyes on him. "But you just said I wasn't supposed to repeat it."

"Right, right." He nodded, rose to his feet. "Good girl."

She gave him an exasperated look, as though he were the child and she the adult, before she scampered off and left him alone. Zack waited for the bang of the front door before he resumed his search.

As Marlene had told him he would he found Tifa in the cellar. She was busy restocking the bar inventory. Dressed in work boots, worn jeans, sleeveless top, and suede, fingerless gloves, she looked like a woman on a mission.

"Hey." At the foot of the creaky steps, he lowered his head to avoid the overhang. The cellar was remarkably well kept, Zack noted. Boxes and various tubs were stacked and organized, complete with handwritten labels, and dust was at a minimal.

"Hey." She glanced up from her clipboard, flashed him a bright, welcoming smile. "You're back sooner than expected."

Was he? He couldn't remember. How was he supposed to think when she gave him that mega-watt smile. "Where is everybody?" he asked when his brain decided to kick back into action. He settled himself onto the edge of one of the wooden crates.

"Hm? Oh, Barret took the others with him to see if they could gather some more information on Don Corneo."

"Don Corneo?"

"Mmm."

"As in the Slumlord of Sector Six? That Don Corneo?"

"Yup." Tifa made a face, blew a strand of sweat-damp hair from her eyes and set her clipboard and pencil aside.

Zack leaned forward, elbows on bent knees. "What kind of information are they looking for?"
She pushed a small step ladder in front of her. "It looks like Corneo could be Shin-Ra's big witness."

"Corneo?"

"That's what Barret says. Hand me the Cactuar Juice, please."

He lifted the small bottles from their cardboard housing and held them out for her. "Corneo? Really?"

She took them. "Thanks. And, again, yes." Handily, she set the green bottles—labels out—onto the shelf. She bit her lip, scrutinized the placement, then made a small "ah-ha" and nestled a rolled up package of cactuar needles beside the bottles. The satisfied look on her face made his lips quirk.

Looking at her now, Zack couldn't help but admire—and not for the first time—the subtle strength in her form. It was...appealing...to watch the graceful way she moved. He cleared his throat and shifted on the crate.

"Scum working with scum. Makes a certain amount of twisted sense, I suppose. How much does he know?"

Tifa leaned her hip against the shelf and lifted one shoulder. "Not sure. But I intend to find out."

The hard edge of her voice brought Zack's head up. "And just how do you intend to do that?"

Another shrug. "I'll go see him. Find out what he knows."

Zack felt the sides of his mouth tense. "The Don?"

"Yeah." She pushed her thick ponytail over her shoulder, placed some olive jars overhead. "Barret told me to leave the lecher alone, but I want to hear what he knows."

"No."

She hopped down, her hands riding her hips. Her voice was chipped from ice. "I'm sorry, did you just tell me no?"

If he told her that the idea of her in a place like that turned him inside out, he knew she would take it as him not having confidence in her—which was as far from the truth as a person could get—but he knew her now, and knew what she'd think. She may not like it, but what she was thinking was way too risky and Zack was prepared to be stubborn.

"It's too dangerous. What if he recognizes you? Besides if Corneo really does have information on us, I'm sure Shin-Ra is all over him."

"Well, I'll just have to be extra careful then, won't I." She wiped her hands on her jeans, picked up a few scattered empty boxes and tossed them into the corner. She was halfway up the stairs before he realized she was fully intent on brushing off his cautionary statement.

He hurried after her. "Tifa."

She kept right on walking.

"Tifa!"

She paused at the top of the stairs, with her hand on the knob, and spared him a glance over her shoulder. "What?"
"I don't think it's a good idea for you to go after the Don—"

"So you said." She gifted him with a small, slightly smug smile. "But, then again, I'm not asking permission." The door closed behind her and a moment later he heard the bolt lock slide into place.

"Damn it." Zack took the remaining steps two at a time. She was quick, he thought, half-amused. He gripped the handle and debated shouldering through. He could do it easily enough, but then he'd have to fix the lock and listen to Barret gripe about the damage.

With a sigh, he made his way back down the wooden stairs. He shoved some crates around; stacked them beneath the small basement window and cursed and wiggled his way out with as much dignity as possible.

Behind the bar, wiping the top down with a damp cloth and whistling nonchalantly, Tifa barely glanced up when he strode in the front door. He took the stool directly in front of her and waited for her to acknowledge him.

When she finally looked up it was to find him staring at her, his dark brows raised in what could only be described as questioning-irritation.

"That was mean," he told her, without heat.

"That's what you get."

"For what? Trying to talk sense into you?"

"No. For being so arrogant."

"Ah." He smirked, leaned across the counter and brought that smile a little bit closer. "That's just my nature."

Tifa shook her head and fought back an answering smile. It was hard not to smile at Zack.

Ever since the night they'd shared in his room, after the supply line encounter with Shin-Ra, the silent camaraderie between them had deepened. That bond of shared pain and past was enhanced by a subtle undercurrent that Tifa couldn't even begin to identify—much less explain. It made for easy smiles and playful banter, but also lingering stares and closer proximities. She wasn't altogether sure what to make of it, or how she felt about it.

"I'm serious, Tifa," Zack said, pulling her back to the matter at hand. "Going after Corneo is a bad idea. Let me and Barret handle this."

All traces of humor dissipated. "Why? Because you think I can't?"

"I didn't say that—"

"You sure as hell implied it."

"All I'm suggesting is that you don't rush headlong into a trap. Give Barret and me a chance to feel things out. Everyone knows that Corneo frequents the Honey Bee Inn. All we have to do is get in there and—"

"It's not exactly the type of place you can sneak into," she told him. "Not unless you want to dress up
as a woman of course."

"Uh, no thanks. I'll pass on that. Besides, not just women that frequent the Honey Bee," he countered.

"True, but it's pretty unlikely that Corneo will be there to socialize with other men, Zack."

His eyes narrowed into slits. "Just what exactly are you thinking of doing?"

"The Honey Bee is always looking for new girls..." She let the sentence and implication trail.

"Tifa. No."

"Zack. Yes."

"I'll tell Barret what you're planning."

Of all the low-down... She shot him a frustrated look. "That's low."

His shrug was casual. "I never said I wasn't above blackmail. Barret would have a fit if he knew you were even thinking of placing yourself in that kind of situation. It's way too—shit!"

Wood scraped wood as the barstool toppled backward and Zack vaulted behind the bar.

Startled by his abrupt appearance at her side, Tifa tensed up. "Zack?"

"My sword," he hissed. "Get me my sword."

She placed a hand on his shoulder. "What is it?" She couldn't see anyone else around, it was just the two of them. Confused, she followed his gaze to the bar top and had to forcibly contain a balk of laughter.

A black spider, no larger than a gil, skittered over the scarred top. Another quick glance around the room verified that this was the cause of Zack's agitation.

With calm, careful movements—and still trying to hold in her mirth—Tifa lifted her cloth and ushered the scurrying arachnid onto it.

"Wait, don't touch it!" he scrunched his face and looked away.

She coughed to cover her laughter and maneuvered carefully around him, made her way to the door. She deposited the spider outside onto the planks.

"You're just letting it go?" Zack demanded, incredulous.

She closed the door. "What's wrong with spiders?"

"They have eight legs and a billion eyes," he stated, matter-of-fact.

"It's just a spider, Zack."

"Eight legs, Tifa!" As if that justified his reaction.

She couldn't help but smile now. "Big baby," she laughed a little, and when his lips formed a sullen pout and he glowered, she laughed some more. The phone beneath the counter started ringing.

"Answer that," she told him, "it's probably your mom. You can tell her all about the big bad spider."
Zack picked up the phone, poked his tongue out at her. "Seventh Heaven, this is Za... Oh...uh, hey. Hi." He rubbed the back of his neck, looking sheepish. "How are you? That's good. Me? No, I'm good. Yeah, I know...Sorry about that."

Tifa paused, her attention caught by the subtle shift in Zack's posture and the slightly defensive way he turned from her and hunched into the phone.

Definitely not his mother.

"No, I've been meaning to call. It's just things have been kind of hectic." He shot Tifa a look over his shoulder. "Uh, Tifa? Yeah. No, no. She's fine. Yeah, I'll tell her. What? Now? Okay." He dropped the phone down below his chin. "Aerith says hello."

Oh. The girl from Sector Five. Zack's former girlfriend... That explained it.

"Hello back." Tifa replied. When he once again turned away from her and shifted beneath her gaze, she decided that this was a conversation that probably needed some space, and she stepped quietly outside.

Once there, she leaned back against the closed door and heaved out a breath. Zack had hardly mentioned Aerith in the past few weeks, and never in depth. Sometimes, Tifa wondered if it was because he had moved on, and sometimes she wondered if it was because he hadn't. She really didn't know much about their history, only that they had one, and she hadn't pried.

Cautiously she peeked into the bar through the slats of the window. Zack was still turned mostly away from her, but she saw a slight quirk of his lips on his profile, indicating a smile. He'd be all right, she thought, satisfied. Whatever the case, he'd be okay.

Not that it was any of her business. Not really. When all was said and done, Zack owed her no loyalty and no explanation. If he chose to leave, then that was his right. He had stayed, he had fought, and he had helped their cause. That was more than enough.

His past and hers were intertwined, but that didn't have to mean that their futures were too.

Tifa took a step away from the door to brace her hands on the porch railing. If that happened, and Zack did leave, she couldn't lie to herself and say she wouldn't miss him, because she would—probably more than she ought to—but she wouldn't blame him either. He had friends, a family, a life to return to.

She didn't begrudge him that happiness. She hoped for it for him. Part of her, she realized, actively wanted him to leave the violence behind, even if that meant leaving her. Unconsciously, her fingers tightened on the rail, causing the wood to groan in protest.

After a time, the door behind her creaked open and drew her from her thoughts.

"What're you doing out here?"

She lifted one shoulder, but didn't turn. "I didn't want to be in the way."

Zack shifted around to face her, his back pressed against the railing and his arms folded over his gray tee-shirt. "It's your bar," he pointed out.

"Not what I meant," she replied evenly.

"I know." He leaned toward her to give her a quick shoulder bump, his expression unreadable. "And
you aren't."

Tifa nodded and continued to watch the open area in front of the bar where Marlene and a couple of other kids kicked a beaten red ball back and forth. Their feet were bare and their clothes tattered, but their smiles were genuine and they drew one from her.

When Zack didn't speak, yet continued to hover beside her, she glanced at him from the corner of her eye. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah." He turned so that his pose mirrored hers and watched the children play. Silence blanketed the space between them. Finally, Zack spoke. "She wants to see me."

Tifa nodded. She had assumed as much. "And?" she prodded, sensing there was more he wanted to say.

"And...I think I should go see her."

Tifa angled her head, studied his profile. "She's important to you, right?"

"Yes. Very."

"Then you should definitely go see her."

"I will; I am, but... I wanted to make sure we're cool."

"Why would I care if you go see Aerith?"

He blinked, a bit startled, and inclined his head toward her. "I meant about Corneo."

"Oh." Well, that was foolish, she thought, embarrassed. The ground was suddenly very fascinating.

Zack's hand gently clasped her upper arm. "Tifa...I..." He ruffled his hair, started to speak, seemed to think better of it, and opted for, "Just promise me you won't do anything stupid while I'm gone. Wait until we can all sit down and discuss options. Okay?"

There was genuine concern in his deep blues, and it was all Tifa could do to hold his gaze and say, "I won't do anything stupid." It wasn't quite a lie, she consoled herself with. Going after the Don was a sound plan, and she knew she could get information if she could get close to him. Zack didn't need to know that she had already made arrangements with Johnny's family to watch Marlene while she waited for the Honey Bee's carriage to come and pick her up. He had his own issues to deal with.

Apparently satisfied with her answer, Zack pushed himself away from the banister and went back into the bar to retrieve his Buster Sword from the rear wall. He returned a moment later. "I won't be long. We'll talk when I get back." With his natural agility he swung himself over the railing and down to the dirt below. "I mean it, Tifa. Wait for me," Zack called to her, walking backwards and pointing a finger.

She lifted one hand in silent farewell, neither confirming nor contradicting. Only when he was out of sight did she allow her hand to drop and the smile to fade from her face. "Bye, Zack."

Just outside the gate of Sector Seven, Zack paced back and forth and rubbed a hand over his face, scratched at the day old scruff there. He probably should have shaved. He would have shaved before. He sighed again and agitated his hair. It had taken him longer to get there than he'd planned, due to increased Shin-Ra patrols, but even still he found himself stalling—had been for a good ten
minutes. It wasn't that he didn't want to see Aerith, because he did. He missed her. Her smile. Her cheerfulness. Just her.

But the simple fact was that he didn't know how to approach her now.

It had been different before because he had wanted her. He was a natural flirt and playful banter came as easily as breathing for him, but now—well, now things were different. There was too much time between them, too much that couldn't be reconciled...and Tifa. If he was honest, there was Tifa. He wasn't sure he liked being honest about that.

He wasn't sure he was ready to feel the things he was beginning to feel for her, and besides that, there was the unavoidable fact that she was supposed to have been Cloud's. That alone kept him from delving too deeply into his emotions regarding her, but still—and despite that—he was self-aware enough to realize that the feelings he did have were growing.

For the past few weeks, maybe months—hell, maybe from day one—he'd felt a connection with her. An attachment of sorts. Initially, he believed, it was based off their mutual pain, and although that link was still there, it was more, and it was deepening. And he didn't know how to stop it—wasn't altogether sure he wanted to.

"I didn't think you were going to show."

Zack whirled guiltily and faced the woman he had once called the love of his life. "Aerith."

Dressed in pastel pinks she looked as fresh and as delicate as the flowers she tended. Her long, chestnut hair hung in a neat braid down her back, held in place by a familiar ribbon. The fact that she still wore it warmed him and shamed him all at once.

"Oh. Uh, hey." Wow, eloquent, Fair.

He gave himself a mental shake, wiped his hands on his dark pants and moved toward her. "Why wouldn't I come?" he wanted to know. "I said I would."

She lifted a shoulder, bounced a ringlet."You've said that before."

Zack winced imperceptibly, but successfully managed to quell that flare of guilt. "I didn't exactly have a choice then."

"I know," she agreed with a small nod, letting him know that she understood that much at least. She paused, looked at him, the ground, then back at him as she weighed out her next words."You've never told me what happened to you."

It wasn't a time he wanted to relive, or a memory he wanted dredged back up, so he asked quietly, "This isn't why you called, is it?"

She kicked a pebble beside her low-heeled boots, slightly dejected. "No. I called because... I...missed you. And I was worried." She looked up with eyes that shimmered. "I saw the news, Zack."

Well, shit. With less certainty than he probably should have felt, he reached for her, and was relieved when she stepped to him. He nuzzled his chin into her hair, let out a long breath."I'm sorry you had to see that."

She shuddered, once—hard—and pressed her face into his chest. "So...it was you?" She didn't sound like she really wanted the answer, but he couldn't lie to her.

"Yes."
With a muted sigh, she moved back. "I had hoped it wasn't."

He told himself that the disappointment in her voice didn't hurt. He could still lie to himself, at least.

"Why?" she asked him, whisper soft, voicing what her eyes had been asking since he'd looked at her.

She was staring up at him expectantly, but he had no ready answers for her. He had done what had to be done and he had done it well. And chances were, before this was all over, he'd do it again. He recalled Barret's words to him. "Because someone has to."

Hands clasped loosely in front of her, she turned away from him. "All the fighting. All the death. Don't you want to be free of it?"

*More than anything,* he thought. But he couldn't be. Not yet, not until Cloud was avenged and Tifa was safe. His jaw tightened. "Shin-Ra has to pay for what they've done."

"But...you used to be one of them."

He felt that one to his gut. She wasn't accusatory, her voice held no censure, but he felt her words like a physical blow. "That was before," he defended.

Her slender brows were furrowed when she looked at him. "Before?" Without knowledge of all he had endured, he knew it was hard for her to understand and that made it all the harder—for the both of them.

He shoveled a hand into the roots of his hair. "Yes, before," he stated. "Before they betrayed me. Betrayed everything." He felt restless; agitated. "Can we walk?"

She nodded, and—to his surprise—linked her arm with his. They strolled, side by side, with only the rustle of her long skirt breaking the silence.

"When Tseng told me you were dead, I didn't believe it," Aerith finally spoke.

"Tseng." The name was a bitter sting on his tongue. "He's the one that told you I was dead?"

"Yes."

Of course he was. Then he could be the one to comfort Aerith in her grief. That bastard.

"I'd never seen him show so much emotion before," she murmured, almost to herself. "Or since."

Maybe he really had believed he'd died during his escape, Zack conceded grudgingly, but he still found himself hardened toward the man he'd once considered friend. Tseng had to have known where he had been trapped, what Hojo had been doing. While he and Cloud had been trapped like rats, swimming in a sea of green, torn open and put back together by the maddest of mad scientists, Tseng had been in his cushy Turk office, loyally licking Shinra's boots.

If he closed his eyes, Zack knew he would still see glinting spectacles; hear the raw sounds of flesh ripping and pain filled screams. Ifrit knew he heard them often enough in his dreams. He shook himself, desperate to be free of the clinging cobwebs of memory.

"Why didn't you believe it?" he finally ventured, glad that his voice held steady.

It was her turn to be slightly evasive. "I just didn't," she replied slowly. Then, "I didn't feel it."
Her words pricked at elusive fragments of memory. Of one voice among hundreds. Soft. Gentle. Comforting. His steps slowed. Memories swirled through his mind, as tangible and elusive as fog. "Sometimes..." He pinched the bridge of his nose, focused.

"What?" she prompted when he stalled.

He turned, kept his eyes even with hers. "Sometimes...in the dark...I thought I heard you."

If at all startled by that, she didn't show it. In fact, she seemed relieved and pleased. "You did?"

"Yeah."

Her warm smile was a gentle caress on his wounded heart. "I prayed for you."

Genuinely touched, Zack bowed his head over hers, "Thank you."

She studied his face, and with a hint of sadness, murmured, "You're never going to tell me, are you?"

He hadn't expected that comment, so it surprised him, but he didn't avoid it. "What happened...it's not something I want to drag you into."

"No. It's more than that, I think." There was a trace of hurt in her voice. "Have we lost all the trust we had between us?"

He wanted her to let it go. What was the point in dredging it all up again? It wasn't about him not trusting her with it, it was about the pain. His pain. He didn't want to feel that now. Not now. Not ever again.

Zack knew he had hurt her, and didn't relish the idea of hurting her anymore than he already had, but he didn't want to invite any more questions either, so he gave her the best answer he could—an honest one. "It's not about trust. What it is, Aerith, is that there are so few good things left to me that I don't want to taint the ones I have with burdens of my past. I nearly died trying to be a hero, and I watched a real hero die in my arms. Shin-Ra took from me the life that was ours, and even though I can't get that back, I refuse to let them keep it without paying for it."

As he spoke, she studied his face, his eyes, the set of his jaw and sighed a soft, little sigh. Her hand was light and cool against his cheek. "My, my, Zack Fair, how you've grown." Her tone was only slightly less serious, slightly teasing.

"Had to happen sometime." He took her hand, kissed the palm, brought it down, and held it as they continued their walk.

When they rounded the corner, Aerith pulled up short. Her laugh was light and chipper—a ray of sun through dark clouds. "I can't believe it's still here!" She let go of his hand and hurried toward a large moogle-head with an excited squeal that quirked his brow.

If there was one thing about Aerith that Zack had always appreciated, it was her ability to roll with life. She was never down for long and despite wearing her heart on her sleeve, and her desire to know everyone else's, she took what was offered and demanded nothing more.

"Come on, Zack. Hurry up," she called, climbing atop the moogle-head. "Can you believe it's still intact?"

I he was honest, he'd have to admit that he was surprised to see the park still standing. Most
everything else had been destroyed, demolished or decayed as a result of Shin-Ra. He unstrapped his
sword and placed it alongside the ladder, climbed up.

"Remember our first date?" she asked him when he squatted down beside her.

"Yeah," he nodded, grinning at the memory. "You were so sweet."

"And you were so full of yourself."

"Hey!"

She giggled, pushed his shoulder. "You were. I remember."

"Yeah, yeah. So do I," he chuckled ruefully. He stretched one leg out and propped an elbow on his
knee. "Still am if you ask Tifa."

Aerith tilted her face toward him, her eyes veiled by her lashes. "I liked her."

"She's likable," he stated, keeping his answer as neutral as possible. Zack hadn't meant to bring her
up. Had actually made mental note not to bring her up. He couldn't imagine a much more awkward
conversation than talking to your ex-girl about the girl you thought you might, maybe, could be—
hell even he didn't know how to explain what Tifa was to him.

"She's very brave, fighting like she does."

He nodded. That one was easy. "She is."

"She seemed nice."

Another easy one. "She is."

"She's very pretty too," she added almost as an afterthought.


"You're a horrid fibber, Zack Fair." She poked him in the shoulder. "A man would have to be dead
not to notice those curves."

All right, awkward just hit a whole new level. He cleared his throat and found anywhere to look but
at her.

Her fingers toyed with a button on her skirt. "So... are you...are you two close?"

Shit. This was another line of questioning he wasn't ready for, but Zack knew he owed Aerith at
least some explanations. "We are," he answered truthfully.

"I see." Her tone was mild but he could sense a subtle tension that shimmered around her like a
second skin.

"Aerith, I—"

She held up a hand, stopping him. "It's okay, Zack. We both know things are different between us
and we can't go back. And even though I can't help but wonder at the could have beens..." She faced
him and her smile was genuine. "I like the promise of what can yet be, even more." There was no
anger, no resentment, only warmth and light and Aerith.
He felt the knot in his stomach uncoil and tension seeped out of him. He grinned at her, opened his arms, and hugged her tight.

She startled him when she rose abruptly to her knees. "Speaking of..." A gilded carriage rolled through the front gates, pulled by two bright plumed chocobos. "That girl. On the back," she pointed. "Looks kind of like Tifa."

Zack sat up straighter, his eyes narrowed. "She wouldn't have," he muttered under his breath. She had said she wouldn't do anything stupid. She was back at Seventh, probably meticulously organizing the toothpicks. It wasn't her on that carriage. It wasn't. He chanted it in his head.

The carriage swung past allowing for a better look at the woman on the small balcony. A familiar black leather skirt and white tank-top—complete with suspenders—sealed the deal. It was her, damn it.

Even from his position Zack could tell something was different about her. Dark hair, usually kept back in a long ponytail was loose and free around her shoulders, and she'd done something to her eyes. They looked heavy, almost slumberous and her lips were a dark red slick against creamy skin.

SEX.

She looked like sex.

He supposed it was the look she was going for, but that didn't change the jarring effect it had on him. With a muttered curse, one that would have done Barret proud, he shot to his feet. "Aerith, I'm sorry, but I have to go."

Aerith stood as well, brushed her hands against her skirt. "Was that Tifa? In the Honey Bee carriage?"

"Yes, damn her." He leaped from the moogle-head, landed with a soft thud and swung his sword up and around his back. "I'm sorry," he repeated, paused. "Are you okay to get home?"

She rolled her eyes. "I got here didn't I?"

He hesitated still.

"Go," she waved him toward the gate. "I'll be fine."

"I'll call you soon," he told her. "I promise." If she had a response, he didn't hear it, he was already running after the carriage.

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The Honey Bee Inn, located just outside the crowded Sector Six Wall Market, was as busy as it's namesake. Patrons of all types went to the Honey Bee, some for the obvious reasons, and others for the escape that the raunchy, bright, fun atmosphere provided. Most nights there was a line out the front and down the steps.

Which was the case when Zack arrived. Music from the showroom filtered out the bronzed front doors each time they opened and the crowd on the steps reacted with anxious excitement each time. They murmured, pushed and crowded the doormen to the point where they were ordered back down.

Zack elbowed his way through the throng of people only to be pulled up short when some guy caught him by the shirt sleeve. He turned, prepared to jerk free, but paused when he saw a mottled
"Hey. Aren't you Tifa's boyfriend? What the heck are you doing in a place like this?"

Zack blinked. "Johnny?"

"I mean, what the hell? If I had a girl like Tifa..." Johnny was angry and wistful all at once, nearly comical in his consternation.

"Look, man, it's a long story." Zack peered over the heads of the crowd, searching for any sign of long dark hair. "Speaking of: Have you seen Tifa?" he asked.

"What? You brought Tifa to a place like this? What kind of guy are you?" Johnny released his shirt, stepped back and shook his head in open disgust. "You're a piece of work. It's a good thing I'm leaving Midgar...or else...or else!" He shook his fist, turned and ran.

Caught somewhere between annoyed and amused, Zack watched the younger man run off. Johnny was a frequent front-stool patron at Seventh, a good kid with little ambition, a heavy crush on Tifa, and a big mouth. Zack imagined half of the sector would know he'd been spotted at the Honey Bee Inn before he got back to the bar.

With a dismissive shrug, Zack started back toward the steps. Jumbled bits of half conversations reached his ears, as well as some pretty lewd suggestions, which only served to hasten his steps. He had to get Tifa out of here. Wall Market was scary, especially for a female. The faster he found her, the faster he could get her to safety...so he could throttle her.

"Hey asshole! Back of the line!"

Zack whirled, faced down the drunk grabbing at his arm. Not normally a man that used intimidation to get what he wanted didn't mean he was above it. With a sneer, Zack leaned forward, towering a good six inches above the other man and snarled, "Let go of my arm," he paused for effect. "Or lose yours."

The unnatural hue of Zack's eyes coupled with the giant sword strapped to his back hastened the other man's reaction. With a yelp, the man let go and nearly fell backwards down the steps. Zack sent a chill look toward the other patrons nearby before resuming his climb; uninterrupted.

At the door a thin, well-groomed gentleman—if one could call anyone employed at the Inn such—with dark hair, in a dark suit and floral bow tie smiled at him. "Welcome to the Honey Bee Inn, where even a man like you can meet his destiny."

"You know a girl named Tifa?" Zack asked in the same clipped tone he'd used on the drunk.

Thin-man's smile wavered only slightly; obviously a man used to threats and intimidation. "Hey, there, you're pretty fast. Tifa's our newest girl."

Zack stepped forward. "I want to see her."

"Of course, but unfortunately, she's having an interview right now. All of our girls are screened and inspected very carefully for your ultimate satisfaction."

What the hell did he mean inspected? "I'm sure they are," Zack bit out, "but I want Tifa."

Thin-man nodded again, his false smile widening to near painful proportions. "I understand. A man wants what a man wants, and here at the Honey Bee Inn we do everything in our power to
accommodate him. Tell you what, come in, relax for a bit, enjoy some of our many entertainments and when Tifa has completed her interview, we will, of course, give you first dibs."

First dibs? Zack resisted the urge to plant his fist in the guy's too-white teeth. Instead, he flashed a wicked smile of his own. He could hunt her down himself once he was inside. "Sounds like a plan" he replied with a wink.

Thin-man flushed and bowed at the waist. "We hope you find everything you're looking for."

"Oh, I intend to."

"Well, Tifa, so far so good. We've found all of your answers very satisfactory."

Tifa regarded the interviewers seated across the table with a calculating eye while maintaining her plastic smile. The man directly across from her, a Mr. Harold Hardwick (she doubted that), sported a gray beard and large mole and had been the one who had done the most talking. He'd asked her the usual questions about her reasons for wanting to work at the Honey Bee and what she'd heard of the establishment, all the while making the pretense of adjusting his glasses in order to get a better view of her chest. The man beside him, Bringham Jones—who preferred to be called B.J.—was as oily as fried chocobo and twice as plump. He smoothed one fat hand over his thready comb-over and licked his lips.

"Thank you. Thank you so much," she bowed her head so they wouldn't see her revulsion, a sign which they mistook for respect.

"Once the second portion of the interview is complete we will begin filling out your new-hire paperwork."

Tifa blinked. "Second portion?"

"Oh it's nothing to fret over, my dear," Mr. Hardwick stated, rising from his seat. "It's all just part of our standard hiring procedure. If you'll follow me."

Tifa rose to follow with chubby Mr. Jones trailing behind her. They left the interview room and walked down a red velvet corridor until they came to an equally red door. Behind the door was a large, dark stairwell that led to the most disturbing room Tifa had ever laid eyes on.

It was sparse with no furnishings, save a table, in the shape of an X, complete with manacles and straps, in the center of the dark room with a spotlight overhead, flanked by a silver tray with an assortment of instruments. It looked like a torture chamber.

Appalled, she turned on the two men. "What is this place?"

"Nothing to fret over, dear. This is just the examination room." Hardwick slipped on a pair of rubber gloves.

"Examination room?" she echoed, suppressing a shudder.

"Y-yes." Mr. Jones dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief. He licked his lips. "Undress and h-hop on the t-table," he wheezed, fidgeted and groped the front of his pants.

There was no stopping the shudder that rippled through her. "I don't flipping think so."

Two sets of eyes narrowed on her, both men crowding her. "If you want the job, then you need to be
examined. We must assure ourselves that our clientèle will be, erm, satisfied with you."

Tifa knew then, what these two perverts did. Broke, hungry, and desperate girls who came to the Honey Bee looking for money, or lured by the bright lights and the promise of glamor were easy marks. How many had laid there beneath that spotlight while greedy hands fondled and tormented them on the pretense of examination?

Her own eyes hardened and narrowed into crimson slits. "How about you get on the table," she practically growled. "Let's see how you like it." With a suddenness that neither man was prepared for, she reached out, grabbed Hardwick's forearm, twisted and flipped him up onto the table face-first.

She snapped the manacles closed around his wrists before he could catch his fetid breath and she swung her legs up, latched her ankles against Jones' neck and jerked down. His flailing arms were strapped where her legs would have been, and his fat face was planted firmly between Hardwick's ass cheeks.

Grinning at her handiwork, she took the stairs back up two at a time. She ignored the muffled shouts for her to stop and for help from the struggling twosome below. She had no patience or sympathy for the likes of them. Let them squirm.

At the top of the stairwell she opened the door slowly, and cautiously peeked out into the hall. Empty. Confident that the coast was clear she shut the room behind her and, as nonchalantly as possible, made her way towards the back rooms where she had seen some of the women in Bee costumes lingering.

Zack shifted his weight, careful not to brush against the man next to him, and wondered again just how in Gaia's name he'd ended up here with them. He had been searching the hallways for any sign of Tifa when he'd come across a room occupied by an oiled, muscular individual that proclaimed to know all the ins and outs of the Honey Bee.

Mukki, as he introduced himself, was an employee and a patron of the Inn and had offered to assist Zack. Exactly how remained to be seen.

"You look nervous, Bubby." A beefy hand groped his thigh, squeezed. "Relax."

Zack inclined his head, pushed his damp hair back. "I'm fine."

Mukki's thick mustache twitched. "That you are, Bubby."

Murmurs of ascent went around the hot tub. Several eyes flickered over him and there was no mistaking the near predatory interest in them.

"Bathing is great. It soothes the body and the heart. How is it for you, Bubby?"

"To tell the truth it's a little crowded for me," Zack answered.

"Ah, you must be more of a one-on-one intimate type," Mukki's smile widened, and up until that moment Zack wouldn't have believed it possible. "But that's okay. You get used to it. Try counting to ten."

"I don't feel like counting."

Mukki's smile turned into a pout and that beefy hand was back on Zack's thigh. "How old are you,
Bubby?"

"Twenty-five." Zack maneuvered his leg away.

"So young," Mukki licked the corner of his lips and winked. "Wanna join my 'young bubby's' group?"

"Not particularly, no."

"That's too bad. We have a weekend get-a-way planned in a rustic cabin. Very macho. I think you'd have a good time. I know I would if you came."

Deciding that he wasn't particularly fond of being on the receiving end of so many double entendres, Zack shoved himself to his feet, sloshing steaming water as he rose. Normally some time in a Jacuzzi would be welcome and relaxing, but not one this crowded. With shirtless-bikini-brief-wearing-men.

"Where are you running off to?" Mukki's pout deepened. "You should stick around and play a bit."

Zack stepped from the tub, wrapped a towel around his waist. "You told me you knew where I could find Tifa," he reminded him. "So where is she?"

Mukki leaned back against the hot-tub wall and sighed. He rubbed a hand over the wet curls on his chest absently. "Hmmm...Tifa...Tifa..." He opened his eyes, smiled. "I don't think I've met her yet."

"What?" Zack hopped on one leg, pulled his pants on. "But you said—"

"I said I could help you find what you were looking for," Mukki interrupted with a wink. "Or so I'd hoped." He leaned on one arm, peering up at Zack. "You sure you wanna rush off, Bubby? We're about to turn off the lights."

Zack buckled his belt, tugged on his shirt. "I'm flattered," he said. "Really. But no thanks."

"Hm. That's too bad. You know where we are if you change your mind."

"Uh, thanks." Zack was out of the door, leaving behind murmurs and chuckles.

He tousled his steam-damp hair as he stormed back down the hallway. He'd wasted a good twenty minutes with Mukki—although the impromptu back rub had been nice—and he was no closer to finding Tifa than when he'd first stepped through the front doors.

He still couldn't quite believe the fact that she had lied to him. It wasn't that he'd never been lied to before, because he had, plenty of times—he'd worked for the biggest liars on the planet, after all—but for it to be Tifa lying to him. It was a jagged pill to swallow and he didn't like it.

He jammed his hands into his hair, expelled a breath. She had no right to worry him like this. What if he was too late? What if something had already happened to her? What if—

A door at the opposite end of the hall opened and a familiar voice filtered through it. "Okay, at the end of this hall? Thanks." And then there she was. Safe and sound.

Relief and anger warred in his gut. He didn't realize he'd said her name until her head lifted. When she caught sight of him, her eyes widened marginally. "Zack?"

The surprise in her expression irked him. He started towards her. To her credit she didn't run, or flinch, or, hell, look even remotely concerned by his rapid approach. In fact, she looked irritated.
"What are you doing here?" she demanded when he was closer. "Yup, irritated."

"What am I doing here?" he echoed, incredulous. "What are you doing here? You agreed to wait for me and Barret."

"I did no such thing."

Another door opened, prompted him to grab her hand and pull her into the shadows beside the wall. "You did." His voice was a harsh whisper. "I thought you'd wait until I got back so we could talk about it, but no, you have to go off and do exactly the opposite."

"I agreed not to do anything stupid," she corrected. "You just assumed that meant I wouldn't come here."

Zack shook his head at her, his jaw set. He wasn't letting her off that easy. "You can twist the logic any which way you want, Tifa, but the bottom line is you lied to me."

"I'm not going to stand here and debate with you, Zack," she stated. "If you wanna be mad at me because I didn't consult with you or wait patiently, twiddling my thumbs for you to give me some sort of go-ahead, then fine, be mad, and stay mad, because that day isn't ever going to come. You don't get to decide for me. No one does."

"Now, wait a damn minute—"

"No, I will not wait a damn minute. If you came here to lecture me or babysit me, then shove off. I'm more than capable of looking after myself."

"What the hell is the matter with you?" His expression was wounded. "I know damn well you can take care of yourself, Tifa. I've seen it. But that doesn't mean I don't worry or care, because I do care. Probably too damn much." His tone was accusatory. "If you think I came to babysit or lecture, well, you're wrong. I came because we're a team and we're supposed to be friends, or at least I thought we were."

"We are friends."

"Friends don't lie to each other."

He could tell he'd surprised her with his anger, but she didn't lash back out, didn't defend. Instead, she stared up into his face and, after a moment, her eyes softened. "You're right." She said finally. "I shouldn't have mislead you."

It was the best apology he was likely to get, he knew. She was stubborn like that.

Since he'd rather them not be angry with one another—even though he was in the right—Zack shifted topic. "So, what have you found out?"

She made a face. "Aside from the fact that there are a lot of creepy people in this place?"

He chuckled, relieved at her easy acceptance of the unspoken white-flag. "Yeah, aside from that."

"Not much, unfortunately," she replied with a disappointed sigh. "So far, Don Corneo is a no-show tonight. I've talked to a few of the girls and they said he hasn't been in."

Zack considered that. "Have you checked the upstairs rooms?"

"Upstairs rooms?"
He ruffled his hair, lifted a shoulder. "The rooms upstairs are designated for more, uhm, personal interaction. Chances are, if he's here, that's where he'd be and employees are forbidden from revealing the clientèle."

A slender brow arched in speculation. "And just how do you know so much about brothels?"

He cleared his throat, scratched at the nape of his neck. "Soldiers talk," he answered finally.

"Uh-huh. Sure, Zack." Her lips quirked. It was a rare thing to see Zack flustered, and Tifa wasn't above enjoying it.

Before he had a chance to comment, or skillfully change the subject—as was his intention—the door at the far end of the hallway slid open and a trio of Honey Bee girls, in full bee costumes, strode through. As they passed, one of the three—a woman with a mass of wild red hair and vivid green eyes—did a double take, stopped and turned back toward them. "Zack Fair? Is that you?" She blew a curl from her eyes and peered at him. When recognition finally kicked solidly into place, her smile was a mile wide. "Oh, my Gods! It is you! I haven't seen you in...years! You're just as yummy as ever!" She grabbed his face with both hands and planted a long, lipstick kiss firmly on his mouth. "Mmm. Still taste good."

Zack blinked rapidly, pulled his mouth free. "Hey there, uh..." Shit. He was completely blanking on her name. What the hell was it? It was some kind of plant. Something that matched her personality...

"Ivy," the woman supplied, giving him a perfect pout when he failed to remember her.

Right. Clingy Ivy. "Ivy," he repeated. "Long time." He slid a look towards Tifa, who was watching the exchange with an expression of amused confusion.

Ivy followed his eyes and turned toward Tifa, gave her a once over. "One of the new girls?"

"Tifa," Tifa offered her hand and a friendly smile. "Nice to meet you, Ivy."

After a moments consideration, the other woman took the proffered hand, gave a firm shake and an equally warm smile. She gestured to Zack with her free hand. "You're a lucky girl if he's yours tonight." She winked saucily. "He knows how to treat a lady, and can go for hours. All them SOLDIER-boys can."

At this, Tifa's quirked lips formed a small "o" and her cheeks flushed dull red. Zack felt his own color rise at the speculative look she gave him.

"Just be careful with this one," Ivy advised. "He's a heart-breaker."

Tifa nodded, winked back. "That's okay. So am I." She linked her arm through Zack's, brushed her lips fleetingly against his chin. "So what do you say, want to show me if those SOLDIER rumors are true?"

Zack nearly choked. What the hell was she doing? "Uhhhh..." Smooth as ever, he thought, as all the blood left his head.

Tifa slid a sly look at Ivy. "Can I just take him to any room upstairs?"

"You don't have your own room yet?"

"No." Tifa shook her head, pouted a bit and gave a low laugh. "I don't think I'm supposed to yet, but...well, look at him. Could you wait?" She ran one hand up his chest, smoothed it across his
shoulders.

Zack tried not to let his surprise—or anything else—show.

Ivy's gaze lingered over Zack and she let out a slow breath. "Here." She pulled at the gold chain around her neck, dragging a small key from her cleavage. "You can use mine. It's door number four."

Tifa took the key with a grin. "Thanks."

"No problem, sweetie. Enjoy yourself." Ivy cast a longing look in Zack's direction and gave his backside a pat when she walked by. "Break her in nice, okay."

With Ivy out of ear shot, Zack leaned against Tifa to whisper, "Quite the little actress, aren't we?"

Her eyes sparkled into his. "When I have to be." She lifted the key like a trophy. "Got us upstairs, didn't I?"

"I suppose you did," he agreed with a grin. "Clever girl. But then again, I do have irresistible charm... and of course, this face." He preened for her, making her laugh.

She wiped at the corner of her eye. "So, uhm, you and Ivy, huh?"

Zack snorted, pinched the bridge of his nose. "For Ifrit's sake I was eighteen—" he began, stopped and as he stared down at her there was a moment—no longer than a blink—that pain flashed in his eyes. Zack shook himself. No use remembering just how much time Shin-Ra had actually stolen from him. So, instead—in typical Zack fashion—he cast off the hurt in favor of a grin and playful banter. "But I left an impression."

"Apparently," she agreed.

"And it's true."

"What is?" she inclined her head and pocketed the key.

"What she said about us SOLDIERs." This time when he bent to whisper, his mouth brushed her ear. "I can prove it, if you don't believe me."

"You," Tifa whirled and jabbed her index finger into his chest, torn between humor and something else. "Try and behave."

His lips curved up in a wicked smile. "Well, if I don't, you can always spank me."

"Zack!" she hissed, bright red.

Zack decided then and there that he'd have to make her blush more. She looked damn adorable.

"What?" he blinked at her with false innocence. "There are entire rooms here for that sole purpose."

She glared up at him, then, after a short pause and with genuine interest, "Really?"

"Tifa!"

As she walked away her warm laughter pulled him. "Come on, Heart-breaker."
The upstairs of the Honey Bee Inn was a quieter rendition of the bustling downstairs. The stairwell and corridor were dimly lit and Zack supposed it was because the clients on this floor were in more invested in their privacy.

The main corridor—long and wide—extended out from the staircase in two directions. At the top of the steps Tifa turned to him. "Okay, which way?"

"What makes you think I know?"

Not buying his innocent act for a second, she crossed her arms, tapped her foot.

"To the left," he muttered with a frown, making her laugh. It was warm and inviting, and completely unsympathetic. When he shot her a narrow look, she nudged him aside with a gentle bump of her hip.

"It was years ago," he reminded her as she passed.

"So you mentioned."

He placed a hand to his chest. "I don't have to defend myself."

The smile she sent him over her shoulder was teasingly smug. "Then why are you?" Her playful little jaunt had his eyes wandering in ways they probably shouldn't.

Zack swallowed thickly; his collar—among other things—suddenly, uncomfortably, tight. He wiped a hand down his face, took an uneven breath. It wasn't as if he'd done anything wrong, he told himself. Tifa was an attractive woman, and he was a guy. A horny guy. A horny guy standing in the hallway of a brothel, with a hot woman.

Under normal circumstances he'd be grinning at his luck, but of course, among other things, his luck had changed of late, and instead of taking advantage of the situation he was counting to twenty and trying to picture Barret naked.

Down the hall a bit, Tifa paused when he made no move to follow. "Coming?"

"Of all the ways she could have worded that. He let out another breath. "Yeah." With a solid image of Barret locked in his head, Zack started toward her.

She made an open hand gesture toward the closed doors lining the hallway. "You really think Corneo is in one of these rooms?"

"Only one way to find out." Past experience had proven that the keyholes in the rooms were large enough to peek through. His lips curved as he crouched down, remembering just how much trouble he'd gotten into the first time he'd been caught gawking through the doors. The room, however, was vacant. "Notta. Empty. You?"

Velvet brown eyes blinked down at him. "You want me to spy on people. Here?"

"No," he corrected. "I want you to look into the room and see if Corneo is inside. How else are we gonna know? Knock door to door and offer cookies?"
She hated when he was logical. She really did.

Resigned, she took a quick breath, darted a glare at Zack, then leaned down to peer into the next room. What she saw inside had her sitting back on her heels, her face turning a deep shade of red. "Oh, my..."

Zack perked. "What's up?"

Blushing, she shook her head. Embarrassed amusement played with the corners of her mouth, turning them up in a smile that Zack very much appreciated.

"Sorry. It's just that...Wow. I had no idea...just wow." She pressed a hand over her eyes, laughed. That's what she got for peeking, she thought, unable to shake the image of the two very old, very naked, lovers making good use of a round bed and silk ties.

"Corneo?"

"Uhm...no."

Even more curious now, Zack moved over to where she stood "What is it?"

Tifa stepped back, shook her head. "That'd just be rude," she tugged his arm. "Come on."

He ignored her protest—and her tugging—to lean down and take a look for himself. After a moment, he let out a low whistle and when he turned his head up toward her his eyes were alight with mirth. "Grandpa's still got it."

"Zack," She hissed and pulled him to his feet, nudged him into motion. "Come on."

He tossed the door one last look over his shoulder before grinning down at her. "That was interesting."

"That was disturbing."

He laughed, angled his head. "Aw, come on. Don't you hope we're like that at eighty-something?"

She placed a hand on his back, prodded him forward. "I'll be sure to reserve you a room."

"Make sure it has those silk tie things and the feather lash. Those looked fun." White teeth flashed over his shoulder and—despite her intention not to—Tifa found herself laughing back.

He made it look so easy, she thought as they made their way. To lose himself in a moment, to find the humor—the normalcy—in places where there shouldn't be any. It was a talent, a charm, and a gift all in one and she was glad he shared it. Shared himself.

And in that moment, Tifa felt infinitely sad for all the people in his life that he wasn't sharing himself with in favor of their fight. They must miss him terribly, she thought with a pang. She knew she would, when the time came. But she didn't like dwelling on that though, so she pushed it aside in favor of a more current topic. "So...how did your visit go?" she asked.

"My visit?" He peered into another keyhole.

"With Aerith," she provided, doing the same on the opposite side of the hall.

"Oh," he considered the question. "Good," he said. "Short, but good. I'm glad I got to see her."
Guilt tightened her face. "You really shouldn't have left her to come here. I'm fine. I can handle this on my own."

"Tifa..." There was a hint of warning in his voice.

"She's important to you."

He turned, stared straight into her eyes. "So are you."

When she would have looked away, Zack strode purposely forward, put a hand on her arm, and waited for her to look up at him. Sometimes she forgot just how tall he was, she thought absently, held by the brightness of his gaze.

She had no defense for this, she thought with a sudden, inexplicable panic. She could barricade herself against his charm, and even his quiet sadness, but his direct sincerity left her feeling uncharacteristically vulnerable.

She moistened her lips. "Zack, I..." But she did know, because it was the same for her, and she really didn't know what to say to that. How to deal with that. She wasn't like him, she rationalized. Expressing her emotions was difficult. After her mother had died, hugs were rare in her house, and although her father loved her—she knew this—he was awkward and often uncomfortable with expressing it. It was a trait she'd apparently inherited. So she said the only thing she could think of to say: "Thank you."

"Tifa—"

"We'd better keep looking." She tore her eyes from his and purposely looked past him down the hall. She could feel his gaze heavy upon her, but refused to meet it again, afraid of what he'd see in hers.

"...Yeah, okay."

Another two doors down and still no Corneo...and Tifa still wasn't looking at him. He watched her, from the corner of his eye, walk the hall, the key and chain spinning around her finger. Having spent the past several months with her, Zack knew that Tifa only fidgeted when she was nervous or agitated, and he had the sinking feeling that he was the source of her agitation.

She was trying to erect those invisible walls again, and he was tired of them. He liked it when she let him inside; when she wasn't so guarded. His eyes wandered over her soft features. She had a passive face, but try as she might, her eyes always gave her away.

She was stopped in front of a door, and those expressive eyes flicked between the key in her hand and the door number.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what room it was, but still he asked. "Ivy's room?"

She nodded, didn't turn. "Looks like."

Voices, speaking low and fast, caught his attention and Zack stood hurriedly. "You hear that?" he asked her.

She inclined her head, listened for a moment. "I don't hear anything."

"I do." He started toward her. Down the hall, movement caught his eye.

A shiny shoe, a dark pant leg.
Shit. He knew those starched suits. The fucking Turks.

They rounded toward them.

Zack went with instinct rather than logic and pressed her into the frame of the door. "Kiss me."

That brought her head snapping around. "What?"

He crowded her against the door. "Just kiss me."

"No, I will not kiss yo—Mmph!"

He didn't have time to argue with her, so instead he yanked her against him, covered her mouth with his and pressed her flush against the door. The kiss went deeper than he'd intended with her mouth parted in protest as it was, but as the taste of her flooded his mouth, Zack couldn't bring himself to regret it.

She tasted like she looked, he thought in a flash—strong and sweet.

When she started to pull away he gripped her hips, held her closer. Not yet, he thought, and tried to convince himself that it was because the Turks were coming. Not yet...

He was impressed with his self-restraint. He didn't push, didn't ask for more, but he held himself in check. That was until her lashes swept down over those deep eyes and her lips softened beneath his.

Then he pressed. Slanted his lips over hers and sank in—a slow slide of heat and tongue. A low sound escaped the back of his throat when he felt her tentative response. Time fell away and everything inside of him swelled; brightened.

"Where the hell do you think he is?"

The voice jarred him back and Zack reluctantly—far too reluctantly given the situation—remembered his reason for kissing Tifa.

"Don't know. This is where Tseng said he'd be."

"Call HQ and find out what the hell we're supposed to do now."

The voices were almost on top of them. Zack shifted, angling his body so that he shielded Tifa. People only ever really saw what they wanted or expected to see, so he knew that the Turks wouldn't look too closely at a couple in the throes of passion. He heard a lewd chuckle, felt eyes on them, but as expected the men were moving again. Hastily, Zack fumbled behind Tifa for the keyhole. A moment later he shoved open the door and practically tumbled them onto the floor.

Inside, he chanced a look down into her eyes, now shining an indescribable shade, and he suddenly wanted things from her that he had no right to want. With her lips still parted and her expression slightly dazed and wary, she looked far too inviting and Zack felt the strong urge to kiss her again.

His mouth twisted, and he realized how dangerously close he was to crossing a line that should not be crossed between them. Reluctant hands moved to her shoulders, set her gently away from him.

"Turks." He stated, voice tight.

She blinked, languidly at first, then more rapidly as her senses returned. "What?"

"Turks," he repeated, turned away from her, away from temptation. "In the hall." He opened the door a fraction, peered through.
She shifted behind him. "Looking for us?" Her voice was cool and even, and Zack didn't know if he was relieved or irritated by that.

"I don't think so. I think they're here for the Don too." He tilted his head, listened, found the voices were quieter, moving down toward the other end of the hall. "I think they're gone." He opened the door, slipped out into the hall, motioned for her to wait. He returned a minute later. "Ready?"

She shook herself, nodded once. "Yeah, let's go."

She was shaken. That much was a given. That kiss had caught her by surprise and left her reeling. Part of the problem, she reasoned, was that she hadn't thought of Zack that way—hadn't allowed herself think of him that way, she corrected—because it was dangerous. He was dangerous. That sweet charm and those easy smiles were far more threatening that a thousand swords, and they could cut much deeper if she let them.

She realized that he had used the kiss for cover, but for some reason that didn't lessen the effect it had on her. Her lips were still tingling and her heartbeat was still galloping recklessly behind her ribcage. But it wasn't just the pleasure of the kiss that troubled her. No, it was the ease she felt in his arms that alarmed her.

It had been fleeting, no more than a minute, but in that minute Tifa had felt peace.

Determined to push the whole thing from her mind, at least for the moment, she swept her hair behind her ear and followed Zack down the staircase. At the bottom, they spotted Ivy heading up.

The redhead blinked in surprise, walked up to them. She cocked her head. "Finished already?"

Ignoring the comment, Zack handed her back the room key. "Is Don Corneo going to be around tonight?"

"You know I can't talk about our clients," Ivy protested, with a furtive glance around.

"Ivy," The way he said the name was silk smooth and covered in honey. It had Tifa's brows arching.

Zack leaned a bit closer to the other woman, his own mouth tilted in a crooked half-smile."Normally I wouldn't ask. Normally I wouldn't even care, but we all know the Don's a regular and I, uh, have some business with him. So, be a darling...where is he?" He chucked her under the chin and gave her a wink.

Blushing, Ivy touched her chin absently, in the spot Zack had just touched. "I never could refuse you." The look she sent him spoke volumes and Tifa shifted, glancing from one to the other. Zack was relaxed, his smirk playful and his posture confident and Ivy was responding. Eyes wide and mouth slightly parted, Ivy looked as though she expected him to swoop in and kiss her at any moment.

Which, Tifa thought with a pang, wasn't entirely out of the question.

"He's holed up in his mansion. Word has it that he's looking to settle down, get married. Apparently he's inspecting potential brides tonight and has quite the list of requirements."

Tifa inclined her head. "Such as?"

Ivy's eyes darted speculatively between the two of them, and Tifa suspected their cover was blown,
but Ivy simply shrugged and answered. "Well for one, rumor is that he expects a virgin bride," she
gave an indelicate snort. "Yeah, good luck there," she sighed, continued, "Young, healthy, ripe—"

"Ripe?" Zack interrupted with a grimace.

Ivy made a disgusted face. "I know, right. But yeah, those are just some of the ridiculous demands
the Don has for his new bride. So, if you wanna see him, go to his house. I doubt you'll get in—it's
no men allowed, but that's where he is."

"Ivy, you're an angel." Zack brushed her cheek with a quick kiss and hopped down the remaining
steps.

"And you, Zack Fair, are a devil," she scolded with a breathless giggle.

His grin was unrepentant and as wicked as the namesake. "Guilty."

*He made it so easy...*

When he motioned for her to join him, Tifa followed, but at a more sedate pace, her mind wandering
away from Zack and to the problem at hand. It was easier to shovel her emotions away for the time
being and focus on Corneo.

Tifa made up her mind to pursue Corneo into his home. She mentally ticked off the list Ivy had cited,
and nodded to herself. She could pull it off.

"I need to grab something," Zack cut into her thoughts. "One sec."

"Sure." She crossed her arms, waited.

Zack approached the front desk, keeping an eye out for unwanted Turk company, while Tifa hung
back. She twisted a lock of her hair around her finger while she watched the other occupants of the
lobby—mostly men, smiling outrageously at the women in costume—and contemplated just how
little she knew of social interaction.

Zack, on the other hand, apparently had ample experience. Several female heads turn to follow in his
wake, and she wondered just how easy it was for him to slip into the role of flirt, charmer...seducer.
So much for shoveling that aside, she thought with a rueful shake of her head. *Ok, Tifa, focus.*

A loud clang and a holler had her whipping around, her hands tightening to fists. Her defense, it
turned out, was unwarranted. The commotion was at the front desk where two associates—both
heaving and sweating—were attempting to haul the Buster Sword from beneath the counter. Zack,
with an almost arrogant casualness lifted the sword away from them, spun it—one handed—over his
head and slid it into its slot on his back.

"Thanks, guys." He tossed each a small pouch of gil. He inclined his head toward the female
audience. "Ladies."

Tifa rolled her eyes at the gasps and sighs.

Outside the door, he asked, "So what now?"

Tifa tipped her head, gave him a slanted stare. "Now, we go shopping."

"Shopping," he repeated slowly.

"Of course. You can't expect me to meet my future husband in this." She gestured to her bar outfit
and Zack cringed. "I thought you'd say that."

He would've tried to talk her out of it, if he thought for one second she'd listen, but the stubborn set of her jaw, the line of her spine and the hard glint to her eyes all told him that anything he said was likely to fall on deaf ears. So, as a result, he found himself standing in a small dress shop, with curious eyes watching his every move, waiting for Tifa to step out from behind the flimsy curtain.

Bored, Zack leaned his cheek against his knuckles and favored the blushing checkout girl with a resigned sigh coupled with a lopsided half-smile. It wasn't that he held any particular objection to watching a woman try on clothes, but after the fifth—or was it sixth?—dress had been rejected, despite his assurances that they all looked "fine", he was getting edgy. What the hell did the dress matter anyway? Really? Tifa was a knockout in sweatpants. The trimmings were irrelevant.

A rustle of fabric behind him had him turning. *Holy Leviathan!* It was like taking a sledgehammer to the chest, he'd later conclude. A jarring expulsion of breath followed by an adrenaline jump start of his heart.

His vision honed in on her and it was as though she were the only one in the small boutique. She was simply stunning. There really was no other word for it. He had always known she was beautiful, he had a brain and eyes, it wasn't exactly a big mystery, but she had never looked so…womanly before. Her hair was scooped back, held in place with two silver combs and her solitary, small earring glinted beneath the shop lights.

Dark material—the color of the Gongagan sky at night—clung to smooth shoulders and traveled along a delicate collar bone and down to hug a trim waist. The fabric wasn't flashy or shimmering, but sleek and soft. It's simple lines made her appear taller. Her legs—those lean, toned legs—were revealed from mid-thigh down to dainty toes that wiggled in sharp stiletto heels.

She turned, revealing the extraordinarily low cut, open back, and the silken texture of her bare skin. "Well?" she prompted when he didn't speak.

"I—uh—I...uhm..." He couldn't find words. Couldn't formulate thought.

Her smile was satisfied. She turned to the checkout girl. "This one."

Zack hastily straightened away from the counter, stumbled over the small step and nearly sent a mannequin tumbling to the floor.

Amused, Tifa's smile widened to a full grin. "Zack! Be careful."

"I should be saying that to you." He caught the display, righted it. "You're liable to give the man a heart attack before we can ask him any questions."

She gave him a quick, embarrassed laugh, brushed her hair back over her shoulder. "Thanks. I think."

Now level with her, he circled her. For the first time in their acquaintance his eyes were alight with something other than humor. They glinted with genuine male appreciation and he did nothing to mask it. She was damn easy on the eyes, and he was tired of pretending he didn't notice. He noticed. He noticed everything about her.

Like the way her hands were wringing one another, indicating discomfort. *Okay, Fair, back off.* He
stepped away, moved to the checkout. "How much?"

"Seven hundred." The girl leaned across the register. "I gave you a discount," she whispered.

"Aren't you sweet." Zack fished out his pouch, counted out the appropriate amount. "Worth every ounce," he told the girl.

Behind him, Tifa blushed.

Wall Market was packed, crowded to the point of discomfort and annoyance. People were milling around, vendors were calling out wares and coupons for food and prescriptions were being handed out to everyone that passed.

Don Corneo's mansion—a gaudy brick building with elaborate carvings—was located on a small hill that overlooked all the hustle and bustle like an omnipresent shadow. Zack stared up at it from the foot of its winding drive.

Beside him, Tifa smoothed her dress, straightened her shoulders. "Okay." She took a breath. "I'll go in, get as much information as I can. Where should we meet up?"

He adjusted his Buster Sword on his back, stared up at the mansion. "I don't like the idea of splitting up."

"You heard Ivy. It's no men allowed."

"I still don't like it." Hated it, in fact. "Just get out safe. I'll find you."

She placed her hand on his arm, gave him a conciliatory pat. "I'll be careful."

"Tifa," he rubbed the back of his neck. "Before you go in. I just want explain...about the kiss."

"What about it?" Her eyes were steady, inquiring, and he found himself wondering at her thoughts.

"I saw the Turks and I did the only thing I could think of." The truth, as it was, wasn't very romantic, but it was the truth, and he went with it. "Here's the thing... I didn't think, I just reacted."

"Well, then, there's really nothing to be said." She looked over at a street vendor, and Zack was left staring at her profile.

He shifted, moving up her right side so that he was looking at her.

She surveyed the crowd. "Zack, look, I know you meant nothing by it, so stop worrying about it, ok? I'm not going to kick your ass over it."

Well, shit. This was going great. He ran a hand through his hair, down his face. Flirting was his thing, he thought agitatedly. This should be easy. He'd smooth talked a dozen girls, had them falling at his feet for Ifrit's sake, but this was different. This mattered. She mattered. "Tifa."

"If you want," she continued, "We can just forget the whole thing even happened."

Zack wondered just how she planned on doing that, because he sure as hell couldn't get the way she felt pressed against him out of his mind. The way she had tasted. The small breathy sounds she had made. He intentionally bit the inside of his cheek hoping to deflect his wayward thoughts and the growing hardness in his pants. "I'd love to, but there's just one problem," he found himself saying.
She cocked her head. "Hm?"

"I want to kiss you again."

"What?"

Zack felt a flare of satisfaction that he'd caught her off guard. "I'd like to kiss you," he repeated, his voice low, his eyes a dark, unreadable blue.

"More Turks?"

His lips quirked at that."No. Because I want to, but more importantly, because you want me to. I want to kiss you again, but only if you want me to kiss you. I won't if you don't." he paused, took a breath. Smooth, Zack, real smooth. With a self-disgusted head-shake he finally just looked her in the eyes and asked, "May I?"

Her teeth worried her bottom lip as her eyes searched his face. He could almost see her trying to rationalize, compartmentalize and sort it out. Her, him, them. He shifted his weight, hands tingling and sweaty. Finally, just when he was beginning to wish the ground would open and swallow him whole, she nodded.

"If you do decide to kick my ass, make sure you hit somewhere unimportant to me." With that, he lowered his head slowly, teasing her. A breath away, then back a bit, then closer, and just when she thought that she just may kick his ass, his lips touched hers. Firm and soft and skillful they plied hers apart.

Oh!

Tifa felt her world tilt dangerously and her hands fluttered like wounded birds before taking his shirt in a death grip. She closed her eyes against the tenderness etched on his handsome features. His tongue lingered over her lips, then slipped inside, tasted, stroked, cajoled. She sighed, opened, allowed him in. He gave her long, drugging kisses that made her breath catch.

His hands were gentle, but firm, and his mouth was patient but she felt the hunger lying beneath.

She had no idea how long they stood like that, locked together amidst the chaos of Wall Market, but when he eased back, a muscle twitched in his jaw and his eyes were a vibrant color that she had never seen before.

"Been wanting to do that for awhile now," he whispered, ran the pad of his thumb along her bottom lip.

She leaned back, saved from response by a couple of teenage boys sprinting between them, breaking them apart. One of the two turned and whistled, hooted at Zack, "Good job, man!"

With more calm than she felt, she adjusted her dress and plastered a smile on her face. "We'll call that a kiss for luck," she told him.

Zack knew better than to push. His own smile was pinched at the edges, but he nodded. "I'll be waiting for you." His voice was calm, but his eyes had storms in them.

Inside her, somewhere deep inside her, something ached.

Zack waited until she was inside before he started up the hill behind her. No way was he letting her do this on her own.
In what could only be described as the tackiest room she’d ever seen, complete with gold threaded throw pillows, risqué artwork and smoldering incense, Tifa waited. Lounged against the back of an overly plush sofa, she adjusted her position a bit, and let her gaze drift over the two other women in the room; the doorway; the single window; and the two security guards, in what she hoped appeared to be idle curiosity.

As her eyes skimmed, she mentally cataloged. The skinnier guard, the one with thinning red hair and goatee—Kotch was his name—had one sidearm and a set of brass knuckles dangling from his belt. He snapped his gum rapidly between his front teeth as his own eyes drifted and stayed on low cut dresses and exposed skin. His leer was revolting, but not so much as his blown kisses and licked lips. Tifa looked away.

"Ok, breathe. You can do this.

She took a moment, then lifted her head and studied the other, beefier guard—Scotch. He also had a sidearm, but not the knuckles and apparently not the interest. His eyes never darted below their eye line. Dark hair that held a hint of curl was slicked back with enough gel to create a hardened style—a gelmet, she thought, as her fingers plucked randomly at the fabric of the pillow.

These two were apparently Corneo’s right hand men, and the only ones allowed to escort the prospective brides. Tifa had heard the other men call them sir on their way up to the "pen"—as Scotch had called the room they now occupied.

On that walk she had counted seven other armed security men. Two by the main door, one at the foot of the stairs, one at the top, and three lining the upper hallway rail, overlooking the main foyer.

Tifa made the safe assumption that the back of the mansion was just as heavily guarded. There were several rooms and doorways that she hadn’t had the opportunity to see, and chances were those were secured as well. It would appear that Don Corneo had a small army of men at his disposal. How well trained they were was still an unaccounted variable.

"Everything looks so expensive."

The whisper cut into her thoughts and Tifa blinked. The woman on her right leaning toward her conspiratorially. Tight blond ringlets were clipped back behind pierced ears and light blue eyes were narrowed in scrutiny. "I wonder how much it's all worth?"

"And I wonder how much of it's stolen," Tifa muttered. When the other woman raised a carefully arched brow, Tifa feigned a yawn.

"Don't get too tired, sweetie. The Don likes 'em frisky," Kotch spoke from the door with a quick snap of gum between his teeth. He waggled his brows and blew her another kiss.

Tifa inclined her head, brought her lashes coyly down. "No worries there."

His grin spread, his eyes appreciating.

She shuddered; swallowed a gag.

After a few more minutes passed, she leaned against the arm of the couch, gave the men an impatient smile. "How much longer until we see the Don?" she asked.

Tifa sat back with a huff.

"I don't know about you, but I'm so nervous I could throw up." With curly copper hair and a smattering of freckles, the girl across from Tifa spoke from behind her thumbnail. She bit into it, wide eyes scanning the room like a caged animal.

Her open agitation reflected Tifa's inner tension. Crossing her legs, Tifa sat up. "What's your name?"

The question caused the other girl to blink. "Me? I'm Rachael."

"Hi, Rachael. I'm Tifa."

"Hi."

"And I'm Shelly." The blond cut in, drawing a questioning glance from Tifa. Seeing it, the other woman shrugged carelessly. "I thought we were introducing ourselves. It's good to know your competition." Her gaze was cool, cynical, calculating. "So to speak."

"Uh-huh." Tifa ticked of Corneo's requirements in her head. She'd wager a case of Cactuar Juice that Shelly didn't meet any of them. Satisfied with her internal cattiness, Tifa turned back to Rachael.

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen." Nervous fingers twisted hair around trembling fingers. "Next month."

A small furrow formed across the bridge of Tifa's nose. She knew from experience that life in the slums was hard no matter what the age—the filth and the violence and the poverty were inescapable—but that didn't prevent the dull ache in her chest as she thought of what would bring a sixteen year old girl to sacrifice herself to a pervert.

In her youth—had Barret not entered her life—would she have been forced to make such a sacrifice? Could she have? She didn't think so. She was having a hard enough time now. She refused to let Marlene's future hold such vile options. Shin-Ra was responsible for ruining so much for so many, and they were going to make it right.

The threads of the pillow snapped in her hand. A pair of blond eyebrows quirked at her and she exhaled a slow breath, closed her eyes and steadied herself. She just needed to focus on getting to Corneo, getting the information, and getting back to Zack.

A stealth approach hadn't been an option. The mansion's angle, coupled with its odd position, made sneaking in near impossible. Not that he couldn't have managed it, Zack thought with a roll of his shoulders, but he really wasn't in the mood to sneak around a pimp's house in the middle of the night. So, with a shrug and a whistle, he marched right past the startled front doorman and straight into the marble foyer.

Before the doors even had time to swing shut, his ears twitched with the sound of rounds being chambered. They echoed over marble tile and danced off painful memory. Instantly his body tensed, fingers twitched and he had to forcibly not reach for the sword on his back.

"Don't move."

Zack had already halted, but didn't hold up his hands. With a smirk, he gave the armed men a dismissive glance, crossed his arms and rocked back on his heels.
"What business do you have here?" It was the same voice, coming from the balcony, but Zack couldn't make out a face.

"I'm here for Don Corneo," he answered.

A respectable distance away, another of the armed men spoke, "The Don's entertaining."

"I'm sure he's a laugh riot," Zack dead-panned. "Interrupt him," Zack said in the same unruffled, even tone.

The men laughed, gesturing at him and ribbing each other. "Who the fuck are you to be givin' orders. Get the fuck outta here before we decide to use you for our personal bitch."

Zack's lips slid into a smile that held a hint of bite. "You could try," he offered with an arrogant shift of shoulder. The flat of the Buster Sword caught the overhead light, drawing attention to its mammoth expanse. The tension in the room went up about fifteen notches and several of the men exchanged uneasy glances.

Jittery men with itchy trigger fingers were far more dangerous than ice-cold professionals, and Zack got the impression he was definitely dealing with the former. Man, he hated guns.

With his stance still arrogantly casual, despite the number of weapons trained on him, he said, "Now, be good boy and fetch him for me. I wasn't sent all this way to stand here being sniffed at by Corneo's lap-puppies."

None of the guns lowered and no one moved. "Sent by who?"

"By Shin-Ra." The word was still bitter as bile. "I'm SOLDIER; first class." Now why did that make him want to choke?

"You, uh, got some credentials or sumthin'?"

That made his lips quirk further. "Or something." He shifted a bit, leaned into the light and let his eyes answer for him.

Murmurs and more twitching and Zack could see them weighing it out. Sensing the upper hand he started walking, slowly, towards the center of the room. "Now, being a reasonably patient guy, I'll let this little interruption slide, but if someone doesn't take me to Corneo in the next ten seconds I'm going to assume you're hiding him from Shin-Ra, and trust me when I say that Shin-Ra doesn't take kindly to that kind of disrespect."

"Whoa, pal! We didn't know. I mean, fuck, how were we supposed to know you was with Shin-Ra?" The balcony voice stepped forward, revealing itself to belong to a heavy-set bald man with a goatee. He motioned for the others to lower their guns.

"Well, you know now," Zack stated amicably. He smiled his easy smile and shrugged. "No harm done."

The men seemed relieved and the tension ebbed to a comfortable uncertainty. A few even laughed and several moved toward him, almost in awe.

"A SOLDIER, huh?" A skinny guy to his right asked. "I heard you guys have to have some weird surgery."

Zack nodded once. "Something like that."
"Is it true they cut off your balls so you can't have sex?" another asked.

"That's a new one," Zack muttered. "Uh, no. I have both balls, thanks."

"Obviously. Come marching in here like that." A round of laughter. "Come on. I'll take you upstairs. Mr. Corneo is inspecting some bridal candidates tonight, so he's in his bedroom."

The thought of Tifa in Corneo's bedroom hastened his steps. "Lead the way."

Don Corneo was a rotund man with beady eyes, dimpled cheeks and a ruddy finish. Had he met him in any other setting, Zack would have assumed him to be a jovial sort with a mild temperament and not given him more than a passing glance. But here, in the silk and sheer of his bedroom, with his robe half open and pudgy fingers stroking idly over the arm of his chair, Zack saw the depravity lurking behind the pale gray of Corneo's eyes.

"So... Shin-Ra sent a genuine SOLDIER to protect me?" It was the fourth time that same question had been asked.

"Apparently." Zack kept his eyes on him. He'd been asked his rank, had been asked to show Corneo his eyes, and asked his purpose, but it was obvious that SOLDIER was as much a mystery now as it had ever been, and Corneo didn't have a clue how to deal with one. Which suited Zack just fine.

Corneo pushed himself to his feet. He strolled the room, a smug smile pushing out the rounds of his cheeks. "They surely know how important I am then." He turned to Zack. "And just how long will you be protecting me?"

One broad shoulder lifted. Not long, you fat fuck. "As long as I'm needed."

"Woo-hoo, good, good." Pudgy hands clapped together. "My own personal SOLDIER."

Zack barely refrained from rolling his eyes.

Beside his bed, Corneo pulled a braided rope. A loud chime thundered through the room, reverberating down the halls. "I have plans this evening," he explained. "But by all means, sit. Stay. Make yourself comfortable."

A glance at the satin covered chair behind him made him grimace. "No thanks. I'll stand."

"I like that. I like that," Corneo clapped excitedly, his chin wobbling with it. "Always on alert! So disciplined!"

Ifrit help me. Zack cringed.

The clang of a gong startled Tifa upright. A quick glance at the other two women found their eyes wide.

"That's our cue, ladies," Kotch informed them. He stepped away from his post and waved them to their feet. "Come on, come on, let's go."

Corneo's room was only two doors down on the left, but it was one of the longest walks of Tifa's life. Each step was metal preparation for seducing a man she had never seen before. She flattened her palms over her abdomen, smoothed her dress down.

You can do this.

She glanced at the fidgeting girl beside her. If she had no other reason for her actions tonight, then
preventing this child from being subjugated to someone else's perversions was enough motivation. She would be the woman Don Corneo chose. She had to be. With that thought she tossed her hair back over her shoulders; stood a bit straighter.

From the corner of her eye she saw Kotch ogle her chest. She cocked her head at him and sent him what she hoped was a smoldering look.

Apparently. He whistled. "Damn, babe. Just damn."

Feeling a bit more confident—if not a little grossed out—Tifa crossed the threshold of Don Corneo's bedroom and was very nearly bowled over by Scotch when she stopped dead. From his leaned position against the back wall, looking right at home and relaxed, Zack grinned at her.

What the hell was he doing there? She blinked rapidly, confusion drawing her brows down to furrow above her nose.

"Well, hello, ladies." Don Corneo rose from his bed, knotted the belt of his robe and made a show of looking all three up and down. "Woo-hoo-hoo, aren't you all little beauties?"

Murmurs of thanks came immediately from the other two, but, still stunned by Zack's presence, it took Tifa a moment before she answered, her eyes still on the shadow of a man in the back. "Oh. Uh, thank you."

An amused smirk tilted sculpted lips and blue eye twinkled.

Perhaps it was the fact that it was well into the forbidden hours of the night, when the good were resting and the wicked were cavorting, in a place known for its immoral temptations that made her thoughts stray in such a manner, but regardless of the reason, Tifa found herself remembering the feel of those lips on hers.

Her face flushed hot and she was forced to look down. Damn him.

"Nice," Corneo said, lifting her gaze again. "Mmmmmmm..." He stopped in front of each of them, cocked his round head back and forth. "Excellent choices. Which one, which one..." A pudgy finger traced over the blond's shoulder. "Soft." He moved in front of Rachael, cupped her cheek, tilted her face. "Young." Another nod of approval. Then he was in front of Tifa. His eyes dipped and lingered on the swell of her breasts. "They real?" he asked with a lick of his lips.

Tifa forced herself to school her features into a soft smile and half-lowered lashes. "Of course," she murmured quietly.

His hand reached up to fondle. Tifa bit back a yelp and closed her hands to keep from slapping him.

"Good, good! Very nice."

Over the top of Don Corneo's bent head Tifa caught Zack's eye and the seething fury banked there surprised her.

"What do you think?" Corneo asked, suddenly turning toward Zack.

It took a moment for Zack to tear his eyes from Tifa's, but when he did, he made a show of looking over all three women, then with a wink replied, "I've always found blonds to be more fun."

Tifa shot him an icy look. Was he purposely trying to sabotage her?
Corneo chuckled, low and lewd. "Hoo hoo, I've known many to be. Very well, then. This one," he pulled the blond forward, "is yours." He nudged her toward Zack, then turned to Kotch. "You and Scotch can share this one." And off Rachael went. His eyes traveled back over Tifa. "And this little beauty is mine."

"What?" Zack straightened away from the wall.

Tifa's eyes widened and her head snapped to the left. No. That wasn't how it was supposed to work. The other two were supposed to be sent on their merry ways, not passed out like party favors!

"Come on, sweetness." Kotch grinned at Rachael. "We'll take real good care of you."

"Oh...Okay..." Rachael's voice was so it trembled. With her head bowed, she allowed herself to be led toward the door.

No! Tifa's hands closed into fists at her side. She lifted her head, caught Zack's eye again. The simmering rage was back, and she could see his mind spinning. Neither one wanted that girl to leave the room, to be used like some toy to be passed around.

Logically, they couldn't risk it. There was just too much was at stake.

Tifa sent an apologetic look across the room. She couldn't let them take that girl. Zack nodded once. Of course he would understand, she thought.

Just before the door closed Kotch's leering voice filtered back in. "This'll be fun."

With blurring reflexes, Zack grabbed Shelly by her wrist, yanked her behind him—much to her gasping delight—and reached for his sword.

Tifa pivoted on her heel and caught the door before it could close. "Hey!"

Both men and Rachael turned toward her.

Kotch barely had time to blink before his nose cracked and blood sprayed his dark shirt. "Ow! What the fuck!" He danced back against the railing, screaming.

"Come on!" Tifa grabbed Rachael and shoved her back inside the bedroom.

"Bitch!" Before she could get herself safely inside, a large hand fisted into her hair, yanking her back around. A thick hand slapped her. Hard.

"Asshole," she countered. Reflexively, she slammed the heel of her stiletto into Scotch's shin. He yowled and jerked back, taking a fair amount of dark strands with him.

Tifa hissed in pain, but managed to get back enough to lift her leg and kick him away from her. She allowed the momentum to toss her back inside the room. She slammed the door shut and slid the bolt into place just as a solid thunk caused the wood to jump beneath her hands. Angry fists pounded from the opposite side, but the latch held.

When she glanced over her shoulder to check on Zack, she almost smiled at the scene behind her.

Pinned against his own headboard, with the Buster Sword angled beneath his quivering chins, Corneo was pleading with Zack for mercy while Rachael and Shelly were practically wading in a puddle of drool.

"You okay?" Zack tilted his head toward her, his eyes narrowed on the red welt throbbing on her
cheek.
"Fine." She rubbed her scalp as she hurried over to the other girls. "Here." She lifted a golden statue of two women—doing Gods only knew what—and shoved it into Rachael's hands. The piece of erotic art would fetch more in Wall Market than Tifa was likely to see in two months at the bar. "Take this."

"But, I—"

"Move. Come on." Tifa pulled at their arms, nudged them toward the window. She flung it open with flourish and motioned them through. "Climb down."

"I am not climbing down that!" Shelly shook her head, backed away.

"You will." Tifa snagged her wrist. "Or I'll toss you out." She glanced uneasily as the door shuddered again. They only had a few minutes before Corneo's men busted through, or found a key. "Now, out!" She shoved Shelly through the opening, but held onto her until she was certain the other woman was sure footed. Rachael followed with a confused, "Thank you."

Tifa waited for only another moment, then she turned back to the bed.

"Who are you people?" Corneo whined.

"Shut up, we're asking the questions now." Tifa approached him in long, angry strides. "What is it you know about AVALANCHE? Talk! If you don't tell us..."

Zack placed his foot on the edge of the mattress, leaned in and said with a wicked smile, "I'll chop them off."

Corneo's ruddy complexion went pasty. It took three tries for him to spit out anything. "I was t-told to find the man with-with the gun-arm."

Tifa's shoulders tightened and her mouth thinned. Any threat to Barret was unacceptable. "Told by who?"

Corneo swallowed convulsively. "I-I can't tell you that. They'll k-kill me."

"And just what exactly do you think I'm gonna to do if you don't?" Zack inclined his head.

"Gods, you're serious!" A thin sheen of sweat gleamed on pasty flesh. "It was Heidegger."

"The head of Public Safety Maintenance?" Tifa frowned. That was pretty high up on Shin-Ra's corporate ladder. "What are they up to? Talk, or I'll smash them." She gestured between his pale legs.

Corneo shook his head, blubbered. "N-nooo, please."

"I'd do what the lady says," Zack advised him.

"I'm not fooling around here either, you know. Shin-Ra's trying to crush that small rebel group called AVALANCHE, and they're really going to crush them... literally."

"What do you mean?" Zack demanded, adjusting the blade so that it rested heavily against Corneo's jugular. He was getting real tired of the stall tactics.

"By breaking the support holding up the plate above them."
Appalled, Tifa stepped back. "What?" she gasped. "Break the support? But there are hundreds of people..." She shook her head. No. Not even Shin-Ra was that cruel.

Corneo regarded the Buster Sword warily. "The plate above Sector Seven is going down. Makes ya glad you're here in Sector Six, huh?"

Tifa felt her heart stop. No. Oh, no! Her hand whipped over to clamp on his arm."Zack!"

No hesitation. He lowered his sword, turned to her. "Let's go."

The moment the sword withdrew, Corneo lunged across his bed and pulled against another dangling rope.

Zack swore and Tifa shrieked as the floor beneath them folded under and they were falling. Loud, obnoxious laughter followed them down and as the slam of the ground knocked the wind from his body, Zack wished he had gut the swine.

Gods, he was sick of falling. That was his first thought the second he regained consciousness. "Tifa!" was his immediate second. He rolled, sloshed water from his eyes, gave a small thank-you to whatever deity had kept him from impaling himself on his sword, and began to crawl toward the limp body laying across from him. "Tifa?" Be okay.

A small groan and her own head lifted, sodden tresses blocking her face. She gave an indelicate sniff and swore. "We're in the damn sewers." She flung her head back, accidentally slapping him in the face with the wet whip-like strands of her hair.

"Ow." He rubbed his eye. "Yeah."

"Gross." Then, recalling everything in a blinding flash. "Barret!" She was on her knees, then feet, scooping her dress from the stank water. Her eyes were wild and filled with unshed tears. "Zack, what are we going to do?"

It was the closest to panic Zack had ever seen her. He grabbed her upper arms, hauled her to stand in front of him. "We're going to get there. We're going to stop them." His voice was even, certain. "We will. It'll take a lot to break that pillar. We have time."

"Okay. Okay." She inhaled a trembling breath. "You're right." She wiped her face, shot him a quick, half-hearted smile. "Okay. Thanks. Sorry I flaked." With quick motions, she bent, pulled off her heels and tossed them aside."Let's go."

She was scared, soggy in sewage, and yet she still managed to offer him a smile and apology. It was tinged with fear, and tight with anticipation, but she was trying, and Zack felt a swell of pride. He dredged the Buster Sword up, hooked it on his back. That done, he grabbed her arms again—surprising her—and slanted his mouth over hers. The kiss was quick and hard, and tasted of things both repulsive and intoxicating. "When we get this done, and we're not covered in sewer water, remind me to kiss you again. Properly."

"Let's just get this done first, Heartbreaker," she replied, blushing. "Then I just may kiss you."

"Then let's go!" Zack grabbed her hand and started jogging down the dark, narrow tunnel.

Pulled behind, encouraged by his Zackness, Tifa found herself believing that they would get there in time. They had to.
A race against time to stop Sector Seven's Plate from falling...

It took no more than an hour for the two of them to traverse the tunnels—narrowly avoiding some of the oddest looking monsters that Tifa had ever seen—and make their way to an abandoned train graveyard, but it was the longest hour of Tifa's life.

Twice she'd tripped over her long dress, and—frustrated to the point of screaming—she'd bunched the material in her hands and tore it off just above her knees. Soggy, barefoot, and in the tattered remains of her gown, she emerged from the sewers, spurred forward by gut-clenching terror and Zack's steady mantra of, "We'll get there."

She climbed the dirty rungs of the ladder, hoping that he was right.

"You doing okay?" Zack reached down, helped her from the manhole.

She hopped up on one leg and pulled a piece of glass from between her toes—the third so far. She'd be lucky if she didn't get some weird infection, but that was the least of her worries, so she nodded. "Yes." She tossed the shard aside and was running towards the eerily silent boxes of metal that blocked the way to the Sector Seven gate before the word had fully formed on her lips. She could feel Zack close behind her, but she didn't look back.

Please...not too late. Please.

They moved quickly between the train cars, climbed through and on, and kept their silence. Neither wanted to voice the option of being too late. It badgered her heart, none the less, and with each heavy pulse in her ears she waited for the shriek of metal and the sound of doom. Clear of the train cars, they rounded the corner and Tifa staggered when she saw the legs of the Reactor Tower still intact. With a gasp, she skid to a stop. "We made it!" Relief made her momentarily light-headed and she had to bend at the waist and catch her breath. "It's still standing." Thank, Shiva. She turned towards Zack, the smile on her face quickly fading when she saw the sharp glow in his eyes, and his Buster Sword now in hand. "Zack?"

"Gunfire." He glanced up, his jaw tight.

Tifa followed his gaze. She couldn't hear anything but she trusted him enough to believe he heard it.

"Zack! Zack, over here!"

Both heads turned toward the voice calling his name. A bright splash of color amidst the dreary slums was weaving between people, hurrying toward them.

"Aerith!" Zack glanced quickly at Tifa before he ran forward, worry tightening his features. "What are you doing here?" he demanded, peering down into her face.

"I was on my way home when I heard helicopters and gunfire." Green eyes flashed anxiously.
"So you ran towards it?" Zack shook his head, caught somewhere between amusement and frustration.

"I was worried," she defended, brushing her hair from her eyes.

"It's not safe here," he told her. "You need to get out of here. Shin-Ra is here. They're about to drop the plate—"

"No!"

The scream snapped his head around and his heart stuttered to a stop at the absolute horror he saw on Tifa's face. He followed her line of sight and felt his stomach knot into a sick ball. Oh, no.

A body—pudgy and familiar—fell from the highest point on the tower, tumbling end over end before it came to a jarring halt against the harsh, unyielding ground with a sickening crunch. People around them shrieked and gasped, murmurs of confusion turning to shouts of panic.

Tifa was the first of the three of them to react. She hurried to the man on the ground, falling to her knees, her hands hovering over the broken body with a trembling uncertainty. Her breath was an asthmatic wheeze but she managed to rasp a name. "Oh, Wedge..."

Zack started forward, guilt already tightening that ball in his gut to a lead weight. He could still hear the sound of gunfire overhead, shouts—incoherent and rapid—as well as the low thumping of a helicopter in the distance, but his attention was focused on hunched shoulders and shaking hands. Over those shoulders Zack saw a body broken beyond repair. A splinter of bone protruded from Wedge's upper thigh and his chest looked like someone had pummeled it with a sledgehammer. "Shit."

Tifa heard Zack swear behind her, heard him approaching, but she didn't look up. She kept her eyes locked on the dimming light in her friend's pain laden ones.

"T-tifa..."

"Hey, there." She offered him a soft smile, stroked his bloodied hair back from his forehead.

"Barret...at the top...gotta help him..." Each word was a choked gurgle, painful and forced.

"Easy, Wedge." Zack now, kneeling beside her.

"Tifa...Zack...sorry I wasn't...any help..."

Tifa closed her eyes, turned her face away. Wedge was always so heartfelt, always trying his best... she couldn't stand the idea that he thought he'd failed them. She wanted to tell him—to say something—but her voice remained trapped by a throat too constricted to breathe, much less speak.

"Don't talk, ok. Save your energy," Zack's voice, on the other hand, was steady and reassuring. He grasped her shoulder, his warm fingers squeezing as he stood. "I'm going up. Aerith," he turned to where she hung back, "can you try and help Wedge?"

Moist green eyes blinked at him and she hesitated, then slowly nodded. "I'll try."

Tifa shook her head, her gaze steady on Wedge's. She bent forward and kissed his lips gently before she rose to her feet. "No."

"Tifa!" Zack gaped at her.
She clenched her hands together into tight fists and repeated the word. "No." She turned away from Wedge and faced Aerith. "It's too late for him, isn't it?"

Aerith nodded, her eyes sad. "I can feel it. He's mostly gone." A tear slipped down her cheek. "But I can try... I can."

Tifa reached for her hand, squeezed it. As hard as it was for her to not try, she knew that Wedge was not going to make it, and there was someone else in need of help. "I need you to do something else, okay? I need your help. I have a bar, called Seventh Heaven, in this neighborhood." She waited for Aerith to nod. "There's a little girl there. Her name is Marlene. Please. Find her. Get her somewhere safe. Please."

A trembling hand wiped across pale cheeks, and resolve hardened moss to emerald. "I'll find her," Aerith vowed. "I'll take her somewhere safe. You can count on me."

"Thank you." With a nod and a shared look of determination both turned away from each other; Aerith, running toward the Sector and Tifa for the Tower. "Everyone get away from the pillar," she shouted at the people milling beneath in curiosity and fear. "Everyone get out of Sector Seven!"

Like a match to tinder, Tifa's voice ignited the simmering unease around the crowd of people and there were cries of alarm as panic emerged. She was forced to physically turn some toward the exit, while dodging questions she had no answers to from others. She ushered off as many as she could, but couldn't wait to see if everyone followed her orders.

Tifa peered around him and should have been more surprised than she was to see Biggs, wounded and clutching his side. He glanced up when she said his name, gave her a crooked half smile. "Hey."

"How bad?" she went to him, and kneeling, tried to assess his injuries.

"No time to worry about me. Barret...Jessie...still fighting. Go."

"But I—"

"You heard him. Let's go," Zack gripped her hand, pulled her up. He had seen Bigg's injury and chances were the other man wasn't going to last long. Having Tifa witness more than one of her
friends die before her eyes was something he wasn't willing to allow if he could help it.

"We'll come back for you," Tifa assured Biggs.

Biggs gave her a weak smile, sagging to sit. "Bring me... a whiskey... when you do."

As Zack turned them away he gave Biggs a solemn nod, silently hoping that the other man's passing was quick.

They managed another few flights before they came across Jessie, sprawled across the blood stained metal stairs, with her breathing shallow and labored, but conscious. She turned her head toward the sound of footsteps, drew her gun weakly and aimed it at them.

"Wait," Zack held up his hands, "it's us."

Limp, Jessie's arm fell to her side and she pressed her forehead to the cold metal of the stairs.

"Zack..." A soft, broken laugh came from her, causing Zack and Tifa to exchange concerned looks. "I'm glad it's you...wanted to see you one last time."

"Hey, whoa." Zack crouched beside her, stroked her cheek lightly and gave her, what he hoped, was an encouraging smile. "Don't go saying things like last." He surveyed her injuries. She was at a nearly impossible, awkward angle, chances were her spine was damaged, and there was likely internal injuries as well. He was no medic, but he didn't like her odds.

"Hm..." She rolled her head to the side, a soft, sad look on her face. "Always the optimist...always liked that... about you. Where's Tifa...?"

"I'm here." Tifa knelt, lifted Jessie's cool hand into her own. "Right here. And Zack's right. We're going to get you out of here, okay? Just hang in there." Please.

"It's alright if I die...because of us...so many people suffering... so many...This is...probably our punishment..." Jessie gave a wheezing cough. "Deserve it..."

"Jessie, no. Please, hang on." Tifa squeezed cold, limp fingers. "Please." But Jessie's eyes were already unfocused, unblinking, and between one heartbeat and the next, she too was gone.

The loud thrum of a helicopter rotor cut off anything else Tifa was going to say. Wind whipped her hair around her head in a frenzied dance and tore at her already tattered dress. She covered her eyes and rose to her feet.

"Come on!" Zack motioned for her to follow him. "They're attacking from the chopper. We need to get to the top if we're gonna help Barret!"

With a last, longing look at Jessie, Tifa followed. It wasn't right that she had to leave her there on the cold, unforgiving metal stairs, she thought bitterly. Warm, open, generous Jessie, laying in a puddle of her own blood, her face twisted in pain, saying she deserved her death. That image would haunt her forever, she knew. *One more to add to my collection.*

"Tifa! Zack!" Barret's booming baritone sounded over the rotor blades and Tifa's knees went weak with relief.

"Barret!" Excited, she rushed forward only to be shoved to the ground as bullets ricocheted across the ground beside her.

"Damn it, Tifa! Be careful!" Zack levered himself over her, his eyes narrowed on her face. He threw
an angry glance at the helicopter buzzing overhead. "Barret!"

"I got you covered!" Barret shouted, laying a spread of fire from his gun arm.

"Sorry." Tifa pushed herself out from under him and sprinted toward Barret again, without much more regard to her personal safety than she had before.

Zack swore and bolted to his feet. As he rose he caught sight of a flash of unnaturally bright red as the helicopter hatch slid open. *Shit!* Zack gripped the hilt of his sword, swinging it over his head as Reno dropped down beside the Pillar's main control panel.

The glint of steel caused the Turk to lift his head and when his eyes met Zack's he smirked. "Too late, traitor. Once I push this," he pressed the button. "Oops. Shows over."

"No!" Tifa shook her head, her face paling. "You have to disarm it."

"Sweetheart," Reno sneered, hand on his EMR. "I don't have to do anything."

"Fine, piss-ant, then we'll make ya!" Barret growled as he hefted his massive arm up and leveled it at the Turk. "You think your little stick scares me? Disarm it!"

Reno's smile was laced with something akin to amused malice. "I'm afraid I can't do that. No one gets in the way of Shin-Ra. No one. Isn't that right, Zack Fair?" Light eyes flickered to swirling blue. "I knew I'd remember you sooner or later. Been awhile."

"I knew I'd remember you sooner or later. Been awhile." Reno tipped his head, lobbed a cocky grin.

Zack adjusted his stance, cricked his neck. "Not long enough."

With a quick flick of wrist, the EMR extended with a crackling snap and Reno leaped toward them. He caught the edge of Barret's arm with the end, sending the pulse through the metal, magnifying its effect. As Barret jerked back—stunned—Tifa sprung forward, swinging her foot in a round house kick.

The little bastard tilted to the side, and her heel only managed to graze the hair at his temples. His low whistle irked her, but not so much as the irritation she felt when he caught her ankle and pushed, using her own momentum to send her tumbling to the side.

"Nice try, sweetheart," he praised with a chuckle.

Zack came in fast and hard from the left, not giving Reno any warning. He swung his sword in a smooth slash, the blade glancing off a hastily thrown up EMR.

"Shit!" Reno stumbled back, barely keeping his footing.

Zack swung again and Reno dodged, rolled, sprung to his feet. His gaze skittered from Zack to a rousing Barret, then to Tifa who was already stalking toward him, then back to Zack.

"Disarm it," Zack ordered, his voice hard. He angled the Buster Sword, his eyes tinged green. "Now."

Reno shrugged, dusted his shoulder. "Like I said. Can't." He glanced at the railing; smirked. "This has been fun though." With that, he tossed a flash grenade that was apparently laced with stun and swung himself over the metal rail, catching the last rung of the helicopter's ladder as it flew past.

"Fuck!" Barret flung his hand over his eyes.

"Damn it!" As soon as he could move, Zack ran to the rail. He hung over it, cursing the Turks.
"Zack!" Tifa stood at the control console, her voice tight. "How do I stop this?" She looked up at him and the red flecks in her eyes shimmered. "I don't know how to stop this."

He didn't either, Zack realized when he was beside her. It was a time-bomb the likes of which he'd never seen before. "It's not a normal bomb," he muttered, vocalizing the running thoughts in his head.

"Lemme just shoot the damn thing," Barret demanded, shoving between them.

"Brilliant plan," Zack muttered, giving him a look. "Why wait for the countdown when we can blow ourselves up right now."

"You got any better ideas, Princess?"

"Not at the moment, but it's kind of hard to think with you breathing down my neck."

"Enough!" Tifa shouted. She ran a shaking hand over her face, exhaled. "Enough. Okay. Just stop it. We need to figure this out. You two can get back to your usual pissing contest after."

Contrite, both men returned their attention to the flashing display only to have it jerked away again as another helicopter swooped along the side of the tower and hovered there.

Barret shifted position, using his larger frame to corner Tifa back in case they opened fire and Zack tightened his hold on his sword. What now? He wondered, grimly aware that with Shin-Ra anything was possible.

The helicopter buzzed by them again and a side window slid open, allowing a familiar face to peer out.

"Tseng," Zack spat the name.

"You'll have a hard time disarming that," the Turk informed them, almost conversationally. "It'll blow the second you try."

Zack's brow raised, questions already forming in his head. What was Tseng up to?

Tifa tried to shoulder past Barret to no avail. "Please," she shouted, "stop it!"

"Only a Shin-Ra Executive can disarm the Emergency Plate Release System." Tseng spoke directly to Zack.

Why bother telling them that? The way he spoke skirted apologetic, but not quite. If there was one thing Tseng was extremely good at, it was his job. He did it efficiently, completed the mission no matter what—even if that meant betraying a friend. Zack's eyes narrowed into slits.

"Why the fuck are we talkin' with this Shin-Ra tool?" Barret shouted. He lifted his arm, the mechanism whirring as rounds chambered into place.

"I wouldn't," Tseng informed them, moving to the side a bit, revealing soft green eyes and pale skin.

"Aerith!" Everything in Zack went cold, then red hot. "You hurt her, Tseng, and I'll kill you! You hear me? I will fucking kill you!"

"Zack!" Aerith shook her head. "Don't worry, I'll be fine! Tifa, she's safe!"

Tseng turned, shoved her back. She pressed forward regardless. "Hurry! Get out!"
This time Tseng slapped her back.

"Aerith!" Zack and Tifa shouted in unison.

Above them, a section of the tower exploded, the force releasing chunks of flaming steel and concrete.

Barret swore. "Shit! No time now! We gotta go!" At the railing, he looked down. After a moment he reached forward, ripped up a tight metal cable. He jerked on it a few times, and satisfied with the tension, motioned Tifa and Zack forward. "We can use this!"

"It'll hold?" Zack asked, reaching Barret.

"Not like I've tested it, Slick," Barret countered. "But the options are kinda limited."

Nodding, Zack had to agree. It was risk their necks on the cable with a chance of survival, or stay on the tower and be crushed. Of the two options, climbing on Barret's big back seemed the more appealing. He started to do just that when he realized Tifa had made no move whatsoever to join them.

He looked over his shoulder and there she stood, watching the sky fall.

"Tifa!"

She didn't turn.

"Tifa!"

Barret turned too. "Teef! Let's move!"

She looked toward them, but remained in the same spot, surrounded by crumbling ruin and flames. "It's all coming apart."

She sounded so small, Zack thought. So lost. "Tifa, please, come on." He held his hand out to her. She glanced at it, at him; impassive.

"Move your ass, Lockhart!" Barret shouted.

Zack wanted to smack the guy in the back of the head, but to his surprise, that shout did the trick. Tifa blinked, her brows came down and she was suddenly running toward them. With the same fluid grace Zack was used to witnessing in her daily activities she swung herself around on Barret's lap, her hands tight on the wire.

With a grunt, Barret hefted the three of them onto the railing and shoved off. The drop was sickeningly fast and Zack would wager money that his stomach ended up somewhere in his mouth, but then the cord went abruptly taut, swinging them into a long arc, and Zack was left baffled at how Barret managed to maintain his grip.

Metal shrieked and the heat of flame chased them until the wire trembled and finally snapped. Zack heard Barret's gruff exclamation and Tifa's soft scream, then nothing as the ground took from him his senses and left him in swirling black.

"What fine specimens you two turned out to be."
"My mother's name was Jenova."

"Hellooooo..."

"I have twenty-one tiny wishes..."

"Cloud!"

"Zack...Zack..."

"Zack!"

His head jerked to the right, eyes snapping open.

"Finally!" A dirt smeared Tifa sat back on her heels.

Zack rolled to his side, levered up onto his elbow. He rubbed his eyes, then his cheek, which was throbbing.

Seeing this, Tifa gave him a half shrug. "I had to slap you a bit."

"Oh." He sat up fully, taking in her ragged appearance. Hair straggled, dirt smeared and pale as a sheet, she looked shaken—and very frail. It wasn't a look that suited her, and it made something inside of him ache. With a low sound, he ran his hands over her arms. "Are you all right?"

Something like pain flashed on her face, but she pushed herself to her feet, stepped away from him. She tilted her face away before she answered. "Yes."

Liar. But he wouldn't push it. Not yet. "Where's the big guy?" Zack got to his feet.

Tifa nodded toward a broken pile of rubble that was at one time the plate above the sector. Barret was there, his fist pounding into the burnt metal.

All around them, destruction, Zack thought as he surveyed the damage. The playground he had been surprised to find standing was standing no longer. Everything was demolished; shards of debris protruded grotesquely from the Moogle head slide and smoldering remains littered the ground.

"Damn it! Damn it!" Barret shouted, his hulking body slamming into the wreckage like a battering ram.

"Barret!" Tifa moved behind him, reached for him. "Barret, stop it!"

He shook her off, leveled his gun and opened fire on the wreckage, screaming his rage and pain and grief into the now visible sky. "Jessie! Biggs! Wedge!" Another round of fire. "Marlene! Marlene! Marleeenee!"

Tifa covered her heart with her hands. His pain tore at her. "Barret..."

He dropped to his knees, punched the ground. His voice was a hoarse choke. "Marlene..."

She circled him with her arms, pressed her face into his back. "Barret. I think...I think Marlene is safe." She felt rather than saw his head come up.

"What?"

Gods, she didn't want to kill that hope in his voice. She hoped she was right. "Before the helicopter
flew off, Aerith...she said 'she's safe'. I think she got Marlene out."

Slowly, the weight against her shifted and Barret stood. Tifa stepped back, waited for his reaction.

"But...the others..." He turned away from the mangled remains of the plate, but still not facing Tifa. "I don't wanna think they're gone."

"And so many others in Sector Seven," Tifa added. She felt drained and so empty.

"This is so fucked up," Barret shook his head. "They destroyed an entire sector just to get to us. Killed...Gods only know how many."

Tifa swallowed. "Are you...so it's our fault."

Barret turned to her, his dark eyes earnest. "No, Teef. It ain't that. It's Shin-Ra. Always the damn Shin-Ra. They're evil! Everything about them is sick and they're using this planet to line their pockets, destroying lives. Our fight ain't over until we get rid of them. Every last one of 'em."

Tifa turned away for a moment, took a breath and allowed her gaze to find Zack. He had his back to them, his own head bowed. "I...don't know," she murmured.

"What don't you know?" Barret asked tightly. "You don't believe me?"

"It's not that. I'm not sure...about my feelings."

Barret followed her eyes, sighed. Another look at her and then he was striding toward Zack's silent back. "And what about you?"

Zack's head lifted, but he didn't acknowledge Barret in any other way.

"You think this is our fault?" Barret nudged him.

Yes. Zack thought, but refused to say it. Refused to add that one more wound to Tifa's already bleeding heart. "What I think is that we need to get moving." He adjusted the Buster Sword on his back. "There's only one place Aerith would have taken Marlene."

The cottage was just as quaint, just as homey as she remembered it, but there was something off about it now. Like a picture perfect painting in the wrong colors. Tifa wrapped her arms around her middle, took slow steps along the path, falling behind both Zack and Barret.

The front door opened before they reached it, and Aerith's mother stepped out onto the front stoop. She wiped her hands on her apron, her face showing tight expectation, like someone waiting to get slapped, and Tifa's stomach knotted even more.

"It's about Aerith, isn't it?" she asked as they reached her.

Zack nodded, the look on his face reflecting pain and hurt and apology. Tifa wanted to reach out to him, she did, but she couldn't. Not now. "I'm sorry. But Shin-Ra...they have her," he informed Elmyra.

"I know." She surprised them. "They took her from here."

Zack's jaw tightened. "They were here?"
"It was better that she went, she said. It was what Aerith wanted." Elmyra's expression pinched a bit, like she was fighting tears, before she managed to speak again. "So she went with Tseng on her own."

"It's because of who she is, isn't it?" Zack asked, his expression hard.

"Not so much who, as what." The older woman's sigh was long suffering. "The last Ancient."

"Last?" Barret questioned. "Aren't you her mother?"

"Not biologically." Elmyra shook her head, her gaze traveling back to a place they couldn't follow. "Nearly fifteen years ago...I went to the train station to see my husband. He was coming home from war...or so I thought. He wasn't there, but there was a woman...she had a child with her." Elmyra paused, pressed her fingers to the bridge of her nose. "She asked me to take her. I had no children of my own, and Aerith was so small...I couldn't refuse. So I took her with me."

"That was a very noble thing for you to do, Ma'am," Barret commented.

Elmyra's smile was a bit rueful and a bit wistful. "Oh, I imagine part of me was selfish. I wanted a daughter, and Aerith was so lovely, so chatty. We talked of everything. It became apparent, though, that she was different. Special. She knew things..." Elmyra stopped, lips clamped shut. "Shin-Ra wanted her, at any rate. They've been after her for years."

"It's amazing how she avoided Shin-Ra all these years," Tifa murmured, awe in her voice.

Elmyra nodded. "They needed her, so they wouldn't hurt her. She's managed to avoid them for a long time, and Tseng..." a smile ghosted her lips and Zack's brow raised. "Well, he has a fondness for her, and assured her that he wouldn't take her from her home."

Zack's eyes narrowed. A fondness, he nearly snorted. What a nice way to say obsession. "But he did," Zack felt the need to point out.

Elmyra turned to him. "She brought a little girl here. On the way, Tseng found them. She decided to go with him in exchange for the child's safety."

"Marlene?" Barret edged closer to the stoop. "I'm sorry. Marlene's my daughter. Aerith was caught because she saved her, I'm so sorry."

The look Elmyra turned on him could have frosted the sun. "You're her father? How in the world could you leave your child like that?"

Tifa's eyes widened and she waited for the inevitable Barret explosion, but to her astonishment, he simply shook his head and gave the most impassioned speech she'd ever heard him make.

"Please, don't start with that. I feel guilty enough, every day. Every day. I think about what would happen to her if something happened to me, but then I think about what her future will be if I don't fight for it. For her. If I don't fight, this planet is gonna die, and my baby along with it. I won't let that happen, Ma'am. I won't. I gotta take care of her the only way I know how, but that don't mean I don't wanna be with her, because I do. Always, I always wanna. I do it for her...and now, now I'm talkin' in circles."

Elmyra reached out, placed her hand on his arm, halting him. "I think I understand," she smiled softly. "She's upstairs. Why don't you go see her." She opened the door.

Barret nodded, thankful, and went through. Elmyra waited a beat, closed the door and turned her
attention back to Zack and Tifa. "You better make this right," she told Zack, pointing her finger at him. "That girl would do anything for you, and now..." she shook her head, closed her eyes.

"It wasn't his fault," Tifa defended. "I was the one that asked Aerith to help me. It was my fault she got involved." She almost wished she hadn't spoken when those eyes came to rest on her. Dirty and smelling of sewer, still wearing the remains of her seduction dress, Tifa felt like a lowly worm. She stared down at the ground.

"Aerith doesn't do anything she doesn't want to do," Zack interjected before Elmyra could speak. "Never has." His blue eyes flashed a dark, swirling color. "No one blames you, Tifa." His voice dared the other woman to say different. He'd take her scorn, her displeasure, her sadness and bear them—it was no more than he deserved—but Tifa didn't, and she'd suffered enough today.

Elmyra, apparently had no intentions of countering that statement. She opened the door again. "Come in. Let's get you cleaned up and in something more..., well, more." She even offered a gentle smile and a hand.

Tifa blinked up, and accepted both. "Thank you."

"Head on up. You remember where Aerith's room is?"

"Yes." Tifa started up the stairs.

Zack followed, at the foot of the steps he turned to Elmyra. "Thank you."

"No need to thank me," she told him quietly. "It's a mother's instinct to fix what's broken, and that girl," she let her eyes follow Tifa. "She's broken."

But was she fixable? Zack wondered, and with a heavy heart he climbed the stairs.

He used the spare bathroom in the hall to shower and freshen up. Elmyra even managed to find some old clothes of her husband's for him to wear. The shirt was a bit tight and the pants a bit loose, but they weren't covered in shit and blood, so he had no real complaints. When he was done he wandered down the hall and debated with himself for ten minutes before he finally turned and went back to the closed white door of Aerith's bedroom.

"Tifa?" He tapped the bedroom door with a knuckle. He heard rustling from the other side, and he briefly hoped she wasn't crying, and then the door opened and he saw her dry eyes and stark expression, and he immediately wished that she had been. It would have been preferable to this emotionless stranger.

"Zack." Just his name, in some odd, flat, horridly lifeless voice that wasn't Tifa's.

She was clean now, her long hair still damp over her shoulders and dressed in a white tee shirt and brown slacks. Her feet were no longer in Wedge's boots, but encased in a pair of canvas sneakers decorated with flowers. His lips quirked a bit at that. Aerith and her flowers... His heart panged in his chest and the smile faded from his eyes, leaving them shadowed with worry. He shook himself and said, "Barret's in the shower and Marlene is downstairs," he told her, for lack of anything else to start with.

She nodded. "How's Marlene coping?"
"Holding up fine. Better than us, I think," he admitted. He reached out, cupped her chin and lifted her eyes to his. "How about you? How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine." She stepped away from him, not allowing herself that small comfort.

"Tifa." His hand closed in on itself, wanting so much to hold her, to help her. "I'm here for you. If you need to cry..."

Her eyes, when they finally met his, were the same dull rust color they'd been the night he'd told her of Cloud. A look he mistook for icy indifference, but now knew was one of acute pain. "I said I'm fine."

"Tifa," he tried again to reach for her.

"I need some air," she evaded, moving past him and out the door before he could stop her.

"Well, shit," he muttered, hand on the back of his neck. He heard the front door open and close, and he knew that she had left the house. Damn her and her stubborn pride, he thought with a scowl. He shoved out of the room and headed downstairs.

"Barret!" Zack pounded on the closed bathroom door. "Barret!"

The white wood flung open and bleary, red-rimmed eyes narrowed. "This had better be fuckin' important!"

Zack withdrew slightly, feeling awkward and that perhaps he'd interrupted Barret's moment of grieving, but he had the larger man's attention now and it was important. "It's Tifa."

Immediately his stature shifted, became broader—if possible—and intimidating."What about her?"

"She's outside, and she's...well," Zack scratched the back of her head. "She's upset."

"Of course she's upset. Shin-Ra just fucked us over again!"

"It's more than that." Zack began only to have Barret wave him off.

"She's a grown-ass woman, Slick. Leave her be."

"But—" The door slammed in his face. Perfect. Zack sighed, rubbed his eyes. Feeling helpless, and uncomfortably useless, he headed for the kitchen.
other...we're all that's left."

"Oh, Barret!" She flung herself into his arms, heaved such a sob that it shook them both. "They're gone!" Her shoulders shook, and her fingers clutched. "They're gone and I couldn't save them!"

His big hand smoothed over her hair and he rocked her, his own frame wracked with gruff hiccups.

"I want them back," she choked. "I want them back so much."

"I know. Me too." He hugged her closer. "Me too." They stood that way for a long while, clinging to one another as they grieved their fallen friends. There were more words to say, yet neither had the energy for them, and instead they simply held on.
She ached.

In more ways than one, she ached.

Her body was drained—physically exhausted from travel and battle, and her spirit was empty. Her heart, still wounded and bleeding from Cloud, was such a shredded mess that she wasn't sure it could ever be salvaged.

She tossed the picturesque cottage behind her a glance and felt the ribbons of her heart tremble. Quaint and simple, offset from the dirt and ruin of the slums, it should have been safe haven. Instead, their fight had brought darkness here; had smeared the image with fear and ruin. From her vantage point she could spot Barret in the garden with Elmyra, and she knew he was coping in his way. Barret liked busy-work. If he was active, then he wasn't stuck in his grief. She knew he would mourn. Knew he would cry. But she also knew that he'd fight that much harder, too. For Biggs, Wedge and Jessie. His conviction was strong before, but today Shin-Ra cemented his hatred.

It was her conviction that she was questioning.

She had once believed that AVALANCHE—and what they stood for—could make a difference, but all they seemed to be doing was causing more hardship, more pain...more death. She'd seen enough death to last her through several lifetimes, and the idea of being responsible for any more ate at her. Barret had told her that Shin-Ra was to blame, and yes, they were...mostly. But didn't they have a share of the blame? Hadn't they provoked Shin-Ra's wrath?

She knew he expected her to stay with him, knew he expected her to pick up the pieces and keep going—because it was what they had done so many times before. She just didn't know if she had it in her this time.

With a sigh, she bowed her head, closed her eyes, and tried to find the resolve to keep fighting that was buried somewhere beneath her grief.

Because he felt he needed a distraction, Zack began the mindless task of polishing the dirt and grime from his Buster Sword.

He tried—in effectually—to ignore the silence all around him. He wasn't good with silence. It clawed inside his skull and made his skin crawl. It hadn't always been that way, he thought with the familiar sting of bitterness, but after Hojo... He shook off the thought. It did no good to dwell on things he couldn't change.

With a sigh, he glanced at the clock above Elmyra's stove. Tifa had gone for a walk twenty minutes ago, Marlene was upstairs for a nap and Barret had gone with Elmyra...somewhere to do something. He was sure they'd told him, but his attention had been on a set of rigid shoulders and a swaying ponytail walking away from him. Always away, he thought, and exhaled through his nose. The walls had been bad enough, but this chasm she'd put around herself was damn near impossible to breech. He shouldn't be as angry as he was. It wasn't in his nature to get pissed, but the truth was, he was angry. And hurt.

Did she think she was the only one in pain, right now? In need? He'd offered her comfort, certainly
would give it—if she'd let him—but she offered him none in return. Hadn't he lost friends today? Wasn't Aerith still missing?

He knew from experience that this was her way to cope. Bottle it up, shut it down. And he was trying not to let that bother him; trying not to feel like he'd been kicked in the gut by her. Trying...and failing.

She needed space. She needed time... and he needed to go.

Aerith still needed his help and he wasn't selfish enough to refuse that.

"Papa?" Quick, light feet pattered down the steps and drew him from his thoughts. "Papa?"

Zack ignored the burst of relief he felt at having the silence broken. He was a grown man, for Ifrit's sake. "He'll be back soon," he called to her. "It's just you and me here, kiddo."

"Oh." Marlene rubbed her eyes as she approached him. A few feet away, she inclined her head, blinked and yawned wide enough to swallow her face.

Zack smirked. That kid was damn adorable.

She maneuvered herself closer to his side, watched him quietly for a few seconds. "Zack?"

"Hm?"

"Do you like Tifa?"

The hand polishing the gigantic Buster Sword paused. "What?"

"Do-you-like-Tifa?" Each word was exaggerated in its enunciation.

That's what he thought she'd said. He cleared his throat, resumed polishing. "Of course I like Tifa. You know that."

"More than a friend?"

Zack drew back a little. This was not a conversation he wanted to be having, considering his thoughts just moments ago; much less one he wanted to share with a five year old. "Why do you ask?" he countered.

"Because I wanna know." Well, there was certainly logic there. "So do you?" she prodded when he remained silent.

Zack shuffled the sword to one side. "She's nice," he evaded.

A dainty foot stamped the tile. "Everyone knows she's nice." She frowned at him and the disappointment on her face actually made him feel guilty. "Don't you think she's pretty?"

He scratched the base of his neck. "Marlene—"

She edged closer, peering into his face with eyes that were moments ago crusted with sleep but now glittered expectantly. "Johnny thinks she is. He wants to marry her. He said so. So, do you think she's pretty?"

Zack leaned back, more than a bit uncomfortable. It was amazing how intimidating a five year old could be."Yeah. OK, yes. She's pretty."
Showing that she was indeed Barret's daughter, Marlene was relentless in her pursuit. "And you like her? Right?" Closer still, until her little nose almost touched his. "Because she's nice and pretty, so you like her. A lot. More than friends. Right?"

He stood, looking for escape. "Uhm..." He walked around the table.

Marlene trailed after him. "Zack?" She skirted around him, tugged at his pant leg, drew his eyes down. "You do like her right? Because you should. Tifa's nice and she helps me and she is always brave, but I don't want her to have to always."

There was a higher pitch to Marlene's voice than usual, Zack finally noticed; an edge that bordered on frantic, if he listened. He bent down on one knee so that he was eye-level with her, and carefully studied her expression. "She helps all of us," Zack agreed, his own voice gentle.

Marlene blinked a couple of times, rubbed at her eyes. "I just want...someone to help her. So she won't leave too."

Hope and protectiveness, all in one so young. She was so earnest, and Zack suddenly didn't want to let her down. She'd had too many things crumble in her life already.

He touched her shoulder. "I think you are a very brave and strong girl, Marlene. Just like Tifa." He bopped her nose, affectionately. "She'll be okay."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Unexpectedly, she threw herself into his arms and buried her face in his neck. There were no tears, she only gave a soft sigh and a small shudder and then she was squirming back and away. And off she went out the front door, taking a larger piece of his heart than she had before.

Outside on the porch, Tifa stood statue still. Guilt and pride, love and sadness swamped her, overwhelmed her, and for a moment it was all she could do to just breathe. In the kitchen Zack was still crouched, his profile averted and if she looked, really looked, she could see the tightness of his jaw, the hard slant of his mouth and the slight slump of usually straight shoulders. It was obvious that he was hurting too and if she hadn't been so busy wallowing in her own misery she would have realized sooner that her distance was harmful to him and to Marlene—two of the few remaining people she cared about—and that just wasn't acceptable.

She would just have to find a new way to cope with her grief. She was sure if she tried hard enough she could push it down, bury it where Nibleheim and Cloud lived until she had the time to deal with it. It wouldn't be the first time she pretended to be fine when she wasn't. She'd become an expert at feeling one thing and projecting another. She could do that for them.

Zack waited a beat before he stood, then grabbed his sword. He adjusted the straps, slipped it onto his back. The heavy, familiar weight was both comfort and burden. He wondered, briefly, if Angeal would have approved of how his family's ancestral blade was being used.

His head snapped around when he heard the screen door bounce shut and he felt his heart squeeze. Framed by the waning afternoon light, with her hair shimmering with hidden fire and her pale skin glowing, Tifa looked almost ethereal. There was, however; an all too human frailty about her and his hands reflexively balled at his sides as he fought down the urge to reach for her. He didn't think he could take the rejection again.

"You're going, then?" she asked him.
He tried for a neutral tone. "Yeah. I have to." He rifled through his hair, loosing strands to fall before the blue of his eyes. "Aerith needs me." Tell me you do too...

She didn't. Instead, she simply nodded. "Okay."

That was it? Okay? Zack glanced away before she saw how much her easy acceptance of his departure stung. "Do you know where you'll be going?" he asked after clearing his throat. Wanted by Shin-Ra and having no home anymore, he wondered at her options, at the struggle she and Barret would now face.

"Yeah." She nodded. "I'm going with you."

"What?" Surprised, he turned. When he looked at her he shook his head."Tifa, I can't ask you to come with me—"

"You're not." Her gaze wandered to the window where Barret and Elmyra could be seen in the garden. "She wouldn't be involved if it weren't for me. I'm going."

"Tifa..." He sighed, ruffled his hair again. "Aerith was there because of me, and you aren't responsible."

Reluctantly, she turned to face him and he could see the fractures in her walls. They weren't as sturdy as before. "If I stop...if I stay here or anywhere...I'll go crazy. I need to do something."

He took one look into her eyes—usually so vibrant, and now so empty—and agreed. Tifa was a fighter. It was in her spirit to want to make a difference, to champion and to protect. That had been seriously damaged today and whatever else he did, Zack was determined to put that light back in her eyes. He straightened his shoulders, felt the need to caution her. "Before we go, you gotta know, I'm going to Shin-Ra HQ. If you come with me, you need to be prepared for the worst."

"I will be. There's a weapons vendor just outside of Sector Six. I'll need some gloves."

"And I'll need some ammo."

Both turned to the new voice.

Barret nodded at them from the open door. He set Marlene to her feet, crouched in front of her. Elmyra stood behind him. "Marlene, you're gonna stay with Ms. Elmyra for a bit, okay?"

Marlene studied her father intensely. "You're coming back, right, Papa? You and Tifa?"

Zack saw the other man's subtle flinch, but his smile never wavered. "You know it, baby." He kissed her forehead, pinched her cheek lightly.

Appeased, Marlene smiled back. "Love you."

"Love you too." His voice cracked. He cleared his throat as he rose to his towering height. He turned to face Elmyra. "This place is dangerous now. You have anywhere else you can go?"

"Yes." She jotted a quick note on a scrap piece of paper, handed it to Barret. "You'll find us there."

He looked at it, nodded once. "Thank you."

"Just promise me you'll come back to her. Safe." She placed her hand on his arm. His metal gun arm, Zack noted, without so much as a flinch. And the big man seemed pretty enthralled by the action himself.
There was a long pause before Barret shook himself and whirled around, his eyes immediately finding Zack's half-smirk. "What the hell you lookin' at? Let's go." He pushed his shoulder, nudged him out the door.

Zack shrugged, kept right on grinning.

Tifa watched the men go, shaking her head. When she turned back around, she dropped to one knee, opened her arms for Marlene. "Be good, and draw me lots of pictures, okay?"

Marlene's arms were surprisingly tight around her neck, but Tifa relished the moment. She buried her face into soft hair, and inhaled the scent of innocence. She had her reason to keep fighting.

Slowly, she rose and handed Marlene over to Elmyra. "I..." Tifa swallowed, spread her hands. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Just be safe."

"Thank you."

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Tifa found Barret and Zack just beyond the cobbled path, both men staring into the distance. She came up on Barret's left, and in silence they stood and listened to the faint sound of sirens and helicopters while smoke billowed around the wreckage of Sector Seven.

Instinctively, she wanted to help. Wanted to dig through rubble and debris, hoping against hope to find survivors, but she knew they wouldn't get within a hundred feet, so they were left staring and helpless.

It was Zack that broke the uncomfortable silence. "We should head to Wall Market."

Barret agreed with a soft grunt. "Considering there ain't no trains going to the plate right now, I'd say that's our best bet." He looked to Tifa.

"Sounds like a plan." She agreed.

They made a stop at the weapons vendor that Tifa had mentioned. The shop was small, but well-kept, and smelled faintly of incense and smoke. In the back room of the shop, where the ammunition and explosives were kept, Barret began dismantling his gun arm and fitting in some new pieces. At the counter, Zack purchased a pouch for his belt and some small containers of potion and some other miscellaneous odds and ends while the balding shopkeeper rambled on and on about some odd thing or another. Every so often he'd grunt or make a small sound of assessment, and the shopkeeper kept right on chattering.

Across the small shop, Tifa rummaged through the fighting gear and came up with a pair of leather shorts and sleeveless top. A few bins later she triumphantly found a pair of steel-toe boots in her size and a set of elbow pads.

"Here."

Startled, she glanced up to find Zack at her shoulder. In his hand he held a strip of leather cord.

"For your hair," he said with a shrug when she simply continued to stare, confused.

"Oh." She took the strap, careful so her fingers didn't touch his. "Thanks."
"Sure." He turned away, his entire frame tight. He'd noticed.

Tifa watched him walk away and sighed softly. She was doing it again. "Zack?" She approached him carefully.

"Hm?" He spared her a glance over his shoulder.

She turned slightly, pulled her hair into a loose ponytail. "Tie it for me?"

His eyes widened marginally. "Sure." He stepped behind her, took the cord from her hand.

He tied a quick, secure knot but before she could lower her hair she felt the light touch of his fingers to her nape. It was gentle, and fleeting, but she knew if she were to lean back, he'd be there. It was comforting.

She took a long quiet breath. "Thank you."

"Anytime."

A throat cleared and Tifa opened eyes she hadn't realized she'd closed.

"You two ready?" Barret's brow was quirked and Tifa couldn't tell if it was irritation or amusement. Either way, it caused her to step away from Zack and pick her clothes up. "Yeah, just let me go change."

Both men watched her walk off and when she disappeared behind the dark green curtain Barret tossed Zack a look. "We're headin' into some heavy shit, ain't we?"

"Yeah."

Barret adjusted his arm, cricked his neck. "We keep her safe."

"Yes."

They shared a mutual nod and waited.

Wall Market was far less crowded than their initial visit, Zack thought as they strode through the main walk. He assumed many of the people in the sector had heard the commotion from the plate bombing and had gone to see. Not to mention there were probably several people that had come from Sector Seven with family and friends still there. He didn't want to think about that. If he were to dwell on it, his anger would get the better of him, and his guilt.

"Where to?" Tifa wanted to know as they neared the Pharmacy.

"Not sure," Zack stopped walking, looked around. Most of the merchant shops had closed signs up. Barret shifted his weight, surveyed the area also. "I say we pay Don Corneo a visit. If anyone is gonna know anything in Wall Market, it'd be him."

"Uh, yeah...about Corneo..." Tifa shot Zack a look, who simply shook his head and held up his hands.

Barret watched the silent exchange before he ran his hand down his face and exhaled. "You didn't,"
he grumbled.

Tiifa shifted her weight, toed the ground. "Well..."

"Teef, what in the hell did I say about you goin' off half-cocked?"

Zack had to pinch his lips together when she simply shrugged and murmured, "I don't know, I tend to drown you out after awhile."

Barret sighed in exasperation. He turned to Zack, jabbing one finger in his direction. "Shock me and tell me you weren't involved."

Zack rolled his shoulders. "Can't."

Barret slid his hand down his face, mouthed a few choice words and said, "All right, all right, so Corneo's is out, thanks to you two—and don't think you aren't gonna tell me exactly how you got in there," he warned Tifa, "so we need a new option."

As fate would have it a new option happened upon them. Two boys, probably a year or two older than Marlene stood a few feet away, eager expressions on their faces. "Hey! Hey you guys! You wanna see something awesome?There's a rope that climbs to the sky!" the smaller of the two proclaimed.

The three companions glanced between each other, and after getting go-ahead nods from Tifa and Barret, Zack made a gesture for the boys to lead the way. Couldn't hurt to see what they were so excited about, he thought.

Behind him, Tifa and Barret fell into step and their little parade marched toward one of the the darker alleys of Wall Market just behind the gym.

As the shadows deepened, Zack tensed a bit, his fingers twitching reflexively. He knew many desperate people that weren't opposed to using children to lure unsuspecting marks into something unfriendly, but he relaxed a minute later when he spotted a slim girl, dressed in worn clothing and twirling a broken doll between her hands. Behind her, a dead power line hung against a graffiti tagged brick wall.

He angled his head, stared up. The rope seemed to go on forever, but it was so dark, it was hard to tell just what was overhead.

"Everyone's been climbing up," the little girl informed them.

"Do you think we can climb it?" Tifa asked, also staring up at the apparently never-ending wire. "Will it lead to the plate?"

"Only one way to find out. We climb it," Barret stated.

"Whoa." Zack held up his hand. "We don't know how far this thing even goes."

"It goes all the way. You know what I see here?" Barret didn't wait for them to reply. "I see a shiny, golden wire of hope."

Zack snorted. "Okay, there. We have no idea how much weight that line will even hold, much less how far it goes—" He stopped when Tifa stepped past them both and hefted herself up the wire and started climbing.
"It's the only way we have right now, and we need to get to Aerith, right?" She told them over her shoulder. "So we chance it."

Barret nudged his shoulder. "You heard her. We chance it."

"Alright. But I'm sure as hell not climbing behind you," Zack nudged him back before grabbing the wire to follow Tifa. Yeah, the view was much better this way, he thought with a smirk.
Chapter Summary

Time to rescue Aerith...at least that's the plan.

Security lamps spilled light across damp pavement, and glass and steel were illuminated to a glistening silver. High above Mako vents, the Shin-Ra Tower stood with phosphorous green disbursements turning the clouds above emerald green, the smog forming a glowing halo around the building.

Zack's lips twisted with that thought. Death lived in that building. No matter the gloss or sheen of polished steel, or angelic imagery, the shadows of that place ran deep, he knew. He remembered all too well just how deep and dark the things in Shin-Ra could get. What he remembered most, beyond the secrets and lies was the betrayal. He had trusted Shin-Ra, believed in SOLDIER, believed in Angeal—believed in heroes, and he'd had those illusions torn from him, stripped out of him in a damp room with shiny blades and shallow screams.

He took a step back.

He almost jumped when he felt firm, steady warmth between his shoulder blades. He glanced down into concerned brown eyes on a pale face. "We'll go in when you're ready," Tifa told him quietly. Her silent understanding eased the heavy knot in his gut and he found himself—not for the first time—grateful for her presence.

"You oughtta know this building really well," From behind them, Barret's deep voice drew his attention and Zack turned slowly away from Tifa to face the larger man.

"Yeah. Every floor above the sixtieth has a particular, special, function and they are nearly impossible to gain access to; security is ridiculously tight. I'd wager that they have Aerith somewhere on those top levels."

"Couldn't be more specific, huh?" Barret cricked his neck.

"Sorry. Seemed to have lost my ability to see through walls."

Barret shot him a narrow look before he turned his attention on the front doors and the two guards stationed outside the glass. "Security looks pretty light right now. Let's hit it!"

"Wait a second!" Tifa pushed herself in front of the larger man, placed a restraining hand on his shoulder. "You're not thinking of just barging in the front doors, are you?"

"I'm thinkin' of kickin' some Shin-Ra ass," he told her with his patented scowl. One that would have had most people cowering in the nearest corner, but had Tifa crossing her arms and pursing her lips.

"That's not going to work. We need to find another way—"

"Ain't gonna be no other way if we stand out here debating the issue. That girl is somewhere in there and the longer we stand out here doing nothin' the more likely she is to be hurt."
"I know that," Tifa cut in sharply, then sighed. "But if we get caught here..." She ran her hand through her dark hair, causing the ends to sway. "Zack, what should we do?"

"What're you askin' him for?" Barret groused, but turned to wait for Zack's answer anyway.

Beneath their expectant gazes, Zack rubbed the back of his neck. He really hated being caught between the two of them when they were having one of their face offs, but this was his decision, he knew. They'd followed him, and it was up to him to lead them safely.

He shifted his stance and gave the building another once over. "It's not like we have an appointment and I doubt they're going to roll out the welcome mat. We need to find a quiet way inside. There will be plenty of time to bust Shin-Ra heads together after we find Aerith," he added when it looked like Barret was going to protest.

Barret huffed a breath, rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

Tifa nodded, gave her comrade a gentle bump, and Zack saw sullen lips curve at the corner. It took a lot to dent those two, and despite both being worn and frayed with loss they remained solidly together. His own mouth curved at that.

"Okay, let's get inside." Shaking himself, he adjusted his sword, checked his boot laces. He'd never forget his third mission when a young, reckless recruit had ended up falling face-first on a landmine after tripping on his laces. Satisfied that his knots were secure, he stood. "If we stay near the back of the parking garage the cameras can't make us out among the pillars. There's a set of stairs behind the building that aren't monitored."

"That don't make no sense. Shin-Ra ain't that stupid—"

"No, they aren't," Zack interjected, his voice tight. "But let's just say there are some things you don't want caught on tape, okay? Let's go."

When Barret opened his mouth to speak, probably to demand a more specific answer, it was Tifa's hand on his arm and a shake of her head that stopped him. He let out a long-suffering sigh and mumbled something akin to "punk ass" under his breath.

Tifa motioned for Zack to lead the way. Quietly the trio slipped into the shadows, with Zack on point. He was the most familiar with the building, the grounds—although slightly changed—and his enhanced night vision helped get them quickly to the stairwell.

His thoughts narrowed until they were focused on one thing: They had to get Aerith out. Get her safe, and keep her out of Shin-Ra's clutches. Zack knew only too well what lengths Shin-Ra would go to in order to achieve their goals, and he couldn't let that happen to Aerith. He wouldn't.

Silver hinges, hidden behind chipped brick and an empty dumpster, barely made a sound when Zack pulled open the heavy steel door they were attached to. He held it open and made a sweeping gesture with one arm. "After you."

Once inside, Zack heard Tifa let out a low whistle. He knew what she was looking at. The barely lit staircase seemed to go up and up forever. "That's a lot of stairs," she murmured as she craned her neck.

He nodded. "It's a tall building."

"If you two are done stating the obvious, we either need to start climbing or start knocking heads. I'm getting' antsy." As if to prove that point, Barret rubbed his gloved hand over his gun arm.
"Fine. Let's go." Tifa took the stairs two at a time.

Zack jogged after her, with Barret behind. Fifteen minutes later they were still climbing, although with considerably less vigor and they weren’t yet half way to their destination by Zack’s mental tally.

"Don't know...why we gotta...climb...all these damn...stairs..." Barret gripped the rail, pulled himself up another flight. He wiped beads of sweat from his brow and tossed Zack a grenade of a glare as he leaned back against the wall, panting. "Probably woulda...been less trouble...just to bust in..."

"We're looking for the more subtle approach." Zack paused beside him, prodded him.

Barret shook off the hand but plodded obligingly along. "Tifa, where you at?" Barret called out tiredly.

A moment later her pale face peered down at them from the floor above. From his vantage point Zack could see trails of sweat on her neck and strands of dark hair clinging to her ruddy cheeks. "Shhh... I'm right here."

"You doing okay?" Zack asked. She was pushing herself too hard, in his opinion, but he was reluctant to say anything. She was motivated and grief wasn't clinging to her like a second skin at the moment, and that was enough for him to hold his tongue.

"Doing okay," she nodded.

"How much farther?" Barret demanded.

She tilted her head up, hesitated before answering. "Just a bit more, I think."

"You've been sayin' that forever now!" Barret grumped. "This ain't one of those never-ending staircases is it?"

Zack rolled his eyes. "No."

"Right." Barret pushed himself up another flight. "Couldn't be that." Ten minutes later, he asked again, "Teef, we there yet?"

"Not yet."

"...Yet?"

"I said not yet!"

"Yo—"

"Look don't even ask." Her boot stomps halted and Zack could hear her rough, ragged breaths. It hastened him past Barret and up toward her.

"We're a way long, long way from being there, okay?" Zack informed Barret as he passed.

"Damn, man. I've had it. I'm going back."

"And take just as long going down as you did coming up?" Tifa called back down.

"Damn." Barret puffed out a breath, plopped onto the steps. "Marlene...baby...Daddy wanted to see you again...one last time..."
"Barret, knock it off."

"I ain't no machine, Teef. Well, except this here arm of mine. But dang, woman, whatchya expect of me? We can't all be SOLDIER boys!"

"Tifa's no boy," Zack reminded him with a grin over the rail.

"You, shut it."

Ignoring Barret's ranting, Zack approached Tifa. "You okay?" She was leaning against the wall, her head between her bent elbows.

"Yeah," she tilted her head, angled him a level look. "Just catching my breath."

He moved to her, laid his hand on her arm. "Don't overdo it. We've got a long way yet."

She glanced at his hand, where it rested on her skin, and gave him a long, studious look. After a moment she said, "You're not even winded, are you?"

He shrugged, surprised by how uncomfortable that simple question made him. "Not really."

She pressed her forehead to the cool cement, sighed. "They really build you guys up, huh?"

Zack wasn't sure he liked the speculative tone in her voice. From the time he'd met her she'd only ever looked at him as a man. Not always favorably, but he'd never seen disgust or fear in her eyes—like he'd seen in others—and she'd never looked at him like he was a monster. He hoped she never would, but she had to know by now that he wasn't normal. Never would be thanks to Shin-Ra, Hojo...and himself.

If he was honest, he had to take accountability for his situation. He'd volunteered for SOLDIER, after all. Had craved it...Strove for it. He had no one to blame for that blind ambition than himself. It was a bitter pill and he still hadn't managed to swallow it.

Thankfully, Barret's booming baritone interrupted his thoughts and Zack wasn't allowed to dwell in his past regrets. "What're you two jabbering about?"

Zack peered down at the other man over the rail. "Why don't you come up and find out."

"Why don't you kiss my black—"

"Barret!"

"Well, damn. He's all superhuman and expecting us normal people to keep up."

Tifa leaned over the rail beside Zack. "Don't be jealous, Barret."

"Jealous?" Barret's mouth flapped open and Zack's grin widened. "What the hell you mean jealous? I ain't jealous!"

"Hmmm...I don't know..." Tifa winked at Zack and he felt a familiar flare of warmth in his gut. She wasn't ever what he expected.

"I'm just as good as anything Shin-Ra's got!" Barret blustered.

Zack couldn't help himself. "Prove it."
In an instant Barret was up on his feet, thudding up the stairs with all the subtlety of a freight train and Zack took off, letting the other man chase him.

Fourteen flights later and a few more barbs tossed around and Zack held up his hand.

Winded, Tifa wiped her forearm across her brow. "Why are we stopping?"

"We're at fifty-nine."

She didn't question it, just nodded. "Okay. But you said Aerith was probably in the upper floors, above sixty."

"I know, but we can't get inside any further up. Even this stairwell requires a clearance card."

"So what do we do now?"

"We go inside, see if we can snatch a card, kidnap an employee, whatever we have to do."

"Now we're talkin'!" Barret's sweaty grin was wide. Eagerly, he adjusted his gun arm settings. "Heh, heh, heh. Time to whoop some Shin-Ra ass!"

"You're eagerness for peaceful negotiations is admirable," Zack drawled.

Barret gave him the finger.

Silent beside the two men, Tifa pulled on her gloves. She flexed her hands in the unfamiliar material and tightened the straps to her liking. "Whatever we have to." Her soft voice echoed Zack's words and when she offered him a soft smile it was gentle and full of compassion. "We'll find her."

Inside him, something tightened; coiled to the point of breaking. They were about to infiltrate Shin-Ra; literally going into the belly of the beast and their odds were not favorable. He swallowed against the tightness in his throat. Even as Barret shot him a glower that could melt steel, Zack cupped the side of Tifa's face, rubbed his thumb beside her ear. "Be careful, okay? This is the real thing. Be ready for anything."

"We will be," she assured him with that quiet conviction he'd come to rely on, then surprised him by closing her eyes and leaning—oh, so briefly—into his palm.

"No turnin' back," Barret stated. Tifa turned her head to face him and they held gazes.

"No," she agreed.

Zack pushed through the door, and the trio stepped out into the hall.

Tifa had expected to have to sneak, steal and perhaps even fight their way to the upper levels, but as it turned out, it had been surprisingly easy for Zack to procure a Keycard. It really shouldn't have surprised her, she thought as she flicked a sidelong glance in Zack's direction. All it had taken was a flash of dimple beside that easy smile and a bit of charm and suddenly the snippity 'Executive Secretary' was giggling putty and handing over a Keycard to replace the one Zack had "lost".

From around the corner, where she and Barret waited, Tifa had to stifle a disgruntled groan at Barret's: "The boy has some skill," comment.
Keycard victoriously in-hand Zack had returned to them, but after five floors of searching they were still no closer to finding Aerith than they'd been when they'd started and now a Turk sighting had them ducking into the nearest hiding spot—which, as it turned out, was a particularly smelly bathroom stall.

"Y'know, I never wanna see another set of stairs, a pushy secretary, or anymore Shin-Ra lackeys as long as I live."

Inside the cramped stall beside his, Tifa was inclined to agree with her AVALANCHE partner. "I second that," she whispered, squirming her way from beneath Zack's elbow. "Ow."

"Sorry," he mumbled. He tried his best to shift his position but the size of his sword made any position they were in equally uncomfortable.

From the next stall Tifa heard a heavy sigh was followed by, "And why the fuck are we hidin' in here anyway?"

"We don't need to mess with the Turks right now," Tifa told him. In fact, avoiding that particular group of individuals was high on her list. As much as she'd like to find a particular red-haired bastard in a suit and grind his spleen to dust, she knew that within these walls, their little rag-tag team stood no chance.

She moved again, trying to find an angle that didn't have her nose pressed either to the wall or Zack's chest. Heat colored her face as her backside once more brushed up against Zack's hip. As they stood now, she was practically flush against him and she hardly dared breathe because of it.

It was ridiculous, she knew, it wasn't as though it was intentional or flirtatious, but that didn't prevent the blush or the flutter in her chest. Thankfully Zack's attention was clearly elsewhere, she noticed. He had his head tilted and was peering up at the vent above the toilet for the third time.

"What is it?" she asked, voice hushed.

"You hear that?" Zack inched onto his toes.

Tifa inclined her head; listened. Voices. Faint, but definitely voices were filtering through the vent. "Yeah..." she lifted wide eyes to Zack. "I do."

Zack stepped up onto the seat of the toilet, peering into the vent through metal slats. "This thing is huge," he commented. He gave Tifa a speculative look over his shoulder.

"What?"

"I bet you could fit."

"Fit where?" Barret asked, incredulous. "In the fuckin' vent?"

"Yeah." Zack hopped off the toilet. "If I remember correctly this ventilation system has a cross section directly over the main conference room."

"And you think the voices are coming from there?" Tifa asked him.

"It's a good possibility," Zack acknowledged.

"All right." She nodded, placed a boot on the porcelain and heard concern from across the divider. "Teef?"
"Just a little recon. I'll be fine."

Zack popped the face off the vent, helped her up. His fingers lingered on her elbow and his eyes were once more the color of the sky at night. "Be careful."

She lowered her lashes, nodded. "I will."

As she climbed into the dark metal she heard Barret grumble, "She damn well better be," and she smiled.

She'd never had a fear of enclosed spaces, and she didn't have one now, but she had to admit that crawling through the dusty vents of Shin-Ra HQ was making her stomach churn. Her forearm grazed a raised piece of metal and she hissed a breath through her teeth. "Pay attention," she chided herself.

Focused, she followed the main chute and the increasingly louder voices until she found herself positioned above a large grate over a mahogany table, surrounded by a number of Shin-Ra suits. She recognized several of the people in the room from AVALANCHE intel. President Shinra, looking plump and smug at the head of the table; Heidegger, the head of Shin-Ra Public Safety and Maintenance, as well as a dark haired man that looked familiar (although she couldn't place him). Also in the room was a fat, bald man that was unfamiliar to Tifa and an attractive blond woman who wore a bored expression.

Finished her mental role-call, Tifa pressed down, held her breath and listened.

"The damage estimates for Sector Seven have come in," the dark haired man was saying. "Between investments and factories on the plate above that region the total loss is about 10 billion gil. Rebuilding should run abo—"

"Rebuilding? We're not rebuilding," President Shinra cut in with a chuckle.

"But, sir—?"

"No, Reeve, we're leaving Sector Seven as is and continuing with plans for Neo Midgar."

"Neo Midgar? Then you believe the Ancients...?"

"Yes. The Promised Land will soon be ours." Shinra turned to the fat man. "Palmer, I want a 15% rate increase in all areas."

Palmer grinned. "Rate hike! Yes!"

"Reeve and Scarlet can split the difference," Shinra continued.

"Oh, man..." Palmer sat down, deflated.

"But, sir," Reeve continued, his voice earnest. "If you raise the rates, people will lose confidence—"

"Nonsense." Shinra grinned at Heidegger. "After all, Shin-Ra will be the ones that save the people from AVALANCHE."

Heidegger's laugh grated on Tifa's nerves, causing her hands to fist. "We will hunt down AVALANCHE for their bombing of Sector Seven and to finance that, we'll need money. Ignorant people will only be too happy to pay for it."

Tifa swore under her breath. *Those miserable bastards!*
Her attention was caught when the double-wide conference room doors swung open and a pale, gaunt looking man with greasy hair and wire rimmed glasses strode in. His white lab coat fluttered against gray pant legs.

President Shinra leaned back in his chair. "Ah, Hojo. How's the girl?"

Tifa's interest was piqued even further. Hojo? Where had she heard that name before? Like an elusive shadow in her peripheral, the answer eluded her, and she nearly swore again in frustration.

"As a specimen, she is inferior to her mother," Elusive Hojo answered. "I'm still in the process of comparing but the difference is a significant percentage."

"Uh-huh. And how long will this research take?"

"I couldn't narrow it down to an exact day, but I'd speculate answers could be confirmed within the next one hundred twenty years or so."

"That soon, huh?" The bored blond asked, studying her crimson nails. She looked idle, but Tifa sensed that was more an intended appearance than actuality.

Hojo adjusted his glasses as he turned from the table, a sneer on his face. "That's why I'm thinking of breeding her. Then we could create a specimen that could withstand our research for years to come."

"Will this hinder my plans for the Promised Land?" Shinra asked, leaning forward now, his palms on the dark wood of the conference table.

"We'll see. I need to plan."

"But--"

"I need to plan." Hojo repeated, unmoved.

"I see." The President sighed. "Well, then, I guess that concludes this meeting. Get back to me soon, Hojo."

The people around the table began to walk toward the door.

"Something stinks," the blond murmured and looked up.

In the grate, Tifa slid back into the shadows. A few minutes later and Zack was helping her down from the duct.

"Ok?" he asked, taking a moment to brush dirt from her shoulder.

"Yeah." She nodded, bent to dust her knees.

"Well?" Barret demanded. "What'd ya find out? Anything?"

"I think a man named Hojo has Aerith—"

"Hojo!" Zack grabbed her arms, his fingertips digging in. His eyes snapped with phosphorous green lines and his mouth slashed an angry line across his face. His reaction was unexpected and she flinched.

He seemed to realize and his grip loosened, his fingertips rubbing as though to soothe. "Sorry," he murmured, eyes softening.
She nodded, but stepped back warily, rubbing her arms. "Who is he?"

"Head of the Shin-Ra Science Department," Barret answered from the open stall door. His dark eyes flicked over Zack. "What's he to you, SOLDIER-boy?"

Zack brushed past Barret, jerked the taps on the sink and splashed water on his face. He gripped the sink, took several deep breaths. When he raised his head, he stared into the mirror with unseeing eyes. "A nightmare." With that, Zack straightened and strode from the bathroom, the door swinging wildly behind him.

Tifa watched him go with a worried frown.

"That guy has some serious issues," Barret told her.

Shaking her head, Tifa shot her friend a dubious look. "And we don't?"

Barret ticked off an imaginary point. "Touche."

They left the bathroom.
They found Zack at the end of the corridor, just outside a pair of elevator double doors, studying what appeared to be a floor directory.

When they were closer, Barret peered over his shoulder. "What d'ya got?"

Zack acknowledged the question, but didn't turn, kept his finger trailing the polished brass. "Looking for...ah. Found it." He stepped aside, pressed the elevator's up button, and pulled his gloves out of his back pocket without looking at either of them.

"What floor?" Tifa asked, her voice quiet.

"Sixty-seven." Zack stepped into the elevator and slipped black leather over white knuckles.

Tifa gave the directory a quick look. The sixty-seventh floor had only two listings: Medical Research and the Department for Expendable Resources. She didn't bother to wonder how the two were related; she was sure she didn't want to know. Thoughtful and silent, she stepped into the elevator beside Zack.

It wasn't until the elevator lurched into motion that Barret spoke again. "That Hojo guy... he's the head of Shin-Ra's Science Department, right? So, what's he want with Aerith?"

Zack's reply was frigid. "Nothing good."

The soft ding of the elevator prevented any further commentary and the trio exited. A quick look around revealed the sixty-seventh floor to be one large, open floor. Dim lit and dreary, with concrete walls and metal grating overhead, it caused an instant shudder in Tifa. There was something unsanitary about the place, despite it being meticulously cleansed, she thought, hugging herself. A faint, but distinct, odor clung to the air—one that reminded her of the trash behind Seventh Heaven and it turned Tifa's stomach. Or...what had been Seventh. She shook off that thought as she placed her hand to her mouth and followed Barret along the white painted cement. There was no time for lamenting now. She had already made the decision to be supportive and fight for those living. Grief could wait.

She glanced toward Zack, but he didn't notice the smell—or didn't care to acknowledge that he did. With rigid shoulders and tense posture, he looked anything but his usual laid-back self, and Tifa found herself wondering just who this Hojo character was and what had transpired between him and Zack to make Zack coil so tight. Tifa worried her bottom lip with her teeth as she studied the line of Zack's back. Part of her wanted to stop him, take him aside and ask...or offer comforting words, but she didn't know exactly what it was she would be trying to comfort.

The truth of it was, she still didn't really know a lot about Zack's past. It hadn't really mattered to her when he'd joined them. But it mattered now, she admitted to herself. Because he mattered now. More than she cared to think about, so she shoved those thoughts aside as well and focused on the the area around them. Empty crates along the walls. Beeping machinery somewhere in the distance. Cool air being pumped in from AC vents overhead. No sign of security. No sign of anyone.

"Wait." Zack held up one hand, then quickly motioned for them to slip in beside some crates. "Someone's coming."

She was really beginning to hate tight spaces, Tifa thought briefly, as she skirted between Barret's
chest and Zack's back to press up against packaging crates. She strained on her tiptoes to see over
Zack's broad back.

At the far end of the room another elevator—one nearly hidden behind a large glass tube—opened,
and Hojo stepped out. A pen scratched against paper as he scribbled on the clipboard in his hand and
his dark, wing-like brows were drawn down in concentration. Tifa took a long look at the man and
found him unfavorable in more ways than one.

Skinny to the point of gaunt, Hojo had thin, sharp features—elongated even more by the sweep of
dark hair that draped over his white lab coat in an unattended ponytail. His spectacles glinted beneath
the fluorescent bulbs overhead, making it impossible to see his eyes, but she suspected she'd find
them cold and calculating.

There was something uncomfortably familiar about the scientist and she instantly disliked him.

Standing in front of the large glass tube, Hojo placed his bony fingers to the glass, and spoke; his
voice almost crooning, "Ah, hello, my precious specimen." He stood there, staring, for a few minutes
more before he made some additional notes and re-entered the small elevator he'd emerged from.

Once he was gone, Tifa scooted from behind the crate with Barret. She paused when Zack made no
move to follow and raised questioning eyes to his.

Wherever his thoughts had strayed wasn't pleasant, she realized. And when Zack shook his head and
finally met her gaze, she drew a sharp breath. Lingering shadows haunted the depths of his
expressive eyes and they turned her heart inside out.

This was not the Zack she had come to know. This wasn't even the Zack she recalled from
nightmares of so many years ago. There was something so very wrong in him, and she had no idea
what it was.

"Zack...?" She stepped forward, gently touched his hand with her own.

He gave her a half smile, a poor imitation of his usual cocky grin, and it only intensified her feeling
of wrongness.

"I'm all right," he told her.

No, she thought, you're not. But didn't push.

Together, they moved further into the open area where the over-sized cylindric tube sat surrounded
by tables of various size. Laid out on each table were sets of instruments that gleamed with silent
malice on white paper.

Cautiously, Tifa picked up a hook that appeared to have a large corkscrew remover on one end. "I
wonder what this is," she murmured.

"It keeps your intestines from spilling to the floor. Or getting in the way." Zack's voice was flat,
distant and so cold that Tifa shivered.

"In the way of what? The tool hit the table with a clang and she wiped her hands on her thighs. How
did he even know that...?"

"Hey. Look." Barret stood beside the glass tube where Hojo's precious specimen sat, idly licking its
front paw and staring back at them with one yellow eye.
Curious, Tifa splayed her fingers against the glass. The creature inside was unlike anything she had ever seen before. Despite its fierce appearance, there was something majestic about the animal. Dark, rust colored fur gleamed beneath the harsh overhead lights and a tail—tipped with flame—flicked up and down. One vibrant, solitary eye followed her movements and the intelligent inquiry in its gaze gave her pause.

"Biological experiment?" she speculated, her own eyes following the strange—almost hypnotic—motion of the tail.

"Probably," Barret replied, distaste coloring his words. "Shin-Ra does all kinds of messed up shit."

Tifa frowned, backed up a step, searched around the tube. "Do you think there's a lever?"

"For what?" Barret demanded, then started to shake his head before she could reply. "No. Uhn-uh, Teef. We ain't letting a wild animal out while we're in here."

"Well, we can't just leave it," she countered.

He huffed a breath. "We've got bigger issues to worry about here."

She shot him a narrow look over her shoulder. "I know that, but that doesn't mean we can't help."

"Damn it," Barret tossed his hand into the air, recognizing her 'stubborn face'. "Princess, talk some sense into her."

Tifa turned away from the glass, intent on giving Zack the same earful she'd have given Barret, but stopped when she saw how still he'd gotten. In front of a metal dome that resembled a steel egg, his normal golden skin had gone a shade beyond pale.

The captured creature momentarily forgotten, Tifa pushed away from the glass. "Zack?"

"Jenova..." His face scrunched into a grimace that was a mixture of pain and revulsion. "They brought it back...its here...still alive."

"What's still alive?" Barret pressed up against the single door, peered through the oval window. "Cripes! Where's it's fuckin' head?" He leaned back, a look of confusion on his face. He shook himself. "This is stupid. Let's keep moving." He stomped back toward the lab tables and the elevator Hojo had disappeared into, his gruff mumble reaching them. "Shin-Ra and their twisted, sick, shit."

Tifa returned her concerned gaze to Zack, who was lost in his own world. Somewhere dark and painful if his eyes were any indication. "Zack...?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep, labored breath. His entire body language spoke of struggle, and it was a few moments before he was able to look at her."Hey," he said.

"Hey." Where'd you go? She shifted, started to place her hand on the steel so that she could peek inside and see what had both him and Barret so spooked, but Zack moved quick, and gripped her wrist, halting her.

"Don't," he said quietly with a shake of his head. "Just...Don't touch it, okay?"

She met his turbulent blues, saw concern and something else swirling there. Something that had her breath hitching and her heart hammering. "Okay." She lowered her arm slowly, but kept her fingers meshed with his for a heartbeat.
She knew Zack was a tactile person, knew he took comfort in solid reassurances, so she offered what she could. He'd do the same for her.

"You guys comin'?" Barret called to them from the small elevator Hojo had used. His voice cracked with impatience and irritation.

"On our way."

The moment the doors slid open on the sixty-eighth level, Zack felt his stomach knot and his palms began to itch beneath worn leather. This lab, unlike the one below, was pristine white and odorless; yet it elicited the same disturbed response from him.

He felt light headed and sick to his stomach.

Fuck, he hated labs.

The machinery and gadgets beeped and whirred as they calibrated, checked, processed or did whatever it was they were set out to do. In the center of the room, standing in a glass tube—very similar to the one that housed the beast below—Aerith stood, fidgeting with the buttons on her half jacket.

The relief he felt at finding her, not only alive but looking none the worse for her ordeal, made his heart skip. "Aerith!"

Her head snapped up and she stared in shock at all of them. "Zack!" Her palms pressed flat to the glass.

He pushed past Barret, started toward her, but a voice from his past—one that chilled the very blood in his veins—stopped him.

"Aerith. Is that her name?" Hojo barely glanced up from the computer terminal he was bent over. "Interesting. I couldn't recall... anyway, what do you want?" he sounded more irritated by than afraid of their intrusion.

Zack turned slowly, and forcibly swallowed against the bile rising in his throat. Just looking at the man brought back echoes of screams and the stench of blood and antiseptic.

No, he thought angrily when the urge to run seeped along his limbs. I am stronger than this.

"We're taking Aerith back," he spoke through his teeth.

Hojo scoffed, adjusted his glasses."I don't think so. The Cetra is too important to my research. Now begone."

Beside him, Barret blinked at Tifa. "Did he just dismiss us?"

She tightened the strap on her glove. "I think he did."

Zack stepped forward, his fingers curling around the hilt of his sword, his eyes gleaming eerily blue. Seeing the scientist now stirred horrific memories within him and caused his stomach to protest and his knees to tremble in a manner that enraged him. This monster—this sick fuck—took everything from him...from Cloud. No way was Zack walking away without his head.
"Let her out and I'll make sure you die quickly." He spoke clearly, and as calmly as his shaken nerves would allow. He felt, rather than saw, Tifa's surprise at his words; knew she recognized that he wasn't making an idle threat.

Hojo apparently had enough sense to recognize it as legitimate as well, because he straightened away from the monitor and finally looked at them. His mouth twisted into what could have been a condescending smirk and he directed his response to Zack, "You're going to kill me, boy? I don't think so. The equipment in here is very delicate. Wouldn't want anything unfortunate to happen, now would we?" Hojo's hand hovered over the control panel.

The rebuttal threat had its desired effect, and Zack froze.

"Good. It's always best to think things out logically before making rash actions." Hojo's smile turned Zack's stomach. The scientist bent to the microphone on the panel. "Now bring the specimen."

"Zack!"

The terrified cry had all of them swinging around to face Aerith. The beast from below was being elevated into her containment tube and she was backed up against the glass, fumbling futilely for a way out. The creature flicked its tail up and down, bared its fangs and let out a bloodthirsty roar.

Aerith screamed.

Shit.

"What the hell are you doing?" Zack demanded.

"Lending a hand to the endangered species. Both are on the brink of extinction."

"You can't mean..." Tifa shook her head, clearly sickened. "Aerith is a human being!"

"A relative term," Hojo muttered. "Human is only a species. People get so worked up over such frivolous things. Consider the beneficial nature of this union—"

They didn't have time for this shit, Zack thought, tuning the Professor out. He turned to Barret, determination tightening his jaw. If they were going to save Aerith they needed to act now. "Take out the glass," he ordered.

Barret's eyes flashed wide. "But Aerith—"

"Show me you're as good as you say you are." Zack closed his hand over Tifa's, pulled her a step back and maneuvered her into the shelter of his arms. He turned them away from Barret, and said, "Go for it."

"All right." Steely eyed, Barret leveled his gun-arm at the containment unit and, after a quick assessment, opened fire. The unit flashed bright white and shards of reinforced glass chinked and began to fall to the laboratory floor.

"Stop!" Hojo scrambled away from the monitors and raced toward the broken tube. "My precious experiments! You fools! What have you done?" His eyes bulged behind his lenses. Anything else he wanted to say was cut short when the creature from inside lunged through the shattered glass with a snarl and knocked him back.

Behind the animal, Aerith stumbled forward. "Zack!"
"Right here." He released Tifa and caught Aerith quickly. He gave her a searching look, content that she was indeed all right.

"Thank you," she said, her green gaze taking in all three.

Zack nodded at her but a soft whir and thrum of vibration snagged his attention. He pressed Aerith behind him with one arm, his other hand moving toward the hilt of his sword.

"What is it?" Tifa asked, alert.

"The elevator." He gestured toward the small one Hojo had used. "Something big is coming."

"Perhaps it would be best if we were to leave now."

The voice, so smooth and calm, seemed out of place amongst the chaos, and even more so when the group realized where it was coming from.

Tifa's eyes widened and she stared open mouthed at the red beast, her stunned expression very much reflecting what Zack was feeling. "Y-you can talk?"

Its large head tipped. "I will gladly talk as much as you wish, later, miss. For now, may I suggest a hasty departure?"

Zack glanced to where Hojo lay, unconscious. "He dead?" he asked the beast.

The large animal shook its head. "No. Merely incapacitated."

Zack's hands balled into fists. There was an easy enough remedy for that, he thought with a sneer. He jumped slightly when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Not while he's defenseless," Tifa murmured. "That's not you."

Zack kept his face averted. He could do it, he thought, grimly. And without remorse. He, of all people, knew what Hojo was capable of while someone lay defenseless. It would only serve the monster right to be done in while he was the same. But Zack knew he wouldn't do it in front of Tifa—or Aerith—so he nodded and relaxed his stance.

"Too late to run now! We got company!" Barret shouted as the elevator doors parted and a hulking mass of monstrosity lumbered out.

With abnormally large teeth and hulking claw-like arms the monster that approached was well equipped to deliver a significant amount of damage to them, should they give it a chance. It shrieked at them, spraying spittle across the laboratory floor.

Zack swore. When they broke the containment tube they must have triggered some sort of alarm. Hojo was known for using monsters as his personal attack dogs, and apparently that hadn't changed over the years.

"Well, don't be rude," Zack turned to Barret as he removed his Buster Sword from its holster. "Go say hello."

Barret's deep chuckle was half amused and half anticipatory. "You first."

"That is one ugly...what the hell is that thing, anyway?"

"Experiment," came the low reply.
Zack tossed their new ally a questioning glance. "You have a name?"

"Hojo has named me Red XIII. It is a name with no meaning whatsoever to me. Call me whatever you wish."

"Red works," Zack acknowledged and spun his sword in hand. "You in or out?"

The flame tipped tail swished back and forth and white fang gleamed bright. "Most definitely in."

"Tifa." Zack glanced over at her, but she was already backing Aerith away from the elevators and placing herself in front of the other girl.

"I've got her," she told him. "You just kick some ass."

Zack nodded. It felt good, he realized, to know that she trusted him enough to handle things. He turned back to the spittle roaring monster and shrugged. "It won't take long."

And it didn't. A few dead-center rounds from Barret and some well placed slashes from Zack and the monster was swaying. Newly anointed Red plowed through the other creature with extreme ferocity and left it writhing on the floor in its death throes.

Barret gave Red a hard look. "What are you?" he finally asked.

"That is an informed question, but difficult to answer," Red replied sagely. "I am what you see." He turned, his single eyed gaze resting on Aerith who was still half behind Tifa. "My sincerest apologies for my behavior back there. I was merely putting on a show."

"I understand," Aerith nodded slowly, stepping out from behind Tifa.

Zack studied her face and knew she was shaken, but not traumatized.

Sensing his scrutiny, she lifted her green eyes to his. "I knew you'd come for me," she told him with a soft smile.

He moved forward, folded her into a quick hug. Her hair tickled his nose and he inhaled her sweet scent and gave thanks that he had made it to her on time. The thought of her in Hojo's hands...it still chilled him, but he shook it off and grinned against her auburn hair.

Watching the exchange between Zack and Aerith was double edged for Tifa. Part of her, the part she liked to keep hidden away, felt a pang of...jealousy? Which was ridiculous, she thought with a subtle shake of her head, because she had no right to feel that way. She and Zack were no more than friends...despite the kisses shared at Wall Market, and she had no claim to him. Not that she even wanted one... And of course, she was thrilled to have found Aerith and found her unharmed. She owed the other woman a rather large debt, after all. Thanks to her Marlene was safe. She had risked everything and traded herself for a stranger. Tifa couldn't think of anyone else that would be so selfless.

Barret thumped Zack on the back, startling him and Tifa. "Look, we can do this touchy feely shit later, okay? But for right now I suggest we get the fuck outta this buildin'."

Zack nodded. He stepped away from Aerith, but kept one hand protectively on her forearm. "We'll need to move quickly."

"I ain't taking those damn stairs again," Barret stated.
"Oh yeah? And what's your plan? Take the elevator and walk right out the front door?"

Barret's grin was borderline maniacal. "They'll never see it coming."

"Were you dropped a lot as a child?"

Tifa rolled her eyes at the back and forth between the two. No matter what the situation, leave it to Zack and Barret to find ways to pick at each other.

"Whatever is decided, we must act quickly. They will most likely be coming for us soon," Red informed them. "The Professor has many fail-safes in order to prevent escape."

As if triggered by Red's words the lights overhead began flashing and a siren started to whine. The main doors to the laboratory swung apart and several armed guards positioned themselves between the group and the exit.

"Great." Barret shook his head. "What's the plan now, Princess?"

Zack shot Tifa a look and she nodded. The plan had been, and still was, to get Aerith to safety.

"The elevator!" Red motioned with his muzzle. "You can use that."

"Go," Zack told them. "We'll hold them off."

Reluctant, but knowing their options were limited, Tifa nodded. But before she could step away, Zack's hand—warm and solid—wrapped around hers and he lifted her palm to his lips and placed a kiss against the leather. One that scorched through and sent her eyes skittering to his, flecked with questions that she wouldn't ask.

His lips quirked slightly at the corners and he said simply, "For luck," before letting her go.

"Come on." Tifa shook herself, grabbed Aerith's hand, and tugged her toward Hojo's elevator. "We've got to get you away."

"But Zack!" Aerith protested, looking back over her shoulder to where Barret and Zack were preparing to defend their departure.

"Zack can take care of himself. Come on." Despite her confident tone, Tifa found herself saying a silent prayer as the doors slid shut and the first gunshot rang out.
"You know, as far as plans go...this one could've gone better." From his hand-bound position between two Turks, Zack rocked back on his heels, his voice tinged with subtle amusement.

"Ya think?" Across the expansive office, also flanked by Turks, Barret shot Zack a dark look from beneath his heavy brow. "What was the first clue, Princess?"

Zack's lips quirked up at the annoyed expression on Barret's face. Not that he could blame the guy, he thought with a shake of his head. He was feeling pretty damn irritated at the moment, too. Bound, hand and foot, standing in the President's office, Zack was forced to admit, he probably shouldn't have been surprised by their arrival here.

It hadn't taken much for them to overpower the guards and get out of the lab. Once outside the place they had found the hall empty. It hadn't been until they reached the elevators that they ran into trouble again...this time in the form of Turks.

Confined in such a small space, the group hadn't been able to do anything but comply with the quiet command of, "Press up, please," and hold out their arms—paws, in Red's case—out to be shackled.

Zack knew before he saw the floor number where they were going. Top floor; President's Office and they were in some deep shit. But he'd be damned if he let on that he was worried.

"You know, the sad thing is that we weren't even taken down by skilled fighters. Nope. This is almost like being caught by really pissed off hall monitors," he continued. "Overdressed, overpaid hall monitors, but still..." As he talked, Zack studied the room, the angles, and tried to come up with a way out. So far, nothing.

"Shut up."

The blunt of an un-open EMR jabbed him in the back and Zack sent a dark look over his shoulder. The Turk—one he didn't recognize—took a step back.

"You know, you guys are kind of a downer to the whole escaping thing we had going on," Zack added.

"Zack, you would do well to listen and keep your mouth shut."
The voice, calm, cool and collected, straightened Zack's spine and wiped the smirk off his face. "Tseng." He turned his head, stared through dark locks and narrowed eyes at his former friend.

Slowly, with methodical, even steps, Tseng made his way over to the large, garishly elaborate mahogany desk in the center of the room. He turned, so that he stood just ahead of the corner with his hands clasped behind his back. Suit pressed to perfection, dark hair tied back in a neat nub, and face a picture of placid neutrality, Tseng was the perfect Turk. "Where is she?" he asked finally.

"You just told me to keep my mouth shut," Zack pointed out.

Tseng sighed quietly. "Now is not the time for games, Zack."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Barret's head come up at their familiarity, but he kept his focus on the tall man across the room.

"Tell me where she is."

"Why? So you can cram her into a giant test tube and ruin her?" Zack shook his head, his mouth tightening into a hard line. "You can go to hell."

"I can assure you that no harm will come to the Cetra—"

"Don't kid yourself, Tseng. Once Shin-Ra has no use for her, they'll destroy her." His eyes flashed. "One way or another."

"You don't know what's at stake—"

"Aerith is at stake," Zack emphasized her name. He refused to let Tseng forget who they were talking about.

"And she will serve a greater purpose than you can imagine."

"Still licking Shinra's boots, huh?" Zack asked, bitterness snaking its way through him.

At this Tseng tilted his head, brows knitted above the odd birthmark in the center of his forehead. "Some of us know the meaning of the word loyalty."

Zack almost laughed. Loyalty? He'd been blindly loyal to Shin-Ra for years. Right up until they tried to kill him. He'd willingly given all of himself to the Company; sacrificed his own body to Mako treatments and special surgeries in order to become SOLDIER. He'd watched friends and mentors get chewed up and spit out, and he'd still done Shin-Ra's bidding. And how was he rewarded for his loyalty? Trapped like a rat and torn apart for the advancement of a corporation hell bent on destroying the Planet they built their empire on. Yeah. He knew the meaning of the word loyalty...just no longer by Shin-Ra's definition.

The door behind the desk opened, cutting off their conversation, and the President of the Shin-Ra Electric Power Company stepped into the room with all the pomp of a King entering court. He ran one hand over his tie, down his portly belly and clucked his tongue disapprovingly at the sight before him. "You've all caused me great deal of trouble."

"We've caused you trouble?" Barret stepped forward, the motion causing the Turk on his right to haul back by his restraints. Undaunted, Barret sneered at the President. "What do you want with us? With the girl?"

Shinra's smile was small and smug. "That girl is the last of her kind. She's a Cetra."
"Cetra... There was a survivor?" Red's murmur was low enough that only Zack heard him.

"As an Ancient she is the key holder to the Promised Land," the President continued on, oblivious. "I expect a lot from her."

"But the Promised Land, that's just a legend," Red interjected, lifting his head abruptly.

Shinra blinked owlishly, his mouth opening then closing like a wounded fish. He had clearly not expected to hear Red speak. It only took a moment, however, before he was once again addressing the room like a speaker at a podium. "Even if that is so, and it's only a legend, the prospect is still too appealing not to pursue. It has been said that the Promised Land is very fertile." His smile widened. "And if the land is fertile..."

"Then there's gotta be Mako," Barret said, his eyes wide as realization dawned on him.

President Shinra pistol shot his finger at Barret. "Exactly." He spun so that he faced the office's large windows, overlooking all of Midgar. "And that is where we will build our greatest triumph: Neo-Midgar. In the Promised Land, Shin-Ra's new glory--"

"Fuck you and your glory, you crazy bastard!" Barret shouted, jerking against his restraints and earning himself a nasty whap from a baton to the back of his head.

"Hey!" Zack grimaced when Barret took a second—harder—hit. "Barret, knock it off!" As much as the other man pissed him off, Zack had no desire to witness the stubborn blockhead bludgeoned to death.

"You're crazy," Barret repeated to Shinra with his head bowed, only slightly, and blood trickling into his eye. "You're fuckin' crazy."

President Shinra shrugged, unconcerned. "Your opinion matters very little to me. All I want to hear from you is where I can find the Cetra."

"Go fuck yourself."

"Sir," Tseng placed his hand to his ear piece, then looked up at the President. "They've found her."

Zack and Barret exchanged worried glances.

"Shit," Zack swore.

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Shit, shit, shit!

The mantra hammered in her head as Tifa practically flew down the long corridor with Aerith's hand gripped tightly in her own. Aerith stumbled a bit, trying to keep up, but Tifa only tugged her up and kept moving. They had to keep moving, and fast. They'd been spotted.

"Here. In here!" Tifa pushed Aerith ahead of her through a swinging door. Inside, she placed her hands on the edges to keep it stationary, cocked her head and listened. All she could hear was the sharp rasp of her own breathing and the drip of a faucet.

"The bathroom?" Shaking fingers brushed chestnut hair from wide green eyes.

"Yeah." Tifa stepped back. She took Aerith's elbow in a firm grip, moved her toward the stalls. If
she was correct—and, Shiva, she hoped she was—then all of the bathrooms should have a ventilation system like the one she'd had to climb into earlier.

And there it was.

Feeling as if the bathroom door was going to burst in at any time, Tifa hustled them into the stall, closed and latched the door. She didn't know how close the guards were or how much time she had. "Climb onto the toilet," she instructed, her voice sharper than she meant it to be.

Aerith's eyes widened, her expression dubious. "What?"

"Please," Tifa implored. "Climb up."

"All right." Fisting her long skirt in her hands, Aerith stepped onto the rim.

From beyond the outer door, Tifa heard muffled shouts and the heavy tread of boots. Quickly, she yanked open the metal grate that covered the ventilation duct. "Get inside."

No hesitation from Aerith this time, and Tifa was relieved. She hadn't meant to sound angry or impatient, but time wasn't something they had a lot of.

Once Aerith was inside, Tifa started to close the grill. "Stay hidden," she said. "Follow the main vent and don't come out until one of us comes for you."

"Wait! Where are you going?" There was fear in the other woman's voice, despite how she tried to hide it.

"I'm going to lead them away from here," Tifa replied and hoped her own fear was well below the surface.

"No, no." Aerith shook her head, her eyes luminous. "Come in here. We can both fit. We'll go together."

Tifa shook her own head resolutely. The best chance Aerith had was for Tifa to divert the attention of the soldiers. "Don't come out," she repeated, "no matter what, until one of us comes for you. Understand?"

"But—"

"Understand?" Harder this time.

"Yes." Aerith placed her fingers on the grate, her eyes searching Tifa's face. "Why are you doing this?

There were a number of answers she could give, Tifa realized. Aerith was important to Zack, she had risked her life for Marlene, she reminded her just enough of Jessie to twinge her heart, but it all boiled down to one simple truth. "I like you," she answered and slammed the grate shut.

The corridor was empty when she ventured out of the bathroom, but Tifa could hear voices and footsteps nearby. Taking a steadying breath, she balled her hands into fists and jogged toward them rather than away. The first soldier never saw her coming, and paid for it with a broken jaw and concussion. The other two reacted as she expected, and the chase was once again on. Her boots made harsh slapping sounds against the tile as she ran towards the flickering red EXIT sign at the opposite end of the hall.
She dared a quick, furtive glance over her shoulder and quickened her stride when she realized three more Shin-Ra troopers had joined the pursuit. Barret had always told her Shin-Ra lackeys were like cockroaches. Where there's one, there's a hundred, he'd say. She was suddenly inclined to agree.

The metal fire door slammed open beneath the weight of her shoulder, barely slowing her down. The stairs she gave a disgusted look. She really wasn't in the mood for more stairs, but her choices were limited. With a low curse, she vaulted over the railing and dropped the full floor. Then again. And again.

After a few minutes, she heard one of the doors above her bang open, then: "Subject is in the east stairwell, Fifty-ninth floor."

No use going down anymore, she thought grimly. They'd be waiting for her if they weren't already. She yanked the side door open. Two armed guards met her on the other side, their weapons leveled at her, red dots emblazoned on her forehead and chest. Well, double shit.

"Don't move!"

Zack was right, Tifa thought fleetingly. That was definitely a ridiculous request.

In a blink, her fist knocked the barrel of one rifle to the left even as she grabbed the second, yanking the muzzle so that as it fired, the bullet splintered harmlessly into the wall.

She didn't try to think; only reacted, and let her training take over. She pushed the gun muzzle down, flipping it out of the startled man's hands, and swung the butt up into his visor. He dropped to his knees, covering his face. The other guard went into the wall, hard, with the force of her kick.

She rushed by, tossed the weapons aside and was rounding the corner when an arm shot out, caught her across her chest and knocked her onto the flat of her back.

On the floor, dizzy and gasping, Tifa blinked. Dark blue pants entered her line of sight and she followed the tailored seam up until she saw her own face reflected in a pair of silver rimmed sunglasses. She scissored her legs, intent on knocking the man on his ass, but he anticipated the move, and his hand closed tight around her ankle.

"Sorry," the Turk murmured.

She spun, yanking herself free and slamming her elbow into his solar plexus. He grunted. When she swung at him again, he used his forearm to block. Behind her she heard more boots and the cocking of rifles. At the far end of the hall two more guards took aim. She was directly in their line of fire when the Turk moved, using his larger frame to push her against the wall, effectively trapping her. "I don't want to have to hurt you, so don't make me, all right?" He almost sounded like he meant it. "Surrender, or they will kill you."

She gave a small nod, the only movement he allowed, and he released her slowly. She gulped in much needed air as she glowered up at him. Deliberate, he pulled a length of zip-cord from his jacket pocket and motioned for her to turn around.

When the band was secured—tight, but not painfully so—she was led down the hall, past the guards, and back into the elevators. By the time this was over, she mused, she was going to hate stairs and elevators and spend her life restricted to one story locations.
The double doors of the office swung open, banging sharply against the wall, and jarring the occupants of the room. Zack felt his throat clench around his breath and he choked a bit at the sight of Tifa being hauled into the office, her arms bound behind her back and her chin jutted up defiantly.

Her eyes met his and she gave a small, almost imperceptible, shake of her head before resuming her straight-ahead glare. Whatever had happened, Aerith wasn't in Shin-Ra hands, but any relief Zack felt over that fact was countered by his concern for Tifa.

He knew she could handle herself, knew she was a fighter and had survived by strength and determination for far too long—in far worse circumstances—but all the logical pep-talking in the world did nothing to alleviate the pound of his pulse nor the tightness in his gut at seeing her bound and in Turk hands.

"This is not the Cetra," Shinra pointed out, drawing the room's attention back to himself.

"No, sir."

"Well, where is she?"

The bald Turk—Rude, if Zack remembered correctly—shifted uncomfortably. "Unknown, sir."

"You lost her?" Shinra frowned, his jowls shaking his displeasure.

Rude lowered his head, but remained silent.

"This has become unproductive," Tseng stated, his eyes traveling to where Zack stood. "It is clear they aren't going to volunteer any information."

"Agreed." President Shinra rubbed his hands together, thoughtful. "Perhaps, then, we should have them speak to someone better suited at getting answers." He lowered himself into his over-sized chair and from behind the steeple of his fingers he said, "Get me a Specialist."

Solemn, Tseng agreed with his President. "I'll see to it."

Zack swore under his breath. A subdivision of the Turks, Specialists were called in only for the really nasty job of interrogation. They were the black sheep of Shin-Ra, talked about, but never associated with. Looked like they were going to have to fight their way out after— "Ow."

A small prick in his left arm caused Zack to wince. Clever, Tseng, he thought as his body became too heavy to hold upright on his own. He glared blearily at the Turk with the syringe, then back at Tseng. His arms were caught when he sagged and his hazy eyes sought out Tifa as he was drug, limp, across the room.

"Zack!" Tifa lunged toward him, was pulled up short by a hard yank and a needle jabbed into her arm.

Dimly, he heard Barret swear and Red growl and Zack assumed they were recipients of the same inhebriating cocktail.

"Zack, it'll be allright," Tifa called out to him even as she slumped forward.

As the door closed behind him and the blanket of fog shrouding his mind thickened to smothering black, it was her voice he held onto.
Cold! Holy Shiva that water was cold!

Zack's head snapped up and he spluttered against the second wash of ice cold water tossed into his face.

"Wake up. We have a lot to talk about." The bucket clattered to the concrete floor, flopping uselessly on its side.

The sound was loud in his ears and Zack shook his head, trying to clear away the last remnants of the tranquilizer. It took a moment for his brain to play catch up, but as the fog retreated, Zack felt his muscles tense, his senses alert in a manner that only meant one thing: imminent danger.

He took stock of his situation quickly, making a mental catalog. He was in a small holding cell of sorts, his arms strapped behind him at odd, painful angles and his shirt and boots had been removed. Never good signs.

He blinked against the harsh white light that was suddenly directed into his face. "Better." The voice—low-pitched and unemotional—belonged to a man with a shaved head and a scar running from his left ear to below the right side of his jaw. He stood in front of Zack, only a few feet away with his head cocked, watching Zack with what could only be described as an anticipatory expression. "You with me now?" he asked after a moment.

Zack supposed he could fake incognizance, but it'd be a waste of time. Deciding he'd rather face whatever this asshole had in store for him head on, he lifted his head and allowed the hard glint in his eyes to be his answer.

The Specialist straightened his posture, his jaw going tight at the challenge. "Good." He painted a conciliatory smile on his face. The movement pulled at the scar tissue on his upper lip and it curved into a sneer. "I've never had to pleasure of questioning a SOLDIER before," the man said, conversationally. "I'm curious to see what it takes to break you." He made his way over to where a black suitcase was propped open on the floor. He bent, retrieved a long, thin blade. "Shall we begin?" he asked, walking closer.

Zack didn't suppose he was actually expected to answer, so he didn't. Instead, he watched the glint of surgical steel beneath harsh light and fought down bile and memories.

The first cuts were shallow, almost gentle in the way the blade traced along his skin, but the sting of air and trickles of blood prevented that illusion.

"Where's the Cetra?" The question was casual, in the same neutral tone as one may have asked, "How's the weather?" But the bite of blade on skin was deeper that time and the touch couldn't be confused with gentle.


The Specialist made a noncommittal sound and continued carving; his hands steady, his motions fluid. Every so often he would switch blades, but his expression remained completely unchanged.

Muscles spasmed and blood dripped and cut after cut criss crossed flesh and sinew until Zack wasn't sure where one ended and another began. Pain muddled his brain and he used his training to narrow his thoughts onto more pleasant things. Like dark chocolate hair and soft, warm eyes. Lips that were parted, yielding beneath his... Fuck! A sharp lick of pain re-focused his thoughts to skin and steel and flowing red.
"The Cetra. Just tell me where she is and this," the Specialist gave the blade beneath Zack's ribs a sharp twist, "all stops."

"Fuck. You."

The other man made a disapproving 'tsk' and began again.

Twenty minutes and what felt like a hundred cuts later, the question was repeated. "Where's the Cetra?" Muscle and tissue separated and a thick stream of blood snaked its way down Zack's sweat slicked chest and over his twitching abdomen.

Zack clenched his teeth. "Fuck you!" he panted. He dropped his head forward, sweat dripping from his nose and onto the blood red floor.

"Hm. Not the answer I was looking for. Perhaps a new toy is in order."

The suitcase beside them was rummaged through again and Zack heard the distinct sound of an EMR crackle to life.

"Is there a limit to what a SOLDIER body can handle?" The Specialist asked, swiveling back to Zack.

The rod tapped against Zack almost casually, but there was nothing casual about the pain that ripped through him. It lanced though his muscles with all the subtlety of a bolt of lightening, jerked them tight and hard to the point where he felt like they would snap—that he would snap.

Back arched and teeth grit, Zack refused to give anything. This guy was a mere novice compared to Hojo, and Zack had survived that, hadn't he? Maybe not as wholly as he'd have liked to believe, but now wasn't the time for self analysis. Now was the time to tap into the reserves he'd had in that dark, hopeless lab. Slowly, deliberately, Zack lifted his head and smiled. "Gonna... have to do better than that..." he goaded. He almost laughed at the other man's baffled expression. Clearly this was not the reaction he was used to. "Lemme guess," Zack continued, annoyed at the lisp his split lip caused. "You weren't SOLDIER material?" There was a superior sneer to his words, a silent taunt that had scar tissue and knuckles tightening.

There was no pseudo-civility when the EMR struck him again. All pretense of calm was gone and Zack took the pain of the baton to his face and fists to his gut with the smug knowledge that it hadn't been him to break.

"Teef, would you stop pacin'; you're driving me and Red nuts." The voice, gruff and lethargic filtered into her cell from the duct-work overhead. "You've been at it for hours. Sit down. You ain't doin' anyone any good by driving yourself up the wall."

He was right. She knew this, but it didn't stop the worrisome thoughts from swamping her. The cot was lumpy and decidedly uncomfortable, Tifa thought, flopping onto her back. She sighed up at the gray ceiling and placed her hands behind her head, her boot swinging up and down across her knee.

She had spent the first ten minutes after waking trying to pry open the door of her cell, but it was reinforced with some sort of shielding that she couldn't place. She'd once seen a Materia that cast a protective barrier over its user, and she wondered briefly if Shin-Ra had someone managed to harness that as well.
Wouldn't surprise her, she thought now, tossing the door an angry look. Shin-Ra was capable of many things she'd never before dreamed. Thinking that brought a familiar knot into her stomach and she once more wondered where Zack was. Was he all right?

As if in answer to her silent thoughts, the doors hissed open and Zack was flung inside.

He hit the floor hard, curled to his side.

"Zack!" Tifa was off the cot in a flash, glaring at the retreating guards as she knelt beside Zack. He rolled onto his back and blinked his one good eye up at her. Oh, Gods...what had they done to him? He was bruised, bloodied and she thought she could smell charred flesh.

"Teef? What's going on?"

"It's Zack," she called, her voice shaking. Blood. There was so much blood covering him. Softer, she whispered, "Zack?"

He stirred, a small groan parting his cracked lips. "Am I still pretty?" he asked.

Tifa placed her hands to his cheeks, smiled gently down at him. "Yes, Princess."

He winced as he chuckled.

"What's going on?" Barret demanded again.

"They hurt him, Barret." She couldn't seem to steady her voice. Her whole body was trembling with rage.

"Fuckers!" The wall gave a loud thud.

Tifa couldn't have agreed more, but refrained—barely—from vocalizing her anger. Her hands fluttered above Zack, unsure of where to grab him. He was covered in lacerations, some still weeping crimson and others dried open, so deep she could see bone. She swallowed the thickness in her throat and shook herself. "Come on, let's get you off the floor." Careful, she slipped her arms around him. "Ready?" she asked.

He gave a slight, careful nod, and together they stumbled him to the cot. Once there, she propped his head on the pillow, as gently as she could, and winced whenever he did. "All right?" she asked and received a small sound of affirmation.

"Tifa...?"

"I'm here." Trembling fingers brushed the forever stray lock of black from his forehead. Beneath the caked blood there were ugly bruises and swelling. They'd really worked him over. She looked around the barren cell and cursed. She didn't even have anything to clean him up with.

After a few minutes, when his breaths had evened out, not so labored, she shifted away and was surprised to find her wrist suddenly shackled in his hand as pain doused blue eyes bored into hers. "Stay," he rasped.

Her heart constricted at the way his voice broke on the word. She smiled tremulously down at him and lowered herself back onto the cot beside him. "I'm not going anywhere," she promised.

Satisfied, Zack rolled onto his side, keeping her wrist in his possession so that she followed; her arm snaked across his abdomen and her forehead pressed to his shoulderblade. She waited until his
breathing settled once more before she pressed her lips to his skin and fought back the hot sting of tears. Oh, Zack.

Zack couldn't say how long he had been awake, drifting between awareness and not, listening to Tifa's soft breathing when the sound of the door hissing open startled her awake and caused his body to tense painfully. Her arm tightened around him marginally, afraid to squeeze his wounded ribs, but wanting to let him know they weren't alone.

"On your feet." The order was issued from behind a visor and gun.

Stubbornly, Tifa shook her head. "He's had enough! He's not going to talk. Leave him be."

An all too familiar suit stepped into the cell behind the guard and a scarred lip turned blood cold. "Oh, we intend to, sweetheart. We're here for you."

"No." Zack, fully aware now, tried to sit up; failed. "Tifa..." He fumbled for her hand. They couldn't take her. No, he wouldn't let her go. His movements reopened several of his wounds, smeared blood across the sheets.

"It's okay, Zack. Shhh...it's okay." She squeezed his fingers, attempted a reassuring smile.

"Tifa." He knew his eyes were bleak...and afraid.

"I won't tell," she whispered to him as she eased him back down. "Aerith will be safe."

What about you? He wanted to shout.

"Move!" The guard grabbed a fistful of her hair, jerked her away from the cot.

"Tifa!" Zack reached for her even as the guard tried to restrain him. Furious, he tossed the man off and fought his way to his feet, swaying. Two more guards entered the room. Fists and boots dropped him, not once but twice. However, all his struggles amounted to was nothing more than reopened wounds and pain. But he still tried. He had to try. "Tifa!"

Arms craned behind his back and head jerked up by the roots of his hair, Zack could only watch helpless as Tifa was hauled from the cell, her voice pleading. "Stop. Please, stop hurting him!"

The nameless Specialist crouched down in front of Zack, smiled his sick little smile, and nudged Zack's chin with his EMR. "I'm going to enjoy breaking her." He brought the baton down hard against Zack's temple causing the room to lose focus and everything to blur.

"Zack? What's going on over there? Zack!" Barret pounded the wall but Zack couldn't bring himself to answer him. He tried to hold onto lucidity but the room spun and fell dark once again. "Tifa!..."

The room was small, bloodstained, and humid. The splatters across the floor were a fresh, vibrant red and Tifa knew without a doubt that she was in the same place they'd had Zack. She stared at the blood and felt anger sear her veins. Bastards.

Across the room the suited man stared at her, but not in the manner she was used to being stared at. There was a cold indifference in his stare, a look of calculation that made her feel supremely uncomfortable...and afraid. She shifted against her restraints, testing them.
"Don't bother," the man said, stepping away from the wall. "If a SOLDIER couldn't break them, you're certainly not going to. And he tried, oh how he tried."

"Bastard," she seethed.

The cool, flat edge of a blade was against her skin in a heartbeat. "That wasn't very nice." It traced along her brow and she fought the urge to shut her eyes when the tip nudged at the corner before sliding along her jaw. "Now, be a good girl and tell me where I can find the Cetra."

"Go to hell."

"Again, not very nice." The blade shifted, trailed along the slope of her breast through her top and back up beneath her chin where he used the point to tilt her head back. "You're very beautiful," he murmured, contemplative.

Tifa stared straight ahead even as he shifted alongside her, his breath hot in her ear. "I could cut you, scar you, take your beauty away and leave you ugly. Hideous."

The clinical detachment in his voice told her that he could and probably would do just that, but she refused to let him cower her. Aerith was counting on her. Zack was counting on her. She wouldn't fail them.

The specialist inclined his head, watched her eyes carefully. "No," he stated flatly. "You're not a vain creature, are you Miss Lockhart." It wasn't a question, and the finality of it had warning bells going off in her head. "Your file says you're a fighter." He stepped back, cocked his head. "Zangan-Ryu to be specific, am I right?"

Did he honestly expect an answer? She stared at the wall, refusing to so much as blink.

"That's a hand to hand technique. Quite advanced." He set the knife down, his fingers walking over a variety of other tools. "I'm told you are quite skilled." He lifted a pair of pliers, then a hammer, tested their weight in his palm. "One has to wonder, how good would a fighter be without the use of their hands?"

Tifa's eyes snapped away from the wall and widened.

"Pride," he whispered, satisfaction in the place of indifference in his voice. "Always the hardest to break." He approached her and the anticipation in his eyes turned her stomach. She thought of Zack, how beaten he was and how bloody.

Shiva...

She refused to flinch, not even when she felt the pliers grip her trembling index finger, felt them tighten. There was a quick, vicious twist followed by an unnatural snap. Her breath caught behind her teeth, tears flooding her eyes.

"The Cetra?" The Specialist moved the pliers to her other finger.

She exhaled through her nose. Shook her head: no.

Another twist.

Tifa lifted her face, squeezed her eyes shut and bit back her scream.

"The Cetra?"
She pressed her lips together. Nodded: yes. When the Specialist leaned closer, she spat on him.

Her satisfaction at his mottled rage caused her to laugh, but her dark humor didn't last. The Specialist reached for the hammer and then she was screaming.

The cell was quiet when Zack regained consciousness and it took him a moment to remember where he was. When he did, near panic had him bolting upright, his bruised ribs groaning at the movement. "Tifa!" Nauseating dizziness threatened to drop him again, but he shook it off.

He pushed himself to his feet; sore and stiff, but healing. His Mako enhanced body was good for somethings, he thought.

Tifa lay on the cot, her back to him, facing the wall.

"Tifa?"

Damp eyelashes fluttered on pale cheeks but her eyes didn't open. "No..." her voice was hoarse and frail.

He leaned over her, placed his hand on her shoulder to roll her over and suddenly her voice rose, sharp and ragged. Alarmed, he surveyed her quickly and found the cause of her pain almost immediately.

_Fuckers! Miserable rotten motherfucking Monsters!_

Her hands were destroyed. Broken from fingertip to wrist, shattered and bloodied.

And Zack broke.

There was no other word for it.

He fractured into a thousand irreparable bits. He staggered, fell to his knees and screamed. He punched the floor, left a dent in the steel. And another. And another. His chest heaved and he wanted to tear the walls down with his bare hands.

"...Zack...?" Her voice, weak, and so, so tired, broke through his rage. Her eyes were open now, and she was staring at him, concern and pain warring together.

"Here. Right here." He moved onto the cot, careful not to jostle her too much.

"Are you...okay?"

He held back a choked laugh. Leave it to Tifa to be broken and bruised and worried about him. He slipped his arms around her, cradled her head to his chest. "No," he answered honestly. "Don't talk, okay. Rest now."

"Safe..." She closed her eyes. "Didn't tell."

"I know," he whispered and she drifted back to unconsciousness he pressed his face into the thickness of her hair and wept.
They came for them during the night and Zack barely kept his sanity each time, knowing the pain Tifa was enduring, while he was helpless to stop them. It was worse then, when it wasn't him strapped to the rack and bleeding, when they took her away and he couldn't do a damn thing about it. They had even taken them together—the Specialist betting that Zack would break to save Tifa. And damn that fucker, he almost had. It was only Tifa's steady, "Don't you dare," whisper that kept him quiet even when she was screaming.

He never wanted to hear her scream again.

Barret had asked through the walls repeatedly about Tifa, and Zack hadn't had the heart to answer. And then, after a while, the question had changed from, "Where's Tifa?" to "How bad is she?" and Zack knew that they'd taken Barret from his cell too.

And still, he hadn't been unable to answer. Physically, they were all wrecked, Zack knew, but he had no idea what type of experience AVALANCHE had with this sort of thing. SOLDIERs were trained for it, schooled in it—physically and emotionally—and as hard as it was for him to endure, it was harder for him to know that they were doing it without that edge.

Guilt warred with anger and Zack cursed himself, Shin-Ra and his gods-damned SOLDIER body that wouldn't fucking heal fast enough. Bruised, bloody, and sore enough to not want to breathe, he took Tifa in his arm when they finally dumped her back into the cell. He cradled her against his chest and tried to soothe her when the pain broke out in sweat and fractured cries. He brushed matted hair from her forehead and wiped ineffectually at the blood beneath her nose and on her lips. "I'm sorry," he whispered, his voice tight. So damn sorry.

And somehow, she managed a small nod. "It's okay."

And he darkened inside.

Because it wasn't fucking okay.

What it was, was sick and twisted and wrong, and he'd make them sorry. For every wound, for every scream, for everything.

With that thought running on repeat, Zack leaned back against the cot with Tifa still cradled to him and watched the door and waited. They'd have to kill him this time. They weren't taking her again. Something was wrong.

Zack's eyes snapped open and reflexively his hold on Tifa tightened. She made a soft, displeased sound and he forced his grip to relax as he considered what had woken him.

It was dark. The overhead lights were out, which wasn't completely unexpected. Shin-Ra liked to keep their prisoners as uncomfortable and scared as possible. Turning off the lights was a tactic he'd seen done countless times before. But it was also quiet. Abnormally quiet.

The phrase: unnaturally still, crept into his head, and Zack straightened, completely alert.
The door.

Tension coiled his muscles, stood the hairs on his neck on end. The door was open.

Carefully, he lowered Tifa to the floor before he unfolded his legs, his pants stiff and tight with sweat and blood. He made his way cautiously toward the cell door, grimacing as his knee—the one the hammer had pounded—popped with each step.

When he reached the opening, and his hands gripped the steel casing of the door, a part of him expected the guards to come busting in and tackle him to the ground, laughing over his folly. He waited a beat, then one more.

No one came.

He poked his head out and found the hall was as silent and as dark as the holding cell.

Holding his injured ribs, Zack ventured a few feet outside of the cell, still expectant of an unseen attack. He flexed his hands, cracking the dried blood on his forearms and scanned the corridor. A few feet away the guards that should have had him pinned to the floor, lay dead with pools of blood soaking through Shin-Ra blue.

Zack swung his gaze up and searched the shadows for signs of anyone, but the short hall was empty. Whoever had killed the guards and unlocked the cell was long gone. He could wonder about the who and why of the situation later, he decided. After he healed Tifa and got the others.

He knelt beside one of the bodies and tore open the man's protective vest—lotta good that seemed to do—to search the pockets for the potions he knew would be there; three of them, standard issue. He did the same to the other guard.

"Thank you." He kissed the green tubes.

Back inside the cell he eased Tifa up from the floor and tilted her head back over his arm. "Hey," he shook her gently.

Eyes, bloodshot and still glassy with pain, blinked up at him and he felt guilt ball into lead and sink in his chest. "Drink," he held the rim of the vial to her mouth.

She glanced down at the green liquid, then up at him."You first," she refused.

Of course she'd be pig-headed about this, he thought with a shake of his head. "Tifa, now's not the time to be stubborn—"

"I know..." she agreed, wincing as she tried to sit up. Her breath hissed between her teeth and she paused a moment before speaking again. "So don't be. If we have a chance to get...out, we need you...to be healed...okay..."

She had a point, damn her, but he couldn't just let her stay like she was. So broken.

They'd broken Cloud too, his inner voice reminded him. Zack shoved that voice back by force of will. He couldn't think of that now; couldn't dwell on how much Shin-Ra really had stolen, broken, and ruined. He especially couldn't think of blood stained desert and a promise made in haste. Not when the person he'd promised to protect was lying beaten in his arms.

Zack found his gaze straying to her hands—black and swollen and nearly unrecognizable. It had been hours and after repeated tortures without any healing, or any help, he knew there was a good
chance she was permanently damaged.

He closed his eyes, inhaled a sharp breath. Stop it. *Focus, Fair.*

"I have three potions for each of us. Just take yours for me, please," he whispered against her temple. "Please, Tifa, for me."

Her lips parted, only a bit, and Zack couldn't say if it was in acceptance or rebuttal, but he didn't give her a chance either way. He tilted the potion, trickled it into her mouth.

She grimaced and her eyes watered as she coughed and spluttered a bit, but when the bruises on her face shimmered and started to fade, Zack felt a swell of relief and delivered the other. When he was opening the third she shook her head at him, lips pursed.

"No." Her voice was firmer—if a bit raspy—and her eyes fully open. "You."

She was set, he noted. That stubborn tilt of her chin was a dead giveaway. Grudgingly, Zack complied with her order and welcomed the warmth of the potion into his system.

Uncapping the next potion he felt his muscles in his abdomen twitch and then tighten and he spasmed. His body clenched in on itself violently and a wave of pure agony swept through him.

"Zack!" Tifa's voice sounded very far away even though she was right beside him.

He grappled for her as he shuddered, tried to hold onto her—onto consciousness—as another sharp pain lanced his abdomen and he felt like he was being ripped in two.

Internal injuries. He should have known. They were a bitch to heal, even with the strongest potions, and he'd seen soldiers bleed out from the wounds reopening without adequate treatment. He needed another potion, but he was shaking too hard to hold the vial and he could already taste the blood in the back of his throat.

His head jerked back as another convulsion stole his breath and Zack swore his insides were on fire. Cool arms curved around his shoulders and Tifa used her body weight to hold him steady before pressing her lips over his, forcing tingling liquid into his mouth, down his throat. After a moment his tremors slowed. They stopped altogether when she poured another vial into his mouth.

He blinked the last remaining pain away and the room came swimming back into focus. Red-flecked, chocolate eyes stared down at him, worry creased between them, tears at the edges. Zack pushed her hair back, curved his palm to her cheek. "Tifa?" He couldn't keep the shaking emotion from his voice, and he didn't bother to try. He was too raw and everything was so twisted and so wrong.

But then she smiled down at him, weak and still tight with pain, but she smiled, and something inside of him righted itself.

He thumbed the edge of her lips. "Any excuse for a kiss, huh?"

She choked out a laugh. "Zack." Her head dipped over his and her hair tickled his neck. "You're impossible."

Zack eased back, levered himself up on his elbows. He could see it when the realization of their circumstances settled on her and her eyes narrowed. She stiffened, immediately more alert. "What's happened?" she asked.

"That's a godsdamn good fuckin' question."
Over his shoulder Zack acknowledged the arrival of Barret. The AVALANCHE leader was bruised and bore a number of cuts on his face and chest, but he was steady on his feet and didn't appear in need of immediate healing.

"Your cell unlocked too?" Zack asked.

"Nope. Just developed the ability to walk through walls," Barret deadpanned. Then his face changed into a look of such pain that Zack wondered if he'd been mistaken and the other man was worse off than he'd thought.

"Aw, fuckin' hell, Teef." Barret strode forward, dropped to one knee beside them, his dark eyes murderous as he took in Tifa's pale face.

"Hey, big guy," Tifa greeted and fought hard for another smile.

Barret swallowed thickly, cupped her chin in his big hand, caressed her cheek with his calloused thumb.

She raised her arm to return the gesture, and winced. She didn't look at her hand though, Zack noticed.

"Aw, shit." Barret's face scrunched when he finally noticed the full extent of her injuries. Even after the potions, Tifa's fingers were disjointed, misshapen and discolored. The bones were beyond broken.

"Don't cry," Tifa whispered, holding his gaze. Then she bold-face lied. "I'm okay."

And Zack felt that right thing inside of him clutch. She'd never put herself above the others, he realized. No matter what. That fact made him want to hold her and shake her all at once.

Barret seemed to have the same problem, because he just shook his head, flustered, and swore softly again. When he lifted his eyes to Zack there was determination in them that went deeper than the anything Barret had shown before.

Silently, they mutually agreed to take care of her. They had to find something stronger than standard potions for her, Zack knew, or there wouldn't be any chance to save her hands. A materia, maybe...or Aerith.

If Aerith was even still around, he thought, hands tunneling through his hair. Tifa had told him where Aerith was hidden, but that was hours and hours ago. The only thing that had given him hope of her safety was their continued interrogation. But even that had stopped, and now there was darkness and death just outside their door.

"We should be going now." From that doorway Red looked in on them, but didn't enter. The voice, soft, with carefully enunciated words, was still surprising coming from an animal. His solitary gold eye drifted from the trio in the cell to the hall, then back again.

They did need to move; to get off of the containment floor and find a way out, Zack knew. Staying as they were was only inviting trouble, and they'd endured more than their fair share of that.

"I agree with the giant kitty-wolf thing." Barret said.

Zack pushed to his feet. He reached down to help Tifa up. "Yeah, let's go."

"I can manage," she protested, face flushed, but Zack very purposefully ignored it and circled her
"You got her?" Barret asked, also ignoring the indelicate snort of his teammate.

"Yeah." Zack nodded, and to his surprise Barret simply inclined his head and followed Red into the hall.

Once the group was out in the corridor Red took point, his nose inches from the ground. He made a chuffing sound, that to Zack sounded like a cross between disgust and fear.

"What the hell is going on?" Barret demanded, standing beside one of the dead guards. The shadows made it hard to see his expression, but Zack had no doubt it was a grim one.

"No human could have done this," Red murmured, sniffing the corpse, a slight rumble in his throat. He flicked a look up at Zack.

Zack held up his hands. "I didn't do it."

"No," Red acknowledged, but there was speculation in his tone. He moved forward, haunches high with tension. His eye gleamed in the shadows. "There's no light any farther down. I suggest we stay close together."

Tifa nodded. "Yes, we stay together."

"Agreed. One second, though." Zack stepped to the side, between the open cells, and yanked on a handle hidden in the wall. There was a pop and snap as the lock gave way and a drawer slid out. Inside he found spare boots and a shirt. He pulled them on quickly, rubbed his hands through his hair, pushed the mussed pieces back out of his eyes and straightened his shoulders.

"All set now, Princess?" Barret quirked a brow.

"Yeah." Zack slapped his back as he passed. "Couldn't have you drooling over me the whole time we're trying to get out of here." At Barret's disgusted grunt, Zack added, "I saw you looking. Don't deny it."

Red cocked his head, confusion evident on his furred face.

"Ignore them," Tifa instructed.

"They are a...unique pair," Red replied, thoughtful.

"Don't I know it," she murmured, but affection was heavy in her tired voice.

Zack stepped beside her, rested his hand on her shoulder. She was still far too pale for his liking.

"Doing okay?"

She nodded but didn't quite meet his stare. "We should get going."

There was nothing more he could do for her, he knew, and they did need to be moving, but Zack hated to push her.

Sensing his doubt, she finally lifted her eyes to meet his. "I'll be okay, really. Let's go."

With Red in the lead, the others fell in line and made their way from the small side corridor to the main hall quickly. As the door hissed open Zack flinched at the unwelcome smell of blood that tickled his nose. A glance back at Tifa and Barret revealed both to be clearly on edge, but it didn't
seem that either had noticed the change in the air; in front of him, Red growled.

The main hall was also dark, but along the walls there were deeper shades of black, splotches and
smears that had Zack holding his hand up, halting the group. He knew what those darker marks
were, even in the pitch black.

"What is it?" Tifa came up beside him.

He didn't want to alarm her any more than he needed to, but he didn't want to see her rubbing up
against the blood splatter either. There was a lot of it; far too much for just one person. "Stay away
from the walls," he said slowly. "Stay close together." You'd better be all right, Aerith.

"We'll find her."

Startled, Zack glanced down at her. She met his surprised look with a worried but determined one of
her own, and he realized that he had spoken aloud. "Thank you," he said softly.

"I can smell her." Red's quiet voice drew their attention.

Zack whipped his head around. "Take me to her."

With a nod, Red took off down the hall with the others following the swish of flame at the end of his
tail. They reached the door to the stairwell and on Zack's nod, Barret pushed it open. There was a
low hum and the security lanterns flickered to life along the hall and the stairs a moment later. The
secondary generator, Zack realized. The one that came on when the emergency exits were accessed.
It wasn't run off the same Mako supply as the main power grid or the first back-up generator.

"Oh, Gods..." Tifa staggered a bit, her eyes wide as she took in the smears of black and red along the
walls, dragged across the floor. Slumped in the far corner was a dead infantryman, his insides spilling
onto his lap and the floor.

"Fuck." Barret wiped his mouth.


"What the fuck happened here?" Barret growled, lumbering down the steps after Red.

For that, Zack had no answer, but whatever had happened had happened fast. There were no alarms,
no signs of any other persons aside from Shin-Ra employees dead or wounded. It was unlike
anything he'd seen... and it reminded him of rumors.

Rumors from the Wutai war. About a man single handedly taking out an entire enemy camp without
so much as a warning flare going off...

The trail of blood and smears was never ending it seemed and as they got closer to the floor that
Hojo's lab was on, Zack couldn't help but feel an anticipatory tingle at the prospect of finding the
Professor dead. He imagined the blood, the open sightless eyes...

"Zack!"

Head jerking up, Zack looked at Barret. "What?" he snapped.

"Sorry to interrupt your fuckin' daydream, but we got shit to deal with." Barret gestured towards the
metal dome on the outskirts of the lab. The one that housed Jenova. Only now, it didn't. There was a
gaping hole in the containment tank and Zack took a step back.
Had Jenova done this? Had that thing gotten free and started wreaking havoc upon the people that had imprisoned it?

"Did it get away?" he asked aloud.

"It looks like it went up." Red said helpfully as he motioned his nose toward the specimen elevator.

"Then I say we head the fuck down," Barret commented.

"Take me to Aerith." Was all Zack said.

Red nodded and led them past the containment units and the elevators, and back into the stairwell. A few flights down and he stopped. "The scent of your friend is stronger," Red stated. "I believe we should enter here."

"Then let's get her and get the hell gone already!"

Zack took a breath. He didn't blame Barret for being strung out, they all were, and knowing they were closer to Aerith, Zack felt his heart accelerate and that tension mount. Was she all right? Had they hurt her? Had whatever had done this hurt her? "Lead the way," he told Red, steeling himself for whatever lay ahead.

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She hadn't moved.

That was the first thing Tifa thought when Red stopped outside the bathroom door. The second thought was much more grim and she wondered if Aerith hadn't fled because she couldn't.

Don't, Tifa told herself. Don't think like that. Aerith would be okay. She had to be.

Her gaze found its way back to Zack and she noticed the tightness at his mouth and the darkening of his eyes as his hands flexed at his sides. He was worried, far more so than he was trying to let on. Aerith was extremely important to him, Tifa knew. She still didn't have a clear picture of their history—she hadn't asked too many questions and he hadn't offered up too many answers—but she knew that there was a history. The bond between them was obvious and deep.

"We goin' in?" Barret asked, breaking the long pause.

"I will." Zack's voice held an off pitch to it that had Tifa wanting to reach for him.

Not that she could, she thought, refusing to look down at her ruined hands. Her shoulders shuddered on her next breath and she forced her anger down. Now was not the time.

"We shouldn't split up—" Barret began.

"Let him," Tifa said softly. "We'll wait right here," she told Zack, giving him a longer look. If you need us.

He nodded once and, straightening, he pushed open the bathroom door.

"He's got one minute," Barret grumbled, crossing his arms over his barrel chest.

Red chuffed in his throat, but otherwise remained silent. His large head swiveled back and forth, and his haunches never seemed to relax. There was still danger near, or the lingering scent of it, and it
had the animal spooked.

Tifa shifted on her feet, her own agitation and anticipation making her edgy. Just when she thought she was going to crawl out of her skin with worry, the door swung back out and Zack was helping a very pale, very shaken Aerith from the bathroom. His hands rested securely on her shoulders, relief evident on his face.

"You're all right!" Tifa let out the breath she had been holding.

"A bit cramped," Aerith nodded, rubbing her thigh. "But all right."

"You were in the duct the whole time?" Barret asked, incredulous. "And they never found you?" He made a noise somewhere between disbelief and sardonic amusement. "Fuckin' idiots."

"It was a good hiding spot." Aerith gave Tifa a weak smile. "When none of you came back, I feared the worst. I thought about trying to escape, or trying a rescue... but by the time I'd come up with any ideas the screaming started." A shudder. "So many voices... so much screaming..."

"Shh, it's okay," Zack rubbed her shoulders, gently kissed her hair. "You're safe. We've got you now."

Aerith rested her head on Zack's shoulder. "What happened here?"

"No one knows." Tifa told her.

"What about you? Did you see anything?" Barret asked.

"No." A shaking hand passed over green eyes. "But I heard the screams." She looked up at Zack then turned her attention to Tifa and said solemnly. "All of them."

Tifa flinched.

Aerith stepped forward. "You should have told them," she said, reproach in her voice. "I didn't want you... any of you—to be hurt because of me."

"It wasn't because of you," Barret stated, his voice gentle, surprising the other woman. Tifa's mouth twitched up a bit at that. Barret, when not bellowing and making a scene, was really quite tender. It sometimes was more jarring to see that side of him than the rough one.

"Shin-Ra woulda found a way to hurt us, one way or another," he continued. "They've been trying to get us since before you came along, so don't worry none about it, okay?"

Aerith seemed less than convinced, but she nodded. "Okay."

"Can you heal her?" Zack moved beside them. He took Tifa's hand in his, lifted it for Aerith's inspection.

Aerith studied the swollen fingers and bruised palm carefully. Then, with a sad sigh, she said, "No, I can't. Her fingers are already starting to mend like this... if I heal her now..." Her eyes were wide and full of regret.

Tifa met Zack's gaze. Hers resigned; his determined.

"Barret." He didn't look away from her.

"What?"
"Hold her."

"What?" Both Tifa and Barret were confused.

"Here." Aerith seemed to know what Zack was thinking, and pulled off her short jacket, and rolled it. She held it up to Tifa's lips. "If you need something to bite."

Tifa frowned, then realization came. "Oh. Oh!" Oh, hell.

Between Zack's fingers, her hands trembled slightly and Zack's eyes softened on hers. He bowed his head so that his forehead rested on hers. "I'll be fast," he whispered.

Barret circled her waist from behind, steadying and secure. She heard him swear into her hair.

Zack moved so that he was directly in front of her, swallowing her entire vision. "Ready?"

Her breaths increased, became shallow, but she nodded once and closed her eyes.

A quick jerk and everything snapped; the sound sickeningly loud in the silent hall.

Oh, Gods, she was going to throw up! Tifa stumbled, nearly fell as pain radiated from her hands through her entire body. She would have fallen if not for Barret's sure hold and Zack's steadying presence.

"Here, I have her. I have her." Aerith pushed Zack aside and captured Tifa's hands in her own. She bowed her head, her voice faint yet clear as she asked the Planet for help in aiding her friend.

Warmth, like a soothing breeze, wafted over them and Tifa felt it tingle through her system. She watched in fascination as her hands became less swollen, less black, began to look normal again. She couldn't help but be startled, awed, and even a bit afraid of the amount of energy she felt coming from Aerith. It was intoxicating.

"Enough." Tifa breathed, pulling herself back as Aerith started to sway on her feet. "Zack, make her stop."

"I can make it better," Aerith refused, determined.

"You have," Zack assured her. "Enough, now." He placed his hand over theirs and Tifa felt the energy flow wan, then snap like a frayed rope.

Looking like she was very much drugged, Aerith blinked hazy eyes. "Okay, now?"

Tifa flexed her fingers. They were still a bit tender—like she'd been sparring without her gloves—but they were healed. Healed. She blinked back the sting of tears. Zack brushed his thumb across her cheek, his gaze intense. There was so much unspoken between them, so much to say, but all Tifa could come up with was, "Thank you." Then emphatically to Aerith. "Thank you."

Aerith smiled a tired smile.

"That's some gift you got there," Barret whistled.

"The Cetra were renowned for their healing abilities," Red informed them. "It would appear that fact is true."

A hint of pink colored Aerith's cheeks. "As much as I like hearing you praise me and my lineage, don't you guys think we should be getting out of here?"
"We should definitely be moving," Zack agreed.

The group walked down the corridor, Red in the lead with Barret flanking, the hall lights flickered and the whir of the elevators could be heard. Slowly, the group turned, and silent, they watched the glowing numbers blink. The elevator was stopped at the top. The President's floor.

"We couldn't be that lucky..." Barret muttered. He looked at Zack. "You think?"

"Only one way to find out."

Tifa shook her head when Zack looked over at her. "Don't even think of telling us to hide. We're coming with you." She gripped Aerith's hand in her own.

"Absolutely," Aerith agreed with a fierce scowl. "No way am I climbing back into that vent and if you try and make me I'll poke your eyes out."

"Vicious little thing," Barret commented, with something akin to admiration in his tone.

"You have no idea," Zack shot over his shoulder.

The two men kept the banter up through the halls and Tifa couldn't ever put into words how much she appreciated them for it. For every corpse or heavy smear of blood there was another set of distracting quips and snide comebacks.

It wasn't until they stood outside the President's door that everyone was silent again.

"This could change everything," Barret said finally.

"Ready?" Zack glanced at Tifa. She nodded. *As I'll ever be.*
Escape from Shin-Ra Tower

The President's office wasn't shadowed or blood smeared when they entered, but fully lit and exactly as Zack remembered it. Somehow that fact and the bright overhead lights made the scene in front of them all the more ominous. Face-down on his garish desk, the President of the Shin-Ra Electric Power Company stared at them with glazed, unseeing eyes and a long, painfully familiar, sword buried deep in his back.

The sight of it stopped Zack in his tracks, and as he stared at the gleaming blade, a mixture of emotions bubbled up in him that couldn't be pinpointed into any one specific. Beside him, he felt, rather than saw, Tifa tense, and wondered if she recognized the sword as well. He scoffed at his own stupidity. Of course she did.

No one saw Masamune and forgot it.

Zack tore his gaze away from the President long enough to scan the room for anyone else, and not seeing anyone, he then surveyed it for anything out of the ordinary. His jaw tightened when he saw the Buster Sword mounted on the wall behind the desk. Shinra must have shelved it there like some sort of trophy.

"Dead," Barret's voice was soft, a bit awed and delayed, as though he were having a hard time believing his own eyes. The AVALANCHE leader edged in past Zack, astute enough to still be on guard despite the abandoned appearance of the office. He rubbed the the shoulder of his gun-arm, shaking his head. "I don't fuckin' believe it. Shinra is dead."

"That sword..." Tifa's eyes were focused so intently on the weapon that Zack doubted she registered anything else at the moment.

It was eerie to see her approaching Masamune. Like standing inside of his own dream and watching the action, but not part of it. For a split second her leather shorts and sleeveless top were tan fringe and beaded leather. He blinked the ghost from his eyes and when she was within a few feet of the President's body, he moved toward her. He didn't want her touching it. It was irrational, he knew, but she couldn't touch it. It was tainted and...evil.

"Tifa." Zack's voice was sharp, and it did the trick. Startled, Tifa snapped her head towards him.

"It's Sephiroth's" she said, and the acid that dipped off the name made clear her taste of the man.

"Yes." There was no use pretending otherwise.

"Who the fuck cares who did it," Barret strode up to the desk; pointed. "This is the end of Shin-Ra! We should be—Hey!" Barret reeled back as a man darted up from behind the chair, stumbling to get away.

Simultaneously Zack and Barret lunged after him. They gripped the man's wildly swinging arms, jerked him to an abrupt and painful halt.

"P-p-p-please...d-d-don't kill m-m-m-me..."

"Looks like there's a little troll in here," Barret sneered.

Skin slick with sweat and ruddy at the cheeks, Zack recognized the man as a Shin-Ra lackey named Palmer.
"What the hell happened here, twitchy?" Barret asked, the full power of his glare causing Palmer to practically shrink in on himself.

"Se-Sephiroth," Palmer stammered. "Sephiroth was here."

That name sent ice and heat through Zack in alternating intervals. He had suspected. He had assumed...the sword being Masamune and all, but to hear it...It wasn't a pleasant sensation. "Did you see him?" Zack demanded with a hard shake. "Did you actually see Sephiroth?"

"Y-yeah, I saw him." Palmer's head was in danger of falling off he nodded it so vigorously.

"Don't lie to me," Zack warned through clenched teeth, the banked green in his eyes flickering dangerously. He felt the urge to shake Palmer again, and decided against fighting it.

"Zack...?" Aerith's soft voice was alarmed. "I think you're hurting him."

Good, Zack thought, because that's damn well what he'd intended. But instead of replying to her—he couldn't lose focus...didn't want to see the gentle reproach he knew would be in her eyes—he simply shook his head, ever so slightly, and thinned his lips.

"Ugh, yes, I saw him. Ow! Why would I lie?" Palmer's teeth clacked together and his wheedling voice grated on Zack's already thin nerves. "I heard him too," he added with a grimace.

"What did he say?" Each syllable was bit out and enunciated with a hard jostle.

"He said, um, he said something about not letting us have the Promised Land."

Barret gave Zack a hard look over Palmer's thinning hair. "So, what? The Promised Land really exists and this Sephiroth guy is here to save it from Shin-Ra? Sounds like my kind of guy."

The notion made Zack's lips twist. "No way. Sephiroth is as far away from good as you can get. If Sephiroth is involved, he has—!"

The sudden flooding of light blinded them. It caused Zack to flinch away from the big bay windows and gave Palmer the opportunity to wiggle out of their grasp and run for the door.

Red flicked his tail in silent question.

"Forget him," Zack waved him down, shielding his eyes. Palmer was of no use to them and not worth the effort of chasing. The Shin-Ra helicopter hovered for a moment, its searchlight scanning the office before it lifted up and they watched it land across the way, on the northern heli-pad. A fluttering of white from the open side door caused Zack to straighten. "We have bigger fish, so to speak."

"What the hell?" Barret's brow furrowed. "Who's that clown?"

"Rufus," Zack stated.


"He's here?" Aerith wondered, moving to stand beside Barret. "He was gone for awhile, right?"

"Rumor had it he was exiled for tryin' to off his old man," Barret told her.

"I've heard no one has ever seen him bleed or cry. Do you think he is responsible for..." She made a sweeping gesture toward the older Shinra's body.
Zack eyed the balcony doors. "Only one way to know for sure."

"Zack, wait," Tifa called to him. He turned to see her hauling the Buster Sword off the wall. "You might need this."

He grunted his thanks when she tossed the massive sword at him. The hilt felt solid in his hands, the weight of the weapon a comfort in its familiarity. They shared a long look, and Zack was surprised by the wealth of things he suddenly wanted to say to her. Felt he needed to say, but knew it would have to wait.

There was other shit to deal with at the moment. There was always other shit, he thought with no small amount of bitterness, turning away.

The doors slid open easily, and the group followed Zack out onto the balcony. "You don't have to come—" he started. A quick grumble from Barret and resolved looks from the others silenced him and he nodded. They were a team. "Stay close. The catwalk is tricky."

The upper catwalks ran between all of the adjacent rooftops of the Shin-Ra building, giving emergency workers and repair technicians access if needed. The bars were sturdy and wide enough for all to pass on, but the occasional gust of wind would sneak between the grated metal with enough force to knock a grown man down.

On the opposite rooftop, Rufus Shinra stepped out of the helicopter and met a scrambling Palmer. "That slippery little worm is quick," Barret commented as they descended the wall.

As soon as Rufus was clear of the blades, the helicopter rose again, circling the building, its searchlight trained on the younger Shinra.

"...So, Sephiroth really was here," Rufus was saying as they approached. He lifted his gaze, eyes flicking over them in disinterest and annoyance. "Who are you?" he demanded. His tone was one of a man that was used to getting his way and brimmed to overflowing with superiority.

And Zack disliked him immediately.

Palmer's eyes widened and he floundered, his mouth flapping until he simply squealed and ran for the stairwell across the pad.

Rufus's brow went up at that and his eyes sparked with interest. "You seem to have made quite an impression on Mr. Palmer," he commented idly. He faced Zack directly. "So, I'll ask again: who are you?"

"AVALANCHE," Barret answered, shaking his fist at him.

Rufus brushed his hair back from his eyes and shrugged. "Ah, yes. The infamous eco-terrorists that were such a thorn in my father's side. A motley crew if I ever saw one."

"I'll show you motley crew," Barret snarled with a threatening step forward.

"You do realize you are threatening the new President of Shin-Ra," Rufus pointed out with a small, smug smile.

Barret snorted. "You're only president 'cause your old man is a pincushion in there."

"Be that as it may, I am still the President and you will show me the proper respect." He walked
toward Tifa, inclined his head, raked his eyes over her from head to toe. "Would you like to hear my appointment speech?"

"Not particularly," she replied, holding his gaze.

"Hm." Rufus smirked and walked to where Aerith stood. Red growled a warning low in his throat, and Rufus stayed a sensible distance away. "The population is counting on Shin-Ra to protect them. They work at Shin-Ra, they get their pay and if a terrorist attacks them, then Shin-Ra to the rescue... but not anymore. I plan to do things differently. My father used money as his means of control... I'll use fear. And that Promised Land he so desired will be mine."

"Well, he likes to make speeches like his father." Tifa rolled her eyes.

His smile was cruel when he turned on her. "A little fear can go a long way."

Zack had heard just about enough. Reaching out, he grabbed Aerith's arm, pulled her to his side and then moved her between him and Barret. "Take her out of this building," he instructed, keeping his eyes on Rufus's smug face.

"Huh?" Barret blinked. "What?"

"Just take her. Keep her safe." He glanced at Tifa, then Red. "Guard her."

The two of them nodded, flanking Aerith and Barret.

"What about you?" Tifa asked and the concern in her eyes warmed him where the icy hate had started to form.

"I'll be right behind you. I just want to take care of him," he pointed at Rufus, who smiled wider in return.

Tifa glanced at Rufus dismissively, then back to Zack. "Don't take too long."

His lips quirked. "I won't."

"Awright, enough of this shit," Barret griped. "Let's go!"

Zack watched them retreat through the steel door that led to the stairs, then turned his attention back to Rufus. He tightened his hold on his Buster Sword, angled it at the ready.

"You're serious?" Rufus cocked his head. "Why do you want to fight me?"

"You want the Promised Land. I can't let you have it."

"And what of newly returned Sephiroth?"

"That's none of your business."

"Hm." Rufus smoothed his hair again. "You do know Sephiroth is an Ancient, don't you?"

Sephiroth an Ancient? Not bloody likely, Zack thought, but kept it to himself.

"He can lead me to the Promised Land. He will, of course, be rewarded for his trouble."

"Sephiroth was sick of Shin-Ra before I was," Zack countered.
"Perhaps. But everyone has a weakness that can be exploited." Rufus's smile was threatening. "What's yours?"

"Go to hell."

Rufus laughed, a soft chuckle that more for show than of genuine amusement. "I see. I guess this means we won't become friends," he tsked. "Too bad. Dark Nation, attack!"

Zack swore at the unexpected assault. Fang and claw leaped from the helicopter hatch and lunged at him. "What the hell?" He dodged the animal's muzzle, swung a swift kick up and sent the creature rolling across the rooftop.

It scrambled to its feet quickly, positioning itself between Zack and its master. Even fully illuminated by the spotlight the specifics of the animal were hard to make out. It was ink black with no distinction anywhere on its sleek form. It was like a living—pissed off—shadow.

A long spine of...flesh?...rose up on the beast's back and Zack heard the air hum and watched it shimmer in front of Rufus. Barrier. That damn thing could cast a barrier spell? Zack shook his head. One of Hojo's precious specimens, no doubt.

The thing growled, then darted forward at staggering speed. Zack was fast, but it was faster. He barely had time to bring his sword down to block the snap of teeth. The animal snarled, shook its head and lunged again. And again. It was relentless and managed to get two deep bites in before Zack found his proper footing.

Blood seeping between his fingers as Zack watched the animal pace in front of him, readying itself for another sprint. It charged, teeth gleaming crimson, and Zack held his stance, knowing if he turned either way he was leaving some major arteries open for attack. The animal hit him hard, plowed him into the asphalt roof and he slid painfully for several feet with the enraged, snarling animal on top of him.

As their momentum slowed, Zack spun himself, circling behind the animal's back and grabbing the long spike at its neck, forcing it down on the ground. Dark Nation, as Rufus had called it, shook itself, trying to dislodge him, but Zack's hold was solid. Black eyes glittered in the light, but there was no life in them, no genuine spark, and Zack felt no remorse at all when he twisted—hard—cracking the animal's neck. All fight left it and it flopped lifeless to the ground.

The cement wall behind him spit up mortar and chips and Zack jerked his head around to see Rufus glaring at him, mouth white at the edges, a sawed-off shotgun in his gloved hand.

"You rotten piece of slum trash," Rufus sneered.

"Aw, did I kill your pet?" Zack pushed himself to his feet, his grin as malicious as any Shinra had given.

"Dark Nation was no common animal," Rufus was indignant. He reloaded, pointed the gun at Zack. "He was a spectacular creature, designed to perfection."

Zack glanced down at the limp body, shrugged. "Looks like roadkill now."

Another round fired, but Zack was prepared. He swung his sword up, deflected the bullet and was in motion before the ricochet hit the ground.

Eyes wide, Rufus drew out a small grenade and lobbed it across the space between them as he sprinted back towards the edge of the building.
The explosion was immediate and sent Zack flying backwards into the wall with enough force to dislodge some of the bricks. Shaking the ringing from his ears, Zack watched as the circling helicopter swung in and Rufus snatched the runner.

"Until next time," he called down to Zack with a tip of his gun.

"Damn it." Zack surged to his feet. Rufus wasn't to be underestimated, apparently, and Zack wouldn't make that mistake again. "Yeah, next time," he muttered, hand tightening on his sword. "Count on it."

There were sirens now.

Tifa winced beneath swirling red lights at the piercing sound. From the lobby loudspeakers a soothing female voice advised them to surrender peacefully and that capture was imminent.

Swearing, Barret raised his arm and pointed it at the speakers, only to swear again—louder and more vehemently—when he realized he was still without ammo.

"Ever wonder who they get to make those recordings?" Tifa asked him as she came up alongside.

He shot her a dark look. "No."

"Aw, lighten up, Big Guy." She reached in her pocket, tossed him a clip.

His brows went up. "Where...?"

"The guards weren't needing them anymore." She did her best not to sound defensive. She hadn't liked pilfering the pockets of the dead, but their options weren't exactly plentiful.

Barret pressed some configuration of buttons on his arm before slipping the clip inside a metal chamber and locking it back into place. The bullhorn in the corner spluttered and bleated and then fell silent, its wires dangling from smoldering plastic. Barret smiled, lowered his arm.

"Feel better?" Tifa asked.

"Yes."

She bumped him in the side. "Figures. But be sparing, okay?" She handed him two more clips. "That's all I got."

Barret placed them in his vest pocket. "I'll make 'em count, don't you worry about that." He gave the front doors a grim look. Resolutely, he squared his massive shoulders. "I'll head out first. Check things out." He motioned them all to get down.

"Be careful," Tifa told him.

He was through the door, and back again in less than a minute, a hail of gunfire spider-webbing the safety glass over his ducked head. Leaning back against a potted plant he sent her a deep frown, and only someone that knew him as well as she did would see the worry etched in it. "Fuckin' surrounded."

"Any options?" Tifa questioned, crawling over to where he was. She raised up to peer out the front window. The parking lot was literally crawling with Shin-Ra troops and weaponry. She swore under
her breath and crouched down beside him. Had it been just her and Barret, she knew he would suggest fighting their way out, all-out in a blaze of glory, but with Aerith and Red, they couldn't risk the casualties. Wouldn't risk them.

"Gimme a sec," he rubbed the spot between his brows, face scrunched in concentration, grooves etched into the corners of his mouth.

Aerith, from her squat beside one of the plush guest chairs, was hesitant, but sincere when she offered, "You could get away and leave me. It's not like it's you they're after..."

Barret gave her a look that was both incredulous and irritated. "That ain't happening," he told her. "You got caught up in this because you protected my baby. Now, I'm gonna protect you."

Aerith's hand rested over her heart and her smile was tremulous. "...Thank you, Mr. Barret."

"Who you callin' mister? That just don't sound right." But he smiled back at her.

"If you people are done chatting, perhaps we can come up with a plan for a way out of here," Red's smooth voice rumbled with impatience.

"Already got one."

Tifa rose up on her knees. "Zack!" She was surprised by the amount of relief just seeing him brought her. She quashed it down, denied the flutter in her chest and refused to attribute any weakness in her limbs to anything more than fatigue.

They were in the Shin-Ra building, surrounded by troopers and Gods only knew what else, trying to find a way out. Focus, Lockhart.

"Sorry it took so long." He shot her a small grin that sent her non-existent flutter into overdrive.

"And Rufus?" she asked, pleased at the neutralness of her voice.

"Got away." He ran his hand through his hair and Tifa spotted fresh blood.

She was at his side immediately. "You're hurt."

He glanced at his arm, shrugged it off. "Not bad."

Tifa frowned, and moved closer to examine it for herself. She pressed her fingers gently around what appeared to be teeth marks. Deep, but nothing too serious. "We should wrap this," she murmured.

"I will later," he told her and she was surprised at how close they were. His breath was warm on her cheek and the forever stray lock of his hair brushed the tip of her nose when she tilted her face up. She raised her eyes to find his bright as the sky and full of everything unspoken. The look made her feel a little light headed.

"So, what's the plan?" Red wanted to know, his voice drawing them apart.

Tifa flushed to the roots of her hair and quickly turned away from Zack only to find herself beneath Aerith's quiet scrutiny. Where were those damn Shin-Ra guards and their guns now, huh? She turned again, doing her best to ignore the flash of guilt that spread through her, and focused on Red. Red was safe.

"We're hitting the highway," Zack informed them with a sweeping gesture to the far left.
Barret crossed his arms over his chest. "And, uh, just how in the hell are you plannin' on pulling that little stunt off, Slick?"

"The showroom upstairs. It has a truck. We can use it to get out."

Barret glanced at Tifa expectantly. He wouldn't make the call without her okay. It was one of the things she appreciated most about him. She in turn looked at Zack, who gave her a nod of assurance, then back to Barret. "It's as good a plan as any."

Barret seemed to agree, if his easy acceptance was anything to go on. "All right. Let's go."

The showroom had been one of his favorite rooms to hang out in, Zack thought as the group pushed through the wide doors. It was a room designed to showcase Shin-Ra's most unique inventions and products yet to come. Completely modern; completely top-of-the-line.

He caught Barret's soft whistle and Aerith's breathy "Ahhhh..." at all of the items in the room. The walls were a series of glass shelves where newly fused materias—some experimental, some well tested—were set up, and there were large circular displays throughout the room with various modes of transportation spinning in slow circles, new paint shining beneath bright spotlights.

Back in the day, Zack had loved to wander the exhibits—and being a SOLDIER—he was often encouraged to try out the newest gadgets and vehicles. Angeal had caught him on more than one occasion in this very room, well past curfew, checking out the latests rides. The memory caused a sharp pang in his chest and Zack's steps faltered.

"Okay?" Tifa's hand on his arm was steady, her presence reassuring. Did she know how much comfort he got from her? How it eased him on a level that he couldn't even begin to understand when he saw the warmth in her eyes? How had she, in such a few short weeks, become so vitally important?

"Zack?" she prodded, when he still hadn't answered.

He reached out, brushed her hair—still matted and caked with blood and sweat—back from her face. "I'm fine." It wasn't exactly true, but it wasn't exactly a lie either, and it'd have to do.

She didn't look entirely convinced, but she didn't question it. "Good," she said. "Now get us the hell out of here."

"Yeah, Slick, what's the plan?" Barret's gaze was speculative as it darted between to the two of them.

He stepped back from Tifa and addressed the group as a whole."Grab what you can: materia, weapons, and follow me." Setting the example, he walked to the glass display case, punched through and snatched a ball of materia. "Don't take the ones in the blue cases, they're untested. The last thing we need is experimental materia blowing up in our faces," he instructed. "Make it fast, they won't wait long before busting in once they figure out we're on the move. Barret, weapons and ammo are over there. We leave yesterday. Move!"

The five darted about the room, splitting up to cover the most ground, grabbing what they could. Barret ransacked the weapons display, whooped at the energy source he found. Aerith and Tifa pulled materia from the shelves, stuffing both of their pockets full. Red sniffed out several potions and antidotes which Zack snatched up.
"Over here," Zack called a few minutes into scavenging. He knew they didn't have any time to spare, he heard the front doors smash in and the thud of dozens of feet coming up the steps.

He opened the door of a small, three wheel truck that Shin-Ra had developed for faster weapon transport. They wouldn't all fit inside, but it would take the bulk of them.

"I'm drivin'," Barret announced.

"Suit yourself," Zack agreed. There wasn't time to argue. He motioned for Aerith and helped her into the cab. She smiled fleetingly at him and he read a thousand questions in her eyes—none of which he had answers for. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze and tried his best to reassure her with that. "Aerith rides in front with you," he told Barret. "Tifa and Red will have to ride—shit!" Zack swore when he saw shadows flit past the doors. "Get in! Now!"

Across the room Tifa flipped a steel table on its side, rolled it in front of the door just as the glass shattered and bullets tore into the floor and walls.

"Go!" she screamed, dropping behind the table and covering her head as glass showered down on her.

"Teef!" Barret bellowed, returning fire. Red leaped into the back of the truck, placing himself between the threat and Aerith.

Zack shoved Barret towards the truck. "I'll get her. You get Aerith out safe! Go! Around the corner. Out the window!"

"You better be right fuckin' behind us!" Barret threatened, dropping the truck into gear and squealing the tires.

From behind the table Tifa pulled a glowing orb from her pocket, slid it into the open slot on her glove. Zack saw her hand glow blue and then she was on her knees, a wall of ice between her and those attacking them.

She was giving him time, and he wasn't about to waste it. He swung his leg over the latest Hardy Daytona model rotating on display, shoved his sword into the rack at the rear, pressed the auto-ignition and gunned the engine.

Tifa turned toward him just as he swerved alongside her, his arm curving around her waist to lift her onto the bike. "Hold on tight," he instructed, spinning the bike around and leaving a trail of burnt rubber in his wake.

"You're insane!" Tifa told him as they rumbled around the corner, accelerating towards an already shattered window, but he distinctly heard a laugh beneath the exclamation.

He grinned at her over his shoulder. "Hang on!"

The wind whistled in his ears and Tifa's fingers knotted in his shirt as the Shin-Ra building dropped away and the freeway raced towards them. Zack tightened his grip on the handlebars, steadied himself and maintained control even as the tires screeched on pavement and the bike jerked at the abrupt impact. He fist pumped into the air. "Yeah!"

Ahead of them, a few hundred feet along the road, Zack spotted taillights and a flickering flame tail. Tifa lifted her head from its buried position between his shoulder blades. "Holy Shiva, we made it?"
Your faith in me is astounding," Zack teased, relief making him feel lighter. He glanced back to say something else but the sight of half a dozen individual headlights stopped him. "Shit," he shifted his weight, sped up. "Company."

Tifa tucked her head under her arm, saw the Shin-Ra Cycles coming up fast. Customized for speed, they were closing the gap quickly. "Zack!"

Two cycles zipped past, crisscrossing in front of them. They weren't focused on them--they after the truck, Zack realized. Aerith!

The remaining Shin-Ra bikes closed the distance, flanking the Daytona on both sides, forcing Zack to slow down or risk a wreck.

Tifa's voice was suddenly in his ear. "Get closer to them."

Zack felt her shift, her weight suddenly absent and the chill on his back was both physical and ominous. "Tifa, what...?"

"Closer!" she shouted, her hands on his shoulders.

Trusting her to know what she was doing, Zack swerved sharply. He felt Tifa press down on his shoulders, and in the mirror he saw her leg lash out, kicking the Shin-Ra rider from his cycle. One foot planted on the seat behind him and then a hand and she scissored out, catching the opposite driver and hauling him off.

Zack's heart jumped into his throat when the third driver caught Tifa's ankle and yanked.

"No!" Zack wrapped his fingers around her wrist, kept her from being drug from the bike. His gaze flickered between her and the truck ahead. He could see sparks and flashes and he knew the armor plating wouldn't hold on the vehicle forever. Neither would his grip on Tifa, he thought as she slipped a bit.

Zack pressed the brake, held out his arm and caught the Shin-Ra pursuer beneath his helmet strap, sending him flying back. He curled that same arm back, pulled Tifa up just before she hit the pavement.

"Thanks," she said, breathless.

"You should be more careful," he snapped. Fear made him irritable.

Defensive, Tifa replied, "Careful doesn't always get it done. Now less attitude and more ass-kick."

She shoved his shoulder, pointed at the truck ahead of them.

Obligingly, Zack sped up, closed the distance between them and the truck. With determination he rammed into the back of one of the motorcycles. As he did, Barret cut the wheel and drove the remaining two pursuers into the guard rail, sparks shooting up from the twisted metal.

Zack pulled up alongside the truck, peered inside. "Everyone okay?" From the passenger seat Aerith nodded. She looked pale to Zack's eyes and he regretted her having to be involved with Shin-Ra at all.

"We'll have to get off the freeway soon." There would be roadblocks set up eventually, Zack knew, and helicopters. "We can take the lower Midgar exit and head—"

"Zack!" Aerith pointed behind them, her eyes wide.
"Damn Shin-Ra just don't give up," Barret cussed, checking his rear-view.

Coming up fast and loud behind them Zack recognized Shin-Ra's Motor Ball recovery and assault vehicle. An unmanned battle unit, the Motor Ball was designed to squash enemies and retrieve hostages. It was an aggressive unit armed to the teeth and larger than most small houses.

"Problem!" Barret hollered, slamming on his brakes. The truck swerved, fishtailed and finally jerked to an abrupt stop.

"Hell." Zack followed suit. Of all the bad karma bullshit... he shook his head. The freeway ahead of them appeared to be collapsed and had yet to be repaired. All that was in front of them was a gaping hole and hundreds of feet of empty space.

Behind them was an approaching mechanical monster programmed to smash them like insects.

They were effectively cornered.

"The machine does not appear to be stopping," Red commented, rising up from his haunches.

"Out of the truck!" Zack ordered, swinging off the bike. He yanked his sword free, spun it in his hand. Tifa hopped off beside him.

The group was forced to dive aside as the Motor Ball rumbled up without pause and ran over the vehicles, grinding them down into mangled, useless, oil-bleeding steel.

A series of loud clacks and whine and the top portion of the machine swiveled and turned toward them, the red eyes at it's center scanning.

"What do we do?" Tifa asked in a hushed voice. The red laser skittered over her features and along the ground.

Zack had seen Motor Balls taken down before, had done so himself in combat training. All they needed to do was target its main control panel and take it down. If he could get close enough, he could probably slice the thing wide open. Barret may even be able to shoot the optic center from the head of the machine and render it blind...

Before he could reply to Tifa, however, another sound caught his attention and the hairs on his arms rose as if someone had surrounded him with static. A slow hiss and sizzle was the only warning before the air around them sparked, electricity slamming into the Motor Ball and scorching the ground with enough force to knock them all back several steps.

The machine whined piteously, clunked futilely for a moment, then stopped, and slumped over, smoldering.

All eyes swung towards Aerith, who brushed her hair back with a dainty shrug. "It was in our way," she said demurely. She held the materia up between her fingers, examined it. "I expected it to be stronger," she added.

"Any stronger and we'd be toast," Barret stated rubbing his eyes, appreciation evident in his voice. "Damn, girl, where'd you learn how to use materia like that?"

Aerith blushed. "It just... kind of comes naturally."

Red padded up alongside her. "If I had any doubts about you being Cetra, they have been silenced with that display."
"That's my girl!" Zack grinned at her. He was proud of her. For someone not used to battle, fighting or constant bloodshed, she was handling everything thrown at her with champion spirit. The fact that she just single handedly whooped Shin-Ra technology ass was simply icing.

She smiled back, proudly. "So...what do we do now?" she asked, changing the subject.

"If Sephiroth is really alive..." Zack faced the distant mountains, his eyes shadowed with memories. "Then I have a score to settle."

Tifa dusted her hands against her thighs. "Me too."

"Teef...?" Barret placed his hand on her shoulder. "Will it save the planet?"

"Maybe." She rubbed her face wearily. "Don't know. I just know that I have to do this."

"Then I'm with you," Barret stated and Zack was once more silently awed by the bond they shared.

"I couldn't ask you—"

"You ain't. I'm comin'."

She nodded, brushed her fingers along his stubbled cheek. "Thanks."

"I'm coming too," Aerith added, straightening her ribbon.


She sighed, appearing to have expected that. "I have things I need to know, Zack," she said, resolve on her face. "Shin-Ra wants me, and will hunt me no matter where I am. Aren't I safest with you?"

He couldn't fault her logic, Zack thought. And personally he would feel better knowing she was safe, but it wasn't a traveling vacation they were about to embark on. He was hunting Sephiroth and by the sounds of it so was Rufus Shinra. Odds were definitely stacked that they would cross paths again.

"I know you think I can't handle myself, but I can. Please, Zack."

"Are you sure?" he asked gently. This wasn't something she couldn't change her mind on, and he had to know she was certain.

She angled her head, both an acknowledgement and challenge. "Yes."

"If it is acceptable, I would like to travel with you until I reach my hometown." Red spoke up.

"Sure." Zack agreed easily. Red had already proven himself a valuable asset and had stayed when he could have fled. The least they could do was allow him to remain with them until he was safely home.

Barret rolled his shoulders, cracked his neck. "So, it looks like this is goodbye Midgar, huh?"

"Looks like." Tifa rubbed the back of her neck in response to Barret's snaps and pops.

"I've never been out of Midgar," Aerith stated, staring up at the sky. "It's a bit daunting."

"Ain't nothin' to worry about," Barret assured her. "You've got us now."
Green eyes glittered above a gentle smile. "I do, don't I? I guess everything will be all right then, won't it?"

"You bet your ass." Barret puffed out his chest.

Tifa rolled her eyes at his antics, but her own smile was full of tenderness. Turning to Zack, she asked, "Where to first?"

Zack gave the distant mountains another look, then said, "Northeast to Kalm. We can rest, get supplies, and figure out where to go from there." He gave the busted vehicles a longing glance. "Looks like we're hoofing it," he added. "So we better get moving."
The Kalm before the Storm

By the time the group reached the outskirts of Kalm Tifa wanted nothing more in life than a hot bath and a stiff drink. The relief she felt at seeing small puffs of chimney smoke rising over the hill was nearly staggering. Her feet—apparently encased in lead shoes—felt like they were about to fall off with each step.

The long walk through quiet plains had left her plenty time to think, and for Tifa, that wasn't always a good thing. She had tried to keep her thoughts on the task of keeping one foot steadily in front of the other and nothing else, but the plan failed miserably as memories of tortured screams and black ashes filtered through and left her breathless and burning.

Was he really alive?

What was he after?

Would they even be able to find him?

A giggle, light as the air it floated on, reached her ears, and pulled her attention up from the laces of her boots to the couple ahead of her. Ever since they'd left Midgar Zack had been in close proximity to Aerith, being both watchful and playful.

In the first few miles not much had been said by any of them, but as time crawled and the miles stretched Aerith had begun chatting—about nothing at all really—but her energy was refreshing and endearing, and Tifa could easily see why Zack was so fond of her. She was impossible not to like, but that didn't stop the unexpected pang Tifa felt whenever she caught the easy smiles exchanged between the two.

She tried to tell herself that it didn't really bother her—that she was simply tired and raw—but the truth of it was that it did bother her. And she wasn't entirely sure she was ready to fully examine the reasons why. So, faced with the options of self-analysis or making excuses, she opted to attribute her wayward emotions to the fact that, at the moment, she felt completely alone within their small group.

Barret and Red seemed to have bonded in the Shin-Ra cell they'd shared and were following behind her at a sedate pace, speaking animatedly about the Planet and its energy. Every so often Tifa would hear Barret's voice and a string of curse words associated with Shin-Ra, but for the most part he was surprisingly quiet and let Red do most of the talking.

Ahead of her, Zack was still teasing Aerith, who seemed content to indulge his playfulness and countered it with some tickling of her own. They were a lovely couple, she thought with that same undefined pang in her chest. Zack with his spiked dark hair and his sharp blue eyes and Aerith with her softly coiled ringlets and gentle emerald gaze. They complimented each other. They fit.

Tifa ducked her head down when Zack glanced back over his shoulder, the rocks beneath her boots becoming her focus as she purposefully ignored the bitter sting of tears in her eyes. Stop it, she scolded herself. You're just tired.

"Hey." She was startled when Zack fell into step beside her. "Doing okay?" he asked.

"Yeah. I'm good," she told him with a nod and was glad to hear her voice was steadier than she felt.

He angled his head, tried to see her face which she kept carefully averted. Zack had a way of seeing through her.
"You've been kind of quiet," he commented. The concern in his voice was genuine, she knew, and the knot in her stomach loosened a bit.

She shrugged, kicked a rock out of her way. "I've been...thinking."

Leaning in, voice lowered to a not-so-quiet whisper, he asked, "Was I naked?"

Her eyes widened and her cheeks flamed. "Zack!"

He grinned, completely unrepentant. "I bet I was." He turned, and walking backwards shouted to Barret, "Tifa's thinking about me naked again!"

And there it was, she thought with a warm flutter. That humor, that genuineness, that made Zack, well, Zack.

"He's delusional," she countered, but she was fighting a smile.

Barret waved his hand. "What else is new?"

Zack shrugged him off with a grin, resumed walking beside her, but his eyes focused on, and followed Aerith. Tifa admired the loyalty he had to the other woman, and once again wondered at their history. She knew, from what Zack had told her, and her own eyes, that they had been romantically involved, and Aerith herself had called Zack her 'first love'...but what of now?

She shook her head at herself. It was none of her business. Zack was her friend, and that was the extent of it. Good friends. Teammates. Nothing more.

"You're doing that thinking thing again," he hip-bumped her.

She aimed a look at him, fully intent on quipping back, but the sight over his shoulder slowed her feet, then stopped her altogether.

Zack stopped too. "Tifa?"

The sun, with its pale fingertips of light playing with hints of blue, was barely peeking over the horizon, stretching up to the waking world. The soft, muted glow was warm, hinting at calm, clear skies and Tifa found herself wondering when the last time she had seen a sunrise was. The simple beauty of it overwhelmed her and as she looked around, really looked—at the trees dotting the road; the grass beneath her feet; the fresh, clean air in her lungs—she let out a slow breath, watched it plume and felt...something stir in her chest.

Life.

Living beneath the plate, surrounded by heaps of metal and decay, it was so easy to forget that there was so much more... so much worth saving.

"Tifa?" Zack laid his hand, warm and steady, on her shoulder.

"It's beautiful," she answered with an open hand gesture toward the rising sun. "I'd... forgotten."

Understanding shone in his deep violet-blue gaze and as he turned to face the dawn with her, he slipped his hand down, linked his fingers with hers and held fast.

The touch was familiar, Tifa realized, with mild surprised. Familiar and...welcome. When had she grown accustomed to Zack being in her personal space? Somewhere along the way he'd managed to slip past her defenses and make himself quite at home.
Deciding that questions were only going to spoil the moment, Tifa closed her eyes, tilted her head back and just...was. For that brief, simple, moment there was no Shin-Ra, no Sephiroth, no painful past, no uncertain future; there was only light and warmth and sunshine and the welcome pressure of a hand joined with hers.

"What the hell is the hold up?" Barret groused, coming up behind them. "This ain't no sight-seeing tour, kids, let's move!"

Returning to herself, Tifa blinked and sighed. He was right, of course. There was no time for silly indulgences. Shin-Ra wouldn't be far behind and there was no telling how far ahead Sephiroth was.

"He's always just so charming," Zack muttered slanting a dark glare at the other man.

Tifa gave the horizon one last, longing, look before she tugged her hand from Zack's and squared her shoulders, dutifully trailing after Barret.

As he watched Tifa walk away, Zack had the overwhelming urge to run up and smack Barret in the back of his fat head. For a moment—far too brief a moment, in his opinion—the shimmering tension that always seemed to surround Tifa had faded, and she had seemed...at peace. Which was something that Zack knew she hadn't had a lot of. It wouldn't have hurt to let her have it for a few more minutes.

Sighing, he ruffled his hair and winced at the texture of grime and blood. They needed to get into town, and get cleaned up. Some clothes and food were in order as well. It'd been forever since he'd had a decent meal and his stomach was currently in the process of trying to devour itself.

"You comin'?" Barret hollered over his shoulder.

"Yeah, yeah. Don't get your panties in a bunch!" Zack jogged after them and seriously considered the head-smack.

Fifteen minutes later, he and the rest of the bone-weary group walked beneath an arched 'Welcome' sign and into the quiet village of Kalm. The town was tidy with an "old-time" feel to it, with its vintage stone townhouses and shops, painted porches and cobblestone streets—designed to look like ripples of water. Those streets were empty now and the quaint little houses were still dark and silent, which was no surprise, really. Kalm was an idyllic community known for its festivals and food and not its hustle and bustle.

It was also known for its close proximity to the Myrthil Mines, Zack knew. Shin-Ra like to keep close track of surrounding villages and what purpose they could serve to the corporation. Years ago it was determined that Kalm wasn't of any real use to Shin-Ra; strategically it was too open and being absent of any real source of Mako it held no interest there, but the mines were potentially useful, and so SOLDIERS patrolled the village from time to time.

Back when he was still a recruit, Zack had considered the surveying clever on Shin-Ra's part—to secure what they could, and use it to their advantage was just smart, in his opinion—but that was before he'd become a surveyed thing. Now, Zack saw it as coldly calculating in a way that made his skin crawl.

"So, this is Kalm," Tifa murmured as she took in the surrounding homes and businesses. Her eyes rested on a mining well in the center of town for a long minute before moving on to gaze across the streets.
"We should find an inn," Aerith suggested. She turned to Zack. "Where to?"

"This way." Zack took point, leading the group towards a nearby inn. The Inn was small, but clean looking, with a "vacancy" sign above the door. Not that they'd be too particular at this point, Zack mused, as he pushed open the door.

The lobby, as he'd expected, was empty when the entered and they made their way to the front desk as a chain; a tired, dirty, nearly broken chain. Zack brushed his hair back from his face before he slapped his palm to the bell on the counter, attempting to look presentable given his un-presentable appearance.

"Hold your chocobos," a rough, sleep-laced, voice filtered out from the back room followed by a bump and grunt and a few seconds later a bleary eyed innkeeper strolled out, rubbing his eyes with one hand and fumbling with his spectacles with the other. His hair, thin and white, stood out in tufts behind his over sized ears. "Who is it?" He blinked owlishly at Zack, donning his eyeglasses.

"We need a room," Zack said by way of introduction.

The elder man peered at him over the rim of his glasses. Warily, his eyes traveled down and back, taking in Zack's dirty, worn appearance with a stiffening frown.

"Our carriage broke down," Zack answered the unspoken question, his voice smooth and even as silk. "We've been walking for hours."

Gray eyes narrowed skeptically, but the innkeeper reached beneath the counter to produce a leather 'Guest Book', which he set carefully onto the wood. "I'll need you to sign in," he stated, one crooked finger jabbing the brown leather. He swept the rest of the group with a speculative glower. "All of you."

Zack cleared his throat, leaned against the counter. "I'd really rather not have to sign in. Just the room, please."

The older man chuffed, indignant. "I ain't boarding no criminals."

"We're not criminals, sir," Aerith spoke up, cutting Barret off before his protest even formed. She gave his beefy arm a gentle pat as she passed him and approached the counter. "We're just weary travelers trying to find a place to rest."

Behind his spectacles, the innkeepers eyes widened and he absently straightened the buttons on his sweater.

"Hi," Aerith greeted, smiling a smile so sunny that the man had to blink again. "I know it's probably a terrible imposition that we're asking of you, but we can't sign in. Mr...?"

"uh...Roemer."

Aerith grinned, apparently proud of the older man for remembering his name. "You see, Mr. Roemer, I'm trying to escape an arranged marriage to a horrid man and my friends here are helping me. If my parents find out..." she gave him a doe eyed look. "Well, let's just say it wouldn't be pretty. I would be so grateful, sir, if you could find us a room." She leaned in a bit, lowered her voice. "Here's the thing...Mr...?"

"uh...Roemer."

Aerith grinned, apparently proud of the older man for remembering his name. "You see, Mr. Roemer, I'm trying to escape an arranged marriage to a horrid man and my friends here are helping me. If my parents find out..." she gave him a doe eyed look. "Well, let's just say it wouldn't be pretty. I would be so grateful, sir, if you could find us a room." She brushed her hands over her skirt, chuckled. "I'm a mess after walking all this time and a soft bed and a warm meal would be so welcome."

The elder man cleared his throat as he closed the 'Guest Book'. He placed it back beneath the counter.
"It's two hundred gil per night."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" Aerith beamed, clapped her hands.

Zack, closing his open mouth, reached into his pocket and pulled out what little gil he'd managed to pick off of the dead guards at Shin-Ra HQ. He counted out two hundred and placed it on the counter.

"No pets," Mr. Roemer grunted, his eyes flicking on Red.

"I can assure you, sir, that he is completely house trained." Red's voice was soft and serious as he tipped his nose toward Zack, his good eye remaining on the man behind the counter.

To his credit, the lines of the innkeepers face barely twitched. He simply pulled a set of keys off the hook on the back wall and handed them to Aerith. To Red he replied, "He'd better be." And the group shared their first laugh in what felt like forever.

Before they left the lobby Aerith asked, "Would it be possible to have some clothes sent up to us? We're filthy, and I'd hate to ruin any of your lovely things."

Mr. Roemer emerged from behind the counter, made his way to a small closet beneath the stairs. "We've got some odds and ends here in the lost and found." He held open the door, gestured to the hanging jackets and boxes of clothing. "Help yourselves."

A few minutes of rummaging secured some clean clothing for all of them, and despite some loose fits and unfashionable combinations, Zack was thankful to have something not smeared with blood. He placed another fifty gil onto the counter just for that little luxury alone.

At the top of the stairs Barret let out a soft chuckle and said to Aerith, "That was some quick thinkin', girlie. Good job."

Zack nodded in agreement and slid Aerith a glance."I never knew you could lie so well. An arranged marriage, huh?"

She blushed a bit, shrugged. "It was the best I could come up with."

"It was good," Zack said, and told her, "It got us a room."

Aerith held up the room key with a triumphant but tired sigh. "And I can't wait to crawl into bed."

"First things first," Barret interjected, his voice once more hard. He jabbed his thumb at Zack. "Princess here needs to fill us in on who this Sephiroth guy is and what the hell is going on."

"You're right; first things first. We need to get cleaned up and get some food and supplies," Zack countered. "Then we can get together and I'll tell you what I know." His eyes sought out and found Tifa. Of all of them, she was the one he needed behind him the most. "Agreed?"

She gave a small nod of ascent, but remained quiet, lost somewhere in her own thoughts.

Zack rubbed his face. Her silence wasn't a problem, but the faded look in her eyes and the way she was retreating, was. He was concerned about her, about what she was thinking...and feeling. He shook himself. Now wasn't the time. "Okay, let's move."
The room they were to share was good size, and had two beds, a recliner, a small table with chairs, a television and access to a bathroom. Once inside, Zack divvied up tasks between them. He had Tifa organize the clothes, and Aerith sort the materia they'd stolen, instructing her to keep the strong ones and set aside the others to be sold or traded for weapons and supplies. Barret and Red, once showered, were sent to do just that while Zack rustled up some breakfast.

The room was quiet when he returned, a tray of food procured from the unoccupied kitchen in his hands. He set it down on the closest of the two beds, and made mental note to figure out sleeping arrangements soon. He didn't imagine Barret wanted to snuggle, so chances were one of them—most likely him—would be sleeping in the chair beside the window.

"Tifa?" Zack glanced around, spotted the bathroom door slightly ajar. "Aerith?" The hiss of the shower told him that it was occupied, so he paused just outside the door and rapped lightly against the wood. "Hello?"

No answer. He knocked again, a bit louder, but still received no reply.

Frowning with concern, he pushed the door open a bit more... and froze. He couldn't see the shower itself, it was nestled somewhere behind the door, near the toilet, but he could see the mirror, and in it, Tifa Lockhart was washing her hair.

Face tipped up into the spray she was vigorously massaging frothing bubbles through her mass of long, dark hair; and as Zack watched, a slippery trail of bubbles slid down a tone back and over a perfectly rounded posterior. Abruptly everything hummed, blurred and then shot into sharp focus, and her reflection filled his vision.

It was a SOLDIER response, one that usually emerged when fighting and he was honing in on targets, and Zack wasn’t altogether sure what to make of his having the reaction now, but he wasn’t entirely complaining either.

Acute senses took in the clean smell of shampoo, the shimmer of skin beneath water, the barely there taste of heat and skin, and as his hands twitched and he had the near overwhelming urge to just feel her when he heard the door of the room open and his name.

"Zack?"

Zack turned away from the bathroom door with a small jump."Aerith!" He closed the bathroom door quickly, wincing at the sharpness of it. "I was just, uh, checking on you guys," he said lamely, rubbing at the back of his neck.

"Uh-huh." Aerith placed a small bowl and towel on the table, pulled out the chair. "Why don't you come over here and let me take care of the injuries your trying to hide," she suggested, clearly not buying his excuse.

Zack blinked. "Huh?"

Aerith cocked her head, tapped a foot, pointed at the open seat.

"How did you...?" He shook his head, smiled ruefully. "Never mind."

She motioned for him to take off his shirt and waited patiently as he did, her cheeks only marginally pink.

Shirt around his wrists, Zack sat in the chair, bent forward so she could tend the series of welts and bruises on his back.

Leftovers from repeated beatings with the EMR baton.

His breath hissed through his teeth at the first touch of her fingers on his skin, but he let it out slowly and started to relax as soothing cool breezes wrapped around him like satin ribbons, seeped into his skin, tingling as they went.

Palms flat on him, Aerith ran her hands along his spine, across his shoulders and back down and with each sweep Zack felt energy flow like water from her to him. He closed his eyes, let out a low groan of appreciation. "You're an angel," he murmured, slouching even more, muscles relaxing and tension ebbing.

She giggled quietly behind him. "So you've said." A few minutes later, he felt her shift, her finger tracing along barely puckered skin. Incision line. "You have a lot of scars," she said softly and he heard the question in her voice. She had seen him shirtless before, several times, in fact, and he knew that he hadn't carried the marks back then. He was SOLDIER and SOLDIERs healed—or they were supposed to. Being peeled apart by a lunatic scientist with Mako infused tools was apparently the exception.

"Yeah," was all he replied, his voice slightly rough.

Her fingertips were light, feathering across his back, no longer sending healing energy, but lingering. Uncomfortable beneath her scrutiny, Zack straightened, pulled his shirt back over his head and broke the silence with a cheerful, "You're the best, Aer," over his shoulder.

Her green eyes were troubled as they tracked over his features. "You keep shutting me out," she accused softly.

He sighed, letting the pretense of cheer fall away, and ran his hand through his now clean hair. "I'm not."

"Then why won't you tell me what happened to you?"

"It's not important."

"I think it is."

He paced a few feet away. "It's not something I talk about," he told her finally. Not something he even liked to think about.

"I bet you'd talk to Tifa," she muttered.

He turned on her, eyes wide.

Her own eyes were large, as though she were surprised at her own words. "I..." she shook her head quickly. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. It's just...things are so different now." She tilted her head, angled him a look. "We used to be close."

"We still are."

"Yes, but it's different. I knew it would be, we both did, but I just...I just wasn't ready to see someone else where I used to be so soon," she explained in a rush.

Where she used to be? Zack raised a brow at that. "Aerith." He approached her slowly, cupped her shoulder in one hand and tilted her chin up with the other. When she wouldn't look at him, he
brushed his lips across her forehead. "No one, and I mean no one, can replace you in my heart. You...are special to me."

Her gaze lifted to the his, searching. "But it's not me you're in love with, is it...?"

"No," he answered after a short pause. He wouldn't lie about that, but the question made him curious, and concerned. "You're not...still in love with me, are you?"

It was Aerith's turn to pause, considering. "I thought maybe I was...until I saw you with Tifa."

He was startled by her confession.

She shrugged, cheeks flushed. "When you left, there was so much unfinished, I guess I felt...we hadn't run our course. But then you came back...except...not to me."

"Aer—"

Eyes still on the his, she stopped him, "I know. But you did...and that's okay, Zack." She touched his cheek, her green gaze warm and tender. "If I'm honest, the answer is no; I'm not in love with you, at least not like I was." She stepped away from him, gave him her profile as she stared out the window.

Zack didn't know what to say, so he simply said nothing and waited.

She sent him a sidelong look beneath her lashes. "When I was a child I learned that I could tap into the planet, like plugging in an outlet, and I could hear these... voices. So many voices and yet... I was so lonely." Her lips curved slightly up in a wistful smile. "And then there you were, crashing into my life, and I wasn't so lonely anymore. And even when you disappeared, even though we weren't together, you were still mine. And now, you're not." She faced him again, her chin up. "And it hurts a little, but I understand."

Zack stood very still, dumbstruck. That she thought so much of him, it made him feel humble. He opened his arms and said with feeling, "I'll always love you."

She smiled, genuine and happy, and stepped readily into his hug. "I love you, too," she murmured into his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," The voice, soft and quiet was tinged with embarrassment and something Zack couldn't identify, and it brought his head up sharply. "I—I didn't mean to interrupt," Tifa continued, her dark eyes darting to the bed and the haphazard pile of clothes there, never meeting his. "I just wanted my clothes. I'll be gone in just—"

"Wait, Tifa, I..." Flustered, Zack struggled for words that would keep Tifa from getting the wrong idea about what she just walked in on.

Aerith took the matter in her own hands, however, and stepping away from him, she reached out for Tifa. "There's always room for one more," she stated emphatically, pulling a startled Tifa into their hug.

Why did the soap from the showers smell so much better on her? Zack wondered, resisting the urge to close his eyes and bury his face in her hair.

Tifa gave a soft "oomph" as she collided with them, but her arms hung limp at her side.

"You don't go until I get a hug," Aerith threatened.
Hesitant arms curled around Aerith's waist. Satisfied, Aerith reached for Zack and placed his arm around Tifa, and Zack recognized the gesture for what it was. Aerith had just given him her blessing and Zack felt his heart swell for her and her generous spirit.

"Thank you," he mouthed over Tifa's head and Aerith smiled.

When the five of them were together again, cleaned and fed, Zack began his story. He paced in front of the window and internally debated on how best to describe Sephiroth and the magnitude of the threat he presented—if he was indeed alive.

"C'mon, man, out with it," Barret urged. "What's the deal with this Sephiroth chump?"

Zack looked up from the carpet, met Barret's impatient gaze. "Sephiroth isn't to be taken lightly. He is--was-- a legend. SOLDIER First Class, and elite even among us. He was the greatest warrior Shin-Ra ever had."

Barret leaned back in his chair. "Sounds like you had a crush on the man."

Zack narrowed his eyes briefly, but then sighed. "In a way, I guess you aren't far off." Before Barret could interject some off-color remark, Zack added, "I used to want to be like him." He looked to Tifa, searched her face. "I wanted to be a hero."

She nodded once, barely there, but it was encouragement, so he continued. Turning toward the window Zack let his mind drift back to his days at Shin-Ra, when he was tagging along with Angeal and idolizing Sephiroth. "We went on several missions together. He was my General and I thought..." he shook his head. "I thought he was my friend."

"What happened?" Aerith asked gently when he stalled.

Zack once more found his eyes resting on Tifa. "We were sent on a mission. It went bad."

"How bad?" Red questioned, lifting his head from his paws.

"Bad." Zack pinched the bridge of his nose. "We were sent to investigate an old Mako reactor that was malfunctioning, releasing brutal monsters near... the village." Funny, he thought, looking at her, that he couldn't say the word. Nibleheim. It was just a town, right? He should be able to spit that much out.

"Just you and Sephiroth?" Barret wanted to know.

"No," Zack swallowed, straightened and refused to flinch. "There were two Shin-Ra Infantry guards with us: Patrick Henderson and Cloud Strife."

Tifa closed her eyes on the name, took a breath and Zack paused for her. When she looked at him again there were flecks of red bleeding into the brown. When Barret opened his mouth, Zack shot him a look, and held up his hand. He wasn't continuing until Tifa was ready.

Slowly, she nodded. "Keep going."

He held her gaze as he recounted his impression of the village, and their reception. "We were to take a guided tour up the mountain to the reactor, try and find the problem. I was a bit reluctant to have someone as young as Tifa as our guide—"
"Wait, wait, wait," Barret waved his hand, sat up. "Tifa was your guide?" He gave her a long look.

"Yeah," Zack nodded.

"You were a mountain guide? For damn Shin-Ra?"

Tifa shot him a glare. "No. I was a guide for my hometown. How about we let Zack finish talking?"

Zack crossed his arms over his chest, the gesture unconscious and futile. There was no way to defend himself from what he knew was coming. "The trip up the mountain was tricky. We were attacked non-stop. We lost Henderson down a gorge and more than once we were forced to fight beasts like I've never seen before—or since."

In brief, succinct words, Zack informed the group of Sephiroth's reaction to the Jenova locked in the reactor, his mental breakdown, and his self-imposed confinement in the Shinra Mansion. Over the next hour he answered as many questions as he had answers for. It was painful for him to relive that betrayal, painful to realize just how deep the wounds still went, and so very painful to watch his words tear at the wall Tifa had built around herself.

Zack sat on the end of the bed. "Later, his insanity got the best of him, and Sephiroth committed his ultimate act of hate and vengeance against the people of Nibleheim."

"What did he do?" Aerith asked, knees drawn up to her chest.

"He slaughtered them." It was Tifa who spoke, her eyes ruby hard. "He killed everyone he could get his hands on and lit the town on fire."

"That's awful!" Aerith exclaimed, her soft green eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "Oh, Tifa..."

Tifa lowered her head, her hair falling over her shoulder to veil her expression. "Keep going, Zack," she whispered.

"I found him at the reactor," Zack continued, choosing his next words carefully. "But I wasn't the first to reach him."

Tifa, with her head still bowed, let out a shaky exhale and then straightened her shoulders. "I tried, foolishly, to avenge my father," she explained briefly. "I was no match for Sephiroth, and he let me know it." Absently, her hand wandered up to press her chest.

"Well, shit, from what Zack says, there was no match for him," Barret said gruffly.

"There was," Zack answered. "He was pure fire and vengeance himself." A swell of old pride caused his throat to close and Zack paused to swallow before he was able to continue. "It was Cloud's village too, and his home, and his mother... a glance at Tifa, "and his love that Sephiroth took."

"The other Infantry Guard?"

"Yes. It was Cloud that attacked Sephiroth, and Cloud that defeated him."

Tifa's eyes were closed again, her breaths small and quick.

She was trying not to cry, Zack realized, and his heart hurt for her. He wanted nothing more than to scoop her up into his arms and take it away. The memory, the pain, Sephiroth...all of it.

"How?" Red asked, snapping his attention back.
"He threw him into the Mako pool at the base of the reactor—into the Lifestream."

Barret rubbed the crease between his eyebrows. "Wait a damn minute. If this Cloud kid killed Sephiroth, how the hell is he responsible for what happened at Shin-Ra?"

"I don't know," Zack acknowledged, not liking having to admit that uncertainty. "But I do know that if it is Sephiroth, then he's more powerful than I imagined."

"Strong enough to withstand a swim in Mako? Yeah, that's pretty damn strong," Barret agreed.

Aerith nodded as she angled a look at Zack. "But what happened to you and Tifa after Cloud beat him?"

Zack shoveled his hands through his hair. Trust Aerith to pick up on what he wasn't saying. "We were all pretty beat up. I don't really remember much, after," he lied. "Just that Cloud and I were taken into Shin-Ra custody..." he looked at Tifa, questions in his eyes.

"Zangan," she provided. "Came and got me."

"So where's this Cloud now?" Barret wanted to know. "Maybe we could get him and have him kick Sephiroth's ass again?"

The ache in Zack's chest almost doubled him over. How he managed to keep his voice steady was beyond him. "Not possible. Cloud was killed by Shin-Ra months ago."

"Aw, shit. Now it makes sense," Barret muttered. "Aw, hell, Teef." His expression was one of concern and understanding. "That's why chuckle-monkey here found you, isn't it?"


"So what now?" Red questioned in his calm, neutral tone. "Interesting back story aside, we must figure out a course of action to deal with the current threat this Sephiroth SOLDIER presents."

"Now we find out what we can. Somebody, somewhere has to have seen a man with a mile long sword and silver hair."

"And if they have? What then? If this person is as unstoppable as you say—"

"I never said he was unstoppable," Zack corrected, eyes flashing. "And I intend to stop him."

"But what if you can't?" Tifa demanded suddenly, surprising all of them. "What if you can't, Zack?" she repeated. Her voice broke and she angrily swiped at the tears in her eyes. "What if I lose you too?"

Zack got to his feet. "Tifa--"

She shook her head, pushing to her feet and rushing for the door.

"Tifa, wait," Zack called after her, and got the door slamming shut as his response. He glanced at the others, who were all staring at him in a muted sort of shock.

"Go after her," Aerith urged.

"Make it right," Barret commanded.

Red simply motioned with his muzzle.
Could he? Zack wondered as he stepped out of the room. Would there ever be a way to make it right?

He found her at the end of the hallway, staring out the large window. Even in the bright light of day, she was shrouded in the shadows of memories, and she had never before seemed so far away from him. It didn't take a genius to know what—who—she was thinking about, and his steps faltered.

There was so much he wanted to say, so much he had to tell her. He wanted so much to just make things right for her, and to take away what had been done. But he couldn't, and that made him ache and hurt in ways he didn't know how to handle.

She had lost everything at the hands of Shin-Ra; her father, her home, her innocence. Her life had been scorched and ruined that night, just as Nibleheim had been, and no amount of words were going to change that.

Sephiroth had robbed her of nearly everything, but it had been him that had left her to die. It was bitter and hard in his heart and in retelling the tale he had been forced to relive that moment. He had left her there, on that cold floor, cut open and bleeding with her fiery eyes dimming with each labored breath. He had stood up, walked away, and left her to die.

He had left that out when telling the others, but in his mind the scene played over and over again.

SOLDIER training was ingrained in him and he had assessed, calculated, and determined her to be a lost cause and had moved on. Teenage Zack had cared nothing for teenage Tifa, but now... Now it twisted him inside to know he'd left her.

"Tifa..." His voice came out husky, but he knew she heard it by the way she stiffened. She didn't turn, remained facing the window—away from him—but the tilt of her head changed, indicating that she was listening. He swallowed, wiping his hand on his pants. "Are you all right?"

"Go." Her voice was soft and ragged, worn and frayed thin. "Just...please, go." She pressed her forehead to the glass. "I'll be okay. Just give me a minute."

He took a shaky breath and another step closer. "I will. I just...I need you to know..." What did he need her to know? That he was sorry? That he never should have left her? That he wished he could go back and save Cloud and give her the happy ending she deserved? Or that part of him, some selfish, greedy part of him, wanted her to look at him and forgive him. "I lied to you."

Her shoulders stiffened but she didn't lift her head, kept her eyes down and angled away from him.

Another step closer. "Back then...I said I wouldn't ask you to forgive me." She let out a soft sound. "But, I'm asking you now. Please, Tifa—"

"Stop."

One more. "Please forgive me."

A shudder from her and then a slow shake of her head... and something inside of him withered.

"I understand if you can't..." he cleared his throat, tried to alleviate the tightness there. "Just know that I am sor—"

"Don't!" Her voice cracked like a whip, surprising him. Then, softer, "Don't say it again." She lifted her face and Zack was stunned to see the turbulence reflected in her eyes. "I can't forgive you because there's nothing to forgive! Don't you see that? I don't blame you, I never did, and I'm the one
who's sorry. I'm so sorry I said...I said I hated you, Zack. I... I just was scared and hurt and...I'm so sorry," she choked, long lashes closing on a shudder. "So please, just don't." She tried to push past him.

"Tifa, wait." He placed his palm flat on the wall, blocking her. There was a subtle shift in his stance, one that told her he was prepared for her to try and dart away.

"Don't leave, okay? Not yet." He brushed the fingers of his opposite hand against the side of her face. "I wouldn't blame you, if you hated me," he whispered. "I can't change what happened...or what I did, but I want you to know...I'd do anything to go back and do it differently."

Her eyes were wide and wary, her body so tense she practically hummed with it.

Words, he realized, were not enough. Inadequate, at best, and empty of what he felt. Slowly, giving her plenty of time to realize his intention, he bent and brushed his lips over her cheek, her nose, and then her mouth, feather light—not really a kiss at all—but it made him light headed and heavy all at once.

She didn't protest, didn't move away, but that wasn't enough. Zack angled his head, pressed—gentle, undemanding—to coax her lips apart. He slipped in past her teeth and savored the slight, subtle play of her tongue against his.

She made a broken little sound, soft and barely there, but it brought his head up. He trailed his lips up over her cheek to brush the corners of her eye where tears had formed and then he was back again, full and deep and more than a little needy.

He felt her fingers flex between the press of their bodies as if she wasn't sure whether she wanted to push him away or pull him tighter.

The decision was made for her when the door down the hall slammed shut and snapped them back to reality. Zack's head lifted from hers only far enough for him to angle a look toward their room, his posture protective and on guard.

"I can't do this," she whispered, and her voice trembled. Her eyes shone in the sunlight with tears and regret and something deep and indefinable. "I just can't." And then she was out of his arms, pushing past him and practically running down the stairs.

Zack watched her go, his lips still alive, tingling with warmth and want, and his heart so heavy it hurt. His fingers tunneled into his hair and he took a steadying breath. He'd pushed, too much, too soon, and he knew it. But he had seen her in that room while he spoke of Nibleheim; had seen the way her knuckles had whitened on clenched sheets, the way her lips pressed together and the way her eyes shimmered ruby red every time he mentioned Cloud, and he wanted to comfort her.

No, he acknowledged to himself. It was more than that. He wanted her to need him, to accept him, and to know that she wasn't alone. She had lost Cloud, but she had him.

And he was afraid that he wasn't enough.
Her dreams were made of fire and filled with guileless blue.

Smoke and screams rang through smoky shadows and wrenching grief burned her lungs until it seared her soul. Heat gripped her with smoldering hands, squeezing and wringing her heart out like a dishrag.

The sky burned unnatural orange and blossoms of fire bloomed across rooftops and along her path.

She knew this path; knew it by heart. She had walked it countless times, for countless reasons, but now, her feet pounded against ground that bled and soft puffs of air erupted from her lungs like the muted growls of a wounded animal as she raced to confront a madman.

When her shaking hands found the still warm body of her father, she took the handle of the murderous blade buried in his chest.

Her vision blurred, reason clouded, and vengeance sang in her blood.

She found Him at the top of a never ending staircase facing away from her, his long, silver hair swaying down his back.

Sephiroth.

She rushed towards him and the soft growls in her throat suddenly became wet gasps.

Green eyes mocked her and a smile turned her stomach.

"Pitiful."

He kissed her with pain.

A silver lick against frail skin. And then she was falling. Hard and broken she landed on the floor.

Tears streaked her face like bitter rain, and they tasted of failure. ~Somebody, please help me...I couldn't stop him. I don't want to die. Please, help me...~


"Tifa." Why was he so far away? "Sephiroth did this didn't he?"

She had no voice, only echoing screams trapped in crimson, staining cold metal. She held out her hands to him, a plea, an accusation...both, neither. It was hard to know.

~SOLDIER. Shin-Ra. You. I hate it all.~

"I won't ask you to forgive me..."

~Don't go. Wait, I'm sorry. This wasn't your fault. None of this was your fault.~

"Just let me make it right..."

~Wait. Don't go...Don't leave me here...Please...Don't leave me...~
He was leaving her. Leaving her...

Cold.

She was so cold.

Wasn't someone supposed to be coming for her?

Everything was so cold, and yet she was burning... How was that possible? It was so hard to think.


"Sorry I'm late..."

Rich velvet. Soft and pure. She knew that voice.

Open your eyes... see...

Blue.

Beautiful blue.

Soothing the burn. Easing the pain.

~Cloud~

"...Tifa..."

~You kept your promise.~ Gold hair, blue eyes and tenderness. Cloud. Her Cloud. And he had come home. To her. He was there and she was in his arms and she could fade away, and it would be okay, because he was there with his so blue eyes...and she loved him so, so much...

~I missed your eyes.~ She reached for him but he slipped through her fingers like sand. The harder she tried to hold him, the finer the grains became.

A voice shattered her like glass.

"Cloud, finish Sephiroth!"

Laughter. Mocking, sick laughter, and swirling green hatred.

And her Cloud was no longer soft, filtered sand, but hard steel, with his so blue eyes were swirling vengeance.

~Wait, Cloud. No!~

Gone were his arms. Cold. She was wrapped in cold again.

"Sephiroth!"

Swords clashed, a scream, a gurgle...

She couldn't see. Blood and sweat and tears and fear...blinding. Blind. She was blind.

Where was he?

Cloud?
The room swayed, blood flowed, a body fell across the metal stairs and the screams of her heart erupted from her mouth, "No! Cloud, no! Stay with me. Stay with me! Stay with me! Stay with me—!

"Tifa, wake up!"

Screams and tears bled over into the waking world on choked breath. Tifa shoved up in the bed and pressed her hands to her eyes, staunching the dampness already forming. Her breath came out in a long jerky whoosh. Cloud.

"You're okay." Someone held her shoulders, steadied her. That voice. She knew that voice. She latched onto that voice, used it to tether her and pull her from the quicksand fear of her nightmare. Zack. She groped blindly, gripped his arms like an anchor.

Warm hands cradled her face. "You're okay."

Was she? She heard her breath, coming too fast, in quick pants that hitched and clogged in her throat. She was very close to hyperventilating. Scream and sob tumbled against one another, both begging to be released, but she grit her teeth and swallowed them back. She blinked her eyes, opened them cautiously, and found that no one else was in the room with them, which she was unbelievably thankful for. She wasn't sure she could handle the humiliation or the sympathetic looks right now.

The remembered taste of blood still coated her throat and it took her a second before she could properly respond to him. "Yeah, I'm okay," She answered finally. Leaning back, she took in swirling blue and a worried frown.

Zack stroked her cheek, wiped away a stray tear with his thumb. "You sure?"

She closed her eyes, took another shuddering breath. "Really, Zack, I'm okay." She shivered, still chilled from her dream, but also from his close proximity. How easy it would be to lean forward and take shelter in those strong arms, to seek comfort and solace in his embrace. "Where is everyone?" she asked, resisting the temptation. Things were complicated enough between them, she didn't need to make it worse by relying on him to make her feel better. She was a big girl...she could take care of herself.

"I left Barret and Red at the weapon shop," he replied, searching her face, "and Aerith is downstairs chatting with the innkeeper. She's hoping maybe he's seen or heard something that could give us a direction."

"Oh." Tifa frowned. It seemed everyone was being useful but her. A look out the side window revealed inky black sky and shop lights. How long had she been out? She wiped her hand down her face, trying to erase the last remnants of the nightmare.

Lightly, hesitantly, Zack brushed her bangs back from her eyes. "You needed the sleep." He answered her unspoken question. "I'd hoped it'd be more restful than it was, apparently."

She was grateful he hadn't asked about the nightmare, although she suspected that he—more than anyone—knew what it had entailed. "You don't need to baby me, Zack," she murmured tightly, still fighting the lingering vulnerability left in the wake of her dream.

"I'm not. You needed the rest. I need you in top shape if we're going after Sephiroth." He stood, tossed her a small package. "Here."

Curious, Tifa opened the brown paper, and pulled out padded red leather. New gloves. Nice gloves,
she realized, taking them all the way out of the paper. Nylon mesh and spandex stretched beneath well stitched leather. A series of rounded, steel nubs crossed the padding above the knuckles and at the elbows. These would do some damage.

She glanced up at Zack through the veil of her lashes and found his face uncharacteristically stoic. He was hurting, she realized, startled by that revelation. He was trying to hide it, but she saw it in the violet hues of his eyes and the straight slash of his mouth.

He was hurting and it was her fault.

"Zack, I..." What to say? What could she say? Having nothing, she shook her head, and murmured a soft, "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," he told her in a voice she didn't know. "We're eating in twenty." From the door he added, "I'll meet you in the lobby."

And for some reason, when the latch clicked shut behind him, Tifa felt like crying.

In the hall, Zack closed his eyes and let his head drop back against the wall as he took a deep breath. Tifa's words had been small and plaintive and so full of desolation that he'd stood frozen in the shadows of the room, his own heart torn to shreds as Tifa tossed and turned on the bed. He hadn't planned on waking her, had only slipped into the room in order to drop off the gloves, but he couldn't listen to her crying out for Cloud; couldn't let her drown in the sorrow of her dreams. It broke his heart. In more ways than he wanted to acknowledge.

"Damn it," he muttered and shoveled his hands into his hair. Why couldn't things be simple? He'd known—before he'd even met her—that she was the kind of woman that lingered in a man's heart and mind. Cloud's commitment to her was evidence of that, but Zack had his own memories of her. He recalled laughing with her outside the Nibleheim Inn, tugging her cowboy hat down over her eyes. He remembered thinking that she was full of odd questions and too-blunt inquiries. He remembered thinking she was too head-strong and too young to be a guide. And, if he was honest, he remembered looking...but not touching, because he had a girl waiting for him... and Tifa had been someone else's.

Zack sighed. So much had changed for him since then—for all of them—and he couldn't have predicted the way fate would intertwine them together again. Or the way that Tifa would make him feel. She tangled up his senses, filled him up with so much emotion that he sometimes felt heavy enough to sink.

She was a fighter, and a friend, and a woman worth caring for...Tifa was his to protect now. He'd taken that responsibility from Cloud readily. It was his promise to his friend. What he hadn't counted on was falling in love with her. And he was falling in love with her. Zack was many things, but self-delusional wasn't one of them. He'd had his share of flings and careless romances as a rising SOLDIER, and had found genuine love with a bashful flower girl from the slums. He knew the difference between lust and love and though he definitely—definitely—had the former for Tifa, it was the latter that was currently causing him to bang his head against the wall. Literally.

If he was any kind of friend, he would find a way to walk away, or at the very least step back. The best thing he could do for her was to give her space. She didn't need this. He knew that, but he couldn't any more stop the way he felt about her than he could stop the sun from rising.

Damn it, Cloud. What were you thinking? Zack thumped his head back a couple more times.
The door to his left opened abruptly and a bear of a man with a full red beard and tired eyes poked his head around the door jamb. After surveying both directions, he turned to Zack. "You lost?"

Zack raised a brow, shook his head. "No."

The other man scowled, deep grooves forming over the bridge of his freckled nose. "Then why are you knocking on my door? You some sort of prankster?"

"Oh." Zack rubbed the back of his neck, one shoulder raising in sheepish embarrassment. "No. Sorry about that. I wasn't. I was just sort of...uh, banging my head."

"Ah," the other man nodded, scratched his hand over faded flannel. "Girl troubles?"

Zack's lips twisted. "That obvious?"

"When a man is standing 'round, banging his head on a wall, it's almost always because of a woman."

Before Zack could reply to that sexist proclamation, Tifa chose that particular moment to step out of their room and into the hall.

Zack had to school his features to keep from grinning at the way the man straightened and puffed out his chest. Not that his reaction was anything new. Men fell all over themselves for Tifa. Zack had witnessed more than one drunken fool since he'd joined AVALANCHE, and plenty of sober ones too.

Even in clothes three sizes too large, that hung off of her in awkward angles, she was damn adorable. Zack could only imagine red-beard's reaction had she been sporting her place-mat skirt and tight tank-top.

Tifa offered up a small smile to the man in the hall. "Hello, sir."

"Uhhh..." The man swallowed, nodded.

She looked toward Zack, but her eyes never quite met his. "Meet you downstairs?"

"Yeah," Zack nodded.

"Okay." She inclined her head toward both men before she made her way along the hall.

They watched her until she disappeared down the stairs and when Zack returned his gaze to his bearded hall-mate, he found the other man's eyes wide and almost accusatory.

"If I had women troubles like that," he jerked his thumb in the direction Tifa had gone. "I sure as shit wouldn't be wasting my time banging my head on the wall; I'd be too busy banging-"

"Ok, then, nice talk." Zack interrupted, and shot him a warning look as he passed.

Halfway down the stairs he heard, "Whatever you did, just apologize! Damn!"

Zack shook his head as much at himself as at the man in the hall. He could just imagine that scene now: 'Hey, Tifa, sorry I left you to die a bloody death on a reactor floor, while failing to fight off the madman that ultimately destroyed your life. Oh, and incidentally, sorry I couldn't save the love of your life from a gruesome death, but hey, I'm here, so whaddya say, babe?' Yeah. He didn't imagine that'd go over all that well.
There was no apology for what he'd done; for what he couldn't undo; or for what he felt now. He'd have to live with that, and hope that she could too.

The dining area was small, but clean, with lanterns on tables and soft music filtering through speakers in the corners. The table was hand carved, as were the seats, and Zack appreciated the hard work that must have gone into making them. His father had made almost all of their furniture and had taught Zack how to fashion several pieces.

Over plates of warm food, the group discussed what they had gathered for information, and though it wasn't much, they found that they at least had a starting point.

Around a mouthful of buttered beans, Barret informed them, "Guy at the weapon shop says a man in a cloak with a bad-ass sword went through town not too long ago. Headed east. You gonna eat that?"

"Help yourself." Tifa lifted her hands away from her plate, allowing Barret access to her dinner roll. "Did your weapon shop guy offer anything else? Like a destination?"

Barret shrugged, chewed. "Nope."

"Sephiroth's not exactly the approachable sort," Zack added, finishing his drink. "But at least we have a direction. What about you?" He faced Aerith. "The innkeeper have anything to add?"

Aerith lowered her fork, dabbed the corner of her mouth. "Unless knowing exactly how many miners were on site during the great mine explosion some sixty years ago will help us, I'm afraid that even though Mr. Roemer was full of delightful stories, none of them do us any good."

"How many?" Barret speared another carrot.

"I'm sorry?"

"How many miners?" he repeated.

"Oh." Aerith paused, thought back. "Fourteen. All survived, and only one injury," she recited.

Barret nodded, resumed eating.

At Aerith's questioning look, Tifa supplied, "Barret was a miner. In North Corel."

"Long time ago," he gruffed, staring at his plate. "Not that it matters none, now." He smacked his hand onto the table, jumping everyone. "So what's the plan? We gonna go after this guy or what?"

"Having a direction is a start, but it is a far cry from a plan," Red's voice—calm and carefully enunciated as always—drifted up from his crouch beneath the table. "But whatever the case, we should strongly consider leaving this town soon." He nosed the plate at his paws, chuffed and turned his head away. "While in town I heard people talking about the attacks in Midgar, Rufus and AVALANCHE. It will not take much deduction to figure out we are a part of that."

"Agreed," Zack straightened in his chair, pushed his dinnerware aside and laid out a brief plan. "Staying anywhere too long makes us vulnerable. It'll be better if we avoid too many stops and too many people. I picked up some traveling gear—tents, lanterns, basic supplies—earlier. Not much, but enough to get us to where we need to go."
"And where's that?" Tifa asked, poking at her peas absently.

"If Sephiroth is traveling east, then he's heading straight for the marshes. The only safe way across those marshes is a Chocobo. If we're gonna follow, then we need Chocobos."

"You just magically gonna pull one outta your ass?" Barret arched a brow.

Zack's lip slanted up. "As neat of a trick as that might be, no, but I know a place where we can get some. It's a hike from here, but we should make it there by sundown tomorrow."

"We need to get some damn clothes that fit," Barret added, plucking at the light green material of his shirt. "I ain't going anywhere like this."

"There's a little shop across the street," Aerith suggested.

Zack nodded. "Ok, good. We'll go there after dinner. Anything else?"

"Yeah. Teef, you gonna eat all that?"

Rolling her eyes, Tifa pushed her bowl toward Barret. "Just take it."

"Thanks. Well, then, I guess we have a plan," Barret nudged Red, who snorted.

"If one could call it that."

"Do you have a better one?" Tifa asked. When Red remained sullenly silent, she leaned down, rubbed behind his ear. "I know you're nervous. We'll be okay," she whispered.

When she raised back up, she caught Zack looking at her, and that illusive something whispered between them before she looked away, a hint of pink on her cheeks.

Clearing his throat, Zack continued, "I can't predict how this is going to play out, and I have a feeling that things are going to get a lot rougher from here, so if anyone wants out," blue eyes softened, rested on Aerith, "then now's the time."

Aerith placed her hand over his, shook her head: no. "The Ancients... Cetra... Jenova... Sephiroth and myself... we're connected, and I need to know how."

"All I know is I ain't letting Sephiroth or Shin-Ra get their grimy hands on the Promised Land," Barret commented. "If they do, then we're all screwed and I just can't let that happen. My baby girl is counting on me."

"I am with you all, until I get home, at least," Red added.

"This journey means different things for all of us," Tifa said, holding Zack's gaze, "but I know why I'm here, and I'm staying. Until the end."

"Until the end," Zack echoed. He would find and face Sephiroth, and he would make Shin-Ra pay or what they did, and he would keep his promise to Cloud. Until the end.
Dinner passed quickly after that and when the group finished eating, they made their way to the small clothing shop across the street as Aerith suggested. During the course of their meal they decided to forgo waiting until morning before leaving. Travel would be easier in the dark, and everyone was rested, so a delay wasn't necessary.

It was a logical and sound decision, and it was good for all of them, Tifa thought, rifling through the racks of clothing. Sitting around thinking about everything was making her antsy—and she knew Barret wasn't much for “idle” either. She settled on a pair of black shorts and a cross-back white shirt and immediately went to change. She felt a bit better—more secure—in clothes that fit, and that helped improve her mood. She was still trembling with the aftereffects of her nightmare, and that bothered her. She was stronger than this, she silently chided herself as she tied her hair back in the leather cord Zack had gotten for her.

Or at least she needed to be stronger.

If she was going to go up against the real Sephiroth—again—she had better pull herself together and not be so shaken by the phantoms in her dream. She was different now. She wasn't some kid that would be so easily tossed aside. Not this time. She grit her teeth and pulled the straps of her gloves tight, resolve hardening her expression.

Satisfied, she looked up into the mirror and caught a glimpse of Zack as he walked out from the back dressing room, absently tugging a deep blue shirt over his head, and her heart rolled over itself. She flushed, and immediately dropped her gaze, but the flexing abdomen was scorched into her brain, as were the scars marking him. Bullets and blades, she knew, and felt inexplicably angry at the unknown strangers that inflicted pain on him. It was jarring, to feel her blood pounding beneath her skin and the need for violence sing in her head. She wanted to hurt the people that hurt him.

With his easy grin and effortless charm, it was easy to forget just how much violence and pain colored Zack. He didn't speak of the things in his past often, and that alone told her that whatever had happened after he'd been removed from the reactor—or maybe even before he'd ever gotten to Nibleheim—was horrific. She remembered his clinical detachment at the instruments they'd seen in Hojo's Shin-Ra laboratory, but more than that, she recalled his pallor and the way his eyes got dark and distant. It was a look that was haunting in its distance, but even more so in its vulnerability.

She had wanted to comfort him then. Still did, if she was truthful, but she wasn't sure how close she could get without getting too close. As it was now, she was teetering on the edge of a thousand emotions where Zack was concerned and she never quite felt like she had her footing.

It was disconcerting...exciting...and terrifying.

And she didn't want to examine it, or herself, too closely. She was afraid of what she'd find.

"Hey." Warm fingers brushed her arm, snapping her to attention. She'd been so lost in her thoughts she hadn't seen him approaching.

With blue eyes clouded with concern, Zack inclined his head, studied her face. "Doing okay?"

"Oh..." She frowned, worked a finger between her brows and tried to reign in her scattered emotions. "Yeah, sure. I'm good. I think I just...need some air." She flashed him her patented 'Tifa' smile.
And watched as it made no effect.

He knew her better, she realized with alarm mixed with comfort. He wasn't fooled by a sparkle of white and a cheeky head tilt.

"Tifa," his voice was soft and serious. "You can talk to me."

Undeterred, she angled her head, kept up her easy, reasonable smile, and added, "I know that, silly. It's just stuffy in here," before scooting past him and making her way towards the exit. She felt his eyes boring into her back with each step and fought the urge to speed up. Calm, cool, collected, she recited in her head.

_Yeah, sure, Lockhart._

The little bell above the door chimed her exit and she let her breath out as the shop door closed behind her. The air outside was refreshing—taking on a hint of cool as the evening deepened—and it smelled so much cleaner than the air in Midgar—especially beneath the plate. Taking a deep breath, Tifa settled herself on the steps and let her head fall back, her gaze wandering up to blue velvet dotted with glimmering white.

The stars.

She loved the stars.

It'd been such a long time since she'd seen them—really seen them—and as she expected, the watching beacons reminded her of Cloud. The sky had been full of stars that night, she thought with a wistful sigh. She recalled staring up at endless night and feeling the subtle warmth of an arm close to hers, and eyes that were both anxious and determined when they rested on her.

Even as a child, Cloud had been so serious. He never took anything lightly, and it was so, so rare to see him smile. But he'd smiled that night, she recalled.

There had been blushing smiles and shy whispers and heartfelt promises. The night had been full of stars and dreams.

Potential that was ultimately lost and burnt out by madmen and fate.

Tifa closed her eyes against the pain in her heart.

"I know I never met the guy you spent so much of your time wishing for," Barret's deep cadence was unexpected, and it startled her from her memories. Tifa opened her eyes and found his dark and serious. "But knowing you like I do, I imagine he was something pretty special."

"He was," she agreed and returned her eyes to the sky.

Barret eased himself down beside her. They sat in quiet for a few minutes before he asked, "How come you never told me about your hometown?"

She'd been expecting the question ever since Zack had told the group about Nibleheim. She had hoped to have a logical answer for him when the time came, but the truth was, she wasn't altogether sure why she'd never brought Nibleheim up to Barret before. He hated Shin-Ra just as much as she did, and she knew he would understand how she felt, but still, she hadn't talked about it. Hadn't opened up. Her answer, when it came, was hesitant. "I guess because if I didn't talk about it...then maybe...it would..." _It would what?_
"It would go away?" Barret prompted when she stalled.

"No," she shook her head slowly. When she turned to face him, she finally faced the real reason she hadn't mentioned Nibleheim before. "I never talked about it, because if I never dealt with it, then it would never heal. It would always be there—open, without closure." She ran her fingers through her ponytail, twisting the end in old habit. "I know it sounds stupid—and I-I...don't know. Maybe it is stupid—"

"No, it isn't," his rich baritone cut in—firm, but full of understanding. "If it didn't heal, then it would hurt; and if it hurts, then you have motive—a reason to fight."

She probably should have been startled by his perceptiveness, but she wasn't. If anyone understood the pain of old woulds, and keeping them open, it was Barret.

"But sometimes," he continued, in a far gentler voice than she'd ever heard him use before, "we become so content with the pain—so used to it—that it numbs us to everything else."

Something in his expression made her sit up straighter and her insides coil. He looked...lost...for a moment—far away. "Barret?" She touched his arm.

He shook his head, leaned back, and took them down another avenue of conversation. "You're an amazing woman, Teef."

"Thank you," she blushed.

"I'd like to think, that over the years I've been a friend to you."

"You have," she assured him quickly, giving his arm a gentle squeeze. "And so much more. You've helped me become who I am. You kept me from being lost to slum life. I owe you so much."

"Bullshit! You don't owe me anything, and you damn well know it." He shot her a hard look. "But, I'd like to think that I did have a hand in shaping you, and that I did a good enough job that you'd be smart enough, and willing enough, to recognize an opportunity for happiness when it came."

Startled, Tifa felt her eyes widen.

"Life's a funny thing, y'know," Barret went on. "It's as much full of joy as it is pain."

She mulled that over for a moment and then sighed. "I'm not a big fan of pain."

"But that's life. Only the dead don't feel, and I ain't in no rush to be dead." He took a breath. "No one knows how their story is gonna unfold, and all we can do is try and live it the best way we know how. I've made a lot of mistakes in my life...some I can never make up for...but what I know now is that I've gotta do what's right. I gotta make sure my baby girl has a future."

He turned to face her. "Opportunities are few and far between thanks to Shin-Ra, and we gotta grab onto them with both hands. Life's short, Teef, and over far too soon for a lot of folks. I loved my Myrna...love her still, and I miss her every day, but I'd like to think she'd want me to be happy, if I get the chance. I'm betting your guy would feel the same." With those very poignant, yet no less confusing words, he got to his feet and, ignoring her very befuddled expression. Bending, he kissed the crown of her head, in the exact same way she'd seen him do to Marlene a hundred times. He smiled down into her upturned face, and though it was quick, it was warm.

Then, with flourish, he opened the door to the shop and shouted in, "If you're done trying on dresses, Princess, let's go! You too, Aerith."
Tifa shook her head and watched him hop from the steps and march into the street, grumbling and
glowering at every passerby. He was such a complicated and complex man, she thought with an
affectionate smile. And never what anyone would expect from his burly, tattooed exterior.

She didn't know exactly what to make of his talk, and her emotions were still in a tangled mess, but
one thing was clear—Barret was far more observant than she gave him credit for.

The door behind her chimed and the soft click of claw on wood announced Red’s arrival, followed
by soft clacks and dull thumps—Aerith and Zack, respectively.

"Just so he knows, that green dress was stunning on me," Zack informed them.

Casting him an amused glance over her shoulder, Tifa suggested they get going.

Zack nodded, immediately focusing on the task at hand. "It's a bit of a walk to where we're going.
Anyone that needs to go to the bathroom should do it now. We leave in five." He glanced at the Inn.
"I need to make a call."

The Innkeeper hovered closer than Zack would have liked, but since he had allowed Zack to use the
phone for a long distance call, he refrained from telling the man to shove off—for now.

His mother answered on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Hey." Zack kept his voice neutral, and low—aware of the ears listening.

"Zack!" The relief in her voice made Zack feel like an asshole for not calling her sooner, but he
hadn't dared risk it. Her voice was hushed and hurried, but still carried the indisputable "Mom" tone
that demanded answers. "I won't ask where you are, or what you've managed to get yourself into,
but just tell me you're okay."

"I'm okay."

A relieved breath on the other end. "And Tifa?"

"She's all right."

"Is she with you?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"Any visitors?" Zack asked, feigning nonchalance as he leaned against the front desk.

"Oh, the usual door to door salesmen. Dark suits, trying to sell me a bag of lies."

Zack chuckled. His Mom was a force to be reckoned with—and he knew very well she could and
would hold her own—but he still worried. "I don't know how often I'll be able to get word to you,"
his guilt gnawing at him.

"Don't worry about us," she scolded gently. "You take care of what you need to. Your father and I
can manage. Whatever happens, I just want you safe, Zack."
"I know. I'll be in touch."

"Tell Tifa to take care."

"I will. Love you, Mom."

"We love you too."

He hung the phone up, his hand reluctant to leave the receiver. His parents had already lived through his "death" once, and he could only imagine how devastated they'd been four years ago when they'd been told he'd died in Nibleheim.

He remembered his mother's voice, accusing and hurt, when he'd called her from Bill's. Weak and bed-ridden, he'd barely managed to get the words out, and when he had, she'd been so angry.

"How dare you," she had seethed, "pretend to be my son! My son died, you heartless bastard." It was the first—and only time—Zack had ever heard his mother swear at him. It wasn't until Bill got on the phone and described Zack that his mother had started to believe.

It took a week's worth of phone calls and answering a hundred questions about his childhood before she'd fully accepted that she was talking to her baby. She had wanted him to go home right then, but he told her that he'd made a promise to a friend and that he had to keep it.

And his mother, being a woman of her word and strong convictions, had understood, and given him her support.

He wished he could do more for her and his father than yo-yo them around and fill their lives with Shin-Ra's duplicity and complications.

"All done with the phone?"

"Hm?" Zack blinked, removed his hand. "Yeah, finished. Thanks." He placed another few pieces of Gil on the counter and thanked Roemer for the stay.

Outside, Tifa met him on the porch. "How is she?"

"She's good. Worried, but good," he told her. "Says for you and me to watch our asses."

Eyebrows lifted. "Your mother said that?"

"Not in those exact words," he grinned, "but yeah."

Tifa smirked at him and it lightened her eyes. "I wouldn't have been all that surprised if she had," she told him in a conspiratorial murmur.

Zack chuckled. Truthfully, he wouldn't have been either. Looking around he spotted Barret and Red adjusting their gear and Aerith waiting near the welcome gate. "Is everyone ready?"

"Yeah." Tifa nodded. "So, where are we going?"

Taking her arm and leading her away from prying eyes and ears, Zack asked, "Ever been to a Chocobo farm?"
The group arrived at Chocobo Bill's just before sunrise, and Zack wasn't at all surprised to see that the farm was already up and active and exactly how he remembered it. Bill took pride in his routine and changed it rarely. Up at the crack of dawn, down with the sun. Been that way since his father's father ran the place—or so he'd told Zack—and Bill saw no point in changing what didn't need changing.

It was a philosophy Zack's own father would have appreciated.

Smoke spiraled from the chimney and the front pasture was dotted with a half dozen grazing chocobos and a few farmhands tossing feed. Dropping his pack onto the ground Zack sprinted up to the fence, searching for one particular bird... and there she was.

"Charlie!"

Bright yellow feathers bobbed and a garbled *Wark!* returned his greeting.

Zack climbed the the fence, reached a hand in to stroke against Charlie's plumage. "Hey, there," he cooed, grinning when her talons lifted and set back down a few times.

Zack imitated the gesture and she hopped in place, turning herself in a circle and whistling.

Zack laughed and followed suit.

"Is that fool dancin' with the damn bird?" He heard Barret demand.

"Jealous?" Zack countered, tossing the man a look over his shoulder.

"You're a special little kupo nut," Barret commented with a shake of his head.

"Oh, he's adorable!" Aerith's smile was wide as she approached the fence. "What's his name?"

"Charlie," Zack provided. "But he's a she."

As if sensing she was on display, Charlie preened and posed, emitting a series of long whistles and short barks.

"I can see why you like her," Tifa commented, moving up alongside Aerith. "She's a showoff... just like you."

"He-hey!" Zack shot her a narrow look. "You hear that Charlie? Tifa thinks we're show offs."

Charlie gave a loud wark and pranced off.

"Now you've gone and done it," Zack chided. "She's gonna be mad the rest of the day."

"Zack Fair! Do my eyes deceive me, or have you managed to wander your way back to the farm?"

A voice called, turning the group collectively towards it.

"Betty!" Zack dropped down from the fence and moved to embrace the woman approaching them. Short, and petite to the point of tiny, Betty was Billy's wife and soon to be mother by the looks of it. A pile of blond ringlets was kept in semi-order by a red bandanna over a slender face. She returned Zack's hug with enthusiasm and backed up to take a look at all of them.

"And you brought friends."

Zack rubbed the back of his neck. He shouldn't feel like he was imposing—as it was Bill had more
hands coming and going on his farm than the Inn in Kalm, but he still felt rude for just dropping in on them. "Uhm, yeah." He turned, made an open palm gesture towards the group. "Betty, these are some friends of mine. Big man over there is Barret, and that's Red, and this is Tifa and that's Aerith."

On Aerith's name Betty's eyes widened and her face broke into a huge grin. "As in the Aerith!? You found her?" Betty laughed, clapped Zack on the back. "The boy went on and on about you!" She told Aerith, ignoring the startled look on Zack's face. "He said he was determined to get to you, and look, he found you!"

Aerith shifted her weight from foot to foot, face bright red, and her eyes darting from Zack to Betty and from their corners to Tifa. "I, uh...He found me, yes."

Betty punched Zack in the arm. "I'm so happy for you!"

"Uh...yeah." Zack glanced at Tifa who was busy pretending not to hear anything going on around her. He sighed, running a hand through his hair. Well, shit.

"So what brings you here?" Betty asked, turning his attention away from stiff shoulders and an averted face.

"I need some chocobos," Zack told her. "Fast and strong."

"Ah," she nodded thoughtfully. "You'll find Billy and Bill both in the barn. Why don't you go discuss it with them. I'll show your friends around the farm while you catch up."

"Thanks."

"Come on," Betty shooed the remaining group towards the stables. "I'll show you the newest hatchlings."

Zack found Bill and his son Billy in the barn just as Betty said he would. Big Bill, as the workers called him, was busy listing off materials as Billy loaded them onto the flatbed of a pick-up truck.

"Need a hand?" Zack asked by way of greeting.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Bill flashed a grin, an instant sign of pleasure. "Hey, champ!"

"Hey." Zack clasped arms with the older man. "Billy," he inclined his head toward the younger farmer.

"Zack." Billy dropped a bundle of steel ties and wiped his hands on his pants before offering one to Zack. "How you been?"

Zack shook the outstretched hand. "Busy," he answered, intentionally vague.

"You in trouble?" Bill asked bluntly.

Zack blinked. "What makes you think that?"

"I know you." He set his list aside.

Zack scoffed.
"And your Mama called yesterday. Wanted to know if we'd heard from ya."

"Oh." Zack shrugged, sheepish. "I talked to her earlier," he informed them.

"Good. But that doesn't answer my question. You in trouble?"

"Yes."

Bill dragged his hands over his bristly, gray hair. "Anything we can do to help?"

"I need some chocobos."

"How many?"

No hesitation, Zack noted. None at all. He was in trouble and Bill was going to help. Just like that. It astounded him, sometimes, that there were still honest, good people in the world. "Four," he supplied.

"Anything else?"

Zack shook his head. "No. That's more than enough."

Bill nodded. "You're heading into the marshes I take it?"

"Yeah."

"I've got a couple of really fast birds. A little untamed, but they'll get you across the marsh without triggering the Zolom."

"I can't promise when I'll get them back to you, Bill."

"Don't worry about it." The older man waved a hand. "You know you're always welcome here, Zack, and anything we can do to help, we'll do. I'll give Chole a heads up and have him prepare the chocobos for you. When will you be heading out?"

"As soon as possible," Zack informed him. "I wish I had time to visit and catch up, but..." he let it trail, not wanting to involve Bill and his family anymore than he already was.

"Understood. I should probably mention there was another person headed towards the marshes. I spotted them this morning when I was getting my coffee. They didn't have a chocobo, so chances are the Zolom had them for a snack, but I have a feeling you may be interested in that piece of information."

Tension thrummed and coiled in Zack and caused his fingers to flex—itching to grab hold of his sword. "Black leather, long hair..."

"Mother of all swords," Billy tossed in. "Yeah. I saw him too. The birds went nuts, squawking and shrieking. I have never seen them do that. Woke me out of a dead sleep." Billy gave a shudder. "It was creepy."

"Yeah...creepy," Zack muttered. He shook off the tension and foreboding and straightened his shoulders. "I appreciate the help, Bill."

"No problem. I'll go get Chole. Gimme ten minutes." He turned to his son. "Billy, you finish up here."
"Sure." Billy gave a nod, resumed loading. "See you around, Zack."

Outside of the barn, Zack spotted Betty and Aerith talking on the porch. Red was stretched out atop a bale of hay and Barret had his head beneath the hood of a tractor, one of the farm hands pointing and explaining, but Tifa wasn't anywhere to be seen.

He sighed, wondering how much damage Betty's words had done. Things were complicated enough between them without misunderstandings, and he knew that though Betty's words were true—the situation had changed.

He needed to make sure Tifa understood that. He made his way to the women on the porch. "Where's Tifa?" he asked without preamble.

Aerith lifted her head and Zack thought he caught a glimpse of hurt in her green eyes, but she smiled and said, "In the stables," with her usual sunny demeanor.

Betty's eyes flickered between the two of them, confusion furrowing her brow, but Zack didn't bother trying to explain. He barely understood the situation was himself, and trying to put it into words for someone else was just...well, pointless.

"Thanks." He dropped over the railing and jogged to the stables.

The smell of hay and manure assaulted him when he entered, but it wasn't an altogether unpleasant aroma. It reminded him of heard work and rebuilding muscles, dancing birds and feeling alive again. Bill and his family had helped Zack through the darkest time in his life, and this place held special meaning for him.

He walked the main aisle in slow steps, not wanting to startle the birds—or Tifa—when he found her.

Her back was to him when he entered the last stall, and she was scratching the soft feathers beneath Charlie's beak, much to the oversized bird's satisfaction. She didn't turn to acknowledge him, but she was aware of him, Zack knew. It was evident in the subtle shift in her posture: the way her shoulders drew up—almost defensive—and the way her head cocked—ever so slightly—to the side, as though she was prepared to listen, despite herself.

When he didn't speak, she crooked her head a bit more over her shoulder, but he couldn't read her eyes, shadowed as they were in the play of light.

He lifted one hand in silent salute, but stayed rooted where he was and studied her expression from his position. Defiant...and maybe a little hurt.

He made an open-palm gesture towards the sky, visible through the openings of the stable ceiling. "Looks like it's going to be a good day for travel."

Tifa turned her gaze to the blue, let out a soft breath. "It is," she agreed. Her voice was cautious, but not completely unwelcoming. That was something, at least.

He cleared his throat. "Tifa."

The hand petting Charlie paused, earning a disgruntled wark, and Tifa tilted her head even more. "Zack," she countered, mimicking his serious tone, and he felt a smile tug at his lips.
"Look, about what Betty said earlier...about Aerith...I just wanted you to know that was...well, that I said all of that before..." Before what? Sector Seven? Before he’d found her? Before he realized he’d changed? Before he got tangled up in so many emotions he couldn't think straight? All of the above?

He ruffled the hair on the back of his head in agitation. Once upon a time, he'd had a silver tongue with women, he thought, hell, with everyone, really. Slick and smooth he could woo, coo and cajole anyone into just about anything...but not Tifa. Around her his words stalled and crumbled in his throat. With a self directed eye-roll, he sighed and shifted to lean one shoulder against the one of the beams. "Well, just before," he finished lamely.

Her face clouded, then cleared. "It's really none of my business." she said after a moment, nonchalant—dismissive.

And something inside of Zack snapped.

The palm of his hand slapped the wood so hard that hay and feathers plumed into the air. "Yes, it damn well is!"

She turned, clearly startled, her eyes wide. He met her look with a hard one of his own.

"Whether you want it to be or not, it is your business, Tifa. I am your business." He was reaching for her before he realized it and his hands closed around her upper arms, bracketing her—gentle, but secure. "Don't tell me you don't know that—don't feel that, because I won't believe it," he shook his head—wanted to shake her—and spoke with something akin to desperation.

She blinked up at him. "Zack—"

"I've tried to ignore it," he cut her off. "I've tried damn hard, in fact, but I can't, and to be blunt—I won't anymore. I can't be the only one feeling this—this thing, this connection between us. I can't be. I'm not alone, here am I? Please tell me I'm not alone...not in this..." His voice faltered when she stood there shaking her head at him, denying his words, a look of near panic on her face.

His breath left him in a soft whoosh and his heart thudded painfully in his chest. He dropped his hands, prepared to turn around and swallow back everything he'd said if it took that look off her face, but then, she whispered, "You're not alone, Zack," and all of his intentions flew right out the window and he was pulling her back into his arms and slanting his mouth over hers.

It was a kiss that broke barriers, took breath and swayed senses. Hot and hard, Zack showed no mercy.

Her fingers curled against his shirt.

"You make me crazy," his voice rumbled slightly; warm and husky. And she did. All logic—what little he usually possessed—flew out the window the moment he touched her.

Like now, with her lips soft beneath his, the subtle flavor of her playing over his tongue as he dared to push and deepen the kiss. He let out a soft grunt when she accepted him, her eyes closing on a sigh.

His fingers sank into the rich thickness of her hair, palms cradled to her face as he slowed the kiss; lingering over the texture of her skin, savoring the taste of her lips, as he tried to show her how important she was, how much she meant to him. He angled his head, went deeper and that brought forth small sounds from her and threatened his already frayed control.

Too soon, however, she moved a step away, and put some space between them. He stopped her
complete retreat with a the fleeting touch of his knuckles against her cheek.

Her face was flushed a bright red, but her eyes were steady and her voice didn't waver when she told him, "I feel the things you feel, too, Zack. I'd be lying to say otherwise, but that doesn't mean I'm ready for them. It's hard being with you." She rubbed her forehead, and frowned. "Sometimes... and sometimes, it's so easy...and I just...don't know."

Her look was so forlorn that it ate it him.

A frown worked its way over his lips, darkened his eyes. "I know, and I won't rush you, but that's all you get, Tifa; my word that I won't rush you. But I can't pretend anymore." He reached up, tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, his fingers lingering in the hollow there. "It's not fair to either of us."

"I can't pretend either…" She took a breath, squared her shoulders. "I'm not Aerith."

"And I'm not Cloud." She flinched on the name and he was reminded at how raw her heart still was. His tone was softer when he spoke again. "I can't replace him. I don't want to. I'm just me." He let his hand drop—reluctantly—and took a step back, gave her some breathing room. "And I'm as much of your business as you want me to be," he added.

"Zack...I...

"Teef? You in here?" Barret rounded the stall corner, his dark eyes moving between the two of them. Immediately his posture straightened and he looked twice as large when he asked, "Everything okay?"

Tifa offered up a half smile, and nodded. "Yeah."

"We're heading out in ten," Zack told Barret. Then to both of them, "Bill spotted Sephiroth this morning. He was headed into the marshes."

"So, we're going in the right direction at least," Barret grumbled.

"If wanting to meet up with the world's deadliest SOLDIER is a direction you want to be heading in, then yeah, it's the right one."

"Ain't like we got a choice, right? We wanna keep the planet safe from Shin-Ra, then we gotta get to this guy before they do." Barret shrugged, waved them on. "Let's go."

In the yard Chole had a quartet of chocobos ready for them. The birds were saddled, with packs of blankets and food—Just in case—Bill said, and refused payment.

Jaws set, faces determined, they strapped on weapons, shouldered their packs and mounted the birds. Barret, Zack and Tifa individually, and Aerith with Red behind her.

The chatter of birds and the scent of wildflowers made the mission they were about to embark on feel surreal. Out here in the lush green and blazing blue it was easy to forget the smog and violence, the smell of decay and rot of corruption.

Fingers strayed to the scars on his cheek and Zack was reminded that the corruption was never far away.

"Let's go." He stirred the reigns, urged his chocobo into a trot. The others followed, and once outside
the gates they let the birds kick off full speed.

They had a madman to catch.
Tifa sat atop her galloping chocobo and tried not to let her eyes stray—yet again—to the bird and rider ahead of her. After a few minutes of watching the grass and trees, she gave up the pretense and settled her gaze once more on Zack.

It was effortless, the way he rode the chocobo, she noticed. His body didn't jerk the way Barret's did, or bounce as Aerith's, but rolled in the natural rhythm of the bird's gait. Like in everything else, it seemed, Zack was a natural.

Tifa bit her lip hard and tried not to watch the way his arms flexed on the reins, or the way his hips surged with each stride, but her attempts were futile and time and again she found her eyes drawn to broad shoulders and a firm backside.

He must have sensed her scrutiny because he turned his head and shot her a quick look, coupled with a flash of white teeth, over his shoulder. He had the most devastating grin, she thought as her heart kicked against her ribs and blood colored her cheeks.

She immediately set her eyes to the yellow feathers sprouting from her chocobo's head and tried to steady her breathing. It was too easy to get lost in his smiles, in his eyes...in him. There was something about Zack that drew her. It went beyond his charm and charisma—both of which he had in plentiful amounts—and past his good looks—though handsome was a severe understatement. It was more than she could explain and more than she was ready to address, but his words in the barn kept coming back to her and Tifa reluctantly faced the truth.

She felt something for him that went beyond camaraderie, beyond friendship, and far beyond affection. Attraction was certainly part of the volatile cocktail of emotions he stirred to life beneath her skin and in her heart, but it wasn't the basis for them. What she felt for Zack was something she had never felt for anyone before. It was so multi-faceted, she didn't even begin to know where to start examining it.

Distracted as she was, Tifa didn't notice the way the ground softened beneath her mount, or the way she had veered farther to the left than the others. It wasn't until her chocobo jerked to a halt beneath her, and gave a startled wark! that she realized that they had veered too deep into the marshes...and she was stuck.

Tangled up in long reeds and loose grass.

Ahead of her, Zack and the others were nearly across and hadn't noticed her lagging. Beneath her, the bird bucked, and its cry became shrill and agitated.

Tifa gave the still waters a quick appraisal before hopping down and crouching beside the agitated animal. "Easy," she soothed, stroking her hand over plumed feathers. She frowned down at the long tangle of reeds wound around her mount's leg. It would take her a few minutes to tear the reeds away, but since it was her fault the animal was snared, she was determined to work it free. "I'll get you out of here." She stroked along the leg, and made soothing sounds as she tugged and pulled at the wet blades of grass.

Several hard yanks had some coming loose by their roots and she had just begun making decent progress when the bird began to shriek and prance in earnest, frantically trying to rip its leg free. Water sloshed and splashed up into her face and Tifa fell backwards into the muck with a curse.
Shoving the sodden ropes of her hair out of her eyes, Tifa waded back to her animal, grabbed a hold of its leg and tried to steady it. "Shhh, okay, it's okay!" She twisted her hands into the tangle and tried to loosen the strangle of limp weeds. She winced as the reeds tightened around her fingers as the bird continued its frantic attempts to flee.

Behind her, sounding much too far away, she heard Zack call her name.

Still holding her chocobo's leg, she dared a glance over her shoulder and felt a scream lodge somewhere in her throat. Beneath the surface of the marsh an enormous shadow slithered, snaking straight towards her at impossible speed.

The chocobo squawked and reared back; its very apparent terror chilling her. Blood splattered against bright yellow as the bird's talons tore and the reeds cut into Tifa's skin.

"Come on, come on..." Tifa tore at the grass, her heart pounding beneath her ribs.

Faintly, she heard Zack shout her name again and heard Barret bellow something, but above those noises she heard the break of water and a hiss that permeated her bones.

_Shit._

Rivers rained down around her and the monster of the marshes loomed twenty feet above, its serpentine body blocking out the sun.

The Zolom.

She'd heard the legends, even in the slums, of the people daring (or foolish) enough to try and cross the marshes and face the Zolom. The reward for its skin was astronomical, and many a desperate fool had gone in search of the monster, never to be heard from again—or so she'd been told. She'd even seen images—mostly in those cheesy newspapers that also claimed Rufus Shinra was half alien and that some woman in Junon had a fish baby—but nothing could have prepared her for the sheer size of it.

With a hiss that sounded like a roar, it opened its giant mouth and Tifa felt her blood freeze in her veins. One thought managed to skitter across her brain and she didn't know why, but she found it funny: She was going to die as a snack for the Midgar Zolom.

"Tifa!" Zack's voice was close—far closer than it was a few seconds ago—and in it she heard sharp command. "Move!"

She glanced to her right and she did scream then, barely managing to roll out of the way as the tail end of the Zolom snapped towards her. Water shot up like a geyser in the spot she had been standing in a fraction of a second before and the force of it tossed her back.

She landed hard against the side of her chocobo, knocking the flailing animal deeper into the water and causing it to flap and squawk mindlessly. Hurried hands swiped hair from her face and she rapidly blinked water from her eyes as she rolled to her knees. Muck and mud sucked at her and she couldn't find her footing.

"Tifa! Get up!" Standing on the back of his chocobo as it sprinted towards her, precariously balanced with his sword swinging over his head, Zack's normally dancing blues and easy smile were replaced by glowing Mako and a hard line and he looked every inch the first class SOLDIER he once was. With a shout, Zack shot himself from the back of his bird, blade swinging to slice into the hissing Zolom, peeling away a deep layer of scale. The move managed to snag the beast's attention away from her, and in an angry fit, it slapped its tail in the water and thrashed wildly.
With an almost casual ease, Zack landed directly in front of her, and using the Buster Sword as a shield, he slipped his arm around her waist. “Hold on to me,” he ordered.

Grabbing a fistful of his shirt, Tifa gasped when Zack spun on his heel and axed his blade against the chocobo tangled in the weeds, cleaving its head clean off. Blood and feathers churned in the muddy marsh water.

The Zolom's tongue flicked out and its interest shifted from the two of them to the fallen bird. It was all the break Zack needed, and before Tifa could blink, he gave a sharp whistle and she found herself thrown in front of him, yellow feathers in her face and Zack's hard chest pressed to her back as the bird sprinted away from the bloody feast.

Craning her neck around, Tifa felt a flare of sadness for the slain chocobo. It was her fault they had wandered...if she hadn't been so distracted then they would have all made it safely across without incident.

She shook her head and attempted to straighten, only to find Zack's arm locked around her waist. "Don't move," he growled in her ear.

Tifa blinked. If she didn't know any better, she'd swear Zack was furious. Probably left over adrenaline. She knew she was still shaking with it. "Zack, I'm fine," she reassured. "You can let go."

His only response was a curt grunt and when she tried to wiggle into a more comfortable position the arm around her waist tightened marginally, but it may as well have been made of steel. She wasn't moving.

Disgruntled and embarrassed, she relented and leaned back against the warm heat of his chest. Stubborn man. After a few minutes his arm relaxed and eventually moved so that he could get a better grip on the reins.

When they reached solid ground Zack slowed his ride to a trot. The others were only a short distance away and Tifa could already see Barret's arm waving. She lifted her arm in response, letting him know she was okay.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Zack demanded, his breath hot on her neck.

"I was trying to get my bird unstuck," she answered, ignoring the shiver his proximity gave her in favor of being defensive.

"It never occurred to you to yell for help? Or, I don't know, to run to the embankment when you spotted the giant fucking snake heading for you?"

"I was handling it," she muttered, hating the heat coloring her face at his scolding.

"I was handling it," he repeated—through clenched teeth by the sounds of it. "Of course you were. Why the hell would Tifa Lockhart need any help from anyone."

That was just about enough. Tifa reached down alongside the chocobo's neck and gave a small tug on the bridle, stopping the animal. As soon as her feet touched the ground, she turned on Zack, eyes narrowed. "What the hell is your problem?" she demanded.

"You are," he snarled, dropping down beside her.

Feeling an unexpected sting at his words, Tifa gave an indignant snort. "Look, it's simple, it was my fault the bird was caught; it was my job to save it. Maybe you can't understand that, but—"
"You can't save everything!" His eyes darkened to a violet hue and his voice, when he spoke, was rough and shaken. "I know that better than anyone, and I understand more than you can imagine." He stepped forward, gripped her arms. "There's a line between selfless and stupid, Tifa, and sometimes I don't think you know where it is." The kiss was hard, deep and over before she could blink, but it left her breathless all the same. When he released her there was pain in his gaze and it tore at her heart, but she remained silent.

Throwing up his hands in frustration, Zack grabbed his pack and roll off of his chocobo, then turned away from her and stomped off towards the trail at the edge of the trees. "Leave the birds!" he shouted as an afterthought.

Startled, by his kiss as much as his vehemence, Tifa could only stand there and stare after him. It wasn't until she heard Barret's "'Bout time somebody said it," that she shook herself from her daze.

Swiping her muck damp hair from her brow, she turned and pointed at Barret. "Not a word out of you."

He shrugged one massive shoulder. "Can't blame the man for speaking the truth."

"Barret—!"

"Save it, Teef." He held up his hand for silence. "I know you well enough to know you're gonna be foolhardy and reckless no matter what I say." He glanced over to the path Zack had disappeared on. "I suppose we should follow."

As tempted as she was to remain rooted where she stood in sullen defiance, Tifa nodded. "We should." After a pause she quirked her brow at him. "That's a little bit pot-kettle on your part, don't you think?"

"Never said I was an example," he grinned down at her. "Come on you two," he waved for Aerith and Red to dismount. "Quit lagging!"

"Perhaps we did not feel it appropriate to interrupt," Red replied, stretching his paws out in front of him. He shook his head, clacking the beads in his fur. "It appeared to be a private moment."

Blushing, Tifa glanced at Aerith from the corner of her eye and found the other woman studying her openly. Green eyes, normally soft and gentle, were narrowed slightly and Tifa couldn't tell whether it was displeasure or curiosity coloring the look.

"Ain't no private moments here. We got shit to do." Barret swung his satchel over his shoulder and set off in the direction Zack had gone. "Keep up."

Red chuffed, deep in his throat, and darted ahead of Barret. Wringing the dirty water from her hair, Tifa turned to Aerith and felt an unexpected flare of something not nice at how fresh and pretty the other woman looked. Her hair was wind tossed and her cheeks rosy with her emerald and moss eyes sparkling in the afternoon light. She was the picture of delicate femininity and Tifa felt like a wet dishrag beside her.

Shoving aside her feelings of inadequacy, Tifa made an open palm gesture in the direction of their companions. "Shall we?"

With a nod, Aerith fell into step beside her. They hadn't gone five feet before Aerith spoke. "It hurts him when you do that." The quiet statement caught Tifa by surprise, although in retrospect it probably shouldn't have.
She cocked her head, one eyebrow arched, hoping she'd misheard. "Uhm, what?"

"Zack." Aerith clarified, although she didn't need to. "When you shut him out, it hurts him."

Uncomfortable, and mildly irritated, Tifa scratched at her elbow and shook her head. "I know you and Zack are close, and I like you...but I really don't want to talk about this."

"About him, you mean," Aerith corrected.

"Fine, yes. I don't want to talk about him."

"With me."

"With anyone."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't."

Aerith inclined her head, quiet for a moment. "All right, then I'll only say this: Zack has a big heart, but it's far more fragile than he lets on." She spoke in slow, deliberate cadence. "Don't break it."

That paused Tifa's stride, and, caught somewhere between amusement and disbelief, she had to know, "Aerith, are you threatening me?"

The other woman thought it over, then beamed a sunshine smile. "Yes. I believe I am."

And for some reason that smile combined with that threat warmed Tifa and loosened from her words she hadn't intended to say. "I don't want to hurt him."

Aerith's smile turned softer, as did her eyes. "I know you don't." She gave Tifa a sidelong glance as they walked. Birds whistled overhead and rocks crunched beneath their heels. After a short while, Aerith spoke again. "You're pretty scarred."

Unwittingly, Tifa's fingers fluttered over her heart. "I guess I am."

"I'm sorry...about your home..."

The words brought a brief searing pain, but Tifa shook it off. "Thank you."

"...Do you remember them?"

"Hm?"

The next words were halting. "Your...uh...parents."

Tifa sidestepped a fallen branch. "I remember my father. My mother died when I was eight."

Aerith made a small sound of acknowledgment. "I remember my mother, I think...Sometimes."

It was Tifa's turn to offer up a quiet, "I'm sorry." There was no comparisons of their pasts as far as circumstances went, but Tifa knew that pain was pain and Aerith had more than her fair share as well.

"Shin-Ra." Aerith shook her head, ringlets bouncing off her cheeks. "They've ruined a lot of things, haven't they?"
Anger tightened her jaw. "Yes."

"It's frightening to think how much control they ha—!" Aerith's voice stopped short, her hand gripping Tifa's arm like a clawed vice.

Following Aerith's gaze Tifa drew in a sharp breath of her own. "Amazing." Taking Aerith by the hand, she pulled her through the edge of trees and into the clearing where the others all gaped at the sight laid out before them.

Sunlight filtered through leaves in a happy little dance, glimmering off the macabre visual ahead. Impaled on a tree, a Zolom lay mangled. Blood and chunks of flesh littered the ground, staining everything dark black with crimson edges.

"You believe this shit?" Barret remarked when they drew closer to where he and Red and Zack stood.

Tifa shook her head. "I don't want to." She turned to look at Zack, who was still and stoic, his eyes unreadable as he stared and stared at the Zolom.

"It's so brutal," Aerith whispered, her hands covering her mouth. "Sephiroth?"

"Definitely." Zack finally looked away from the bloody mess. "Every legend you ever heard was an understatement. He's stronger than anyone I've ever faced and twice as ruthless."

"But why drag the Zolom here?" Red wondered. "It does not make much sense. Why make that effort?"

Zack glanced at Tifa. "To leave a message."

"A pretty fuckin' effective one, too," Barret grumbled, his good hand rubbing against the metal of his gun arm. "And I, for one, ain't gonna stand here and gawk at the fucker's sick greeting card. We can make a cut right through the Myrthil Mines and save time. I say we get our collective asses moving."

Zack cricked his neck, flexed his shoulders. "Agreed."

An hour later the group stopped outside the main cave entrance of the Myrthil Mines.

"It's probably a good idea to rest for a few minutes before we go traversing through dark caves," Zack suggested, dropping his pack. "Let's take ten." He untied the drawstrings and opened the canvas, pulling out a canteen. "Here."

"Thank you." Aerith took a swallow and passed it to Tifa. She did the same and gave it to Barret, who took a draw from the top and then gave Red a speculative look.

"I'll find some on my own," Red commented with a hint of amusement. "For now, I am going to find a tree."

"Good idea. If anyone has to piss, now would be the time," Barret added as he headed in the opposite direction.

"I don't have to," Aerith said, settling herself onto a boulder. "I'll just wait here."

"Same." Tifa stretched her arms over her head, flexed her legs and climbed atop a rock herself.
"Holler if you need me," Zack told Aerith, and then without a word to Tifa, walked off into the trees.

Tifa sighed. He was still angry. Frowning down at her hands, Tifa decided that maybe she should apologize. She hadn't meant to be so reckless, and Zack had risked his life to save her. Her heart sped up a bit at the image of him charging to her rescue, sword aloft and fury in his eyes.

Hopping down from her perch, she glanced at Aerith. "You okay here for a minute?"

Aerith's smile was a little bit brittle, but genuine. "Sure. Go get him."

Tifa found him not too far away, standing with his forearm braced against a tree and his head dropped down.

"Zack?"

He tensed and turned his face away from her. He cleared his throat before he spoke. "Yeah?"

Zack had never seemed unapproachable to her before, but the rigid set of his shoulders and clipped tone paused her steps and her fingers curled into her palms. She took a steadying breath and moved a few steps closer. "I'm sorry."

He nodded, but still didn't look at her. "Okay."

She could turn around now, she thought, and go back to the cave. He accepted her apology and she could just wait until this wrinkle ironed out. Zack wasn't the type to be angry for long, and she knew that eventually his nature wouldn't allow for him to be sullen forever.

But it wasn't up to him, this time, she mentally scolded. If she cared about him—and she did—then she had to make the effort for his sake as much as he would for hers.

"I didn't mean to be so reckless," she continued, voice gentle. "I didn't think."

"You almost died," he replied, his own voice oddly quiet and distant. "I can't...I can't fail you too."

Oh. Oh, Zack...

With a quiet, resolute, breath, Tifa closed the distance between them, placed her hand on his shoulder and turned him to face her. "Zack, you didn't fail anyone. You saved me. And I never said thank you, so, thank you for saving me."

She heard his indrawn breath and saw his eyes widen marginally as, hesitant, she slid her hand over the soft fabric of his shirt, up and up until her fingertips brushed the dark strands of his hair. Gently, she drew his head down to rest on her shoulder. "Cloud was very lucky to have you in his life," she whispered. "So am I."

She felt his breath shudder out against her neck and then his arms circled her waist in a desperate hug. They stayed that way—twined together with his head on her shoulder—until a throat cleared behind them.

"Barret says it's time to go," Red informed them, voice quiet, and hinting at apology.

"All right," Tifa nodded, sent him a gentle smile. "Thanks." She waited until Red walked away before she turned back to Zack. "I think we should get going."

"In a minute," Zack breathed, lips bumping hers. "Just...one minute."
As tempting as it was, Tifa carefully tried to disentangle herself. "He won't shoot me, but he may you."

"Might be worth it," Zack murmured, nuzzling her cheek.

And her knees went weak.

"Zack..."

"Gods, I love when you say my name."

"Move it, Princess!"

"Annnnd there goes the moment." Zack lifted his head, shot a glowering Barret a narrow look of his own. "Great timing!"

"She's decent. You're dressed, so, yeah, I think I have excellent damn timing! Now, stop pissing me off and march your ass over here so I can knock your head off."

Zack took a step back but kept his hand on the small of her back. "You know, I suddenly feel very bad for Marlene's future boyfriends."

She shook her head, smirking. "Come on."

The Myrthil Mines, once active and productive, now sat unused and vacant due to rampant monster sightings and incidents. A number of miners had disappeared and even more were found with unexplained injuries, but investigation was not an option as Shin-Ra ceased production and 'sealed' the mines.

It was one of the reasons Kalm had been so quiet during their visit, Zack speculated. Miners and their families had left to find other work in other towns. Despite the infrequent use and abandonment, the mines were still well maintained and held little risk of cave in.

But it was still crawling with monsters, Zack thought when a deep voice spoke from an outcropping of rock.

"I'm afraid I can't let you pass."


"I don't recall asking your permission," Zack replied, crossing his arms and rocking back on his heels, a small smirk curving his lips.

The Turk appeared equally unconcerned. That was until he spotted Tifa, who was still wet from her tumble in the marshes and shivering slightly in the cool shadows of the cave. Slipping his jacket off, Rude held it out to her.

The gesture was received with a shake of head and a muttered, "No thank you," from Tifa but the sight of the proffered jacket sent an ugly itch crawling along Zack's skin. The Turks didn't break uniform. Zack was almost certain they slept in suit pajamas, so for Rude—one of the most devoted of the Turks—to be offering Tifa his jacket spoke volumes to Zack. And what it spoke of, he didn't like. Not one bit.
"How the hell did they get here?" Barret growled as he came up alongside Zack, gesturing towards another slim shadow—blond and female—above them and drawing Zack's murderous gaze away from Rude.

"We have a vast number of resources at our disposal. We, unlike some, don't have to rely on game animals to get us where we need to be."

"Tseng." Zack inclined his head in greeting as the other man stepped out from the shadows of the cave wall.

Ignoring Zack, Tseng stepped toward Aerith, who, surprisingly also moved toward him. "Are you all right?" he asked her, genuine concern permeating his normally reserved voice.

"Why wouldn't I be?" she asked in saccharine sweet tones. "Zack's here to take care of me."

Even more surprising than the odd exchange was watching Tseng flinch as though Aerith had struck him. "I...see."

"I doubt that." Aerith brushed her hands over her skirt. "Are you here to take me in?"

"No." Tseng shook his head. "Now that Sephiroth has reappeared it seems that Shin-Ra has other, more pressing, concerns."

"Am I supposed to be grateful for that?"

"That's not what I meant. Aerith...I want to explain—"

"No," she cut in. "You've lied to me too many times. I don't want to hear anything from you."

Tseng bowed his head. "Very well. If the fates are kind, we won't be seeing much of each other again. I...Take care of yourself, Aerith." He held her eyes for a long moment before he broke the look. "Rude, Elena, with me; our ship leaves dock soon." With a sharp click of heel to stone, Tseng did an about-face and headed into one of the dark tunnels snaking through the mines.

Once the Turks were gone Zack turned to Aerith. "Wanna tell me what that was all about?"

She flushed from neck to roots. "Nope."


"I said I don't want to talk about it, Zack."

"Okay, okay." He held up his hands. Back before Nibleheim, Tseng had been one of Zack's closest friend's and he had long suspected the other man of harboring feelings for Aerith. It never occurred to him that maybe she returned those sentiments. He frowned, working a knot in the back of his neck.

He hoped she didn't.

For her sake. For all their sakes.

Things were complicated enough without mixing up emotions with the Turks.

"Are we to follow them?" Red's quiet inquiry echoed softly against the stone.

"No." Zack shook his head, thinking about Tseng's words. The man was the most precise and
meticulous Turk out there. He never let anything slip. "I know where they're going."

"Oh, yeah? And how's that?" Barret demanded.

Zack closed his eyes, rubbed his temples. "Psychic powers."

"Bullshit."

"That Turk said they were taking a ship. There's only one harbor near here. They're headed to Junon." Tifa supplied.

Zack gave Tifa an approving smile and took a fair amount of pride in her blush. "Bingo."
The Great Ninja Yuffie

Chapter Summary

The group adds one more...

They were being followed.

The low-grade buzz of awareness that hummed through Zack had hair raising and sinew tightening—pulling muscles, readying for battle should he need to.

From the corner of his eye he caught Tifa slant him a look and he nodded subtly. She felt it too.

Behind them, Aerith chattered happily, giving Barret more information than the big man would ever need to know about how to properly nurture and tend to the frail flowers of Midgar, while Red trotted along behind, his flame tail swishing back and forth.

There was no need to alarm everyone just yet, Zack figured, so he feigned a stretch, angling his head to peer into the shadows of the forest around them. The deep underbrush remained still and the trees offered only minimal movement in their branches, but Zack knew there was someone—or something—watching them.

There!

Zack's mouth thinned and he turned his full attention to the forest shadows, giving up the pretense. The breeze had settled, but the leaves of one tree still trembled. His hand closed around the hilt of his sword, and he adjusted his stance. "If you want to sneak up on someone, you should be a little less obvious," he called out.

There was a swell of silence as the others halted, finally noticing that he'd stopped, and that he was shouting at the trees.

Tifa gave Barret a quick hand signal and he immediately adjusted his gun-arm and took position in front of Aerith. Red, who relied on instinct, maneuvered along Aerith's other side with his haunches up.

There was another pregnant pause as they waited for a response of any sort while the trees swayed and the sunlight danced between.

Barret lifted his arm, the gears whirring to life. "You want me to just start shooting?" he asked in a voice loud enough to carry.

The leaves rustled then and a voice called out, "You only know I'm here because I want you to!"

Zack's eyes widened at that voice. It was female, accented Wutainese and young, and it jangled something in the distant parts of his memories. He glanced at Tifa and noticed her expression was also surprised—although he imagined for a different reason. Hearing how young the voice sounded, Tifa lowered her fists and relaxed her stance.

"Wait, Tif—shit!" Zack swung his sword out, deflecting the over-sized shuriken that spun suddenly
from the shadows. The weapon spun back, arcing through the air much like a boomerang, the thrum of it's deadly arms lingering inches from Tifa's face. Zack fought down the urge to reprimand her for dropping her guard. He'd let it go...for now.

He turned back to the forest in time to see a small hand dart out from the leaves, snagging the spinning weapon casually, and a moment later a slim figure dropped lightly from the branches.

Not only had she sounded young, it was apparent that their would-be attacker was young. Early teens, if Zack had to guess, with short dark hair that framed a face that hinted toward future beauty. Brown eyes, rimmed with dark lashes and mischief sat above a pert, slightly upturned nose and bow shaped lips turned up in a wide smile. "I'm the Great Ninja Yuffie. Pleased to meetcha!" She waved at them, cheeky and arrogant, with the massive shuriken slung over her shoulder. "Now, hand over your materia!"

She was marginally taller and a little louder than he remembered, but her attitude and appearance zipped straight into Zack's memories and pulled up a younger version of the 'Great Ninja'. Memories flickered like old movie footage behind his eyes and he recalled scared bravado and furious taunts while Shin-Ra soldiers crawled through the streets of Wutai.

"You!" He pointed his finger at her.

In turn, she smiled wider and turned her thumb on herself. "Me!"

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Zack demanded. "You could get yourself killed with stunts like that!"

"What stunt? I'm about to kick your asses and take your materia," she explained with a wink.

Barret's booming, disgruntled voice drew all eyes to him. "Dammit, and I thought maybe we had some action." He lowered his arm, shrugged dismissively. "We don't have time for this. Let's keep walking." He nudged Aerith into motion. The others followed.

"H-hey!" The Great Ninja Yuffie exclaimed when they began walking. "Wait! Wait!" Ignored, she called out taunts, until one of them struck a cord. "I kicked your ass once, SOLDIER, I'll do it again!"

This brought everyone up short and Zack felt four pairs of eyes boring into him.

"Zack?" At Tifa's inquiring—and subtly amused—look Zack quickly denied the claim.

"She did not!"

"Did so!" Yuffie countered with a tilt of her chin. "One hit and you were whining like a baby!"

Barret's laugh was grating, but Zack expected the ribbing. No way was Barret letting something like this slide. "Got your ass handed to you by a toddler?"

"She was a kid!" Zack protested with a scowl. "What was I supposed to do?"

"Beat the snot out of her," Barret provided evenly.

"Sure. That's a good plan."

"Better than letting her kick your ass."

"She didn't. I pretended to be defeated so she would go away."
"Sure. If you say so."

Zack rolled his eyes. He was never, ever living this down.

"Hey! Quit ignoring me!" Yuffie stamped her foot. When that didn't work she swung her shuriken out again, this time aimed for Aerith.

The weapon's frantic spin was halted abruptly by the Buster Sword, the shuriken snapping in half on impact. "Don't." Zack lowered his blade to his side and gave the girl a hard, glowing stare. "I don't have any quarrel with you, and I really don't need one." His voice could have etched stone. "But if you attack my friends again, I will."

"You don't scare me!" Yuffie shouted, her stance defiant.

"He should," Tifa's voice was calm and carried with it the weight of sincerity. She shrugged one shoulder and continued in the same idle tone, "It's not like you'd be the first person he's killed today. I think..." She spaced out her fingers, ticked off three. "Yup, you'd make number four." She gave a weary sigh. "It's so hard to keep SOLDIERS in line. All that Mako...it does stuff to them."

Zack felt something in him shift uncomfortably. He knew Tifa was teasing—knew she playing a part to deter Yuffie from fighting with them, but her words...hurt. She didn't realize; she would never do so intentionally, but that didn't stop the sting he felt or the ache it left behind. Because all that Mako did do something to him.

Something ugly and unchangeable.

"Of course, if he kills you, then we won't have to waste anymore time out here. Hmmm..." Tifa tapped her fingers to her chin, contemplating.

Yuffie, for her part, simply gaped, her mouth flapping open and closed, but no words came out.

"Barret, what do you think?" Tifa asked suddenly.

"Wait, wait, don't ask him!" Yuffie spluttered.

"Wait, wait, don't ask him!" Yuffie spluttered.

"Why not?"

"Because he'll wanna kill me!"


"I was only foolin'!"

Aerith gave Yuffie a long look, and Zack recognized the teasing glint in her eyes. "Well...I don't know..."

"Are you really going to kill the child?" Red's smooth voice was a bit agitated and his yellow eye flickered with inner light.

The shriek Yuffie emitted had them covering their ears. "Ohmygods, ohmygods, it talks! It talks! What the heck is it? It can talk?!

"I know you idiots were joking before," Barret groused, wincing as the piercing wail crested and fell and then rose again, "but if she doesn't cut that shit out, I'm gonna shoot her."

"Enough!" Red snapped, his growl echoing. "Yes, squealing child, I can talk. As for what I am, I
am what you see. Now, if you are done with your insulting tirade, then please be so kind as to
remove yourself from our way, and we shall be going."

Yuffie blinked several times and, to Zack's surprise, went quiet. "Uhm...sorry," she muttered. She
took a breath before straightening her shoulders, her self-assured grin back in place. "So, where are
we going?"

Barret scoffed. "What's this 'we' shit, pipsqueak. You ain't coming."

"Of course I am," she scoffed right back. "I'm the Great Ninja Yuffie! Master Treasure Hunter and
Adventurer! I go wherever I choose to go, and right now, I choose to go with you guys!"

"No." Zack shook his head as he returned his sword to the holder on his back "You don't want to get
involved with us, trust me."

"Ooooh, now you make it sound dangerous!" Yuffie rubbed her hands together. "Even better."

"It's crazy to want to look for danger," Aerith said. "But you may be able to help us."

"How?"

"We're looking for a man in a black cape. Have you seen him?"

"Nope."

"Okay, then, she can't help." Zack made quick motions for everyone to start walking. "The sooner
we get to Junon, the sooner we can find out where Sephiroth is headed—"

"Wait!" Yuffie ran up beside him and latched onto his arm. "Sephiroth? As in General Sephiroth?"
she asked, her face uncharacteristically serious.

Zack tensed, but nodded. "Yes."

"Why? Why are you looking for Sephiroth?"

"That ain't any of your damn business," Barret interjected, his palm pushing against Zack's shoulder
as he passed. "Move it, Princess."

"Look, you have to let me come with you," Yuffie exclaimed, clinging. Gone was her toothy grin
and in its place steely determination glinted in her eyes. "You owe me that much."

Zack flinched, but still refused. They had enough problems without adding a kleptomaniac teenager
to their ranks. "I'm sorry, kiddo, but my answer is no."

"Don't 'kiddo' me!" A small foot stamped on his toe. "Because of you—because of Shin-Ra and
SOLDIER—my home, my home, is a tourist attraction! Nothing is as it should be! And it's your
fault! You owe me! If there is a chance to get revenge on the General then I want it! He destroyed
my home!"

"Look, Yuffie—"

"She can come."

Zack closed his eyes, his breath leaving him like a punch. "Tifa..."

Even Barret stopped, but to Zack's eternal surprise, the big man said nothing and even nodded.
Hands on her hips, Tifa met Zack's stare, her mouth set. "She can come. I'll be responsible."

*Like you need that,* Zack thought. One more thing to carry on your shoulders. But he didn't say it. Couldn't say it. He knew—the moment Yuffie had proclaimed her home destroyed by Shin-Ra—he knew she was theirs now.

Yuffie's grin was triumphant.

"Once, just once, do I find any gil or materia missing and you're gone," Zack murmured, low enough for only Yuffie to hear him.

Her gulp was audible, but she still smiled. "Fair enough." She fumbled in her pocket, handed Zack a small pouch.

"What's this?" he asked.

"The gil I just took from you." She flashed her grin again before bouncing off after the others.

Zack sighed, a hand digging into his hair. He watched as Yuffie practically tackled Tifa, looping their arms together and yammering away like they'd been friends forever. "Great, just great."

They made surprisingly good time once they started moving again and it wasn't long before the harbor was in view.

"Ew. This place is ick!"

The loud proclamation was completely unnecessary, but not completely inaccurate Zack had to admit as the crested a low hill. They made their way rather somberly towards the city.

Junon Harbor, one of the busiest and most active cities Zack could remember was completely run-down. Buildings, weathered by sea and smog, were cracked and chipped and looked ready to sink against the ground in weary defeat. The air, which should have tasted of salt and freedom, was rank with the stale, muted flavors of things too unpleasant to name and the ground beneath their feet crumbled and flaked beneath them.

"What happened to this place?" The question was one that Zack didn't actually expect an answer to —after all, every one of them knew what happened to any place when it looked as decayed and crippled as this place did—but it came out of him anyway as the group trudged their way past the iron walls of Junon.

"Place looks like it got its ass kicked," Barret mumbled, wiping one hand down his face. Zack couldn't tell if it was simple commentary or an answer to his question, but either way, he chose not to respond.

"You folks from Shin-Ra?"

The group turned and found wrinkled, weary eyes gazing up at him from beneath the wide brim of a tattered fisher's cap. Shoulders slumped beneath a stained brown tunic and worn rope basket. The old man gave them all a cursory once over.

"We aren't," Aerith replied at the same time Barret demanded: "Do we look like we're from fuckin' Shin-Ra?" which earned him a cuff to the back of the head from Tifa.
Gray eyes didn't blink, but crooked teeth appeared behind cracked lips in a gap filled smile. "Well, good, then. Can't stand them damn Shin-Ra. Ever since they built that city up there during the war there's been no fish in the water and nothing but pollution in the air."

"Are you a fisher-man, sir?" Aerith asked, her sweet voice almost too bright in the dimness.

This time the man did blink and his smile grew to painful proportions. "Used to be. Fifth generation, at that. But not anymore." He made tsking noises and shook his head sadly.

"That's all very interesting," Barret grumbled, glowering at the group. "But can we get on with business? We ain't here for the tour. Old timer, you seen a man in a black cape wandering around here?"

"No. I can't say that I've seen a feller like that around here. You're the first bunch of newcomers this town has seen in a long time."

"Would you, by chance, know of any activity around the harbor by Shin-Ra, perhaps?" Red asked, his voice melodic and even toned as usual.

"Holy Leviathan! It talks!" The old man practically shrieked, backing away a few quick steps.

"You get that a lot," Tifa commented, bending to ruffle the tuft of fur behind Red's ear, a half smile on her face. The gesture was meant to soothe any inadvertent sting the old man's words may have given, Zack realized as he watched the tightness ebb from Red's haunches. "Everyone's so startled to hear you speak," she continued in a light, teasing lilt, "but no one ever seems surprised when Barret does it."

"H-hey!" Barret groused, crossing his arms over his chest, but his scowl wasn't as fierce as Zack knew it could have been, and his tone wasn't offended. It seemed their rag-tag little group was forging some bonds, and despite the hardships he knew they were going to face, Zack couldn't help the sense of pride he felt at being a part of them.

The old man adjusted his basket. "You folks be staying in town?"

"Not long," Zack informed him. He glanced at his companions and for the first time noticed weariness in Aerith's shoulders and around her eyes, despite her cheery smile. The flicker of guilt that he'd carried with him since the Shin-Ra tower raid flared to life and burned a hole in his heart. "But if you know of a place where we could find some food and a room for a few hours, we'd appreciate that," he added.

"Decent food is scarce, I'll tell you that right now. But Mother Gerdie has spare rooms in her house if you're not too particular."

"We ain't got time to be sitting on our asses," Barret stated with a firm nod.

"I could use a break." Tifa interjected before Zack could issue a proper counter.

Barret turned toward her, one thick eyebrow arched in clear disbelief. She met his look with a pointed one of her own. "I'm tired," she stated, her head tilted, daring him to contradict her.

She was perceptive, Zack thought with a smile when he noticed the way her brown eyes flickered over Aerith. And caring.

He knew—better than anyone—how anxious she was to confirm whether or not Sephiroth was alive, and how much she needed to know. He had the same drive, the same need, the same bitter
taste in his mouth and shadow in his memories. He also knew first hand how strong and capable she was, and knew she wasn't tired...or at least not weary enough to require taking an extended break, yet she was asking for one.

Not for herself. No, Tifa would push herself to the limits of endurance and beyond—of that Zack was simultaneously certain and terrified of. For her friends though, there was nothing she would not give. His heart doubled its rate in his chest and he smiled, soft and tender, at her. *Thank you.* He mouthed the words over Aerith's head and watched, with amusement, as Tifa blushed and looked away.

He was going to melt her with that look, she thought, red-faced and pulse pounding. She refused to meet his gaze again, though she felt it burning across her skin. He was too endearing like that, she thought, with his eyes alight and smile gentle.

Cocky Zack she could handle—despite his charm and appeal; fierce Zack she could relate to—and valued him as companion and comrade; seductive Zack was a bit more of a challenge with his smoldering eyes and sinful mouth, but still, she could manage. It was humble Zack that she had the hardest time resisting. When his arrogance didn't veil the pain and fear, and when concern and thankfulness changed blue to violet. That was when she wanted to go to him and hold him—and be held. It was in these moments that she felt her heart would be safe in his care, that she could hand it over to him for keeping...

"Yo! Teef!"

"Huh?" Startled, she blinked rapidly and found dark eyes and a darker scowl directly in her vision. "Quit daydreaming and c'mon!"

"Oh, what? Sure." Dumbly she trodded behind Barret who was giving her his 'you better not flake' glare.

Ahead of her, Yuffie spoke to Aerith. "You must really like pink."

Aerith gave her her mud splattered skirt a quick glance. "Actually, my favorite color is yellow."

Yuffie turned her head a bit. "Then why all the pink?"

Aerith's cheeks tinted to match her ribbon. "Uhm...Zack..." She waved her hand toward Zack's back. "He liked the color on me."

Tifa's boots dug a little deeper into the soil.

"Oh," Yuffie chuckled and waggled her brows. "He's really, really cute. Is he your boyfriend?"

Although she wasn't looking at her, Tifa felt Aerith's stare before she heard the reply of, "Not mine, no."

Yuffie, following Aerith's gaze, turned to walk backwards. "So, he yours?" she called.

Was he? Tifa wondered. Was that something she was ready to claim? She wasn't sure, but she found herself even more reluctant to deny it. Zack...hers? The idea set off small sparks of awareness and warmth through her body—and deeper still, into her soul, where it warmed places long left cold and dark. Gods, what was that man doing to her?

"He is!"
Startled, Tifa's eyes flew up and she found Zack's focus locked on her. Her face burned when she realized that he could hear everything being said. Damn his SOLDIER hearing. And then her heart pounded triple speed when she realized just exactly what he'd replied to.

She floundered for a response—confirmation, rejection, it didn't matter, just something—but came up empty.

"Lucky." Yuffie pouted, turning away and returned her attention back to Aerith.

Tifa flushed, risking a glance, and realized that Zack was still looking at her. Like he was waiting for her confirmation. She had no chance to offer neither affirmation or denial because suddenly there was a frantic woman pleading with them.

"Help! Please, someone help!" The scream was frayed and tear-filled. "Please, help!"

Sword drawn, gun cocked, gloves donned—they swung around as one to face the elderly woman scrambling up the stone steps of the beach. "Please! My granddaughter!" She staggered, fell.

Tifa rushed to her side, helping her to her feet. The woman was soaked, her gray, thin hair in strings over her eyes and her pale, wrinkled skin was sand covered.

"A monster..." frail fingers dug into Tifa's arms. "A monster has my baby!"

"Where?" Zack was beside them in an instant.

"The beach!" The woman pointed with trembling hands as her knees gave out again.

"Aerith!" Tifa called. "Easy, ma'am. Please, be easy."

"On my way!" Aerith placed her hands beneath the other woman's elbows, facing her. "Go," she said to Tifa and Zack. "I've got her."

"Right. We'll get your granddaughter," Zack assured, the strength in his voice and sheer presence comforting. He moved so quick that by the time Tifa realized he'd gone, he was already on the steps, his feet flying over the ground and down the stones.

Tifa rushed behind him, and decided not to bother with the beaten walkway and instead chose to vault over the wooden railing and dropping to the sandy ground below.

"Teef! For Ifrit's sake, that girl is gonna be the death of me!" She heard Barret swearing from above. Lifting one hand over her head she waved to let him know that she was unharmed, but didn't miss her stride.

On the beach, down by the shore, a small body lay, crumpled and discarded like a broken doll. In the water a monster slithered, tail churning frothy foam in the waves. "Oh, no," Tifa breathed, her legs pumping faster.

She wasn't going to make it, she thought with terrifying clarity. The sea-creature was arched for a strike, its target clearly the girl laid out on the beach, and she wasn't going to make it in time! "No, no, no!" Her voice was harsh in her throat and she denied a cry as the creature lurched forward—mouth wide and ready.

Blood sprayed the sky, dropping down like crimson rain and Tifa watched in fascination laced horror as the monster's head slid to the side and then fell clean off. The body swayed a moment longer, then it too fell into the pink water.
Standing with his legs braced on either side of the child Zack held his sword out, eyes flickering with green light as he watched the beast displace and crumble.

It hadn't stood a chance, Tifa realized, eyes wide. Zack had sliced through the creature with cold efficiency, dispatching the giant monstrosity without even breaking a sweat.

"The girl?" Tifa raced to his side, dropped to her knees and reached for the tiny body.

"Don't." His voice was ragged despite his even breathing. "Don't look," he said.

But her hands had already clutched fragile shoulders and rolled the child onto her back. "Oh, gods!" She was going to be sick. Tifa fell back, her hand over her mouth. Empty eyes stared back at her and torn, bloody skin flapped in the ocean breeze. "No, no, no." She shook her head, tried to deny the sight in front of her.

"Tifa." Zack's arms circled her, lifted her to her feet. "Go. I'll finish here." He cupped her cheek, his eyes sad as he forced her to focus on him and not the dead child. "Go on."

A breath shuddered in her lungs. "No." She wouldn't let him do this alone. Not this. It would crush him, she knew, to tell that frantic woman that her 'baby' was dead. She could see it on his face now; the anger, the sadness, the defeat. She laced her fingers through his, and squeezed. "We'll do this together." Zack's words from earlier echoed in her head and her hurt ached. You can't save everything...

She got that now. She understood. Truly, she did.

But, still it'd be nice if they could save someone.

She felt tears sting the backs of her eyelids as, together, they picked up the little body and walked up the sand, toward the rocks and the waiting grandmother they'd left behind.

Mother Gerdie's house was dark and quiet, the occupants mostly asleep when Zack entered. He made his way through the small house, toward the back bedroom that he'd been assigned. His steps were careful, keeping the creaking of the floorboards to as much of a minimum as possible. At the end of the hall, he closed the door quietly behind him. Inside the small, but surprisingly tidy bedroom, he removed his boots and rested them against the wall beside the bed, near his sword.

He brushed his fingertips over the hilt and closed his eyes.

Death.

Everywhere he went, he carted death behind him.

This sword...was meant to protect and defend. It was a symbol of hopes and dreams...and honor. And now, thanks to him, there was more blood on it than ever.

"I'm not doing this very well, am I, Angeal?" he whispered. The wistful pang he felt in his chest had him staggering forward, hand braced on the wall as the weight of failure and memories pressed him into the dark. His throat was tight, eyes burning. "I could really use your advice right now...not that I ever took it," he murmured. His breath left him in a long, jerky whoosh. "Please."

Silence.
And then, "Zack?"

_Tifa._

How did she always know?

The light but insistent knock on the door had him recrossing the floorboards and turning the loose handle. Tifa stood on the other side of cracked wood, her arms hugged around herself. She looked very pale in the muted moonlight that managed to filter through the permanently smog stained windows, he thought with a frown.

"Hey." He opened the door, moved back to allow her room.

She stepped through the threshold. "How is she?" she asked after the door clicked shut.

"Sedated." Weariness weighed his words, his heart, him. He'd just come from the house of Priscilla Lane, grandmother of "Little Priscilla", where several townsfolk had gathered to help the elder woman through her grief.

It had torn her apart—the death of her beloved granddaughter. She had cried and screamed and wailed until finally someone, and Zack couldn't remember who, had come and cast sleepel on her.

He had offered to be the one to bury the body, but there was a sense of discomfort with that, and the offer was politely—but firmly—declined. They had an undertaker, they would handle it. No need for outsiders to get involved.

Through the buzz and commotion of the tragedy, Zack learned that sightings of sea monsters weren't all that uncommon and that Little Priscilla had been going down to the beach for days in search of her missing dolphin—presumably devoured. As a result, Zack and the others had decided to stay for the remainder of the night. There were things they could do here to help, they'd concluded. So they did. Throughout the afternoon he and Barret and Tifa worked to fortify the beach and made barricades along the shore while Aerith and Red went to assist with the elder Mrs. Lane.

Even Yuffie got involved, surprising them all. "What?" she'd exclaimed. "You've met me for five minutes and you think you know me? Pffft. Losers." And then she was off in a huff, setting about closing the docks. Since fishing wasn't possible anymore, she and Red closed up the untended bait shops and placed signs and picket-posts up as warning.

It had taken hours and several thousand pounds of bagged sand, welding, and organizing, but they had managed to get a great deal accomplished before they lost all daylight and had to call it a night.

Zack had expected blame and harsh words—him being a former SOLDIER and failing to save the child—but there hadn't been any. What he had received was quiet thanks for his effort and gratitude for his slaying the beast.

He would have preferred the former.

"How are you?" he asked Tifa, pulling himself from his thoughts.

Lashes veiled shining eyes. "I'm okay." She turned toward the window. The silence stretched with the shadows.

Zack had the urge to fidget, but tamped it down, and instead shoved his hands in his pockets and waited.
"Do you think Sephiroth is still here?" she asked finally, her voice faltering—only slightly—on the name.

That broke his heart, he realized. Watching her struggle to pretend to be okay. Physically, mentally, emotionally—she put on a hell of a show, and Zack felt a small ball of worry form in his gut. Because that was all it was. A show. He could see the lines of tension around her eyes and feel the thrumming of unease beneath her skin.

Not many other people did, though.

Barret, maybe.

But to everyone else Tifa was strong, dependable, unshakable.

"I don't know," he answered, moving so that he stood beside her. Being closer to her helped him. "Maybe."

Another long silence as the clouds covered the moon, draping them in ink and muted gray.

Zack rubbed the back of his neck and struggled to find the words that he wanted to say. "Tifa... chasing Sephiroth... It will be... There's going to be more death. By his hand or others, it won't matter. When Shin-Ra and Sephiroth are involved... bodies get littered behind."

She lifted her chin, stared out into the blurry night. "I know."

Of course she knew. He wasn't sure what he was warning her of—she'd already lived through the worst nightmare, but he wanted her to understand...to know, that none of it was her fault.

Today had been a staggering blow for all of them. Simply because the honest truth was there had been nothing they could have done for the child. They couldn't save everyone...no matter how much they wanted to. They—he—needed to accept that, he'd realized, stacking bags today. He had told Tifa that in the marshes, but the fact remained he had expected to jog onto that beach, dispatch a monster, and play hero once more.

Except, as he already knew, heroes were sadly rare and didn't always win.

Studying her, he noticed her fingertips twitch and flex spasmodically, and with a small grunt, he reached out and took one hand between both of his.

Startled, her eyes widened and when they lifted to his they were a shade somewhere between chocolate and roses and Zack felt his heart kick. Slow, he began to rub his thumbs against her palm in firm circles. "You should have told me," he chided gently, his voice a low murmur.

When she looked confused, one side of his mouth curved. "They still hurt," he elaborated, giving the hand within his a gentle squeeze.

"Oh." She blinked, once, twice, and he could see her mentally working up a plausible denial, so he simply gave her another crooked smile before lifting each finger to his lips for a light caress.

"I can feel it," he mouthed against her palm, breath whispering between them.

"Zack..."

"Hush." He brushed her hair behind her ear as his eyes deepened to match the midnight sky. "Let me take care of you." I need to take care of you.
The shadows in her own eyes deepened but after a moment she nodded and relaxed her fingers. "Okay."

Zack diligently massaged her joints, soothed her aches, rubbed away lingering tightness. Tifa closed her eyes, her sigh music to his ears. Her body swayed and eyelids drooped, exhaustion finally able to ease in past soreness and tension.

Her voice was sleepy. "Zack..."

"Hm?"

"I...don't...I can't...want to feel like this..."

His heart stopped. Kick-started again. "Tifa?"

"Sorry," she murmured, realizing she was rambling Gently, she removed her hands. "I'm just tired."

"Did I do something wrong?"

"No, no, nothing like that," she quickly assured him, but her eyes still held a nervous tension that made his breath tight and chest constrict. She stepped away from him, hands wringing one another at her waist. "I just..." She trailed off, shook her head and lowered her lashes to veil the crimson flecks sparkling beneath. "Never mind." She turned away from him, reached for the door. "You should get some slee—"

"Don't." He was behind her in an instant, the breadth of his chest pressed into her back, his hand circling hers on the doorknob. He pressed his nose into her hair, took a shuddering breath. "Don't go."

"I...I can't stay," she whispered back.

"Yes, you can," he told her.

In front of him, her head bowed and he felt her firm her resolve. Then she turned and her mouth was on his and Zack couldn't think anymore. It was the first time she'd ever initiated a kiss between them, and Zack felt his insides swell and brighten in the way they only ever did for her. His pulse throbbed in his chest, head, hands and lower, while his blood hummed beneath his skin, singing for her. More of her. Only ever her.

She lifted her chin, angled her head and tasted him.

And Zack—renowned ladies man—shivered. His hands moved to cradle her jaw and he returned her kiss with tender affection and simmering passion.

When they parted, it was slowly—reluctantly—and Zack felt her tremble against him.

"Tifa." Breaths came in ragged bursts, his eyes shining in the shadows. "Stay. Please. I need you."

His fingers curled beside her ear and his smile was full of gentle coaxing. "Please. I just want to hold you while I sleep."

It was the please that did her in, she'd later contemplate.

His eyes were sincere and swirling with pain, despite the smile on his face, and her heart cracked within her breast. Selfless to the point of sacrificial, Zack rarely asked for anything. But he was asking her now.
How could she deny him?

Holding his gaze, she slipped her hand down his arm to link their fingers. "You'd better not snore," she whispered, and watched his eyes widen and shine with something that was simultaneously joyful and terrifying.

She led him to the small bed, nerves causing her upper teeth to work her bottom lip to rawness, but then his warm, strong hands were on her shoulders and he whispered "It's okay."

And suddenly it was.

Tomorrow they would resume their search for Sephiroth.

Tomorrow the people of Junon would bury one of their young.

Tomorrow they may fight another battle.

Tomorrow they may slay another foe.

Tomorrow they may lose another friend.

But tonight...tonight they had each other.
Zack woke just before daybreak, and felt...different.

No nightmares, he realized.

No haunting images of mad scientists and swirling green.

No blood-caked desert.

No broken hearts.

Just sleep.

It was...refreshing.

He went to move and felt the warm weight of a body draped over him and confusion gave way to realization. Tifa had nestled into him in her sleep, he noticed, but still had her arm between them—her fist curled over her heart.

As if she was guarding it; protecting it. Locking it. Her name was so painfully fitting.

He wanted to lift that hand curled on her chest, unclench those fingers. He wanted to unlock her fist—unlock her heart...as she'd done his.

His mouth curved up on that thought, even as another warmed him further. She looked like so peaceful, so young.

Zack leaned up on his arm, to better study her, to breathe in her sleep warm scent. Long, dark hair spilled across the pillow in a tangled cascade that he couldn't help but touch. He trailed his hand through it, watched the strands sift through his fingers.

He got it now.

That blind devotion, that unspoken connection and loyalty. He knew now why Tifa always knew when he needed her—he just wasn't sure she knew. Even if she did, she probably wouldn't acknowledge it.

Despite his eagerness—a trait he'd been teased about all through SOLDIER—Zack could be patient. He would be patient for her. He'd persuade her, he'd coax her, and eventually...when she was ready...he'd tell her...he loved her.

I love you... he didn't say it out loud. Knew she wasn't ready for it, but he felt it. Gods, he felt it.

Sighing, she shifted against him, her nose nuzzling beneath his chin and he had to bite the inside of his cheek to stave off the reaction that little movement caused. She inhaled, sighed again and relaxed once more. Apparently she wasn't ready to start the day just yet.

That was okay, he thought, brushing his hand across her cheek. Neither was he.
Morning, however, would not be staved off by his sheer willpower, and sooner than he'd have liked, the sounds of feet on floorboards and voices in conversations drifted beneath the door and disturbed the warm tranquility of the room.

In the circle of his arms, Tifa stirred. "...Zack...?"

"Hey." He brushed the tip of her nose with a soft kiss, grinned at her instant blush.

"...Time is it?" she asked, eyes still heavy with sleep.

"Early."

"Mm." She dropped her head back down, closed her eyes. "Don't wanna get up. You make a nice pillow."

And Zack—to his utter and complete astonishment—felt his own cheeks heat, and knew that he was blushing.

Slow, so not to startle her or break the unexpected vulnerability she was showing, Zack feathered the back of his fingers over her shoulder. "Thank you," he murmured, quiet, sincere."For staying with me."

Dark lashes fluttered, lifted, and chocolate wine simmered for him. "You're not alone, Zack."

He nodded, kept his eyes on hers. "I know." His fingers brushed against her ear, moved to her jaw, his thumb skirting the edge of her bottom lip. "Neither are you." He touched his lips to each corner of her mouth, feather-light.

She exhaled his name. "Zack."

His heart clenched—answered back. The kiss was sweet; slow and purposeful. Her lips were soft, pliant and willing and it was so easy to get lost in her. So, so easy.

She gave a small, breathy sound, her fingers flexing and then shifting to clutch in his hair and he knew that she was lost too.

He angled his head, deepened the kiss, used light the caress of his tongue to entice her mouth open, and groaned when she allowed him entry. Tentative, she tangled herself in his kiss. She moved restlessly beside him and Zack rolled, pressing her beneath the warm, solid weight of his body.

He kept himself braced on his elbows, kept his mouth fused to hers, blanketed her with tenderness and desire.

And she responded.

His heartbeat skittered like a pebble on a pond and he felt the familiar soar of brightness in his soul that accompanied her.

But that wasn't enough.

Seduction—although extremely enjoyable—wasn't enough. He wanted more than her body.

He wanted her heart.

He eased back, skinned lips over her cheeks, eyes. "I could really, really get used to waking up like this," he warned her, pressing an open mouthed kiss to her shoulder.
A loud boom followed by a crash from the other room jarred them apart and they both heard Barret shout something about bullets and scrawny Ninja ass followed by a yelp and another crash.

"We'd better go see what's going on," Tifa said, gently disengaging herself.

Zack gave a disgruntled huff as he let her roll from his arms, but the smile never left his face. She wasn't closed off, she hadn't shoved those walls between them. It was an unexpected thrill for him, and he appreciated the exposure she was giving.

He knew it wasn't easy for her.

Once on her feet, Tifa worked her hair back into a ponytail. Something fundamentally possessive stirred in his gut as Zack observed her through half-lidded eyes and hand propped behind his head.

There was a certain level of intimacy involved when watching another person grooming, and he wasn't above enjoying that either. He watched the play of her shoulder muscles as she lifted the thick dark mass and tamed it, and thought about how much grace and femininity were hidden behind power-house punches and bruised knuckles.

She was enticingly female. Her curves broadcast that, but she was also feminine, he realized with a quirk of brow.

She caught him staring. "What?"

"Just thinking."

"That explains the confused scowl."

"Hey!" He laughed up at her.

"Come on," she toed the mattress. "Get up. Barret probably has Yuffie terrified."

Zack yawned, rolled his eyes. "I'd be more inclined to bet that's the other way around."

Tifa slanted him a look from over her shoulder. "Just how do you know Yuffie?"

He'd been expecting that question since the woods. He sat up, rubbed a hand down his face and felt all his inner happiness waver beneath the shadows of his past. "I was on the front lines when Shin-Ra invaded Wutai," he explained with careful, succinct words. No need to tell her how many soldiers he'd beaten. No need to think about Angeal and his lessons. No need to think about the Kingdom he'd help suppress and the little Princess whose life he helped ruin.

Something must have shown on his face because the next moment Tifa was crouched in front of him, her hand on his shoulder and her gaze burning into his. "You can't go back. You can't undo. You can only learn, grow and move forward. The things you've done...you did because you had to. It was your job, and no matter what you may think, or say, I know that you are a good man, and I know you didn't do anything that went against what your heart told you to do."

Her words slipped past skin and ribs and pierced deep into his heart and in doing so, they bled out some of the dark weighing him down. He swallowed against the tightness in his throat. "How do you know?"

She tilted her head, her explanation simple. "That's just the kind of man you are."

"You..." his voice scratched, heart hitched, "make me want to be that kind of man." He leaned into
her, cradled her face in his palms. "I could be that man for you."

"Zack," she brushed his hair back from his eyes, her own shimmering with warmth and something deeper. "You already are."

More than a little dumbstruck by her impassioned words, Zack found himself fighting the urge to drag her back down to the bed and show her just exactly how well he could follow his heart.

She smiled at him.

He stopped fighting the urge.

His fingers closed on her wrist, and he gave a tug. He smirked at how her eyes widened when she toppled forward and then grinned when her lips parted—ever so slightly—in anticipation. Teasing, he avoided those tempting lips and his mouth tasted her throat, made her gasp.

Trumpet fanfare declared his feelings.

Wait...what?

Silence.

Okay, then...where was he...? Teeth skimmed along an earlobe.

Another wave of trumpet blares.

Zack lifted his head. "Did you hear that?"

Tifa also had her head cocked, listening. "Trumpets?"

"Man, I know I'm good, but trumpets?"

She rolled her eyes, pushed him back. "We should go see what all the commotion is."

Zack grudgingly rolled to his feet, helped her to hers. "Yeah, yeah," he sighed. Figures.

He looked positively sullen, Tifa thought, hiding her expression from him. It was flattering, and flustering...and she was completely in over her head.

She'd realized that fact weeks ago, but last night, while she had sat in the shadows of her assigned room, worried and waiting for him while he went to deal with the grief of another person—a person he had no ties to, and no obligation toward—she came to realize that the feelings she held for Zack were far more complex than she'd acknowledged, and yet, simultaneously so simple she felt like an idiot.

Barret's words had filtered through her mind as she'd paced the floor, waiting. The conversation forced herself to answer some hard questions. Was she willing to take a chance for happiness? Could she risk her heart? Zack was worth it—of that she had no doubt—but was she? Did she deserve to be happy? After all that she'd done?

But more than that...could she make him happy? She didn't want to tarnish him—not with her pain, or his guilt. She could see it in his eyes when he looked at her—the guilt he carried over Cloud, whether he realized it or not—and it weighed heavy on her heart.
She didn't blame Zack. Couldn't blame him. He had tried to save Cloud, and although she was still unclear on all of the details, she knew that Zack had given everything he had. That's just who he was.

And he deserved someone that could give their all for him.

Could she?

She hadn't known the answer when the door opened and she heard heavy tread. She hadn't known the answer when she'd knocked against hardwood and inquired how he was. She hadn't known it even when he'd kissed her and asked her to stay.

But later, while deep asleep and dreaming, he had whispered her name and smiled. It was so vulnerable, so tender, and so happy that she knew then.

Yes.

Looking at him now, she smiled and was lightened in heart and step when he grinned right back.

Yes, she could.

They made it almost all the way down the hall before a beefy hand clamped on the back of Zack's neck and hauled him off the floor.

"I would be breakin' your scrawny ass in half if she wasn't in her altogether!" Barret shook him like a rag doll, hard enough to clatter teeth.

"Barret!" Tifa gasped, mortification and humor blending on her face. "Barret, put him down! Nothing happened!"

He shot her a narrow look. "I know that! You're a good girl." But he gave Zack another hard shake. For good measure. "And it better stay that way."

Dropped, unceremoniously to his feet, Zack rubbed the back of his neck and scowled up at Barret. "What the hell is your problem?" he asked, rolling his shoulders.

"You are!"

"I meant, earlier. We heard you bellowing."

Barret's face was a thundercloud of irritation. "That damn kid!" He pointed down the hall. "Caught her trying to rifle through the drawers in the kitchen."

Zack's eyes narrowed. That little shit. "I warned her." He strode into the other room, his expression a mirror of Barret's.

On the couch, feet curled beneath her and wearing a bright smile Yuffie waved. "What's up?"

"What did you take?" Zack demanded, eyes like slits.

"Huh?"

"What did you take?" he repeated, hauling her off the couch before searching the cushion beneath.

"Hey!" she squealed, indignant. "I didn't take anything! I was looking for something to eat and Happy-Smile-Pants over there got all huffy!"
Tifa quirked a brow. "Happy-smiley-pants?"

Barret jabbed a blunt finger in her direction. "Don't," he warned.

She grinned. Too late. "Whatever you say, Happy. Where are the others?"

"Aerith and Red went outside to see what all the racket is about," Barret replied. "I'm going out too. Before I break something," he shot Yuffie a glare.

Zack finished his search of the couch, grabbed Yuffie by her shoulders, squared her in front of him. He wouldn't tolerate her stealing from them, or from the people that opened their doors for them. "What did you take?" he repeated.

Wide, shiny eyes blinked at him. "Nothing! Honest. I didn't." Her lip trembled, tears slipped. "Why won't you believe me?"

Zack instantly felt like an ass. He sighed, ruffled her hair. "Okay, sorry. I'm sorry."

Yuffie gave an exaggerated sniff, wiped her eyes. "Okay," she replied in a meek voice.

"You're hungry?" Zack questioned, latching onto what her reasoning had been. She nodded. "Okay, how about I go see about getting you some food."

"Okay." Another sniffle.

Tifa waited for both Barret and Zack to leave the room before she stepped up beside Yuffie and, still looking after the other two, held out her hand, "Hand it over."

Yuffie blinked at her, opened her mouth to protest. Tifa leveled her a look. Yuffie closed her mouth, her own eyes narrowing. "Fine." Grumbling, she dug into her pocket, pulled out a shimmering red amulet, pressed it into Tifa's palm. "You guys are no fun."

Tifa sighed, shook her head. "If you want to stay with us, I suggest I never know of you doing that again. We're going up against Shin-Ra. There will be plenty of people you can steal from that I won't bat a lash at, okay?"

Yuffie's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Really." Tifa angled her a look. "But if you steal from anyone else, you're out."

"Deal!"

"Good. Let's go."

Outside, in the gray light of morning, the townspeople milled excitedly through the streets. Wind carried snippets of conversations to her ears and Tifa caught brief exchanges that all revolved around one thing: The new President of Shin-Ra was here.

"If Rufus is here, I gotta go pay my respects," Barret growled as he came up beside her.

"Yeah. He and I have some unfinished business," Zack concurred. His attention shifted and familiar warm light filled his eyes. He lifted his hand, waved.

Tifa followed his motion but knew who he was waving to before she spotted Aerith and Red walking towards them. The smile on his face was one reserved only ever for the other woman. It was a mixture of tenderness and familiarity.
Aerith replied in kind, waved back. She carried a small basket of bread and gave each of them a piece when she finally reached them.

"Good morning." She stood on tiptoes and placed a quick peck to Zack's cheek.

"Hey." He grinned, dimple showing. "Thanks." He lifted the bread, chewed.

"No problem." She angled her head, surveyed the streets. "Busy place all of the sudden."

"Yeah."

"So, does anyone have any idea on why the hell Rufus is here?" Barret asked. "Didn't he send those damn Turks after Sephiroth?"

"President Shinra is going to be getting a sending off reception," Aerith informed them. She shrugged dainty shoulders at their curious glances. "What? People like me. They talk."

Tifa chuckled. "You are deceptively sweet-looking," she commented.

Aerith's grin was sunbeam wide. "I know."

"So Shinra is here to cross the ocean?" Yuffie questioned.

"Yes. But does that mean Sephiroth already crossed?" Aerith tapped her chin thoughtfully. "I mean, why else would they be leaving? Right?"

"Chances are that whatever Shin-Ra is up to isn't good, so we should check it out, regardless," Barret answered.

Tifa had been thinking much the same thing. "I agree."

Red cocked his head. "So, how do we find him?"

"Chances are he's on base," Zack answered, swallowed the rest of his breakfast. "So we need to get through there." He pointed to the heavily guarded steel barricade that separated the town of Junon from the Junon Harbor Base.

"Oh, yeah, piece of cake," Yuffie rolled her eyes.

"No one said you had to come," Barret snapped.

"Too bad, I'm going. In fact, I'll get in all by myself. You just wait and see. The Great Ninja Yuffie will—"

"Hush." Red chided with a snort. "Must you chatter on so endlessly?"

Yuffie poked her tongue out at him, hands on her hips. "You hush, mongrel!"

"Mongrel?" Red's tail flickered, waved back and forth. "You dare!?"

"Oh, I dare!"

"Enough!" Barret's bark of an order had everyone jumping. "We ain't got time for your bullshit bickering, so shut up! We don't know how much time we have before President Douchebag leaves. We need to get onto that base."
"Wasn't there a large tower in the water?" Tifa speculated. It was hard to remember exactly what the beach had looked like—she had been so focused on getting to the little girl.

"Yeah," Zack nodded, gaze speculative. "Probably an electrical tower of some kind."

"Which means it's probably coursing with high voltage," Barret added.

"Oh, well, then Zack should be okay," Aerith chirped. "He can climb it and check things out."

"Bwuah?" Zack sent her an incredulous look. "You heard him—high voltage."

"Yeah, but you'll be fine." She patted his arm, grinned.

"You are evil," he told her with affection. "I'm not dumb enough or desperate enough to swim in that water or climb that tower."

"The other option is the front gate," Tifa commented, still looking at the massive steel doors.

Barret cocked his brow, one corner of his mouth slanted in an anticipatory smirk. "Walk right in, huh?"

Red leather slid along smooth skin and Tifa's responding smile was laced with determination. "Walk right in."

Walking in—as it were—required a bit of ass kicking, but ended up being far easier than Zack would have imagined it to be. Between Barret's barrage of energy shots and his own attacks, the guards at the gate were quickly defeated, and the reinforcements dispatched were numerous but unskilled. Aerith and Yuffie managed to get inside the gate office and were busy attempting to hack the system while Red secured the door with fang and fury.

Zack watched with a sense of pride—and a sliver of worry—as Tifa danced between two soldiers, her fists and feet connecting with solid precision. She flicked her hair, tossed him a quick grin, and somersaulted over the back of a Shin-Ra grunt before elbow dropping him to the ground.

Damn, she was sexy.

Skin coated with a light sheen of sweat, muscles flexing and contracting, damp hair clinging to ruddy cheeks. Zack couldn't help but imagine another circumstance that would dishevel her in such a way.

He grunted when the butt of a rifle caught him in the temple. He shook his head, smirked at his own folly. He was way too easily distracted by those long legs of hers...

"Damn it, Tifa!" he shouted, rubbing his head with one hand and knocking the attacking guard out with the other.

Startled, she looked over at him. "What?"

"Stop looking so damn sexy!"

She slammed her heel down onto the back of a helmet. "What?!

He shoved another trooper away, palm-punched him in the chest, knocking the wind out of him.
"You heard me!"

"Hell, Princess, we all heard you!" Barret slammed the metal of his arm beneath a jaw, sending the soldier careening wildly into four others. "Now quite watching Tifa and focus on getting your ass in there!" He pointed to the yawning steel in front of them.

Zack swung his gaze to the left where Yuffie and Aerith were emerging from the office. "You did it!"

"Of course we did!" Yuffie swatted his words. "Stupid. And stop hogging all the action!" She leaped into the fray, her peals of laughter causing Zack's own lips to arch up.

It had been a long time since he'd felt the heady rush of combat and enjoyed it. He remembered Aerith telling him—in what felt like a lifetime ago—that she was afraid of SOLDIERs because they loved fighting. He hadn't had a response for her then, and probably couldn't give her one now...not one that made any sense. He was at a loss in how to adequately explain the hum of blood and adrenaline beneath skin, the heavy pound of heartbeat and fire, the sense of achievement in pride when you stood the victor.

"Hey! Come on slow-poke!" Tifa darted past him, drawing him from his thoughts. Her eyes were bright with hidden fire and he knew suddenly that she would understand. It was as much a part of her as it was him. She was a fighter—a naturally gifted one at that. He recalled, somewhere in the echoic confines of memories, Zangan speaking of her. He had claimed her to be his most talented student, and for a mentor renowned around the world, and even sought after by Shin-Ra for training, such a claim was impressive.

With a flash of white teeth, Zack crouched, focused his energy, and then launched himself off the ground in a blur of speed. He had the satisfaction of hearing Tifa shriek as her hands clutched his shoulders. His arm was secure around her waist, his stride never breaking as he flung her over his shoulder. "Who are you calling slow?" he teased.

"Zack! Put me down!"

He ignored her.

"Damn it, Zack! Zack! I mean it!"

"Are they, uh, always like that?" Yuffie asked trailing behind, jogging beside Barret.

"No."

"Oh."

Barret surprised her with a smile. "But it's about damn time."
All Aboard

The scents of salt and sea commingled with metal and gasoline to create an industrial cocktail that couldn't be found anywhere else in all the world. Embedded deep within the belly of a cliff, overlooking the vast ocean, Junon Base was Shin-Ra's largest military base—large enough to house a city within itself, complete with shops, diners, and resident quarters—and home of Shin-Ra's most advanced weaponry division.

The decision for that was strategic and cunning. Through Junon Harbor and its ports Shin-Ra had access to the entire world. It was here that the prototypes kept within the Shin-Ra Tower were implemented and shipped out.

As such, it was a vital stronghold for Shin-Ra. SOLDIERS trained in virtual simulations of this base for that very reason. Zack couldn't count the number of simulations he'd run, memorizing the base—and how to defend it.

Rumor had it, that at one time Angeal, Sephiroth and Genisis had actually destroyed one of the Junon Base Sim-rooms during training. Zack had asked Angeal to tell him the story, but Angeal—in typical Angeal fashion—had simply waved him off and told him to focus on his own training.

Zack never thought he'd be thankful for those redundant hours, but as the elevator grate slid open and the group stepped out onto the lower platform of a hangar that dwarfed them, he was.

"Wow." Hands placed on her hips, Yuffie rocked back on the heels of her soft boots. "That is one big floaty-thing!"

Turning to follow the direction of her gaze Zack took in the sight before him and let out a low whistle.

A few hundred yards away hovered an airship. A giant, behemoth of an airship, with its large rotors making lazy circles and its massive bulk tethered to the base-deck by countless cables. The sheer size of it was staggering. Never had Shin-Ra—back in his days, at least—had such an aircraft. Sleek and silver with dual engines and a drop down cockpit the ship was like nothing Zack had ever seen before.

But, as impressive as the airship was, Zack recognized the potential behind it. A weapon.

An innovative one-of-a-kind weapon, but a weapon none the less.

Beside him, Aerith breathed out a soft, "Amazing." She stood with her eyes wide and wonder-filled, and Zack felt his lips arch, just a bit. As worldly as Aerith sometimes liked to believe herself to be, she really had been quite isolated in her upbringing.

It almost made him regret taking the hidden tunnels through Junon Base to the docks. The inner city was rather spectacular in its own right. Shops and parks, beauty salons and bars, all housed within the base, but with all the commotion regarding Rufus and his celebration, Zack had taken the safer route.

"Do you think someday we'd ever be able to fly on something like that?" Aerith questioned aloud, head tilted to the side.

Surprised, Zack blinked at her. "In the sky?"
On his other side, Barret rolled his eyes. "You know anywhere _else_ you can fly?"

"Of course not, that's not what I meant. It's just that..." _She's scared of the sky..._ Zack paused, recalled the memory fondly and silenced himself. Zack remembered what Aerith had said about the sky and his eyes when they'd first met, and he was happy to realize that her fear was diminished. He was also happy to keep that memory to himself. Sending her a crooked smile, Zack let the sentence fade away. "Forget it."

"It will not take the guards long to warn of our breech," Red spoke up, diverting conversation and attention. "Do we, at this juncture, have a plan?"

Zack turned to Tifa, wanting her thoughts, and found her still regarding the airship with her brows drawn low. He could see the wheels in her head turning, speculating as to what Shin-Ra might use such an airship for. "Tifa."

"Hm?"

"We have to decide what to do now."

With a shake of her head, furrow smoothing out, she turned and addressed the group. "Don't get caught," came her even reply.

"Anything more elaborate?" Red's fangs glinted in what could easily have been considered a smile.

"At the moment...no." Tifa shrugged, glanced back the way they came. "But you're right, this place is crawling with Shin-Ra, and we need a plan. So, Zack, where do we go from here?"

"Hey, wait! Who in hell made him leader?" Barret demanded.

"I'm sorry, Barret," Tifa swiveled toward him, her voice saccharine sweet. "I was unaware you were familiar with the layout of this base and the hidden passages." She gave an open palm, sweeping gesture. "Please, go ahead and tell us which way to go."

Zack watched with amusement—and a fair amount of affection—as the two bickered back and forth. It was heartening for him to witness their never-changing bond. No matter what seemed to be thrown at them, Barret and Tifa remained constant to each other.

Even toe to toe and snapping at one another Barret's posture screamed overprotective and Tifa stood in open armed trust.

Zack envied the bond they shared. It reminded him of his time with Angeal.

"And just what in the hell are you looking at?" Barret's baritone boom snapped Zack back from his wandering thoughts.

His return and smile were both easy. "A jackass."

Barret took a menacing step forward. "C'mere, you scrawny shit!"

"Cut it out, both of you." Tifa gave them pointed looks.

"He started it," they replied in unison, immediately contrite.

"You're pretty good at that," Aerith commented, an appreciative smile on her face.

Tifa flashed an answering grin. "Comes from running a bar."
The clanking sound of doors closing and gears whirring caused the group to move abruptly away from the elevator and push themselves into the shadows of the overhang. Down the dock, one of the many hangar doors opened and a couple of men wearing jumpsuits stepped out, talking between themselves as they made their way toward the airship.

"We need to go," Tifa whispered, maneuvering herself for a better angle. "Zack?"

A quick glance at the deck revealed it still mostly vacant. "Looks like whatever 'send off' Rufus is getting is apparently occupying most of the soldiers. Maybe we can find some spare uniforms and get close to—"

"Uhn-uh, Slick. You may be able to blend in, but a couple of us here ain't gonna get any closer than this. And even if the crew manning this place is half-stupid, and by the looks of it, they are, there's bound to be some higher-ups that take notice to a man with a gun graphed to his arm trying to get close to Rufus."

"Not to mention a talking dog," Yuffie pointed out.

"I am not a dog," Red growled.

"Whatever. A talking thing that's not a dog, but looks like a dog, and growls like a dog, and sheds like a dog..."

"Human, you test me."

"Okay, ease up, both of you." The reprimand would have been more effective if Zack hadn't been fighting a grin. "We have to figure out where to go from here."

"Couldn't we just find his ship?" Tifa asked. "And get on it? I mean, we know Rufus is leaving on a ship, right? So why don't we just sneak on that instead of running all over the base. If Sephiroth has already left and that's why Rufus is leaving, it makes staying here seem kind of pointless. Right? So all we have to do is get to the dock and sneak on board... Or maybe I'll just shut up now." She trailed off when the others offered no feedback.

"No, no," Zack shook his head, feeling stupider than he had in a long time. "That plan makes perfect sense. With the skeleton crew down here, and most troops probably in Rufus's vicinity, we should be able to get to the ship relatively easily—"

"And then what?" Yuffie wanted to know. Her fist met the palm of her hand. "When do we get to kick some more Shin-Ra butt?"

"Calm down, pint-size, we gotta get there first," Barret told her. "But I like your enthusiasm."

Yuffie beamed. "Yeah, okay, so what are we gonna do?"

"If you'd ever let me finish a sentence, maybe then you'd know," Zack interjected. He paused a beat and when she didn't say anything else, he continued. "Finding and getting on that ship is what we need to do, yes, but we also have no idea where the ship is heading or what we'll be up against. Up another level there's an indoor city. We can likely get some supplies and information up there."

"An indoor city?" Red snorted, hackles up. "Bottled and contained. That seems to be a common theme for Shin-Ra."

Zack heard the hint of anger in Red's normally dulcet voice, and felt a twinge of sympathy for the pain he must have endured. None of them had ever bothered to ask how long Red had been in one of
Hojo's test-tubes, but the scarring on his body—even hidden as it was by fur—and those unseen scars of the mind—told Zack that it had been long enough.

Tifa must have sensed it too, because she crouched beside the large beast and buried her face in his scruff, her fingers threading through mane as she hugged. Just hugged.

"What are you...?" Red began a soft protest but then with a short purr-like sound he closed his eye and sighed, muscles slack.

Zack felt a surge of pride and affection wash over him as he watched Tifa lend Red her strength. She constantly amazed him with her ability to comfort with the simplest of gestures. Generous, understanding, affectionate...strong. She did it so often and so selflessly that he doubted anyone really noticed that she was doing it; sharing their burdens, taking a bit of their pain onto herself.

He crossed his arms to keep from reaching out to her and pulling her into his arms. He wanted to hold her, to shelter her; he wanted to take away her hurts and keep her from crumbling beneath the weight of all she took upon herself.

After a quiet moment she stood. "Okay, so up it is," she said as though there was never a pause.

Unable to quell all of his instincts, Zack stepped to her, brushed the backs of his fingers along her jaw. Her eyes were warmed cinnamon when they lifted to his, and only his awareness of their situation and Barret's close proximity kept him from leaning down and capturing her mouth.

"We can't all go up," he told her. "We're no small group, and we're bound to be spotted. I'll go."

She nodded, albeit reluctantly. "We'll get to the ship and wait for you." She lifted her hand, wrapped her fingers around his and gave them a gentle squeeze. "Be careful."

Zack savored her touch. It was still new, her openness, and he wasn't about to push for more, but he would cherish every moment of it. Even if only fleeting and in the midst of chaos. "You too," he whispered back. He scanned their ragtag crew, felt both worry and pride. "All of you."

Making it to the upper levels of the base wasn't nearly as difficult as it could have been, and Zack was admittedely surprised by the lack of precautions Shin-Ra was implementing. With the huge fanfare and celebratory send-off, they'd set up a beacon as to Rufus Shinra's whereabouts—but hadn't bothered with proper security? It was almost as though they were inviting infiltration.

He didn't have long to speculate on that, because just ahead of him, from the side alleyway, soldiers marched out from the shadows—in formation—before heading down the street. The dark maroon of their sharply pressed uniforms told Zack that these were second tier Lieutenants. Higher ranking members of the general forces. Not SOLDIER class, but not grunts, either.

Zack followed.

"Which ship do you think it is?" Aerith whispered, sliding along the wall to peek around Tifa. They could spot Barret and Yuffie a few yards ahead, ducking behind some crates but there was no sign of Red.
"Something big and overdone, I'm sure," Tifa replied with a small smirk, but her shoulders remained stiff with tension.

"He'll be fine." Soft, but firm, Aerith's hand settled on Tifa's arm, giving a reassuring squeeze.

Tifa let out a breath, nodded. "I know. It's not Zack I'm worried about." Not entirely. She avoided worrying about Zack, because she knew if she allowed herself to fret over him, she'd be little to no help with anything else. Besides, Zack was more than capable. She'd witnessed first hand his skill with a sword, and his strength was astonishing. Zack could handle himself. It was who they were ultimately chasing that had Tifa feeling so on edge. "If Sephiroth is really alive..." The thought alone was enough to stutter her speech and chill her blood, but the idea that Rufus Shinra wanted not only to find the General, but to use him for his own ends...that was enough to make fear a living thing crawling through her body. Focus, Lockhart. No time to be flaking.

"I don't remember ever meeting him," Aerith murmured. "But I heard about him. Often. From Zack, from Tseng, from the newspapers. He was quite the hero."

"He was a monster."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Aerith blinked her eyes, unaware of how her absent musing stung. "I didn't mean —"

"I know." Tifa cut her some slack. Aerith wasn't malicious, and Tifa seriously doubted the other woman had a hateful, hurtful bone in her body.

"That was insensitive of me," Aerith protested.

One thing Tifa had noticed in their short time together was that Aerith took everything to heart, and Tifa refused to let her past cause anyone else pain. "You can't change what was, or how he is remembered," Tifa brushed off her apology with a gentle smile. "Look, Barret is signaling us. Let's go."

It was only a matter of minutes before the troops reached their destination. The soldiers stopped on a lower platform, near the docking area, and remained in formation. Nothing like going in a big circle, Zack thought with a self directed eye-roll.

Suddenly, the Captain of the squad stepped out and raised his rifle. "Junon Military Reception!"

The group began a salute with marching and rifles. Zack remembered doing some of those ridiculous ceremonies. It was practicing for one that he'd developed his 'finishing move'. He'd showed the sword spin off to Angeal a few dozen times, all arrogance and pride.

He remembered Angeal's response: "Showing off won't do anyone any good on the battlefield, Zack."

And his own reply: "Yeah, but it will impress the ladies."

"Your priorities are inspiring."

Zack chuckled at the memory. Angeal had always encouraged him, even in the ridiculous, and even while teasing. He missed that. He missed him.
A changing of position drew Zack's gaze to the front of the line, and he shook off the cobwebs of memory to focus on what was in front of him. From his vantage point in the shadows, Zack could see pristine white flanked by dark suits. Rufus. Shifting lower, Zack crouched down and leaned forward; listened.

"Heidegger!" Rufus barked.

"Sir!" From behind a jeep, portly and grizzly Heidegger waddled forward. "We weren't expecting you so soon, Mr. President, Sir..."

A sharp slice of Rufus's hand silenced the other man. "I don't want excuses, Heidegger. What's the status on the airship?"

Wiping a handkerchief over his brow, Heidegger relied, "The long range airship is still being prepared."

Long range airship? So that's what that was. Zack made mental note of that. If Shin-Ra had airships that could be used over hundreds of miles, they were an even larger military threat than they'd ever been.

"How long before it's ready?" Rufus insisted.

"About three more days, gyahahaha."

"Don't." A long, probably perfectly manicured, finger pointed in Heidegger's face. "Stop that ridiculous horse laugh. You sound worse than Scarlet. Things are different than when my father was in charge. Obey, or I'll have your tongue removed from your head. Understood?"

"Gya...yes...Sir!"

"And my ship?"

"Nearly ready. We should be off in the hour."

"Good. We don't have time to delay. I want Sephiroth located, and I want him found now!" The tails of his trench-coat snapped when he turned.

"There was a rumor of a man in a black cape on the base," Heidegger offered up, hand still working the handkerchief. "Our men are still looking."

"I don't care about rumors, I want results. If word spreads of a possible Sephiroth sighting, you can bet Fair and his motley crew won't be far behind."

Closer than you think, you arrogant prick.

"No worries, Mr. President. We'll crush them as soon as we find them," Heidegger promised, his beefy hand making a fist.

"I don't want anything in our way. Too much is at stake for your careless foul-ups."

"Leave it to me, sir."

"You'd better not fail me." With that Rufus spun on his heel and made his way along the dock.

Heidegger waited until Rufus was away before turning on his soldiers with angry, threatening motions. "You better not let him down! If you fail me, you'll regret it! Dismissed!"
"What's up his ass?" Zack heard one of the men ask, and smirked himself.

"Heidegger's got a lot of stress. Ever since Hojo resigned, he's had to head up that division and investigation as well."

Zack froze. Just that name was enough to make his throat ache with tired screams and skin itch like it needed to be peeled off. He fought back the reaction and focused on the words of the soldier. Hojo had...resigned? Zack wasn't sure what was worse—that lunatic working for Shin-Ra, or the idea of him loose, without constraints.

"Hey, weren't you just dismissed? Get the hell going!"

"Aye, Captain!" The group of soldiers spilt up, jogging away from their central point. Standard search pattern, Zack thought, following them with his eyes. There were so many young cadets, all eager giddyup and faces still plump with youth. He suddenly felt very old, despite his mere 23 years.

Shaking himself, Zack got to his feet. Heidegger said Rufus's ship would be leaving within the hour. That gave him just enough time to hit the weapon shop and stock up on a few things. He let his gaze wander back to the docks, searching the shadows for any sign of Tifa and the others. Seeing none he could only hope that they'd made it on board, and were safe.

"You want me to do what with this shit, exactly?" Barret eyed the fabric in his hands with a dubious expression.

"Would you quit complaining and just put the damn thing on."

"You can't be serious—"

"Do I look like I'm joking?" Tifa tapped the toe of her boot, arms crossed. "Look, I don't like the idea of wearing this uniform any more than you do. I hate it, in fact, but if we're going to have any chance on this ship, we need to blend in." She shoved a cap onto the pile. "Now blend."

Stepping from behind a stack of towels, Aerith adjusted the belt of her uniform. "Any sign of Zack yet?"

Ignoring the pang of worry that went through her, Tifa forced a smile. "Nothing yet, but you know Zack. He likes to make an entrance."

Aerith nodded, her own lips curving. "Yeah."

"Okay, this, is just...fuckin' stupid." Barret fumbled around the armholes of his shirt, swearing and stomping.

"If I can get into uniform, certainly you must be able to figure it out."

Tifa almost choked on her laughter when Red emerged from the other engine room. Tufts of orange and red fur protruded from white cotton and he swayed on his hind legs.

"What? I think I make a fine human," Red sniffed. "Besides, you people only look at the surface anyway. You see what you want to see."

"I dunno. I see a doggie in a sailor uniform," Yuffie giggled, swinging her legs back and forth from her seat in the rafters. "Does anyone have a camera?"
"Quiet, you."

"Awwww, as adorable as you look, I think it'd be best if you just stayed hidden." Tifa said, swallowing back her own mirth.

"Very well. Besides, these buttons are chafing."

"Oh, I don't know. I've seen worse." A voice came from behind.

Aerith spun on her heel, clapped her hands. "Zack!"

Leaning in the open doorway, satchel slung over his shoulder, Zack grinned at them. "Miss me?"

Tifa felt her heart kick against her ribs.

"Play coy all you want, Lockhart. You missed me." Zack winked at her, the tossed an armload of clothes at Barret. "Here. Wear that instead."

Barret grabbed the thick gray material and held it up. It was an extra large jumpsuit—easy to get in.

"Thanks," he grumbled.

"Don't mention it. Besides, you trying to squeeze into that little get-up," he motioned at the white sailor suit, "would be like a bear wearing a marshmallow, or something equally disturbing."

"Har har," Barret rolled his eyes. "I don't suppose you found out anything useful, like, oh, I don't know, where we're headed?"

"Ship's headed for Costa Del Sol," Zack supplied absently, his eyes roaming over Tifa in her Shin-Ra sailor outfit.

Tifa felt heat flood her cheeks and attempted—not for the first time—to adjust the buttons on the crisp shirt. The sharp angles of the uniform did nothing to detract from her curves, she silently mulled. Just the opposite, in fact. The lines accented her breasts and dipped in at her waist. She felt more display wearing the starched whites than she had in Corneo's mansion.

"Boy, you're gonna wanna put those eyes back in your head," Barret warned quietly as he passed.

Any retort that Zack would have made was cut off abruptly by a loud, wailing siren.

"What the hell?" Yuffie covered her ears and flipped backwards off the rafter, landing with a soft 'oomph' on the balls of her feet. "What is that sound?"

"Alarm," Tifa replied and reached into her back pocket for her gloves. The overhead lights flickered.

"Emergency alert! Suspicious persons found on board. All personnel not on detail immediately search the ship. Repeat: Suspicious persons found on board. All personnel not on detail, search the ship."

"Damn, they found us already?" Barret frowned.

"I don't think it's us," Aerith stated. She glanced at Zack, worry darkening her eyes. "Sephiroth, maybe?"

"Only one way to find out," Zack responded, his hand curling around the hilt of his sword. He
turned toward the door.

"Wait." Tifa rushed to his side. No way was she letting him go on his own. She had to know. "I'm coming with you." When he opened his mouth to argue, she shook her head, stopping him. She was resolute in this. "Barret, keep everyone here safe."

"You come back safe," he countered with a hard look. "Don't make me come after you," he warned.

"I won't." She ushered Zack out, closing the door behind them.

"Ready?" Zack asked.

"No." Relying on instinct and heart alone, Tifa gripped his face in her hands and stood on tiptoe, pressed her lips-quick and hard-to his. When she released him, she nodded. "Okay, now I'm ready." She started down the corridor.

It took Zack a full three seconds to find his voice. "Wait! Hold on, maybe I'm not ready!" He jogged after her.
Unwanted Shipmates

Steel and white walls brushed against the breadth of his shoulders, footfalls echoing like hollow shots in the dim confines. Zack had never before considered himself claustrophobic by any standard, but as they traversed the lower deck and the lights flickered overhead and the sounds of screams grated on already raw nerves, Zack felt as though the ship itself was trying to strangle him.

From the above deck came the frantic bark of orders accompanied by the steady drum of booted feet, but it was the sounds seeping from within the darker recesses of the ship that turned his blood to ice.

Agonized pleas and screaming.

The kind of screaming that crawled over skin and clawed hair up by its roots.

It was the sound of gruesome death.

"This way." Zack made a quick right down an adjacent corridor. Together, he and Tifa skirted a series of maze-like passageways until at the end of one low ceiling passage they came to a second control room.

Zack held up his hand, slowed them to a cautionary walk. The last thing they needed to do was barrel headlong into a pointy blade—or the barrel of a gun.

Inside the room boilers blew steam in angry hisses and red lights cast an ominous glow over metal and wire. He had gone only two steps into the room when a hand reached out from behind a water tank, snagged his pant leg. The fingers were coated red, freshly painted in the color of life and death.

"Please..." the man garbled, "please...it's... not human... help...h...elp..." Spit and mucus slipped down a wobbly chin. "Not...hum..an..." The man's eyes closed, his breath a shaking rattle, his fingers still clenched tight on Zack's pants.

As gently as he could, Zack shook the man's hands off. There was nothing that could be done for him, or the other people that Zack could see littering the floor of the shadowed room. Broken, bloody, discarded... It was a macabre echo of the horror they’d witness within the Shin-Ra Tower and Zack was tempted to turn and tell Tifa to go back to the engine room and wait for him. She didn't need to see this—not again, not anymore—but she was already ahead of him, shoulders drawn up.

"He's here," she whispered, her voice tight; coiled. "I can feel it."

Zack flexed his fingers, hand itching to reach for his sword. He felt it too—the cold clamminess in air that was heavy with tension and...wrongness.

Ahead of them a figure lurched against the boiler, obscured by rising steam and inadequate light, causing both him and Tifa to take battle-ready positions.

A blood soaked white uniform came slowly into view. The stripes on the arm proclaimed the wearer as Captain, and before Zack could help him, the commander of the ship stumbled, righted himself momentarily, his eyes glazed with pain and desperation, before he pitched forward—dead even as he hit the floor.
Standing behind, cloaked in black leather and shadows, stood the former SOLDIER General, stained sword casually in hand.

"Sephiroth?" Zack whispered. He hated the way the name choked him.

Phosphorous green eyes blinked lazily from behind a veil of silver hair—glowing faintly with Mako and deadly intent.

Anger and fear coalesced in his veins and Zack's felt alive and leaden simultaneously. It was surreal, seeing the General again. Alive. Looking like he'd stepped straight out of Zack's memories.

He was paler—and perhaps thinner—but he was still Sephroth, with sharp angles and tight features, schooled into an expressionless mask.

Those eerie eyes flickered again—slanted pupils constricting and dilating—and Zack felt his skin crawl over too tight muscles as he shivered. Inhuman, was the word that skittered in his mind. Instinct had him stepping forward, placing himself directly in front of Tifa. In fight or flight—for Zack—there was only ever one option. "What the hell are you doing, Sephiroth?" he demanded.

"Fulfilling my destiny." Idle, the voice belied any emotion. In fact, Sephiroth sounded downright bored. "After such a long sleep, our time has finally come..."

"You didn't need to kill all these people!" Zack waved his hand to encompass the mass of bodies in the room.

"They are in our way." Simple, uncomplicated; dismissive.

Zack refused to be dismissed. "Yeah, well, now I'm in your way." His fingers tightened around the hilt of the Buster Sword.

Long hair strayed between arched brows as Sephiroth inclined his head. He took a step around the fallen Captain, the tip of Masamune trailing through pooled crimson. "Do you think I will not, Zack? Do you think I will hesitate to cut your insides from your belly?"

Zack flinched on his name. Sephiroth recognized him; knew him. Which meant that it really was Sephiroth...

"Why do you hesitate?" Sephiroth continued in that same bored tone. "Is it because you once knew me?"

"No." Zack shook his head, but kept his eyes fastened on the man in front of him. "You stopped being the Sephiroth I knew when you became this—this monster."

An arch of lips, but the voice remained unchanged. "Are you so untainted, Puppy? Is there no blood on your hands? Come then," he invited, spreading his arms wide, "and cut me down as you did Angeal."

"Damn you!" Zack trembled, Sephiroth's words knocking the very breath from his body. It couldn't have been a more effectual blow had the wound been placed with steel. Zack felt it straight to his core; guilt and pain and grief sliced through him, cut his defense...

"You are as much a monster as you claim me to be."
In his mind Zack no longer saw Sephiroth's sickening green gaze, but Angeal's pale eyes; heard his mentor's rasping last words. Zack staggered back, fingers leaving the hilt of a sword he should never have owned. "Damn you to hell."

"Damn me?" Sephiroth shook his head, and this time his tone held dry amusement. "Hardly. I am as above damnation as Gods can be. You, on the other hand...your pathetic species is damned forever."

Species? Muffled echoes of foggy memories attempted to claw to the surface. Hojo's voice tugged at him—suffocating him. Needles and pain and skin peeled like fruit... Perfect specimens...new breed...new species...pain...so much pain...and drowning in a sea of green and sick...so sick...please...

"Zack." Tifa. Behind him, with her steady hands on his shoulders, supporting him. She was pale, clearly shaken, but her eyes glimmered with determination. "Don't let him get to you."

Fighting off the caustic tendrils of memory, Zack demanded, "What the hell happened to you?" This was not the man who had trained him—who had helped him become stronger and face the truths of Shin-Ra. This was someone...something...else altogether.

Malice curved thin lips. "I do not have the time to reminisce with you, Pup. I've come only to fulfill my birthright."

The distinct hum of Masamune's blade should have been warning enough, but even still Zack was too slow—or Sephiroth too fast—for him to dodge the attack completely. Shoving Tifa to the wall, Zack braced himself in front of her and hissed through his teeth at the slice of metal through flesh. Blood spurt from the gash in his arm.

"Zack!" Tifa struggled to see over his shoulder.

But Sephiroth no longer had interest in them. He shimmered like an apparition and was gone between one blink and the next.

Tifa hastily shoved around Zack. "You're hurt." Gentle, but sure, her fingers parted fabric to examine his wound.

"Don't." Zack tugged his arm away. "It's nothing."

She blinked up at him, confusion at his rebuff in her eyes. "Zack...?"

His jaw tightened, eyes shut. It hurt—so much—right now, and he didn't want her to see...didn't want her to feel his pain. He'd already given her too much of that. "We should... get back the others."

There was a silent pause and he could feel her weighing out whether to push or relent. Finally, she stepped back, gave him his space and he fought the urge to grab her back.

She nodded, and her eyes stayed on his. "Okay, Zack."

"Well?" Barret met them at the door of the engine room, expectant and impatient. "Was it Sephiroth?"

Zack felt Tifa's eyes on him before she answered. "Yeah, it seems like it."

"It seems like it?" Barret repeated, brows knitted. "It is or it ain't, so which is it?"

"It's him," Zack inserted. He gave the group a long look, took in their tired, anxious faces. They
needed rest—he needed rest. He felt sick and drained. "But he's gone now."

"Gone where? We're on a ship in the middle of the godsdamned ocean!"

"Barret, enough. Please." Weary, Tifa brushed her hair from her face, took a seat on one of the crates.

"You're bleeding!" Aerith gasped, rushing to her side.

Tifa glanced at the splatter on her shirt. "No, I'm not. Zack is."

Aerith turned. "You're hurt?" she asked, her eyes wide with concern.

"It's nothing," Zack repeated his earlier statement. Then, when her forehead furrowed, more gently, "Really, Aerith. I'm fine."

"Stop babying the boy," Barret rolled his eyes.

"What happened? We heard screams. Did you confront Sephiroth?" Red questioned.

Zack carded a hand through his dark hair, being careful not to meet Tifa's eyes when he replied. "Sort of."

"Sort of?" Barret shot him a narrow look, and then sent Tifa a searching glare. "What the hell kind of answer is that?"

She shrugged, drew her knees up to her chin.

Aerith twisted the bottom of her shirt. "So you saw him?"

Saw him, heard him, failed to stop him... "Yes."

"Did he say anything?"

Zack flinched. 'You are as much a monster as you claim me to be.'

"He said: 'Our time has finally come'." Tifa provided.

The words fell heavy and foreign amongst them, as though simply speaking them held consequence.

"What the blue leviathan does that mean?" Yuffie whined.

"So is he also searching for the Promised Land?" Red wondered aloud.

"That's probably a safe bet, yeah." Zack glanced at Aerith. "If it even exists."

"So, we're chasing a lunatic that's chasin' a fable? That about right?" Barret chuffed. "Perfect."

Leaning back against the wall he crossed his arms over his chest and closed his eyes. "Wake me when we dock."

"Are you sure we should stay in here?" Yuffie rolled a small green materia back and forth between her palms. "I mean, we're just kind of hanging out."

Zack adjusted his sword against his back. It felt too big and too heavy and not his. "I think Shin-Ra has bigger problems than checking their Engine Rooms. We should be safe here, but just in case I'll take watch. The rest of you should get some sleep. We don't know what we'll be facing in Costa del
"But what about you?" Aerith reached out, touched his injured arm. "Shouldn't you rest too?"

"I'm SOLDIER," he replied, his tone flat even to his own ears. "I'll be fine."

"But, Zack..."

"Get some rest, okay?"

Aerith hesitated a moment before she stepped back. Graceful, in the way only she could be, she settled on the floor, her head propped on the curve of her arm. Red padded over and lay at her feet.

With a dainty shrug Yuffie flopped back against their discarded clothes and shut her eyes. "Nighty-night."

At the door Zack paused, feeling the steady pressure of Tifa's eyes on him. He sighed, resisted the urge to go to her. She didn't need his shit added to hers. "You should sleep," he told her without turning.

"Like I can," she murmured, voice muffled against her forearm.

Zack opened the door. "Try."

On the other side of cold steel Zack dropped his head back with a thud and swore beneath his breath. "You're as much a monster as you claim me to be."

You're a monster...

Guilt clawed his gut, doubled him over. "Damn it." His fist hit the floor, ground against the metal. He took a shuddering breath, focused himself, but like a parasite the words borrowed deep and festered.

Monster...

The door should have melted from the intensity of her stare.

Tifa winced as her teeth scraped the raw portion of her lower lip. She'd successfully gnawed the top layer off and was now working on removing the entire bottom lip. Who needed that anyway, right? She couldn't really whistle to begin with...and lisps could be cute...and her mind was wandering in some odd directions.

Anything to not think about Sephiroth and the fears and sickness he stirred in her heart...

Or Cloud and how much she hated never seeing him...never telling him...

Or Zack and all the pain he tried to hide...tried to shoulder...

Stop thinking.

Stop.
Tifa placed her fingertips to her mouth, patted away the dollop of blood her teeth had worried free.

"Maybe you should just go talk to him."

Tifa sighed, cocked her head. Aerith. "How long have you been awake?"

"Long enough to know you've successfully worn a hole in your lip."

"Yeah, well, a girl needs a hobby..." Tifa shrugged, tried to dismiss the conversation. She should have known better.

"Talk to him," Aerith whispered.

She was always direct. Tifa wasn't sure she liked or hated that about the other woman. Especially when it came to Zack. "He doesn't want to talk."

"Yes he does. He just doesn't know what to say."

A lack of words was not something Zack Fair suffered from, but Tifa decided not to argue the point. "You talk to him then."

Aerith scowled up at her through the shadows. "Don't be an idiot. He doesn't want to talk to me. He needs you."

Tifa shifted, her eyes back on the door, her teeth back on her lip. "He's hurting..." she finally whispered. "I hate that."

"I know. I do too." Aerith propped herself up on her elbow. "And I know you're hurting, and I know that this isn't easy. I don't know everything about your past...or even Zack's, but I do know that in this—you guys are bonded. You have this shared pain, and from what I have seen, it's not something either of you should have to shoulder alone. So...You going?"

A flutter in her stomach, a beat too fast in her chest... Yeah, she was going. Wiping her hands on her thighs, Tifa hopped from her cramped position on the crate. "You can be really pushy," she told Aerith when she stepped over her.

Aerith's smile was crooked. "Yeah, I know."

Fingers curled around the handle of the door, Tifa looked back over her shoulder. "Thank you, Aerith."

"For what?"

"For not letting me be a coward in this."

The crooked smile broadened and beamed. "Sometimes all anyone needs is a little push." Then, more serious but still with the sunbeam glow, "And faith. Believe in him, Tifa."

"I do," she opened the door.

He should have known she would come to him.

She always did when he needed her, but he had hoped not to burden her. Not this time.
"Hey," she said in that quiet, velvet over steel, voice of hers.

"You should be resting," he replied, gaze fixed on a spot above her head. He would be fine if he didn't look at her...if he didn't take in those dark eyes that swam with a million wonders, didn't watch those soft lips quirk and curl with her gentle words, didn't melt against those hands that held so much...

"I would be, if you were."

"I already told you all, I'm SOLDIER. I'm fine."

"It must have slipped my mind," she stated with dry dismissal. She leaned back against the wall, propped a boot and crossed her arms over her chest in a pose that was a surprisingly accurate imitation of Barret's familiar stance. She tapped her fingertips along her bicep. "Zack?"

He sighed. She was damn hard to ignore. "Yeah?"

"You aren't a monster."

Startled, he jerked his head towards her.

"SOLDIER, Shin-Ra, whatever they did—whatever they tried to do—it doesn't matter. You aren't like him."

Zack swallowed. "Tifa...I..."

She turned, faced him. "They can't take away who you are, Zack." She placed her palm to his chest. "Here, where it matters, you are Zack Fair. Not SOLDIER. Not anything else. Just...Zack."

"But you don't know..." He took a step back, her touch almost painful in how desperate he wanted it. How much he needed her words to be true. "I've done things, Tifa..."

"We all have."

He shook his head, grappled with the grief building in his throat. "Not like me."

Undaunted, she took a step toward him. "Tell me."

He didn't want to. He didn't want to see that soft concern replaced by hard malice or disgust. But she had a right to know. She had aligned herself with him—fought with him, and for him—she deserved to know that she was helping a fallacy.

"What Sephiroth said..." Gods, this hurt. "About me killing a mentor..." He closed his eyes, let out a slow exhale. "It's true."

She was quite for a long moment and then, very quiet, "I know."

Wait, what? Zack opened his eyes; confused.

Tifa scuffed the toe of her boot along the floor, her gaze now avoiding his. "It was in your Shin-Ra file."

His file? "Wait, when did you—?"

"Jessie." Tifa paused on the name, her heart still recovering from that loss, before she continued. "When you first approached us...when you wanted in...Barret had Jessie search your history." She
tilted her head down, bangs veiling her face. "I'm...I'm sorry."

Zack swallowed, cleared his throat and tried to digest what he'd just been told. "No, no, it's understandable...I mean Barret was just looking out for you guys—"

"Not for that," she cut in. "For you. For what you must have felt. For what you had to do. I'm sorry. It must have been terrible."

Zack remembered the pain, and rage, and helplessness. He remembered hating Angeal for forcing his hand, and grieving over the loss of his friend. He remembered being afraid that without Angeal to guide him that he'd be lost.

"Tell me...about him. About Angeal, was it?"

"Yeah, Angeal."

Tifa slanted him a look. "What was he like?"

"Tifa, I killed him." He couldn't escape that one fact.

Quiet, she searched his face. "I read the file myself, Zack. I saw your report. He killed himself, and used you as the weapon. It was cowardly and cruel."

He flinched. "Tifa!"

"But I know that's not the man that taught you to be the fighter you are," she continued, relentless and sympathetic, "so tell me about him." She reached out, tentative and slightly shaking, to brush his hair out of his eyes. "Tell me about your friend. I want to know of the man you aspire to be like."

Zack's breath hitched in his lungs. Gods above, she was too good for him. Unconsciously, he moved into her touch, pressed himself closer. "Angeal...he saved me." His voice cracked, stuttered. It was so hard to breathe. "They were my friends. They were my brothers...and they became...something else."

Images of Wings and Mako and tubes of liquid pain flashed through his mind.

"Shhh, it's okay." She threaded her fingers through his hair, the motion soothing. "It's okay, Zack."

"Tifa." He pulled her roughly into his arms, buried his face against her neck. "Don't let me become like them."

Arms twined tight, she held fast. Even though she knew nothing of his rambling, he was sure, she still promised, "I won't, Zack. I won't." And within her embrace the demons and monsters retreated.

Her lips feathered his cheek and her words soothed the tension from his body. He lifted his head, only enough to see her, and felt the wrongness left in the wake of Sephiroth shift and fade. How she did that, he didn't know—and how he ever managed a single day without her was a mystery. But she was with him now, and he was never, ever letting go.

He shifted them so she had her back pressed to his chest, and his arms bracketed her close. Leaning back against the wall he started to talk. About SOLDIER and about Angeal. The halting words soon loosened and before long his chest rumbled with soft chuckles and remembered fondness.

Inquisitive and interested, Tifa asked him details and encouraged him for hours, until her eyes drooped and his voice scratched from use.

Zack rubbed the flat of his hands along her arms, pressed small kisses against the curve of her
shoulder and neck. "Thank you," he murmured, feeling lighter than he had in many, many months.

"You're welcome." She smiled against his forearm.

"It's almost dawn," he mouthed against her ear. "You should try and get some sleep."

"Attention Dock Workers, we will be arriving in Costa Del Sol in fifteen minutes. Prepare for docking!"

Tifa yawned, glowered at the intercom. "So much for that idea."

Zack rubbed the back of his neck. "Uh, yeah, sorry about that."

She smiled again. "Don't be. It was nice hearing about your good memories. Come on, let's go wake the others."

Zack placed his hand on hers. His heart thundered in his chest. "Wait."

"What is it?"

Words, he was good with them, right? So, why then, were they stuck on the roof of his mouth? "Tifa...I..." I love you. How hard was that? He swallowed, prepared to try again.

"What the hell? Why are you two down here? Didn't you hear the announcement? Docking in fifteen! Get ready!" Down the corridor a chubby little man clapped his hands together, made great big shooing motions before ambling up the stairwell.

Wide-eyed, Tifa stared after him. "You know, we really should be thankful that Shin-Ra hires so many imbeciles." She pushed open the Engine Room door. "C'mon, let's get going."

Behind her, Zack blew out a breath. "Yeah...thanks, Shin-Ra. Thanks a lot."
Sun streaked bright and vibrant across the sky and sparkled off of the blue, blue water that rolled and hissed against white sand in playful frolic. Costa Del Sol was as vibrant and beautiful as he remembered it, Zack thought, as he and the others—having managed to slip off of the ship via the cargo hold—made their way into town. With its sun-baked brick buildings and cobbled streets, flags and banners streaming in the ocean breeze and laughter blending with seagull cries it was the very epitome of paradise.

"Wow," Tifa spun in a circle. "This place is amazing."

It was her reaction that Zack found most enjoyable, though. Wide-eyed and with lips parted, she looked like a kid shown a shiny toy. She'd never been anywhere like this, he knew, and he found he wasn't in a big hurry to remove her from it.

That smile—the one where her back teeth showed and her eyes went a thousand different shades—was damn hard to come by, and he wanted it to last. Even if only for a few hours.

"It's also hot as hell," Barret grumbled, tugging at the collar of his jumpsuit.

Over his shoulder, Zack asked, "Is there anything you don't bitch about?"

"No," Tifa answered for the big man, her teasing smile softening the word. Stepping back, she gently bumped Barret with her hip, getting a grumbling smirk in return.

"I could definitely get used to hanging out here," Yuffie added, nodding up at the clear sky. "Definitely."

Giving up on loosening it, Barret simply ripped the collar open. "We ain't here on vacation."

"No," Zack agreed, eyes and mind still on Tifa. "But there's no reason we can't break here before heading off. Rufus and Heidegger are no closer to Sephiroth than we are. We need some time to regroup and come up with a plan a bit more strategic than we have been."

"I think that's a wise decision," Red added with jaws apart and panting slightly. "This heat has dried out my nose. I need to find someplace cool, and soon."

That thick fur must have been stifling, Zack thought with a twinge of sympathy.

"A change of clothes would be nice," Yuffie added, wiping her brow. "Bathing suit and sandals and all that."

Dark hair coiled in a fist and held to the back of her head, Tifa asked, "And how exactly do we get them?"

"Leave that to me." From her pouch pocket Yuffie tugged free a small bag, heavy with gil.

"Where the hell did you get that?" Barret wanted to know.

"Found it."
"Uh-huh."

"You have your uses," Zack gave a flash of teeth that had the teen blushing to the roots of her hair.

"I don't know how you don't have him tied up somewhere, under lock and key," Yuffie said to Tifa.

At that, it was Tifa's turn to blush and Zack found that he liked that fluster on her more and more. It meant she wasn't immune to him, and that maybe she wanted some of the things he did. Please, Gods.

"Moving on," Barret shoved himself up beside Zack.

"Jealous much?" Zack winked at him.

"Y'know, it's too damn hot to kick your ass, but I'll get to it."

"I'll pencil you in."

"Jackass."

"Love you too."

"So...are we? Getting bathing suits that is?" Aerith sounded pretty eager about the idea and Zack couldn't see a reason for them not to have more comfortable attire. Besides...Tifa in a swimsuit was just too much temptation to resist.

"We should probably change into something a bit less conspicuous than Shin-Ra sailor suits, yes," he nodded. "Just don't wander too far. We need to get supplies and information."

"Who the hell left him in charge?" Barret mumbled, not for the first time.

Tifa poked him in the side. "Stop being a baby."

Zack held out his hand. "Yuffie, hand over some money."

"Say please."

"We could turn her upside down and shake it off of her," Barret suggested.

"A sound plan," Red rumbled with an amused gleam in his eye.

"Oh, fine. Here, you big whiners." Yuffie plopped several bills and gold pieces into Zack's palm. "I want the change back," she told him.

He gave the wad a quick once over before pocketing the gil. "Okay, so we'll meet over there, at the information booth, in an hour. Shops are lined up along the street, and almost all of them have clothing so that should be plenty of time."

Tucking the remaining money into her own pocket, Yuffie glanced up at him. "You've never seen women shop before, have you?"

"You appear to be considerably familiar with this place," Red pointed out.

"Been here a couple of times," he supplied. But that was all he said. Reliving Genesis Clone attacks or thinking about Cissinei—who had somehow vanished from the Turks—didn't really appeal to him. He'd much rather focus on the task at hand and enjoy the sunshine while they could. "So,
everyone set?"

Nods all around.

"I'll be over beside that building," Red motioned with his muzzle. "In the shade, if any of you need me."

"Would you like me to bring you some water?" Aerith asked as he trotted off.

"That would be nice, yes."

Zack gave a head nod. "All right, guys. One hour."

She had never before seen such small scraps of cloth passed off as clothing before and for her that was saying something. Tifa held up a vibrant orange piece that looked as though Red had used it as a scratch pad and shook her head. A few more similarly scant suits were tossed aside until she finally found a one-piece that she could consider 'clothing'. It only took her a few minutes more to decide on the color—dark red—and some simple sandals.

She was tying her hair back when Aerith emerged from the opposite changing stall, in a cute little floral bikini, and gave her a wide-eyed look. "You're not wearing that are you?"

Tifa blinked, glanced down at her bathing suit, flustered. "What's the matter?" She wasn't hanging out anywhere and it covered a heck of a lot more than the other slips of suits in the shop did.

Aerith blinked right back, eyebrows disappearing into her hairline. "You can't be serious..." She shook her head, ringlets bouncing. "If I had your body there is no way I'd hide it."

Defensive, Tifa crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm not hiding it."

"Well, you sure as heck ain't showing it off," Yuffie chimed in from behind a rack of sandals. "And that's a shame, because whenever I finally get boobs, I'm gonna flaunt the heck out of them. And I can guarantee that mine will be little hills compared to your boobnormous mountains..."

"I thought the idea was to blend in, and not draw attention to ourselves," Tifa hissed, her cheeks warming. It was bad enough when guys noticed her body, but to have Aerith and Yuffie making commentary on it...well, she didn't know how to react to that.

"Yeah, well there's attention and then there's attention," Aerith informed her as she selected a shimmering gold two piece from the hangers. Thoughtful, she held it up in front of Tifa. "Ooooh," she smiled wide. "This one."

"Wait, what? No. There's not enough material there to be a decent napkin."

Giving a soft, dejected sigh, Aerith started to walk away. "Hmm...I'm not sure I can pull it off. What do you think, Yuffie? Would Zack prefer this one or the pink?"

She was going to have a crick in her neck from snapping her head around so fast, but Tifa didn't care. She gave Aerith a curious look, trying her best not to be upset, and failing; miserably.

Catching her eye in the mirror's reflection, Aerith smiled innocently. "If you won't give the poor guy something to look at, I will." She held the bikini aloft, waggled it back and forth.

Snatching the skimpy little thing from Aerith's hands, Tifa stormed into the dressing room, grabbing
a sheer floral patterned sarong as she went. Outside the curtain she heard Yuffie and Aerith exchange high-fives.

In the stall, Tifa debated for a good five minutes before braving the suit. She stared in the mirror, her hand drifting up to the very thin line that ran between her breasts, nearly to her navel. Had it been any other blade, she imagined her scar would be much more pronounced, but Masumune was like a razor, and had cut quick and clean. She sighed...shoving the thought from her mind and finished adjusting herself in the suit. It really was quite tiny.

A few seconds later, Yuffie's hushed voice paused her again. "Isn't it weird for you? I mean, tall, dark, and drool-worthy used to be with you, right?"

Hating herself for eavesdropping, but sincerely curious about the answer, Tifa held her breath and leaned closer to the thin curtain. It was a question that had been plaguing her since Junon, when she had decided that she wanted to be with Zack. How did Aerith feel?

Tifa didn't want to hurt her. She liked Aerith. It was...nice...having another female around. Especially one like Aerith who chose smiles over swears and could heal with magic, but also with heart. The idea of breaking her heart was not appealing, and Tifa wouldn't allow herself to stand in the way if there was something there to rekindle.

"Sometimes," came Aerith's equally soft reply. "But probably not as weird as it should be."

"What do you mean?"

Yes, Aerith, what do you mean? Tifa bit her lip.

"I love Zack." Warmth and sincerity coated her words and Tifa was surprised by how easy the other woman was able to speak it. "And what he and I had was really great, but..." Aerith trailed off, sighed in that quiet way of hers.

"But?" Yuffie prompted.

"But things change. People change. Love changes."

"That's all very philosophical and all, but, uh, it doesn't really answer my question. It doesn't bother you? At all?"

"It did, at first," she admitted and in her stall, Tifa flinched. "But they...connect. In a way that he and I never did. She's good for him, and she needs him—whether she'll admit it or not."

"So, you're okay with Zack being with someone else?"

"No," Aerith corrected. "I'm okay with Zack being with Tifa."

No longer able to pretend she couldn't hear them, Tifa slid the curtain back, only to find Aerith already facing her; expectant.

"Looks like I was right about the suit," she smiled. "You look amazing."

"Aerith—"

"It's all about the fit," Aerith continued on as if she hadn't spoken. "When the fit is right, everything else just falls into place. The same suit can look really good on a lot of different people, but when that one special person puts it on...it just never seems right on anyone else again, you know?"
Tifa nodded, feeling warmed and moved by both Aerith's acceptance, and assurance. "Thank you."

"Aw, you..." Aerith reached out, eyes damp, and pulled Tifa into a hug.

"Aw, jeez, you guys, lemme in!" Yuffie wrapped her arms around them both. "Girl hug!"

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Naked.

She may as well have been naked for all the cover the stupid little scraps of cloth offered. Hands crossed in front of herself Tifa shot Aerith a narrow eyed look. She couldn't believe Aerith had actually talked her into leaving the shop wearing it. "This is stupid," she muttered.

Aerith waved a hand dismissively. "Oh, hush. You look great." She paid for her ice-pops. One for her, one for Red.

"I feel...exposed."

"You should feel damn proud," Yuffie interjected after a lick of frozen treat. "I think that guy just crashed his bike."

"What?"

All three turned in unison and spotted a lanky teenager fumbling to right himself around his twisted pedal bike and two other men spilling their drinks.

Aerith's grin was cheeky. "See? Fun." Her smile was infectious and Tifa felt the corners of her own mouth twitch in response.

"Oh, hey, I see the boys." Yuffie pointed.

In the square, Red lay in the shade and Barret, now in loose cargo shorts and white tank top, sat on a bench while Zack kicked a ball back and forth with a couple of local kids. His laughter drifted on the ocean air and tightened something low in Tifa's gut.

Did he have to look so damn good? She wondered, admiring broad shoulders, lean muscle, and thick black hair. He bounced the ball off his knees, playful and unaware of the sets of eyes he was attracting.

"Close your mouth, Yuffie. It's not polite to drool." Amused, Aerith tipped the girls chin up.

Barret spotted them, raising an arm and waving. "Yo, Teef. Over here!"

Zack turned to face them then, the smile on his face devilish and flirtatious and it made Tifa all too aware of how little clothing would separate them should he touch her.

_Breathe_, she told herself as she walked forward, her eyes glued to Zack. And his violet blue eyes that teased and smoldered, and tanned skin marred by too many scars, but somehow making him all the more appealing, and the way his abdomen flexed as he laughed, and his-

"Ow!" The flagpole seemed to come out of nowhere, smacking her in the forehead and squishing her nose.

Dropping the ball, Zack rushed to her side, hands gentle on her cheeks. "Ouch, Tifa. You okay?"
"Yeah." She rubbed her wounded nose, annoyed. "I was just distracted by..." *Solid chest, flexing abs, killer grin.* "Distracted. I was just distracted." Then her breath caught, finally registering that he was right there; bare chest and tender smile, so close...

"Hey," he murmured, fingertips brushing hair from her shoulder.

"Hi."

She blushed furious red when his eyes drifted down, widened, and his dimple appeared.

"Aerith picked it out," she said hastily.

"Remind me to thank her." His eyes darkened, voice slightly rougher than its usual smooth timbre. She blushed again, her own gaze shifting a bit away from his, flustered.

Zack knew that touch and close proximity was still new to her, and he wasn't about to go overstepping his bounds so he told himself to back off, or at least he tried. His brain issued the command, but his body refused to obey. In fact, the only portion of his anatomy that seemed responsive was threatening to tent his palm tree shorts.

That was until Tifa gasped, and jumped back, avoiding the cascade of freezing water that sluiced over his head and shoulders.

"What the hell!" Zack spluttered, whipped around to face his assailant. Behind him, ice-bucket still in hand, Barret smirked.

"Why-?" Zack sloshed his hair back.

"For whatever you were thinkin'."

Knowing exactly where his thoughts had been headed—Tifa, him, night, sand and surf, no clothes—Zack couldn't exactly fault the guy, but it still sucked all the breath from his lungs.

"Now that Zack's done overheating, weren't we gonna make actual plans?" Yuffie grinned around her popsicle.

Zack shook the remaining water from his hair. "We were. We can get maps at the information center."

"And food," Yuffie chirped. "Food is a must. I'm staaaaaaaarving."

"Fine."

"And we should have a place to stay. No idea how long we're going to be here," Aerith added. "Rather than wandering around, and risk being seen or overheard, maybe we should have a room, or something."

"Anything else on your list of demands?" Barret grumbled.

"Those little umbrella things they put in fruity drinks."

"Uh-huh."

"Why don't you all head to the information center and Tifa and I will go find a place to stay," Zack offered.
"I don't think so, Slick." Barret warned.

"Worth a shot."

Tifa punched him on the arm.

"Ow."

"Keep your mind out of the gutter, Fair," she scolded.

"You can't wear something like that and expect me to think coherently," he told her with a wink.

Blushing, Tifa punched him again.

They managed to get maps, recommendations for a local cafe, and rented a bungalow in short order. Costa Del Sol was efficient and productive, filled to bursting with tourists and similar requests, although Zack highly doubted for the same reasons.

Most people milling the beach and shops weren't on a mission to bring down Shin-Ra and find a mad-man hell-bent on destruction, but he'd take efficiency gratefully.

It was nice, though. Being around the others, almost relaxed, sitting in the Sunlight Glade Cafe. Not to mention Tifa's very surprising, and very appealing attire. He let his gaze slip sideways again and admired the way the gold material highlighted her natural skin tone, and the way her body—toned and shaped by years of training—moved with subtle grace and sway.

She made it hard for him to think...hell, she made it hard for him to breathe.

"You're staring again." She inclined her head, the fall of her hair veiling her eyes.

"I am," he admitted, completely unabashed. He reached over, and was rewarded when, without hesitation, she slipped her hand into his. Heartbeat loud in his own ears, he brought her palm to his lips, kissed it softly.

"You should do that more," he commented, voice low.

"What?"

"Blush."

Barret lowered his menu to glower. "Cut it out you two. We're going to eat, and I don't wanna lose my appetite."

Zack snorted. "He has a way of ruining moments between us, you ever notice?."

She smiled affectionately. "It's a gift of his."

"Everything on the menu looks great," Aerith murmured, one finger gliding along the list of local delicacies. "What are you having?" she asked Zack.

"Not sure. Something spicy..." Zack glanced up idly from the menu as the bell above the door chimed. It took less than an instant for him to recognize the man that entered, even before he removed his hat and sunglasses, revealing the ugly, jagged scar across his face. "Son of a bitch." All he saw was red.
He was up and in motion, so fast that none of the others even registered what he was doing until he had literally mowed the newcomer down. Shoulder to gut, he drove him into the wall, crashing through tables and screaming patrons. Glass and silverware clattered to the floor as the two men grappled, spilling food and drink and making a mess of the dining area.

The other man was larger than Zack, outweighing him by a fair amount, and he was using his hammer-fists to pummel him in the back. Zack, for his part, ignored the pain and used their close proximity to bare-knuckle punch the other man in the face. Hard hits that knocked teeth free.

Behind him, somewhere that seemed much too far away considering how small the cafe was, he thought he heard shouting and his name, but there was a kind of madness in his blood now—a need to make this man suffer—so he ignored them and focused on inflicting as much pain as he could.

The Shin-Ra Specialist snarled, spitting blood and teeth. "So you lived, you little shit," he ground out. He swung wildly, catching Zack beneath his chin. Zack took one step back, but that was all.

Licking the blood from his busted lip, Zack used his forearm to drive the Turk back again. Brutal, he rabbit-punched kidneys.

Desperate, realizing he was no match for a non-drugged, non-bound Zack, the Specialist clawed, going for Zack's eyes, but Zack avoided the clumsy grope and rammed his fist into the man's exposed throat. Choking, the Turk dropped down, tried to crawl away.

"I don't fucking think so." Zack grabbed him, slammed his head into the floor. Lifted, slammed him down again.

He rose up, and in his mind he saw Tifa's swollen, broken hands, and brought his fists down like he was trying to punch through the floor. He felt—with viscous satisfaction—bone break beneath his hand.

*Kill him.*

The thought screamed through his head like fire and Zack hit again and again.

Face, chest, ribs.

Again and again.

A hit for every scream. Every cut. Every wound.

"Zack! Zack! Enough!" Tifa was suddenly pressed to his back, her arms wrapped around him. She gripped his arm, her voice soft in his ear, reaching through the blood lust and anger to wrap him in warmth and soothing honey. "Stop. Please."

Panting, blood coating his arms and chest, Zack allowed the man to drop back against the wood, barely conscious. He wiped his forearm across his forehead, removing the sweat as it beaded to sting his eyes. "He hurt you."

Her arms tightened. "Zack..."

"He cut you and made you scream." His fingers curled, spreading open wounds on the backs of his knuckles. He remembered it all. The smile on the man's face as Tifa bit her lip to keep from screaming—the grin that appeared when she couldn't hold it in any more. "He tried to ruin your hands," he reminded her, voice shaking.
"And you made me better." Trembling, her fingers threaded his damp hair. "Stop, okay. I don't want this. Please. Please don't."

And with that, she sucked all the fight from him. Head bowed, he took a shaky breath.

From behind them, Yuffie spoke up. "Uh...we should probably go."

"Yes, I believe we officially lost any hope of being inconspicuous." Red agreed.

"Because a talking cat goes completely unnoticed," Barret remarked, but he too was on his feet. "But, yeah, we've worn out our welcome." He gestured to the man behind the small counter, wearing a bright floral shirt and a shotgun in hand.

"You folks need to leave," he ordered in a trembling voice.

Once on his feet, Zack refused to meet any of their eyes. "Let's go." He walked away, straight and stiff, leaving Tifa's fingers curling on the space between them.

"You okay?" Aerith placed her hand on the small of Tifa's back.

"Yeah." She looked down at the bleeding man at her feet. She remembered all of Zack's wounds. Every one of them. "I couldn't let him kill. Not like that," she said, quiet. Crouching down, she leaned in close to the Specialist. "If you can hear me, then you'd better listen. Come near us again, for any reason, and I'll personally cheer him on until you're a pile of broken bones, and then I'll cut your balls off and feed them to you."

When she stood, Aerith blinked owlishly. "You're scary."

"When I have to be." Tifa agreed. "Yuffie, pay the man for damages."


On their way out Tifa kicked the Turk in the side—for good measure.

The water stung, but not as much as the disappointment he knew he'd see in Tifa's eyes whenever he got brave enough to look in them.

He'd lost control.

He'd wanted blood.

He was more than capable of getting it.

It was natural for him—easy for him—to fight. And he had wanted to see that man bleed. Wanted to hear him scream.

With a long sigh, he shook off the water.

There was a light knock on the door. "Zack?"

"I'll be right out," he called.

"Just wanted you to know that we're going to the beach for awhile," Aerith replied. "Barret thinks it might be a good idea to question some of the people about Sephiroth."
That made sense. It was a good step. At least someone was still thinking. The idea that it was Barret was mildly amusing. "All right. I'll be done in a minute."

"That's okay, you should rest. You didn't sleep last night." Her voice was gentle, edged with concern, but firm. "We'll be back in a couple of hours."

Great. Now even his team didn't want to be near him. "All right," he echoed again. Defeated, he splashed cold water onto his face.

He took a few more minutes to wipe off his neck and chest before padding barefoot into the main area of their rented bungalow. The meager contents they'd managed to haul with them from Midgar were piled next to more recently acquired items, but they were still woefully low on supplies.

Zack made mental note purchase potions and softs, as well as basic medical items and extra clothes. They wouldn't need much, but it was better to be prepared than caught off guard. He pulled the stool out from the small island, rested his chin on his palm and stared at the wall.

He hated feeling this out of sorts.

"Instead of sulking in there, you could always join me out here."

Zack's head snapped up, surprise raising his voice to a rather unmanly octave. "Tifa!"

Leaning against the side of the sliding glass patio door she nodded towards the deck. "There's a swing thing out here that I can't figure out."

"A swing thing?" he repeated dumbly, making his way towards her.

"Yeah. It's like a net on poles."

"Ah. A hammock," he said, spotting what she was referring to. The small porch faced the ocean, the hammock tied near the cottage and overlooking the sand and surf. "You lay in it."

"I figured that much," she scoffed. "I'm not a complete idiot. But since I've managed to fall out of it twice now, I think I'm probably doing it wrong." She rubbed her backside.

Distracted for a moment, Zack cleared his throat. "Uh, yeah, they aren't complicated. You just have to distribute your, uh, weight, evenly."

"Ok, show me." She nudged him.

Obliging, Zack laid in the hammock, sighed when it dipped and his body relaxed into the mesh. "Like that," he told her. When she still looked dubious, he held his hand out to her. It was shaking, he noticed, and hoped she didn't.

Cautious, she took it, allowed him to tug her down next to him. Once she was settled she sighed. "Oh. Nice."

Yes, Zack silently agreed.

Tifa let her fingers glide along and in between his, careful of his bruised knuckles. Zack never would have thought such a simple motion could be sexy, but the way his blood thickened and senses honed in on her sweet scent and soft skin, he was quickly reassessing his 'sexy' standards.

Curling on her side, nestled against him, she fit perfectly. Maybe it was the romantic in him, he didn't know, but it was like she was made for him.
"Tifa...?"

"Hm?" She angled her head, the sun glinting off dark strands to light them with hidden fire.

"I'm sorry."

"Zack."

"Yeah?"

"You lost yourself a little bit back there," she said quietly after a time, emotion heavy in her voice.

"Yes," he admitted with a long breath. "But you brought me back."

She tipped her head up and her mouth found his. Her lips were as soft and as giving as she was. She sighed as he shifted them, lifting her so that her body molded to his, a sweet sound that played his heart as well as his senses. Her hands brushed his shoulders, his neck, his face, until they buried themselves in his hair.

She moaned softly when he took his mouth from hers and trailed slow, open mouthed kisses along her jaw, and down to the pulse of her neck. His hand—calloused fingertips—slid up her leg as his mouth toyed with her ear.

"You have the softest skin," he murmured, face close. So close she could see the green flecks buried in the sea of blue.

She brushed her lips across his forehead, retreated and allowed her own hands to skim across his chest, her eyes going dark and liquid at the puckered scars there.

Bullet wounds.

She'd seen enough of them over the years to know, and her heart bled for him. There were so many. She didn't need him to tell her...she knew. He got those trying to save Cloud.

He tensed beneath the inquisitive pads of her fingertips, but he didn't retreat. He allowed her to trace each one, and when she felt him shudder, she angled her head, kissed the silvery tissue.

"Tifa." His hands cupped her hips, held her steady.

She felt the hard press of his arousal through his shorts, and it had her gasping, feeling flushed and anxious. His hands and lips seduced her senses, and she melted and coiled simultaneously.

As much as Zack loved the feel of her in his arms, the sound of her breath quickening, her pulse speeding up, he knew she wasn't ready for anything more, so he eased back, his smile tender. "Tifa, you're so much more than I deserve."

"Zack, if this relationship is going to work, you really need to stop being so dumb." She let out a breath, caught his face between her palms and spoke with steadfast sincerity. "You are wonderful, and brave, and the most genuine person I have ever met, and if you don't pull your head out of your ass and see that, I'll be forced to beat you."

Something in his heart bloomed. From ash and dark, it blossomed and spread until his blood warmed with it and the smile on his face threatened his ears. "Relationship?" He asked. "As in we're a couple?"

Hesitation appeared at the corner of her eyes. "Uhm...yes. I mean, that is, if you still want me?"
"More than anything." He made a vague gesture at their tangled limbs. "I thought that was pretty obvious."

She blushed. "I didn't want to presume."

 Barely there, Zack let his fingertips glide over the skin of her arm, back and forth. He watched the sun glitter off the ocean water, nuzzled into her hair, and let the heaviness in his heart go. "No presumption. We're together," he confirmed. Drowsy and content, he turned her carefully, so she was cheek to chest and closed his eyes. "Definitely together." And he wasn't letting go.

He didn't know how long they slept but the sun had fully set when he heard the front door and footsteps.

"They're back," he murmured against Tifa's ear, rousing her.

She nodded, immediately awake. "How'd it go?" she called once they were inside the bungalow.

"Well, we didn't find Sephiroth," Aerith said.

"But we did find someone that might have some answers," Barret added, coming up behind her. He shoved a smaller man forward.

All the warmth and heat Zack had gained from laying in the sun drained from him.

"Hojo."
There were times, Zack thought, as he tugged on a pair of khakis, that fate was a real bitch. Or had really bad comedic timing. He wasn't sure which.

Hey, Fair, why don't you get all nice and cozy with your girl, calm down that adrenaline rush, and then BLAMMO, face to face with another monster.

His breath was stuttered and his fingers shook as he fumbled with the buckle of his pants. It wasn't as if he hadn't already seen Hojo before; he really shouldn't be this upset, he fumed. But it felt like a punch in the gut. For a moment—brief though it was—Zack had felt content and at peace.

Hojo was a sour reminder that peace was an illusion so long as Sephiroth and Shin-Ra were loose on the world.

The bedroom door parted, just wide enough for a voice. "Decent?"

"Yeah." The word was muffled by the hem of his shirt, stuffed between his teeth, so he could concentrate on the button that refused to fit into the hole.

Tifa had changed also, and under normal circumstances Zack would have been disappointed to see the itsy bitsy bathing suit exchanged for loose cotton pants and sleeveless top, but as it was now, his nerves were frayed to snapping and he could barely focus on getting his own pants on.

Quiet, she watched him for a minute, then, very calm and efficient, she stepped in front of him and halted his hands. "Zack."

Through the fall of his bangs he looked at her and watched her face soften and worry flood her eyes.

\[\text{Anguish.}\]

It was there in swirls of blue and brilliant green and it broke her heart.

Tifa recalled white knuckles on a bathroom sink, and a rough voice that was both hollow and haunted. Nightmare was what Zack had called Hojo, and seeing his pale face and stricken expression now, Tifa knew that for Zack truer words were never spoken.

Hesitant, still uncertain as to what and how she was supposed to act, she brushed his hair back, searched his face.

Gruff, he chuckled, looked away. "Damn pants," he muttered.

"Here," she reached for the button, but Zack stepped back.

"Only so much touching like that a guy can take," he said, but there was no feeling behind it. Familiar teasing laced with unfamiliar strain. "I can manage."

"Okay," she nodded, fingers curling into her palms. Then, because she couldn't stop herself, "What did he do to you, Zack?"

"Oh, y'know, a little of this, a little of that," he shrugged, turning away.
Patient, she waited.

After a stretch of silence in which only the curtains sighed, he spoke, "Do you remember how I told you that Cloud and I were taken to a lab beneath Shinra Manor...?"

Something awful tightened in the pit of her stomach, and Tifa nodded. "Yes."

"Well, meet the mad scientist in charge of our...treatment."

She had no words for that, no answer or reply. She had no idea what 'treatment' Zack and Cloud—her heart clenched a bit there—had endured. All she knew was that whatever had happened, it had been bad enough for Zack to risk life and limb in order to escape it.

Years, he'd said. They'd spent years in a lab...

"We were specimens," Zack continued, voice flat, completely without inflection. "For what, I still don't know. All I know is that there were tubes and Mako and endless days on a cold table being cut open and sewn back together." A shudder ran through him and he bowed his head.

Shaky and sick in her heart, Tifa moved around to face him again. "Barret can question him," she offered. "You don't have to—"

With a sharp breath, he straightened. "No. I'll do it." He met her gaze, his eyes hard with resolve. He firm his jaw. "I'll do it."

"All right." She stretched up to place a soft, fleeting kiss against his dry lips. "When you're ready. Take as long as you need."

"One more." Zack tugged her into his arms. Gentle, almost shy, he settled his mouth over hers.

Tifa let herself press closer, her hands moving up to cradle his face. Let him take from her comfort and strength, in any form he could, she thought, and opened for him.

"Maybe two," he mouthed against her, and this time there was genuine warmth behind it.

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The tight fist around Zack's heart lessened a bit whenever he touched Tifa, so he kept his fingers twined with hers as they made their way to the cottage's main room, where their friends and Hojo waited.

Greasy, was the word that came to mind when Zack's eyes found and rested on the thin man seated in one of the dining chairs. Long hair—un-combed and perhaps unwashed—tied in a loose pony tail that hung limp along a rumpled white coat. A lab coat at the beach? Was he for real with that shit?

"Hojo." The name was thorns on his tongue.

Behind his glasses, narrow eyes blinked. "It took me some time, but I remember you now." He leaned forward, thin lips parting in a perversion of a smile. "It's been a longtime, Zack Fair."

Zack felt Tifa's fingers tighten on his in silent reassurance.

"What are you doing in Costa Del Sol," Zack asked, making certain not to show how much the Professor's presence disturbed him.
"I would think that's obvious," Hojo's reply was mildly amused. "Working on my tan."

Zack grit his teeth. "Don't bullshit me. Answer."

"That was an answer," Hojo replied evenly. "I was enjoying a well deserved vacation until your friends here accosted me."

Barret snorted.

"Why did you leave Shin-Ra?" Zack demanded.

"My employers no longer sought the same goals I did. Not that it is any of your business."

"Why come here?" Zack pressed. "What are you after?"

"I have said all I am going to say."

Barret leveled his gun arm at Hojo's temple. "Looks like he don't wanna talk and we ain't got time to waste. I say we shoot him and move on."

A low rumble from Red and a nod. "Agreed. We need not endure the presence of vermin any longer than necessary."

Zack studied Hojo for a full minute, his expression contemplative and disturbing. Finally, he shrugged. "Sure. Splatter his brains. He's useless."

"I would think you and I are after the same thing," Hojo interjected as Barret cocked back.

Zack held up a hand. "And that would be?"

"Sephiroth."

"You saw him here?"

"No," Hojo replied. Then, almost agitated, "Have you?" When Zack didn't respond Hojo smiled. "Ah. I see. Interesting. And here I thought you were a failure... Do you feel it, Fair? The Calling?"

The man had officially gone off the deep end, Zack thought, watching as Hojo adjusted his glasses and beads of sweat appeared on his bone white brow.

"Is it crawling in your blood? The urge to go someplace?" Hojo laughed, a harsh abrasive sound and there was a malevolent fever in his eyes as he spoke. "You won't be able to resist it, you know. I made sure of that. No, no, no. When He calls, you will answer."

"You're a nut," Barret muttered.

Hojo swung his head towards him. "You mock what you are too inept to understand. You have no idea..."

"Enlighten me."

"Your pathetic brain couldn't handle the information," Hojo sneered. "A lifetime, a hundred lifetimes and we would only barely be scratching the surface of the Ancients and their powers."

"What powers?" Aerith stepped forward, her emerald eyes shining faintly beneath the lanterns. "Tell me, Professor, what of the Ancients and Jenova. Do they share the same blood? Same history?"
Zack reached out, took her hand. The last of her kind, he remembered. Human, and something...else. Something great and terrifying and mystical. Profound and frightening, he could only imagine how hard it was for her to have so many questions and no answers. No one to answer.

"Ah, the Ancient," Hojo sighed, hand reaching up as though to touch her, but he let it drop when Red growled. "Tell me, how is your mother Ilfana?"

"You don't know?" Aerith frowned. "She died."

"That's...unfortunate." Hojo moved to stand, but a large hand on his shoulder shoved him back into the chair.

"Sit." Barret glowered.

"So many new developments," Hojo continued to mumble, glassy eyed. "Potential, potential..."

Zack decided he needed to regain the Professor's attention. "Hey," he snapped his fingers in front of Hojo's face. "Pay attention. Where is Sephiroth going? What is he after?"

"The answers are neither here nor there, for now it is the beginning and the end." Another sharp laugh. "It begins now. No more failures." He blinked up at Zack. "No more pathetic failures." He grinned and it was cold. "Where is the other one? The one that screamed and begged for a number? He was worse than you, with all his weeping and whimpering."

Zack flinched, and beside him he felt Tifa tense.

"Does he mean Cloud?" she whispered.

"Yes, that was his name, I believe. I would presume he died, as weak as he was—grk-!"

"Shit!" Barret swore and Zack was stunned when Tifa suddenly launched herself at the Professor. The dining chair fell back with Hojo being straddled and Tifa's hands curled ruthlessly around his neck.

"Bastard," she seethed between clenched teeth.

"Tifa," Zack rushed forward, curved his arm around her waist, tugged, and got an elbow in the side. "Tifa, stop." Hojo's eyes were glazed, rolling back and her fingers tightened until crescents bled against pale skin.

"I'll kill you!" she hissed at Hojo even as Zack attempted to haul her back. "Let me go! Zack! Let go! You sick bastard, I'll kill you!" She kicked at Hojo, grief and anger forming a violent madness in her. "Let me go!" She fought to break free. "I'll rip you apart for everything you did to them!" She continued to shout at Hojo. "Zack, let go! Let me go!"

"I can't," Zack murmured quietly into her ear, wincing as her flailing accidentally jabbed ribs and shins. Chaining his own anger at Hojo back, he tightened his grip. "Tifa, it won't bring him back."

When she screamed and managed to wrench free long enough to punch Hojo in the face, Zack simultaneously cheered for her and wept inside. He grabbed her again, hauling her around and tucking her to his chest. "It won't bring him back," he whispered again, raw and aching for her—with her. "It won't. No matter how much we want it, it won't." He locked his arms around her and pulled her far enough away that Hojo could scramble away, clutching his throat and gasping for air.

Holding her tighter, Zack drowned out everything else—her fear, her rage, her pain—with
tenderness and love. Against his back her fingers clawed and suddenly rough sobs wracked her shoulders and a broken name shattered his heart.

"It's okay, I've got you." He kissed her hair, hugged her close. "I'm here."

Across from them Barret stared, silent and stunned as Aerith pressed her hands to her mouth, her own tears leaving streaks against her cheeks.

"Holy shit," Yuffie breathed in the shocked silence.

"Fiesty creature," Hojo rasped, a blood sticky smile on his face. "What a wonderful experiment you would be."

Rage rolled in Zack and his head snapped up. It was brutal, tearing its way through him and sending his blood pulsing with the need for blood and vengeance. But he wouldn't leave Tifa, wouldn't let her go when she was clinging so desperately to him—to herself. Over dark hair, Zack's eyes blazed with enough threat that the professor fell silent.

"Barret," he growled.

"Yeah?"

"Take that out of here."

"With pleasure," Rough, Barret yanked Hojo from the floor.

Zack shifted his hold on Tifa, bowed his head over hers protectively as he murmured soothing, nothing sounds. She'd needed to get this grief out for months, and as painful as it was for her, and for him to witness, he knew it was necessary. He gave Aerith a pleading look and she nodded, ushering Red and Yuffie from the room.

Alone, Zack gathered Tifa up, cradled her in his lap as he rocked her and listened to the harsh, choked sounds that clogged her throat as she wept and wept.

There was no hell dark enough, nor fire hot enough, for the likes of Hojo, he thought.

Slow, the tears and trembling ebbed, until silent and empty, she lay quiet in his arms.

"Sorry," she sniffed.

"Don't be." He lifted her face, brushed her tears away with his thumbs.

She laid her head on his shoulder, took a long, shaky breath. "Okay."

Zack felt his lips curve a bit. Tifa snuggled into him, her head tucked beneath his chin and something loosened in his chest and soared, because they were okay, he realized. Together, they were stronger, and together they would heal.

A little later, when the shock had settled, and the house was once again quiet, Zack found himself standing on the back deck, face to the glowing moon, unable to shake Hojo's chilling words from his mind. *Is it crawling in your blood?*
Frowning, Zack ran his hands over his face. Hojo had done so much shit to him, it was hard to say what might be crawling around inside of him, and that thought alone was chilling, but couple that with some bizarro link with Sephiroth and Zack felt ice on his bones.

The hiss of the sliding door grabbed his attention and Zack turned, nodded a greeting when Barret stepped out behind him. "Where is he?" he asked.

Barret didn't answer at first, instead moved to lean against the rail, staring up at the sky. "Tied him in the basement. Red's guarding the door," he answered after a time. He cocked his head, studied Zack. "Something tells me I probably shoulda just shot the fucker."

"Probably."

"How's Teef?"

Zack tousled his hair with one hand. "She's resting. Aerith and Yuffie are with her."

Barret took a slow inhale. "I ain't never seen Teef act like that."

He sounded uncertain, and a bit off, and Zack couldn't blame him. Tifa was their tether, the one that pulled them back when they strayed too close to the edge. Witnessing her fall over it headlong was unsettling to say the least. But she had needed it—maybe not accompanied by the angry outburst—but the grief needed an out before it ate her alive.

"She needed it," Zack echoed his own thoughts.

To his surprise, Barret simply nodded. "Sometimes we all need to let go." And then surprise turned to utter astonishment at the big man's next words. "I'm just glad she's got you there to hold her up when she falls." And with that, Barret stalked back into the bungalow.

Shaking his head, Zack followed, smile teasing the corners of his mouth. "I knew you liked me."

"Don't push it, Princess."

"Wanna hug?"

"Get the hell off of me!"

"Aw, c'mere."

"I will shoot you."

"If you two are done flirting, can we maybe decide what to do now?" Seated on the counter, one leg dangling and the other tucked beneath her chin, Tifa watched them. "We don't have time to flake" she said to Barret, before either man could speak.

"No one thought you did," Barret gruffed, ruffled her hair.

Taking it in stride, Tifa blew the now loose strands from her face and gestured to the table where Aerith and Yuffie also waited. "So, Zack? Where now?"

Wasn't she something? he thought with pride and a grin. "There's not a lot of options from Costa," he answered. "Corel is the only town near enough to make sense to travel to. I say we head there."

Barret was already heading for the door. "I'll let Red know. We should move soon," he said over his shoulder. "Avoid Shin-Ra and make use of the dark."
"Agreed." Zack nodded.

"Aw, I was hoping we could stay here and have some beach time," Yuffie pouted.

"When this is over, we should come back," Aerith said, rising to her feet. "When we can enjoy ourselves and sunbathe and sip drinks with little umbrellas in them."

"That'd be fun," Yuffie grinned, rubbing her hands. "What is it with you and the little umbrellas, by the way?"

"They're cute."

"Ah."

It was a nice sentiment, but in truth, it was unlikely that they would ever not be enemies of Shin-Ra, and Zack doubted that any of them would have the luxury of normalcy ever again, but looking at expectant green eyes, he found himself unwilling to break that fragile hope.

So, instead, he grinned, and said, "Just as long as Tifa wears that bikini again," and enjoyed the blush that followed.
Barret's Pain

Chapter Summary

Barret's past is ugly...but we all knew that.

Corel, as it turned out was gone. In its place was North Corel—a shallow, beaten down version of what was once a small but well-maintained mining community. Broken buildings and canvas tents were homes and shelter, the meager housings surrounded by mounds of scrap and dirt.

Zack blinked against the rising sun and felt a frown tighten his lips. Back when he'd traveled this area—early in his days as a Shin-Ra grunt—Corel had been a sturdy town, filled with sturdy people, but the people milling about looked defeated and sour. Nothing like the folk he remembered.

A few feet ahead of them, Barret's pace quickened and it was him that stepped through the shabby gate that unofficially marked the town's entrance first. Immediately, he was approached by several people, which wasn't altogether unusual given Barret's appearance and the fact that they were strangers, but what struck Zack as particularly odd was the way Barret kept his head down, even when voices rose and an angry fist struck out.

"Barret!" Tifa rushed forward.

"Shit," Zack muttered, moving to belay any retaliation from their big companion. The last thing they needed was Barret unloading on a bunch of half-witted idiots. But to his—and everyone else's—surprise, Barret simply took a step back and did nothing.

"You have a lot of fucking balls showing your face here again after what you did!" The man that struck Barret was shouting when they reached them. Spittle flayed between dry lips and dotted his whiskers, so great was his agitation.


"Back off," Tifa shoved herself in front of Barret, her face as fierce as Zack had ever seen it.

"Mind your business, bitch," one of the men snarled, stepping up to point a finger in her face.

Now there was a bad idea, Zack thought, striding forward. This was their town and their place, and he had no intention of stomping on any toes or causing trouble, but he'd be damned if he sat back and watched some asshole insult Tifa. He let his hands rest on his hips, and kept his smile easy, but the threat was in his voice when he said, "I would really advise against doing that."

Many faces of the small crowd turned on him, but one look at his eyes and the large sword strapped to his back and they were quick to step away.

"Fuck it, you ain't worth our time." The man who'd struck him spit at Barret's feet. "You got fifteen minutes to get your asses out of our town." He waved for the others to follow as he turned and stalked off.

Quiet, barely a whisper, Barret said, "I'm sorry," and Zack didn't know if he was speaking to the
Tifa spun around, her eyes wide and worried as they rested on her friend's profile. "What the hell was that, Barret?"

"How can they say such horrible things?" Aerith demanded, coming up alongside. She rubbed her hand over Barret's back, her green eyes glittering. She kicked a rock. "Jerks."

"Don't fret none," Barret told them, his voice rougher than usual. "I deserve anything they wanna dish out."

"Barret!" Tifa's resistance to that idea was palpable.

For the first time since he'd met the man, Zack saw defeat on Barret's face. It was frightening, he realized, to witness that tough outer shell crack. Barret, despite his bluster and attitude, was motivational and inspiring in his determination. The man staring blankly down at the gravel was not the Barret that Zack had come to know. "Care to explain," Zack invited.

"My hometown used to be around here." Distant, Barret's eyes lifted from the ground, surveyed the dry hills and rubble. "Used to be..."

"What do you mean 'used to be'?" Red questioned when Barret stalled. "What happened?"

"It got buried...just under four years, and it's all gone... and it's my fault. All of it...my fault."

"Barret, what are you talking about?"

With a sigh, Barret ran his hand down his face, started pacing. "Corel was a coal mining town. Wasn't nothing special, really. Kind of a dusty dirt hill in the eyes of some, but it was calm and it was home. A real small town, but with potential, y'know...or that's what Shin-Ra said. Back when they came, it was the first time I'd ever heard the words Mako Reactor..."

With a heavy feeling in the pit of his stomach, Zack remained silent and listened as Barret spoke of Scarlet and Development Teams and all of Shin-Ra's bright, shiny promises.

"I thought it was the answer. I thought...I thought it would make life better, so I promoted the idea of developing with Shin-Ra. I pushed for it until the whole town was in on it. Well...almost the whole town." Another sigh and Barret shook his head. "Dyne always was a stubborn one." There was affection, remorse, and something akin to pain in his voice.

"Dyne?" Tifa asked.

"My best friend. He was against the idea of development. He wanted to preserve the traditions of our fathers and grandfathers, but...my wife, Myrna, was sick and...all I wanted was her to be well. I figured if we had the money...if we had the means..." He took a shaky breath. "Anyway, Shin-Ra promised us all that we would have everything we needed once the reactor was built."

The heavy feeling solidified to lead. "What happened?" Zack asked.

"They built the reactor. It went up, life went on. But then Dyne and I had to go out of town for a few days. While we were gone, there was an explosion at the reactor." Barret stopped walking back and forth, stood looking out at something only he could see. "Shin-Ra blamed rebel factions, blamed the town for being unable to stop it. As a result, Shin-Ra troopers burnt our homes to the ground." His hand clenched, face darkened. "I never should have gone along with building that damn reactor. The whole town. All my relatives...all our families...everyone. "

Instinctively, Zack reached out, took Tifa's hand. The bone-pale color of her face and stricken expression told him that she'd not known this piece of Barret's past, and the news struck a little too close to home. He could feel the fine tremors running through her body, but her voice was steady and her gaze didn't waiver when she spoke. "Blaming yourself won't change it, Barret. We were all fooled by the lies Shin-Ra spewed back then. There was no way you could have known."

His gaze flickered her way, but didn't stay. "Maybe, maybe not. But I can't forgive Shin-Ra, and more, I can't forgive myself, Teef. They took advantage of my town. Of me. And I lost my wife...my Myrna," he choked, coughed to cover it. "That's why...that's why I get so mad. So angry. We have to stop them, we have to make a difference."

Well, that certainly explained a lot as far as Zack was concerned. He had a sudden empathy for the man beside him and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "We will," he promised.

"Uh, guys...I... think we need to go. Now," Yuffie pointed a finger.

The men that had approached Barret earlier were returning, this time with make-shift weapons in their hands. Although Zack knew they were no real threat, after Barret's story, he felt that these people had suffered enough. "Yeah," he said, "let's go."

"Where?" Aerith asked, gesturing to the wide expanse of sand and garbage. "There's not a lot of options, Zack."

"There is a Ropeway," Red lifted his muzzle in the direction of a small shack and an ancient looking riding car.

"So there is," Zack nodded. The old cable car looked solid enough, despite it's rusting shell, he considered. The cables were a little more slack than he'd like to have seen, but there wasn't much to be done for that. "Looks like we take that." He turned toward the growing throng of people coming toward them. "We're leaving, okay? We don't want any trouble." To his group, "Time to go."

"Any idea where this thing goes exactly?" Tifa asked him after he paid the vendor. She eyed the unstable looking cables over their heads warily.

"None, but it's gotta be better than here," Zack pointed out, helping her inside the metal car.

She glanced at the men wielding pipes and sticks, then at Barret who was silent and sullen in the corner. "True enough."

"All aboard!" The ticket vendor called, then before they could all be seated, he jerked the lever and they were off with a whir of propellers and a series of snapping creaks.

"I can't look." Yuffie clapped her hands over her eyes, tucked her head.

"Oh, wow," Aerith gasped as they angled up in a steep climb.

Beside him, Tifa leaned over, peered out the dirty window. "How high does this go?" she wondered aloud.

"Too high," Yuffie squeaked before he could reply. "I don't feel so good," she added with a groan.

"Do not puke," Zack warned.

Yuffie made a gurgle and nodded. "That's the plan."
"At least not until we stop," he added, feeling bad for her. She really did look rather green.

Red pawed the glass, head tilted. "What is that sound?"


"The what?" Tifa peered beside him, her eyes widening as the mammoth amusement park came into view between the clouds. Light shone and strobed in happy rhythm to the blaring music.


"So...SOLDIER Sephiroth took a detour to a kiddy park?" Barret scoffed.

That was about as likely as Zack laying a Chocobo egg, but it wasn't like the group had a heck of a lot of options at the moment, and being as such, Zack didn't see the harm in scoping the place out. Everyone from everywhere went to the Saucer. Someone had to have heard or seen a man in black leather carrying a ten foot sword. "Probably not," he confirmed. "But it's worth checking out."

"The beach, and now the fucking whoopdee-do park. You ever gonna pull your head out of your ass and do anything? Or are you just dicking us around intentionally? Making neat little circles for Shinra to find."

"Barret!" Tifa snapped her head around.

"It's fine," Zack soothed with a shake of his head. He met her eyes, gave her a soft smile. The big man was hurting and Zack was an easy target. No matter. He had thick skin, and better him than the others.

The car lurched and hummed as the propellers stopped, their steady thrum slowing as they approached the dock. "Are we going to stay for a bit?" Aerith wanted to know.

"We're gonna check things out, yeah." Zack took her hand, helped her to her feet. Then Yuffie, who did an admirable job of waiting until she was outside of the car before losing her lunch.

Tifa and Red hopped off on their own and Barret was the last to leave the swaying cable car.

"This place is amazing!" Aerith clapped happily. She nudged Barret. "Come on, let's have some fun!"

"We ain't here for fun. We're supposed to be finding that Sephiroth jackass."

"Aw, come on, Barret," she cajoled. "A little fun won't hurt."

"I ain't in the mood." He turned away, scowl etched on dark skin and Zack winced at the sharp tone.

"That's too bad." Aerith sighed dramatically and when Barret didn't respond she shrugged. "Fine. Have it your way. I'm going to enjoy myself."

Aerith, Shiva love her, wasn't exactly the most tactful of people, Zack knew. He recalled her talking about flowers and sunlight while he'd sobbed his heart out after the death of Angeal.

A life of relative isolation would do that, though, he mused, and he'd long ago forgiven her lack of social skills in favor of her generous heart. She meant well, always, and that more than made up for any clumsy wording or misspeak.
Tifa, however, wasn't as inclined to overlook it, and pulled Aerith aside. "What are you doing?" she asked between clenched teeth.

"I think if we just act normally, then maybe he'll snap out of it," Aerith whispered back.

Tifa rolled her eyes. "You don't just snap out of that kind of thing, Aerith."

"Well, what should we do? Let him wallow in it?"

Tifa's brow furrowed, the question giving her pause. "Well, no."

"All right, then. Let's go have some fun." Out came the sunbeam smile.

That smile was damn hard to resist, Zack thought, almost laughing when he saw Tifa's face soften and knew that Aerith had caved her too.

"We're going to go play," Aerith announced.

"Fine! Go fucking play!" Barret snarled, waving his arms. "Have a grand ole fucking time, but don't forget, we're after Sephiroth!" With that, he stormed away from them and towards one of the many tunnels that lead to the Gold Saucer attractions.

"Wow, he's pissed," Yuffie commented, joining them.

"You are as astute as ever," Red commented in turn, earning a tongue poked out at him.

"Barret!" Tifa called after him. "Damn it, Barret, wait!"

"Ehn, let him go," Zack suggested. He trailed his fingers down her arm. "He'll work this out."

"I know," she replied quietly, but the hurt lingered. "I just worry."

"Do you think I made him too mad?" Aerith asked, her hands rolling over one another.

Tifa shook her head, her expression contemplative. "Barret is comfortable in anger. I think...maybe...it'll help." She nodded. "Yeah, he'll be okay." She glanced at Zack through the fall of her hair. "But he's right, we don't have time to play."

"Don't plan on it, but we should look around." He smiled, eased in closer. "And if we happen to play a game of Mog House or take a walk into a secluded alleyway..."

She pressed her hand to his chest, eased him right back. "Focus, Fair."

She was damn cute when she was resisting his charms. "Oh, I am focused, Lockhart," he assured her. "Very focused."

She shook her head but he caught the glint in her eye and the curve of her lip. "You're hopeless."

"I know."

"Which direction do we go first?" Red questioned. "And do we travel as a group or should we divide our efforts and gather as much information as possible?"

Zack rubbed the back of his neck. He didn't like the idea of splitting up. They were in enough danger and trouble as it was, and he felt better knowing he was nearby to help should any of them need it, but Red had a valid point—separately they could cover more ground.
Sensing his thoughts, as she was often doing, Tifa moved to him, touched him and immediately soothed some of the worry from him. "Splitting up isn't the best idea in the world. I know it makes the most sense as far as scoping out the park goes," she continued when Red looked about to comment, "but I think dividing up will only lead to trouble...well, more trouble."

"All right, so together it is," Zack gave a nod.

And it was together that they wandered the amusement park. They talked to a few hundred people, by Zack's best guess, and made only minimal progress, but, the fact that they had made any was good in his book.

Occasionally, he would notice Tifa's eyes searching the throngs of people, worry evident in the way her teeth worked her bottom lip. Barret, he thought, you asshole. In those instances, he made sure to get a little too close, maybe say something a little too outrageous, and draw her back.

It was a blatant ploy—and not even a very good one—but Tifa recognized the effort, and Zack was rewarded when she tugged his arm, pulled his face to hers. "Thanks." And she kissed him.

"Anytime," he murmured, thumb tracing her lower lip. Then, back to the task at hand, they resumed their searching and questioning.

Yuffie and Aerith, as it turned out, were the more successful of the group. Both with open, eager personalities, they drew forth trust and information. Between the two of them they learned that no man in black leather had been spotted, but several people in black cloaks had mysteriously come and gone throughout the park.

Zack recalled seeing a couple himself, once he thought about it.

"I think that the people in cloaks are connected to this," Aerith commented when they stopped to rest and eat.

Zack had the same suspicion, but he was curious as to how Aerith arrived at that conclusion.

"Well, aside from the timing," she explained, chewing on a hotdog. "There's the fact that they are so elusive."

"Like they don't want to be caught or see," Yuffie added. "Like Ninjas. Only not as cool."

"I think I've seen these cloaked people before...In fact, I think we all have. In the slums," Tifa reminded them.

"Never been to the slums," Yuffie chimed.

"Nor I." Red corrected.

"Okay, well at least we three may have seen them," Zack gestured to himself and Aerith and Tifa. Aerith placed her hotdog on a napkin, leaned forward. "They were sick, right?"

"I think so." Tifa nodded.

"Sick how?" Red wanted to know.

"They were just...off," Aerith searched for the right word. "Like they were lost."

"Yes," Tifa agreed. "Exactly." But with all the grime and filth and despair already in the slums, the
cloaked figures were overlooked. "Shit," she muttered, feeling like an idiot.

Red cocked his head. "So, do we now broaden the scope of our search and questions to include these individuals?"

"Probably a good idea."

"I don't wanna catch any ewwy sickness," Yuffie protested.

Zack finished his drink. "I doubt what they have is contagious."

"Yeah? Prove it."

"Fine, then you don't have to talk to any should we find one," Tifa cut in.

Hands folded on the table, Aerith sighed. "We've already been through most of the park with no luck."

That was true, and Zack had been surprised to find several of the event squares closed for 'renovations' and it sent tingles of awareness through him now. Something was up. He had no idea what, but there was something happening at the Saucer and he'd wager his lucky undies that it had something to do with the cloaked figures and perhaps even Sephiroth.

"Hey, maybe fortune kitty can tell us where they are. I saw it dishing out fortunes when I went to the bathroom."

"Fascinating," Red replied.

"You shush. Hey! Moogle-cat-thingy-fortune-reader, c'mere!" Yuffie stood up, waved her arms over her head.

Zack shifted closer to Tifa's ear. "Subtlety just isn't her thing, is it?"

"She's a unique ninja, that's for sure." Her lips arched.

Zack chuckled, but as the giant moogle waddled toward them, he felt amusement leave.

"Hey, hey, you!" From atop the moogle's rounded head a black robotic cat, wearing a crown and carrying a megaphone spoke to Yuffie. "Wanna hear your future? Lemme tell you your fortune and I'll tell you of a bright future, a happy future! But don't blame me if it's a bad prediction! I'm a fortune telling machine and my name is-"

Zack braced his elbow on the table, smiled a slow, dangerous smile and leaned into the light. "You can cut the act, furball."

The cat whirled atop the moogle, eyes wide and megaphone dropping.

"Been a long time." Zack reached out, plucked the little robot from its perch, peered into it's mechanical eyes. "Reeve."

In his hands, the robotic feline squirmed, then stilled. "Crap."
There was a moment of silence around the table as Zack's teammates absorbed his statement, and then Tifa blinked, her eyes moving from the sullen and silent robot in his hands to his face. "Reeve Tuesti? The Head of Urban Development?" She knew the Shin-Ra roster almost as well as he did.

"One and the same. I did a number of missions for Reeve and his division when I was in SOLDIER. Cait Sith here is a reconnaissance robot, used to gather information, infiltrate and make battle and scenario predictions."

"What's it doing here?" Tifa wanted to know. She leaned across the table to peer into Cait's face.

"Any closer, lass, and I'm liable to kiss ye."

She gave Zack a sharp look. "This is a robot?"

"It is."

" Mostly," Cait agreed with a flash of small white incisors. "But all male."

Zack inclined his head towards the overly large Moogle still lumbering nearby. "Get rid of it," he ordered. Although unassuming in appearance, those Moogles could pummel their way through concrete and had a hell of a lot of force behind them when they charged.

Wide-eyes blinked up at him. "You'd have me defenseless?"

"You bet your ass. Get rid of it, Reeve, or I break your toy." He tightened his grip, gave a small shake.

"Fine." Cait grumbled. He placed the golden megaphone in his hands in front of his face. "Go take a nap!"

The sharp peal made Zack flinch, and he gave another shake as retribution. He waited until the Moogle waddled away before addressing Reeve/Cait again. He skipped formalities and trivial questions and cut straight to what he needed to know "How long before we can expect Rufus to drop on our heads?"

"The new President is otherwise occupied."

"And the Turks?"

Cait shifted in Zack's grip. "What do you want me to say? That your whereabouts are completely unknown?" He sighed, and there was something distinctly Reeve-like in the sound. "Look, Zack, this is Shin-Ra you're up against. Given the recent chaos you've been fortunate, but the fact is, you and your AVALANCHE friends aren't as discreet as you'd like to believe."

Zack had known as much. He had avoided saying anything to the others because tension and stress was high enough. Shin-Ra was at times inefficient, but rarely inept. When they wanted something done—it got done. Still, Zack didn't feel the need to worry the others by giving Reeve's words weight, so he avoided them and asked instead, "Is that why you're here?"
"I'm here for the same reasons as you I suspect."

"Sephiroth." Was everyone and their brother out looking?

Cait nodded.

"Why not just use your fortune telling abilities, predict the future, and tell us where he is?" Yuffie chimed eagerly.

Both Zack and Cait swung their heads toward her.

It was Aerith that replied, though, faint amusement in her tone. She placed her hand on Yuffie's shoulder, eased the younger girl back. "I don't think he really can predict the future."

"Och, that's insulting, lass. I can find missing objects, people, tell ye what date ye'll be married. All kinds of useful things!"

"Why does it do that?" Tifa wanted to know. "Switch voices like that?"

Truth be told, Zack had no idea why the little robot kept alternating from a subdued calm voice to a thickly accented and slightly high-pitched voice. It was an oddity that he'd never questioned before, but now, he also found himself waiting for the answer.

"Well, if ye wanna know, I may be a robot, but I'm also me," Cait told Tifa. "Reeve sparked me to life, but I'm my own personality. There could be a hundred Cait Siths, but there's still only one like me! Reeve runs the show when he needs to, but I'm not Reeve...well, not entirely."

Tifa glanced up at Zack, one eyebrow lifted. "I'm confused."

"Ditto." He sighed and ruffled his hair. The confusion would have to wait in favor of more pressing questions, though. Such as: *What to do now?* He couldn't exactly let Cait go. He would just deliver their location to Shin-Ra...then again, he was up-linked with Reeve, so chances were reinforcements were already on their way...damn it.

As if reading his mind, Reeve/Cait shook his head. "I haven't let them know."

"Like we can believe you," Zack said, surveying the crowd for signs of suit or rifle.

"You can. I have nothing to gain by turning you in. You are the best chance I have of locating Sephiroth. Let me join you and I will help you find him."

"Uh-huh. You want me to lead Shin-Ra to Sephiroth. No fucking way."

"The alternative is for me to follow you...or tell Shin-Ra where you are. Look, Zack, we're after the same thing here. Let me help you. Through me, you have access to any information Shin-Ra gets."

"Yeah, and they have access to us. No thanks."

"You're a fool if you don't think they don't have access to you now. Look around, Zack. There are video cameras everywhere and a hundred Shin-Ra employees milling about the park. You think a man with a huge sword and Mako eyes goes unnoticed? Or another with a gun graphed to him? Or a
creature such as that," Cait pointed at Red. "The only reason you aren't held or dead is because they are preoccupied with finding Sephiroth first."

Zack flinched at the truth of Reeve's assessment.

"In the end, it won't really matter what you say, because I'm coming with you one way or another. It'll just be easier if you agree to it."

"Or, I could break this doll and run. We've escaped before," Zack pointed out, sucessfully silencing Reeve for a moment.

"I'd really rather ye not kill me," Cait pleaded, folding his paws over Zack's hands, eyes wide.

Beside them, both Aerith and Yuffie made soft, sympathetic sounds in their throats.

"It's a machine," Zack pointed out, each word a careful enunciation. "You are a robot."

"I'm me."

Frustrated, Zack scowled at the cat. "I am not debating this with you."

"Zack." Tifa placed her hand on his shoulder, squeezed gently and he was once more soothed by her familiar, steady calm. "We don't have a lot of options. Bring him with us. We'll figure out what to do with him on the way."

"Beautiful, smart and..." feline eyes strayed, "generous. A bonny one indeed." Cait winked.

Leaning close to a pointy ear, Zack whispered, "That'd better be the damn robot, Reeve." And in his hands, Cait stilled.

"So are we letting him come with—?"

The sharp sound of an intercom blare interrupted Yuffie and jerked all of their attention up to where the PA System shrieked for a park-wide announcement. "Security detail to section 27. Security to section 27. Attention Gold Saucer gamers, the Battle Square will be closed for maintenance effective immediately. The Battle Square will be closed for maintenance effective immediately. Please enjoy the remaining event squares. Thank you."

"I find that an oddly random conjunction for an announcement." Red commented, rising from the ground.

"Ditto. Let's go." Zack pushed away from the table. Cait hopped onto his back. "What the hell are you doing?"

Adjusting the little crown on his head, the cat-doll shrugged. "You can't expect me to walk. My legs are puny."

"For the love of—get your damn moogle. And so help me, Reeve, if you try anything—"

"Consider me warned."
The Battle Square was probably Zack's second favorite event square. He'd visited several times in his up and coming days as a grunt, using the experience to hone his skills against monsters he'd yet to face on exploratory missions and grunt details.

It had always been packed with spectators and fighters, filled to capacity and always with a level of excitement and activity that was addictive, but when they slipped through the chute door, the area was empty—eerily so—and quiet.

Immediately, Zack's hand went to the hilt over his head and he saw Tifa tighten the straps of her gloves. This was becoming an all too familiar scene for them, and he was instantly expecting blood and death.

He didn't have to wait long.

Across the registration area, there was a stairwell, and staggering down it, a Gold Saucer Security guard stumbled. Holding his stomach, blood seeping between his fingers, the man gasped and pitched forward, taking the last dozen steps in a nose dive. He landed with a sickening crunch and a gurgle of fluid.

Aerith's hand covered her mouth. "This is bad."

Zack glanced behind him, saw her fishing in her pocket for the green materia she kept there.

"Stay back," he told her with a shake of his head. He crouched beside the fallen guard, checked for a pulse out of training, but knew it was for nothing. Clouded, vacant eyes stared sightlessly up at him from behind a shag of dirty blond hair and for a moment Zack was back in the desert and his breathing seized in his chest.

"Do you think it was Sephiroth?" Cait asked from atop his Moogle perch, unwittingly pulling Zack out of quicksand memories before they could take hold.

Zack gave the dead employee a quick once-over, and knew that whoever had killed him was not Sephiroth. Not unless the General had started carrying a gun. There was a door at the top of the staircase that led to the Battle Arena lobby, where registered fighters waited or mingled before and after their rounds. He stood, wiped his hands on his pants. "Everyone, be ready," he told them. "Aerith, stay behind me." He glanced at Tifa who nodded once.

Ready.

Through the door at the top, they found more carnage. Wounded bodies littered the floor, limbs at odd angles with blood smeared in slick splashes against the stone. Immediately, the group split up, triangulating the room, but all within eye-shot and immediate assistance of each other.

It was becoming second nature for them, Zack noted absently. To read one another, to work together. He'd seen teams of men train for years and never achieved this level of silent communication.

"What...how...could anyone do this?" Horror written on her face, Aerith stepped cautiously over a pool of blood.
It always hurt Zack when Aerith hurt, and seeing the stricken expression on her face pierced deep. He moved to her, placed one arm around her. "You okay?"

"Yes. No. I...I just..." She turned her face into his shoulder, shuddered.

"I can have Red take you back out—"

"No." She shook her head against him. "I'm part of this team. I'm staying."

"Aerith—"

"Hey! I think this one's still alive!" Yuffie called out, waving her arm to get their attention. She was knelt beside an injured competitor, her hands pressed to a bleeding wound on his chest. "My friends will help you," she told him, voice shaking. "Just hang on, okay?"

A kid. That was the first thing Zack thought when they joined her. The fighter bleeding at his feet was no more than fourteen years old, barely old enough to enroll in Shin-Ra military, but old enough to compete at the Gold Saucer.

"Shit," he hissed, dropping to his knees.

"Here," Aerith was already beside him, her hands moving to take Yuffie's place.

"A...ma...man..." His teeth chattered as blood dribbled past his pale lips.

"Shh, it's okay, don't talk." Aerith instructed. "Yuffie, hold here. Press; hard!" Aerith fished the materia from her pocket.

"Gun...gun...for his..ar-arm..."

Aerith's green eyes widened, moved to Zack.

"Shit," was all he said.

"Barret wouldn't do this?" Aerith whispered. "Would he?"

"He wouldn't." Behind them, Tifa's voice was sudden and hard. "I know what you're thinking and it's not possible."

Turning, Zack's face softened. "Tifa..."

"No!" She took a step back, her eyes shimmering and glinting beneath the overhead lights—determined in the way Barret had taught her to be. "He wouldn't." She was steadfast.

Zack, as much as he was reluctant to believe it, couldn't rule it out. He'd witnessed—first hand—some of the greatest warriors and men he'd ever known snap and go insane. Slow, he took a step towards her, hand outstretched. "Come here."

"No." She took a shaky breath. "I can see it on your face...you think...you think it could be Barret."

"Look, I don't want to, but—"
"There are no buts!" She swiped an arm out angrily. "He wouldn't, so shut up. Just...shut up!"

"Okay. Okay." Zack nodded, kept his voice low, soothing. She was shaking, he could see the fine tremors running over her, and his heart broke. Let me be wrong, he silently prayed. He wasn't sure Tifa could take that kind of blow. He got to his feet, gave Aerith her space so she could heal the boy and tried again to reach for Tifa. "We'll find him."

"Zack!" Cait's high-pitched yowl was followed by a snarl by Red as the doors around the circular room slammed open which had Zack swinging the Buster Sword free and turning to confront whoever was coming their way.

Stepping through the doors with weapons drawn and faces masked in fury, Gold Saucer guards as well as some personal security, quickly surrounded them. Zack recognized one of the men as the Gold Saucer Manager, Dio. A flamboyant man with a deep tan, long brown hair, and the inability to ever wear a shirt. He reminded Zack of a gold chained Mukki, but that image was disturbing, so he shook it free.

"Shit," he muttered, taking stock of how things must appear to them.

"This is gonna be ugly," Cait whispered.

"No." Zack wouldn't let it. They had no quarrel with these people, nor did they need one. He lowered his sword. "I know what it looks like—" he started.

"It looks like this is as far as you go," Dio cut him off, snapping his fingers.

"Zack...?" Tifa raised her fists, cast him a questioning glance.

He shook his head. He wouldn't have innocent blood on their hands.

With a nod, she relaxed her stance.

"What? We're just giving up?" Yuffie tossed her hands in the air. "Come on!"


"We didn't do this!" Zack protested when his arms were yanked behind his back. "Listen to me, man, we didn't do this!"

Dio folded his arms over his chest, shook his head. "Forgive my skepticism, but the room's full of corpses and you're standing there with weapons drawn."

"We put them down—!"

"No, wait, let me finish," Aerith protested as she was pulled to her feet--away from the bleeding man.

"Hey!" Zack pulled against the men holding him. "Let her finish! She was helping him!"

He was ignored.

"You can pay for your crimes below! Get rid of them!"
From opposite ends of the room, two huge robots emerged and the floor beneath them trembled.

A few feet away a gaping hole appeared, dust and swirling heat coming up from the depths.

"Wait, wait!" Zack turned his head towards Dio as he was shoved forward.

Having a difficult time holding him, the guards motioned for the robot and Zack's breath was crushed from his body by hard metal and a death grip.

Well, fuck.

And then he was tumbling down a hard chute, followed by the others.

Spitting dust and dirt from his mouth Zack pushed himself up from the sand. "Everyone all right?"

"Oh, yeah, just great," Yuffie rolled to her side, puffed out a breath, blinking rapidly. "Never better."

Zack shifted, found Aerith being helped to her feet by Tifa and Red and Cait already up. "Tifa?" He dusted his pants, walked to her.

"Where are we?" she asked, staring at the endless sea of sand stretched to the horizon.

"The remnants of Corel. Now a prison," Cait provided. "This whole area is surrounded by quicksand. No way out—at least that's the rumor. There are, I find, always exceptions to such facts."

"Yeah, well, we'll figure out just what that exception is and get our asses out of here," Zack agreed. Tentative, his hand hovered over Tifa's shoulder. He wanted to offer comfort and reassurance, but he wasn't convinced that Barret hadn't gone off the deep end.

She turned then, and looked past him. "Barret!" she exclaimed.

Zack followed her as she ran.

Barret turned before they reached him and the look on his face was one that Zack had never seen him wear before. It was a mixture of resignation and pain, and it had both him and Tifa pulling up short as their big companion stepped away from them.

"Stay back, Teef. This is something I gotta deal with on my own."

"Barret?"

"I mean it!" he shouted. "Don't come near me!" He ran from them.

"Barret!" Tifa started forward, but Zack grabbed her arm. "Let go," she pleaded.

"Tifa." Gentle, Zack pointed her to where Barret had been standing, and the dead body left behind.

"No," she whispered, shaking her head. She turned her eyes up to his, hurt and confusion causing
the red to bleed through chocolate. "He wouldn't. I know him, Zack. Please, let me bring him back," she whispered.

Unable to bear that look from her, Zack pulled her into his arms, tucked her beneath his chin. "We'll get him back," he told her as he kissed her hair.

She clung to him, nodding. "I have to believe in him, Zack."

"I know." And he thought maybe he did understand. Everything in Tifa's life had ended up in tragedy and death, but then she'd found Barret and a new family, and that too was destroyed recently, and all that remained...all she had left of that...was Barret.

"I need you to believe in me," she murmured. "I know him. Even if you don't trust him...Trust me, Zack."

Without a doubt or fail, he thought, dismissing his previous assessment. If Tifa said Barret wasn't responsible, then he'd take it as fact.

"What do we do now?" Red asked, approaching them with his snout up--scenting the dry air.

Keeping one arm curved around Tifa, Zack addressed the rest of them. "We ask around, find out who has seen what and find the way out of this place." He looked down at Tifa. "And we find Barret and kick some sense into him."

Aerith took Tifa's hand, shared a gentle smile. "That's a good plan."

"I think I saw your scary looking friend near that building," Cait pointed toward the burned husk of a house.

They made their way to the shack that Cait had pointed out with Zack leading the way. He stayed close to Tifa, knowing how her close proximity eased him, and hoped that his did the same for her.

The door was hanging half on, the hinges charred and squeaking when he pushed it open. The interior of the house appeared to be empty, and he debated on calling out for Barret.

He didn't need to, as it turned out, because behind them, angry scowl back in place, Barret stormed inside. "I thought I told you to stay away!" he bellowed.

"Whoa, l-l-look, they just want to talk!" Cait said, covering his face with his hands when Barret lifted his gun-arm.

Barret opened fire, the bullets sailing across the small shack and tearing through fabric. Spinning, Zack pulled Tifa into his chest, covered her head with his hands, braced to feel bullet pierce flesh once again, but after a moment he realized that no injury was coming. Behind the couch a man coughed, crawled and fell.

"What the...?" Zack looked to Barret for explanation.

"I told you, I didn't want you involved."

Tifa pulled herself out of Zack's arms and stalked across the room, her palm slamming hard into Barret's chest hard enough to stagger him. "Yeah, well, I already am pretty damn involved, you
"asshole!" She pushed him again and Barret looked chagrined.

"Teef..."

"Don't *Teef* me," she scowled--hurt. "What the hell is going on?"

"The people in the arena claim a man with a gun-arm committed the murders," Red informed Barret, head inclined in an inquisitive manner. "Is this true?"

"Yes," Barret nodded. "But it ain't me," he quickly added.

"If not you, then who?" Cait questioned.

Barret blinked at the cat, then at Zack. "Who the fuck is this?"

"Long story, we'll fill you in later." Zack waved him on. "So who was it? Do you know?"

"I have an idea." There was a pause and Barret sighed, weary and heavy. "Hope I'm wrong." He shook himself, straightened. "Got this," he moved his gun-arm, "when Shin-ra attacked the village. They shit me and Dyne down from a cliff. Dyne ended up falling and I caught him, but the soldiers, well, they were pretty relentless and shot our arms nearly clean off. After, I couldn't use my hand, and could barely move the limb. Heard of a new procedure that could graft a gun to a limb. I figured why not...it wasn't like I could do anything with it anyway..."

"Go on," Tifa urged when he faltered.

"Got a gun so I could get revenge on Shin-Ra. Back then, the doc said he's done the procedure on another man—left arm. I didn't think nothing of it, then...but now..."

"You think it might be Dyne," Aerith said, eyes soft. "Because his injury was the same as yours."

"And if it is...then I gotta do this alone. I need to apologize, make it right, so when I die I can see Myrna again."

"You want me to say go ahead, do this on your own," Zack muttered with a shake of his head. "Well, I can't. You die and that's on my head." He nodded toward Tifa. "And it'll hurt someone I *actually* do care about, so no. We're here to help you."

"Ain't you a sentimental jackass. I ain't asking for your help."

"Never said you were. But you've got it. Like it or not," Zack added. "That's what friends do."

"Well, that's just lovely. Looks like you have a bunch of others fooled." At the door, a stranger stood, his expression haggard, eyes bloodshot. He was rough looking--a miner, clearly at some point--and had familiar coloring. Zack couldn't quite place it...but his eyes...

"Dyne!" Barret turned to face his former friend.

"Now there's a nostalgic voice. Never thought I'd lay eyes on you again." Dyne sniffed, wiped his hand under his nose, smearing dirt and blood.

Barret took another step forward, waved the others back. This was something he had to do on his
own, he'd said, and Zack respected him enough to fall back.

Tifa and the others did the same, but they all stayed alert, very aware of the tension between the two men.

Barret made a placating gesture with his good hand. "I had always hoped I'd see you again. There's so many things I need to say—"

"You can just shut your mouth," Dyne leveled his own gun-arm at Barret's chest. "You ain't got nothin' to say that I want to hear. I tried not to hate your rotten guts. I did, but the fact is, it's your fault! All of it!"

"I-I know." Barret lowered his head.

"I promised Eleanor that I wouldn't hunt you down, so I didn't, but here you are, coming to me...interfering with me, again!"

"Look, I know you can't forgive me—"

"No, I can't and I won't!" Dyne spat on the floor. "You may have them fooled," he moved his arm to encompass the group of them. "But I know what you are."

"I was your friend," Barret whispered.

"I have no friends!" Dyne shouted, eyes wild. "I have nothing! Shin-Ra took it all, tore it away!"

"But the people you killed..." Barret looked up, pleading. "Dyne, they had nothing to do with it."

"You think I care? You think that matters? I have nothing! All that I know is despair and emptiness! Fuck them and fuck you too! My Eleanor is gone...my Marlene..." Raising his arm Dyne started to shoot into the ceiling.

"Dyne, Dyne! Marlene is alive!" Barret shouted.

Bullets stopped, Dyne lowered his arm and his gaze. "Mar-Marlene is alive?"

That's where Zack knew those eyes from. His gut tightened.

"She is. She's in Midgar, I can take you to her. Let's go together," Barret encouraged, his voice softer than Zack had ever heard it. Pleading. "Please, Dyne."

"I thought...I thought at least she had that..." Dyne was talking mostly to himself. But then he turned those bloodshot eyes on Barret. "I thought at least my Eleanor wasn't alone, that at least her and Marlene were together, but now... Now I have to find Marlene. So I can send her to Eleanor."


Barret echoed the statement. "Don't be crazy, Dyne. Just be calm and we can go...we can go to her."

The laugh that Dyne let loose was enough to turn blood to ice in the room. It was off and edged with madness.
"Barret, you aren't getting through," Zack warned.

"You stay out of it!" Barret shouted. "No matter what, you stay out of it."

"Barret!" Tifa shouted. "I will not let anyone hurt Marlene!"

"Don't expect you to." He continued to face his former friend. "Lemme handle this."

"Handle this?" Dyne echoed, laughing. "Handle this? I am not to be handled, Barret!"

"Dyne, you can't do this to yourself. Come back to Midgar. See your little girl...we can help. We can."

"My little girl..." Something flickered in Dyne's eyes, his expression contorting. Like a flickering candle sanity and insanity flashed over his features. He looked down at his arms, then at Barret, then at the body on the floor. "My baby e-can't see me like this...what...what have I become?" He took a step back. "I am...not fit to touch her."

Something in his tone sent warning bells off in Zack's mind. It must have done the same to Barret because he was reaching for Dyne. "Wait, I'm no better. I have blood on my hands too, but you can still love her. I'll take you there...Dyne..."

"Tell her...nothing..." Dyne shook his head, a small, fleeting smile on his face. "Take care of her and don't let her know what a monster I was. Be her father Barret. That's how you can earn my forgiveness."

"Dyne, no!" Too late Barret realized his intent and before any of them could move, Dyne raised his arm, pressed his weapon to his temple and fired.

Aerith gasped and Yuffie shrieked.

Barret dropped to his knees, head bowed forward and shoulders shaking with rough, harsh sobs. "Damn you, Dyne! Damn you!"

Without a word, Tifa slipped across the room and dropped herself beside her friend, wrapping her arms around his head and holding him while the others could only watch in stunned silence.

After a few long minutes, Barret took a ragged breath and wiped his eyes. "I have to keep that promise. I have to take care of Marlene. And to do that, I need to make sure Shin-Ra can't suck the planet dry." He looked up at Zack. "If that means finding that Sephiroth guy, then we find him."

Zack nodded, throat tight. "We will."

"First, we need to find a way out of this place," Cait pointed out.

Barret pushed to his feet. "Leave that to me."

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