Mo Tesla lost everything. His family died in a car-crash two years ago. His boyfriend dumped him for some bimbo. His best friend ditched him because apparently artists aren't cool.

He doesn't really think about throwing himself at the psycho at the bank. But it turns out he should have, because now he's caught up in a world of magic, politics, war, and unethical experiments.

He's way too sober for this.
ON HIATUS
Before We Begin

The character I created for this story, Mo Tesla, is an alcoholic. However, I must note that I didn't design him this way because alcohol is cool or whatever. I myself do not drink—I'm alcohol intolerant, and with how common alcoholism is on both sides of my family, I wouldn't risk it even if I could metabolize the stuff.

There are lots of different kinds of alcoholics out there. I created Mo's brand of it by picking and choosing traits from my various family members. But the important thing is that even if I describe Mo as having times where he goes for long stretches of time without a drink, it's not easy on him. Breaking the habit is hard.

Alcoholism is not fun. It is not cool. It can ruin you. I have one uncle and two aunts who are perpetually between jobs and have pyramids of empty cans or closets of empty bottles. The uncle can't live on his own and one of the aunts has a bit of a rap sheet. The other aunt has two sons and no husband, and both of her sons are always in some trouble or other because she can't or won't take care of them properly.

I learned about high-functioning alcoholics after hearing a service worker describe my father as such. My dad drinks three beers minimum each night after getting off work, and at least four a day on weekends. She (my dad is trans, piss off) will usually look at what drinks restaurants serve first thing after getting the menu, and will have beer for dessert instead of cake or ice cream like the rest of us. However, she never drinks and drives. I have never seen her drunk to the point of slurred speech or puking or blacking out, and she has been this way as long as I can remember. I have seen her go up to two months without drinking anything. Whenever we desperately need money for bills, she will be the first one to strike beer from things we buy.

Mo Tesla was modeled after my dad, one of my uncles, and two of my cousins. Mo will try to keep his drinking to late afternoon and evenings. He will drink a minimum of three beers a day, but a maximum of emptying a bottle of something plus two mixed drinks, or the equivalent. He carries around a flask to take sips from if he feels he desperately needs it. He drinks because he feels it helps clear his head, lets him concentrate, and smooths out his emotions. He can go for extended periods of time without drinking, but will most likely binge afterwards.

I did not design Mo to promote unhealthy drinking. Mo is not okay. This is part of his character, and he himself is aware of this. Mo is aware he has a problem and would like to fix it, but isn't sure how to do so. I designed him like this because it has to do with how the story progresses and his relationships to others.

I cannot tell you the signs of an alcoholic or what to do, but I can tell you the recommended limits for a man to drink are three in a day or fourteen a week, and two a day or twelve a week for women. Regularly going over is bad. Drinking so much you puke or black out is bad. I can't control you, but I'm not endorsing alcoholism.

Thanks for reading my little PSA. Please enjoy the story.
Chapter 1

Mo sighed, turning to look at the clock hung up over the doors.

Just turned noon. He got here before the lunch rush even technically started and already there were fifteen people in line ahead of him. Jeez.

Adjusting how his bag hung from his shoulders, he took to examining his hands. Trying not to think about... everything.

Losing his parents and older brother was old news. But getting dumped on the anniversary of their death stung. And Lucius apparently didn't think he was cool enough to hang around.

It had been two years ago now that the remainder of Mo's family had been caught in a thirteen-car pile-up. They were the lucky ones. They died immediately, instead of gradually getting crushed or burnt. They'd been on their way for a surprise visit, apparently. That was what the cops and coroner and everyone else told him, but chances were they had been aiming to drag him kicking and screaming into rehab.

Vicky... well, Mo had gone to his boyfriend's house on the anniversary, because... even if they weren't the greatest and never listened, they had still been his family. Even if they hadn't listened, at least they weren't neglectful or abusive. And Mo had gone to Vicky's to see if he could spend the night, only to be turned away. Vicky had informed him with all the grace of an ice-skating refrigerator that he was only a tool to get the ladies, since everyone loved a gay man. His ex had then been pulled away by a busty blonde wearing too much makeup and a dress three sizes too small.

He really didn't want to think about Lucius.

The line shuffled forward a little bit. Mo picked at the paint under his nails and peeled a small strip of dried glue from his palm. He wondered if he could do something with a large tub of glue, a plastic skull, and a pound of glitter. Probably, but he'd have to figure out what to add in addition. Skulls and glitter were nothing new. Maybe he could take a blow-torch to the back of the skull and melt open a hole, then pour in the glue mixed with glitter so that it ran out. Title it 'Your Brain On Art.'

The line shuffled forward more.

... No, that title was done to death.

Three more people came into the bank. Five past noon.

Mo chewed on his lip, examining a blister from painting for far too long on the crook of his pointer-finger. Maybe he could call it... 'Medieval Medicine?' Yeah, that sounded unique enough. So. Plastic skull, tub of glue mixed with a pound of glitter, blow-torch, bottle of rum... there was his night planned out.

He tasted blood.

His hand went up to touch his lip. His thumb came away smeared red.

“Aw, shit...” he mumbled, sucking his lip into his mouth and wiping his hand on his pants. Hopefully he hadn't chewed on it so much that he'd bleed all afternoon.
The line shuffled forward a little more.

He should scratch the rum from his plan tonight. As lovely as it sounded, he really did need to stop. And he knew he could do it, he'd gone a month without a drop once before. Extending that into never again shouldn't be too hard.

So he'd finish all the alcohol in the house tonight and call that it.

There. A plan. He could even put a rubber band on his wrist for negative reinforcement.

Mo swiped his tongue across his lips. It seemed like the bleeding had stopped.

Twelve people in front of him. Ten past noon.

The window at the front of the bank shattered as something hurtled through it, earning screams of panic. The man that had torn through the window howled incomprehensibly, waving around a large gun and what looked like a polished green gemstone.

Mo might've been drunk often, but he was no idiot. The glass at the front of the bank was thick, most likely bulletproof. You'd have to be strong to just break through it. The guy pacing the floor yammering nonsense had just torn through it like a bull through tissue paper.

He examined the man carefully.

The guy was dressed in what equated to rags. He stank of rot and chemicals, bleeding sluggishly from an array of wounds. His skin was pale, unhealthily so, not like Mo's own fine china skin. His hair looked gray, tangled and snarled. Some kind of sludge seemed to drip from his shoulder. The gun was large, but looked almost antique. The green stone was fist-sized and caught the light in an almost eerie way.

As the man stopped, swaying back and forth and muttering, Mo risked a glance towards the teller desks. The silent alarm had been sounded, right? So the police would be here soon?

A kid started to cry.

The gun-holder instantly honed in on the noise, snarling and pointing his weapon.

He was far too sober, Mo decided long before he realized he was throwing himself at the loon. Far too sober to be putting up with this nonsense.

Mo might've been tall, but he was lanky and lean, with very little muscle. Despite having the clear weight advantage, the stranger with the gun was not expecting to be blindsided by a hundred-sixty-three pounds of alcoholic. Both of them went down, the psycho howling angrily. Mo tried to grab onto the guy to pin him, but the stuff on his shoulder was slippery, and Mo just collapsed and unintentionally head-butted the man. That earned a yelp of pain, which Mo took advantage of to swat the gun as far away as he could.

Before he could do anything else, the loon tossed him off. Everyone was screaming again. Mo grunted, his head and shoulders a mass of pain.

Oh.

The man was standing over him, panting like a rabid dog.
Mo could hear sirens coming closer as the man raised the polished gemstone up over his head. With a strangled scream, he threw it down full-force at Mo, who was just barely able to shield his face.

There was a bright light. Too bright. It hurt. The screams were all garbled or something now, he couldn't make them out. The sludge on his hands and front burned. He felt like he was being torn apart and squeezed through a tight tube all at once. Every squishy part of him objected violently.

He fell, sprawling on his back on a cold floor.

What? That wasn't right, he'd already been down on the floor. And the bank was carpeted with ugly maroon fuzz, not cold in the slightest.

His mouth was too wet.

There were voices.

Slow and clumsy, Mo staggered to his feet. He was... somewhere. Not the bank. There were people in white coats racing around. Unsteady and vision warping, Mo almost pitched over, reaching out to steady himself.

One of the white coats was coming closer, saying something. He couldn't make it out, the words sounded distant and muffled, like they were underwater.

He turned away and puked.
Chapter 2

It took Mo a while to properly wake up.

He felt hungover. He hadn't been hungover for... it must've been years, by this point. It felt awful. His skull and throat were stuffed with cotton, his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, his eyes were trying to pop out of his skull, and his stomach churned. He wanted water, painkillers, and something to take the edge off, not necessarily in that order. It was horrible.

Because he felt so awful, it took Mo longer than it probably should have to realize that he wasn't in his own bed or room. The ceiling was a strange one, anyway. It lacked the familiar cracks and missing paint-chips that made pictures and constellations and mazes. It was bland, plain and sterile. Then there was the soft hum and regular beeping.

Trying to sit up didn't work. He could lift his head up, but could only really move his shoulders and hips. His wrists and ankles were strapped to the bed. More of a cot, really. A small handful of assorted wires were hooked up to his chest and left arm. An IV drip was taped down on his wrist. Turning his head revealed several machines he didn't know the name or function of. One looked like a heart-monitor. The others... a mystery.

A hospital, then.

... Why?

Confused, Mo dropped his head down and closed his eyes, trying to think back. What was the last thing he remembered?

... The bank. The gun-waving loon. Right.

Had the guy been on drugs or something? PCP had some pretty crazy effects on people, right? A spike in strength, bizarre aggression, hallucinations? If it had been potent enough, could just coming into contact with contaminated blood dose someone? If Mo had gotten high or whatever on some bastard's drug-filled blood, it made sense that he would be restrained.

... Hadn't there been something else?

He didn't know. He couldn't focus. His head hurt too much.

But by this point he was too aware to become unconscious again. It couldn't be called sleep if he felt this hungover. And with his body revolting, falling asleep or becoming unconscious... well, Mo felt he'd have better luck fighting his way out of the leather straps holding him down on the hospital cot.

His groan had no noise whatsoever, just a gross clicking in the back of his throat. It hurt. Maybe he should prioritize water over painkillers and taking the edge off.

A door opened. It was too loud, making him wince.

“You're awake, then.” a clipped voice said.

“H'lo.” Mo rasped, forcing his eyes open again. He couldn't quite make out the person standing over him. Just that they wore a crisp and clean suit.
“How do you feel?”
“H'ngover. 'S shitty.” he forced out, closing his eyes once more. It hurt too much to keep them open, best just keep them closed.
“I imagine. You displayed several symptoms of mako poisoning. It's honestly amazing you weren't vegetated.”

Just loud enough to drown the beeping out, quiet enough not to make his ears bleed. Mo decided that whoever this was, he at least liked their voice.

“So, do you have a name?”
... Well that was... odd.

“Don't... don't you've my records...? This's th' hospital, right...?” Mo replied, cracking one eye open. He could make out dark hair, dark eyes, and a blank expression before closing his eye again with a grimace.

“No. Your name.”
... Okay, maybe whatever had happened after had been bad. Maybe the drug was something experimental and dangerous. There were plenty of explanations for why he'd be at a facility that wouldn't have him on record like Jack-Hicks Memorial.

With how dry his mouth was, swallowing did nothing for him. He did it anyway, hoping it would spur his saliva glands into waking up.

“Mo. Mo Tesla.”

“Where are you from?”
“Originally... currently...?”

“Why not both?”
“Rykersville, Illinois... Rosenburg, New York.”

Talking was becoming easier. His mouth... wasn't dry, but he'd take mildly damp at this point.

“... I see. And you work for...?”

“Villers Accounting and Insurance... I'm a secretary, don't actually do any finances...”

There was a stretch of silence. Mo cracked his eyes open to make sure the man was still there. As he did, a cool hand pressed to his throat.

“Mr. Tesla. What do you have to gain from such blatant lies?”

His eyes opened all the way. “Lies? No... what...?”

“No such places exist, and I believe I would've heard of such a company.”

Mo stared up at the man looming over him.

After a moment, everything seemed to click into place. “... I'm still on whatever drug that was,
aren't I? I'm just dreaming right now, high on... whatever freak offshoot of PCP that was...”

Talking so much came back with a vengeance. Mo turned his head to the side, away from the suit standing over him, and coughed. His chest heaved as he did so, and he tasted copper.

Yuck.

“... PCP?”

“S'meone's sheltered...” Mo mumbled, unsure of why he was talking to a hallucination. “Drug. Bumps up strength, but you're crazy aggressive... and hallucinate. I think. Dunno. Prefer booze. Cheaper. Legal.”

The cool hand was withdrawn. Mo just closed his eyes.

“Mr. Tesla.”

“Mm.”

But nothing else was said. The door closed, and Mo was left alone with the beeping heart monitor. He'd wake up again in a bit, most likely. Have no hallucinations then. Be easier to deal with whatever then.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

You cannot tell me that Turks don't use manipulate materia for interrogations. The possibilities for applying something that allows you to manipulate other living things totally include forcing someone to spill their guts.

It took Mo less time to wake up properly this time. His memory of the last time was... a little fuzzy. But he could sort of remember talking to a guy in a suit. But... that... might have been a hallucination?

Ugh. His head still hurt. He didn't feel as horrible as he had earlier, but his head still hurt.

Groaning didn't hurt, at least.

“Oh, you're awake!”

He lifted his head. A nurse stood at the foot of the bed. Cot.

“H'lo.” he greeted blandly.

“How do you feel?” she asked with a cheerful smile.

“Head hurts. Not as bad as earlier, but hurts.” he replied, lying back as she came closer.

“Well, that's good! No one was sure you were going to make it earlier!”

That bad, huh? Whatever the loon at the bank had been on must've been really strong then.

“... Hey, did someone come in here earlier? A guy in a suit? Dark hair, dark eyes? Or did I dream him up?”

The nurse paused, looking confused. Then she brightened, saying, “Oh, yes. I wasn't on-duty at the time, Melinda was, but yeah, she mentioned that someone from General Affairs was here!”

... Oh. Okay.

Mo closed his eyes with a sigh.

“You're recovering so quickly. It's only been a day since your body rejected the stabilizer shots. It's funny, honestly you don't look like you meet the physical requirements for even the infantry.”

That made him open his eyes with a frown. “What?”

Before the nurse could continue talking, someone cleared their throat.

Oh. The suit was back.

The nurse scurried out, leaving him alone with the suit.
“... So it wasn't a drug-dream, huh?”

“Why are you under the impression that you were drugged, Mr. Tesla?”

“My memory's fuzzy. I feel like shit. The guy I fought with... was either on drugs or just bat-shit crazy.”

Another stretch of silence.  

“Why don't you tell me what happened.”

Okay. He could do that.

Closing his eyes and forcing himself to relax, Mo thought back.  

“I'd gone to the bank. Lunch rush was just starting, so the lobby was starting to fill up. And then... this guy came crashing through the window. That glass, the stuff banks use, it's thick. I think it's bulletproof. Whatever it is, it's hard to break. But this guy did, just ran through it. He... didn't look well. Was bleeding, covered in guck. Especially his shoulder. Wore rags. He... he was carrying some antique gun and a... I dunno, it looked like an emerald, or some other kind of gemstone. Fists-sized. Caught the light in a weird way. And he was... he just jabbered nonsense. Stank, too, like chemicals. But anyway, he... he was gonna shoot a kid. I wasn't thinking, I just... threw myself at him. He wasn't expecting it, so he went down pretty easily. I managed to throw the gun away, but he was... slippery. It was hard to hold on. He threw me off...”

He frowned.

This was where things got... fuzzy.

“Is that all?”

“No, no, it's just... it gets harder to remember. He... he was pissed. The stone or whatever it was, he threw it at me. It was like an explosion... I think. There was a bright light, and everything hurt. Next thing I remember is... waking up here, talking with you. Anything that happened between is... gone.” Mo answered with a sigh, opening his eyes again. “So what did happen?”

The suit regarded him emotionlessly. Mo wriggled a tiny bit to ease the ache he felt growing in his back, probably from holding still for so long, and gave a bland stare of his own.  

After a minute, the man finally responded, “You appeared in the labs of the Science Department without any warning. You proceeded to fight off four of the scientists before finally being subdued. Pieces of a shattered exit materia were found clinging to your clothes. You are currently under suspicion for working with AVALANCHE or some other terrorist cell.”

It took a moment for him to process that.

“Sorry, I didn't understand half the things you just said. What Science Department? Who the heck is AVALANCHE? What's... what's exit materia?” he said, shaking his head.

The suit came closer. “Where do you think you are, Mr. Tesla?”

He blinked. “Clearly not Jack-Hicks Memorial Hospital, so I was hoping you'd tell me.”

The man was standing by his head now.
Mo felt his eyes widen when the man pulled a yellow stone from his pocket. Like a smaller version of the one the man at the bank had. “What is that?” he asked, voice cracking a little from the tinge of fear.

“Manipulate materia.”

The stone glowed.

Mo gasped, back arching up and off the cot as he struggled to breathe. But he couldn't. It was like his brain was shutting down. It hurt. Oh, hell, it hurt. He wanted to die.

And just like that, the pain was gone. He was limp, gasping for breath, gulping down air.

“Tell me your name.” the man ordered.

You first, Mo wanted to spit.

“Mo Tesla.” he answered demurely.

“Your age and occupation.”

“Thirty-five years old. Secretary for one of the executives at Villers Accounting and Insurance. Part-time artist.”

No, shut up. He'd already said all this, why was he repeating it?!

“Are you part of AVALANCHE?” the suit asked.

“No. I've never heard of any organization by that name before.”

There was a pause. Mo wondered if he could bite his tongue off during it. He felt... trapped. Like there was a hand on the back of his neck that he was struggling against but it might as well have been Vicky sitting on top of him.

“What are your feelings and intentions for the Shinra company?”

... Who?

For once, his mouth and his brain lined up. “I don't know who they are, but if they stay out of my business, I will respectfully stay out of theirs.”

“Then why are you here?”

He didn't know, how was he supposed to know, last thing he remembered was the bank!

“I'm lost.” his mouth replied calmly.

He felt sick. There was a green tinge at the corners of his vision.

“What do you mean, lost?”

The stone wasn't glowing as brightly. Everything else seemed to be glowing instead. It was green.

He felt sick. He wanted to puke.

“Mr. Tesla.”

The light of the stone seemed to flare. His vision was washed green.
He screamed, arching his back and straining against the leather straps. One gave way.

He was gonna puke.
Chapter 4

He felt like he was floating.

Great, his mind griped, more drugs, most likely.

Mo's eyes opened easily this time around.

... Well where in the hell was this?

It was dark, but streamers of green drifted aimlessly about. A quiet murmuring tingled at the back of his skull.

As he looked around, trying to figure out where he was and what was going on, a soft hand touched his shoulder. Gasping, Mo whirled around—

Oh shit.

He didn't know who the woman before him was, tall, blonde and beautiful, but she was breathtaking. There was... an aura of power to her, impressive and imposing and terrifying.

Her hand moved to his face. He could hardly tell it was there, her touch was so soft.

Why did she look so apologetic?

She pushed—

Mo sat up with a gasp, clutching at his chest. Several screams sounded around him, assaulting his senses. He felt raw and overstimulated. He was cold and his head hurt and oh fuck he was gonna puke again.

His hands moved to the sides of his head, turning and leaning over. His body shuddered, his insides heaved, and his eyes streamed, but nothing came up. Not even bile. How long had it been since he'd eaten, then? And how many times had he thrown up since?

“Well, this is interesting.”

Vision blurry with tears from trying so hard to throw up, Mo turned his head to look at the speaker. A twisted grin and glinting glasses greeted him.

“A negative reaction to manipulate materia, followed by four hours of apparent death and a sudden revival. Tesla, was it?” the hunched man approaching him asked.

“Ugh... yeah... Mo Tesla...” he replied, confused. Apparent death? What? What did the man mean by—

He was naked. He was naked, on a table, surrounded by people in white coats.

Mo squeaked in shock, shoving his hands down and bringing his knees up to his chest.

“Oh, please, it's nothing any of us haven't seen before.” the hunched man waved dismissively.

“I dunno, drunk tattoos are always an experience...” Mo mumbled, blushing hard enough he could see the red on his nose. The tramp-stamp, for example. That had been done the first time he'd
gotten black-out drunk, ten years ago now. It wasn't even a classy tramp-stamp, bold black lettering and a bright red arrow. And the neon purple kiss-mark on the inside of his left thigh wasn't exactly the classiest thing either.

But the hunched man just scoffed, waving him off. “Someone fetch something for him to wear. It won't do to have him die again of something as mundane as the cold.”

“Why do you keep saying I died?!” Mo demanded, horribly perturbed by the idea.

“Because, Mr. Tesla, you were. For the past four hours, you have had no pulse, no heart-beat, and no brain activity. Your body temperature began to drop and your pupils did not react to light. You were dead as dead could be.”

“... That's insane.”

The man grinned even wider. “Say what you want, Mr. Tesla, but you're on that table because we were preparing to cut you open.”

Mo promptly jumped off the table, keeping one hand over his privates. One of the other white-coated people came closer, holding out a bundle of clothes. Mo gave a wan smile, taking the smooth, plain fabric. They were little more than hospital scrubs, but he'd take them over being completely naked.

“First things first, we'll need a blood sample. Measurements, medical history...” the hunched man was mumbling, scribbling on a clipboard as he came close.

“Wha... oh, well, sudden death, I suppose... Um, I'm... I didn't catch your name?” Mo stammered as he fumbled his way into the scrubs.

The man peered at Mo over his glasses. “That is unimportant to you. Hold out your arm.”

“I've puked a lot recently, shouldn't I drink something first?” Mo asked awkwardly as he tugged the shirt over his head.

“Afterwards. You'll be fed and watered after we've drawn your blood and gotten your measurements.”

“Not now, Professor. Mr. Tesla, if you would come with us.”

He knew that voice.

Turning around, Mo felt his eyes widen. “You!” he said accusingly, pointing at the suit. There were two others with the man this time, both redheads, though of different degrees. One looked more feminine, while the other was... more androgynous, but the half-buttoned shirt showed a masculine chest. The suits must've been some kind of standard-issue thing.

“Oh, what do you want?” the hunched man grumbled, glowering.

“Mr. Tesla is to come with us for questioning.” the first suit said flatly.

“I imagine you're going to kill him again, then?”

“That is not and was not our intent. Mr. Tesla, please.”

When he didn't move, eyes wide and perplexed, one of the redheads moved forward, past the white coats, to grab his arm. “This way, buddy.” redhead the masculine grinned. Mo allowed himself to
be tugged along like a dog, not entirely sure what was going on.

The suits led him through a few short hallways before stopping at an elevator. Redhead the masculine didn't let go of his arm, grip firm and unyielding, but not painful. He kept his head down as they entered the elevator, watching his feet.

He wasn't sure how long they'd been in the elevator— not very— when his stomach growled loudly.

Blushing furiously, Mo couldn't stop himself from saying, “Hey, shut up!”

Redhead the masculine snorted and guffawed. Redhead the feminine smiled. The original suit didn't seem to react at all.

There was a stretch of silence, making him want to squirm in discomfort.

Finally, he just caved in and asked, “Was I really dead?”

The redheads looked to the original suit.

“... Yes.”

Mo felt sick.
Chapter 5

It was suit central. Everyone on the floor but him seemed to be wearing one.

Mo kept his head down as they left the elevator. Redhead the masculine continued to guide him, pulling him along as they followed the original suit. Eventually, they arrived at a door, their little leader knocking. A gruff voice called to come in.

“Sir,” the original suit said as they entered, “Mr. Tesla.”

Gulping, Mo lifted his head.

They were in an office. Sparsely decorated, but nice all the same. An older-looking man with a scar on his face and brown hair sat at the desk. Not bad-looking, really.

Oh. Sharp eyes. Mo was ready to go back to the creep in the coat and offer up his blood now.

“I see. Thank you, Reno, Cissnei.”

Both redheads all but bowed out. The original suit beckoned him forward.

As Mo moved closer, fidgeting with his hands, the man at the desk stood.

“So you're Mr. Mo Tesla.”

He dropped his gaze again, murmuring, “Yes sir...”

“Tall one, aren't you?”

“Six-foot, last I checked...”

“Not a scrap of muscle on you, and yet you fought off four men at once, badly injuring one.”

His head shot up, eyes wide. “I... what? No...”

“And then you tear out of SOLDIER-grade restraints, shatter a materia, and put a hole through a wall.”

Mo opened and shut his mouth a few times before shaking his head. “I... I need a drink. I'm too sober for this. What is going on...?”

“Sit.” the man ordered, gesturing to a lone chair in front of his desk. Shakily, Mo obeyed. “Now,” the man continued, “If you’d watch this.”

A computer was turned towards him. As his attention turned to it, a black and white video started playing. It looked like security-camera footage. It showed what looked like... okay, he didn't know what it looked like, but there were tables with things on them and people in white coats moving around. A lab? Wasn't it actually a lot like the place he'd just been taken from?

On the screen, something happened, like a shockwave. Papers were blown away and glasses broke. A person appeared in the middle of the floor in a flash of light. There was panic among all the people on the screen. As the newcomer staggered to their feet, Mo recognized it as himself. Off-kilter and shaking his head, clearly disoriented. One of the white coats approached him slowly, hands out in a placating gesture. The on-screen Mo seemed to stare blankly before turning away
and puking. Mo himself winced, making one count on the answer to how much he'd thrown up since his last meal.

The white coat that had approached him reached out, touching his back.

The on-screen Mo spun back around, facing away from the camera as he grabbed for the white coat's neck, lifting them up off the ground. Mo covered his mouth with his hands, eyes wide in horror.

Four others ran forward, ramming into his back and grabbing at his arms. There was no sound, but Mo could see them yelling. His on-screen self dropped the first white coat, and they fled. For a moment, it looked like the four new ones were succeeding in subduing him.

But then he grabbed one and threw them. His fist crashed into another's nose, and he had turned enough that Mo could see his face, contorted by a snarl. The one with the bloodied nose stumbled back, only to have another thrown on top of them. Totally ignoring the one clinging to his back, the on-screen Mo advanced on the one he'd thrown. Mo cried out as his foot connected with their back. Their ribs. Their head.

The one on his back seemed to stab him with something. He collapsed.

The video ended.

Mo realized he was crying.

“... I... did that...? I don't remember... I... I wouldn't hurt someone like that...”

“Well, it's hard to tell on the footage like this, but your eyes were showing signs of mako-glow. Like a bad reaction to an injection of the stuff.” the man said plainly. “They aren't now, but apparently they did when you reacted to Tseng's manipulate materia.”

... Who...? Oh, the original suit was still in here. His name was Tseng?

Oh, no, the man had drawn out a tape-player.

“We had him record your conversation earlier. Probably won't remember this either.”

Mo wiped at his eyes, gulping nervously as the tape in the player started.

‘What is that?’

‘Manipulate materia.’

... No, he remembered this.

‘Tell me your name.’

‘Mo Tesla.’

‘Your age and occupation.’

Mo shook his head, saying, “I remember this.”

The man frowned, pausing the tape. “You weren't effected, then?”

He felt a small bubble of anger rise up in his chest. “No! I mean... I didn't want to say any of that! I
wanted to tell him to piss off because I'd already answered his questions, what was the point of repeating them?! But I couldn't, it was like my damn mouth wouldn't shut up, and I was being strangled from behind when I tried to resist! I wanted to bite my tongue off!"

“Was that the reason for your lashing out?”

Mo paused, blinking in confusion. “Lashing... out? I was tied down, how was I supposed to lash out?”

“So you don't remember everything, then.”

Mo blinked again.

The tape was played once more.

‘— and Insurance. Part-time artist.’

‘Are you part of AVALANCHE?’

‘No. I've never heard of any organization by that name before.’

Mo swallowed. He hated how plain and bland his voice was in the recording. There was no emotion, it was almost robotic. The idea that someone had done that to him was... scary.

‘What are your feelings and intentions for the Shinra company?’

‘I don't know who they are, but if they stay out of my business, I will respectfully stay out of theirs.’

‘Then why are you here?’

‘I'm lost.’

And that was where he'd blacked out, coming to on the slab as people prepared to cut him open.

But the tape didn't end.

‘What do you mean, lost?’

No answer. Just silence.

‘Mr. Tesla.’

There was a vicious, almost animal scream that made him jump in shock. Neither Tseng nor the gruff man reacted.

There was a loud snap, followed by what sounded like a curse. More snapping and a snarl. Static, like there was a scuffle. A noise like glass breaking.

‘Leave me alone! I didn't ask for this!’

... Was that... him? It had to be, it was his voice, but...

‘Your problems aren't mine, woman! Just let me go home and die peacefully!’

‘Mr. Tesla—’

‘Shut the fuck up, you had no right to mindfuck me like that!’
The yell was accompanied by a loud crunch, like something had just been put through a car-crusher. There was another animal scream, followed shortly by a thump. The scream tapered off into snarling, which quickly faded away into silence.

“... What...? I don't remember that... what woman...?” Mo mumbled, eyes wide and frightened.

“We were hoping you could tell us, Mr. Tesla. You appeared out of nowhere, have apparent surges of mako-fueled strength, had a negative reaction to manipulate materia, and died before reviving again.”

Mo couldn’t help but laugh weakly, putting his head in his hands. “You make it sound like one of my drunk escapades. I haven't been black-out drunk in so long, though, I don't get blacked out anymore...”

His stomach whined again, clenching painfully.

“Shut up, nobody cares about your problems.” he muttered into his hands.

“When was the last time you drank?”

“... How long have I been here?”

“Just shy of two days.”

“... Round up, call it three days, then.”

“I see. And the last time you ate?”

“Uh...” Mo lifted his head, propping his chin up on his knuckles as he thought. “Uh... I think the same. Yeah, about the same, I was at the Kitchen Sink waiting for Lucius. Only... he apparently had better things to do, so yeah, I ate then.”

The gruff man nodded over his head. Mo twisted to see Tseng approaching.

“Come on, Mr. Tesla.”

Oh dear...
Chapter 6

The original suit was Tseng. The gruff man was his superior, known as Veld. The floor of suits was the Investigative Bureau of General Affairs, commonly called the Turks. The Turks were part of a company called Shinra Electric.

Mo sighed as he pulled on the shirt. He was being loaned a set of actual clothes, in comparison to the hospital scrubs. A plain white button-up and some black slacks and shoes. They looked like parts of the Turk uniforms, honestly.

He was so confused.

Apparently it had been deduced that he wasn't from this world, like in some sort of sci-fi movie. Which was... stupid, really. He kept waiting for Lucius to jump out and yell that it was all some prank.

But Lucius didn't like hanging out with artists. Artists were lame.

Mo shook his head, biting his lip in effort to ground himself as he turned to the mirror in the small bathroom Tseng had taken him to. They were going to feed him after he was properly dressed, and then he would be assigned a detail and taught what he needed to know about the world. Then he was to see Professor Hojo for a—

He dropped the comb he'd been given in shock as he stared at himself in the mirror.

It was him. It was definitely him. The same china-pale skin, like a doll. The same just-past-shoulder-length dark brown hair that bordered black. But his eyes had changed. Not drastically, but enough that he could see. He'd lived with dark brown eyes almost his whole life, people teasing him about how they looked like black pits when his bangs hung in front of them. But now they were lighter. More obviously brown, with pale spokes and a purply ring.

It was wrong.

Ignoring the comb he'd dropped and how messy his hair was, Mo all but launched himself out of the bathroom.

“What is it?” Tseng asked, sounding mildly alarmed.

“I— It's— What happened to my eyes?! Why are they... They're wrong, my eyes don't look like that at all!” he stammered, lifting his hands to cover his face. “What's happening to me?! Why... who did this to me and why?! I don't understand!”

There was silence as he panted harshly, unable to calm down, rocking back and forth of his heels.

“When you first were brought to medical, you showed signs of full immersion in mako and mako poisoning as a result. One of the effects mako has on the body is to create a glow in the eyes, bright blue. If your eyes were a dark enough of a brown, then it's possible that you weren't exposed enough to achieve that. Instead, your eyes became lighter.”

“What the hell even is mako?” Mo asked miserably, taking his hands away from his face.

Tseng was standing in front of him, offering the comb up.
“That will be covered later. Finish cleaning up and we'll introduce you to your guard.”

Sighing, Mo took the comb and moved back to the mirror. He didn't spend too long on his hair, he never did. He just got the worst of the tangles out and made sure it laid flat. It was tempting to hang his bangs in front of his face so no one would see his eyes, but then he wouldn't be able to see. So he pushed his bangs behind his ears and nodded. He was as ready as he was going to be.

Tseng didn't really react, just started walking, so Mo hurried to follow after him.

He was led back to the... or another elevator. He hadn't really paid attention to directions. It could be the same or different for all he knew.

Redhead the masculine was waiting there, doing something on his phone. Mo noticed his bag hanging from the guy's shoulder, the black tote a little worse for wear but otherwise okay.

“This is Reno. He'll be your guard for the day,” Tseng said, “Stay near him and do as he says.”

The redhead grinned, putting his phone away and giving a little mock salute. “Yo, how's it going?”

Mo wasn't sure how to respond, so he shrugged. Tseng seemed satisfied, and left.

“Come on, let's go get something to eat. I'm starved, and boss said you haven't eaten in, like, three days!” Reno declared, turning to punch a button for the elevator. “Oh, yeah, this is yours, right?”

“Yeah... It is...” Mo smiled wanly, accepting his bag and slinging it onto his back. It felt like things had been rearranged, it didn't sit as comfortably on his back as usual. They'd probably gone through it, looking for weapons or something. He supposed he really couldn't fault them.

The elevator arrived and opened with a ding. Reno waved him inside with a grin, selecting a floor and swiping a card. Mo noted that there were seventy floors, according to the panel of buttons. They were headed to the... fortieth floor, it looked like.

“So the grub in the canteen ain't great, but it ain't toxic like everyone thinks. Honestly, I've had worse hospital food, yo.” Reno grinned, chatting like they were old friends who hadn't spoken for a while.

“Hospital food actually makes pretty good hangover food, in my experience.” Mo found himself replying. “Nothing in it makes you want to puke too badly, and it often helps replenish anything you already did throw up.”

Reno snickered, “Sounds like you've got experience, yo.”

“You know what HFA means?” Mo answered blandly.

“High-functioning alcoholic, right?”

He nodded.

Reno raised an eyebrow, looking him up and down. “Dude, what? You're a giant, sure, but I bet I weigh more than you!”

“Part of what makes it so easy. Low body mass makes it easy to get drunk relatively fast. Been at it for almost eleven years now. Haven't blacked out from drinking for... almost ten. Haven't been hungover since... a few years ago when I went dry for a month.”

“Don't most people die before reaching that point?”
Mo shrugged. “I'm not most people.”

“Fair enough, yo!”

The elevator dinged, announcing their arrival. Reno grinned, jerking his head. Mo nodded, following the redhead out.

His first thought was high school all over again. It looked just like a cafeteria, and all the people inside seemed to have arranged themselves into cliques with little crossing over. It even smelled relatively the same, like cooking but not like food.

“... That's a lot of people.” Mo noted, eyeing the clumps and clusters of people.

“Well, everyone's gotta eat, yo. C'mon, this way. But yeah, we got Turks, infantry, SOLDIERs, executives, pencil-pushers, scientists, pretty much everyone in the building except the top-dogs. They eat out. Hey, there's Rude! Rude! Buddy! Save us a seat!”

Mo peered around, trying to see who Reno was waving and yelling to, but nobody really seemed to care or take note. It could have been anyone.

Reno led Mo over to the lunch-line— what else was it supposed to be— and they each collected a tray with food. After that, Reno bounced off, leaving Mo to wind his way across the floor after him. When he caught up, Reno had plonked down next to a more intimidating-looking suit, wearing a pair of sunglasses. That must've been Rude, then.

“I'm supposed to stick with you, y'know.” Mo grumbled as he sat down across from the two.

“Aw, it ain't far. You could see me, couldn't ya?” Reno grinned playfully.

Mo rolled his eyes, examining the food on his tray. It looked like the mush served in high school cafeterias, too. Was probably just as bland and flavorless.

“So, this is Rude. He's my partner. Rude, thus is that guy who popped up in the labs and smashed Tseng's manipulate materia.” Reno introduced cheerfully.

Rude gave a stiff nod. Mo bobbed his head back, mumbling quietly.

Reno seemed content with that, and started chattering. Mo raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment. If the redhead was going to talk instead of eating, then that was his choice to make.

As it turned out, Reno talked a lot. He seemed to talk enough to compensate for his partner, Rude, who Mo had yet to hear talk at all. Like a comedy trope. He wondered how much trouble Reno caused and got Rude in trouble for.

Mo finished his food— bland, with hints of artificial, just like high school— long before either of them did. So he chose to reorganize his bag. That way it'd at least sit comfortably on his back.

Nudging the tray to the side, Mo pulled his bag into his lap and tugged it open.

Yes, it had definitely been dug through. His sketchbook and planner weren't neatly together, for starters, everything else in a jumble around them.

Sighing, Mo carefully pulled the two books out. The sketchbook was put down on the table, with the planner on top. Then he took out his wallet, placing it above the planner on the sketchbook. The little bag holding his pencils, pens, and erasers was put next to the planner. His flask... he set
aside after giving a little shake. It felt and sounded about half-full. While it wasn't much, he got the feeling he'd be wanting the contents soon. He could just stick that in his pocket. That left his phone, which was dead, and... why did he have a pair of socks and an empty ziplock in here? Oh, no, he knew, it had been raining a lot. He had the socks and bag so he wouldn't get sick or end up with some variation of trench-foot. Puddle-foot or something.

Everything arranged properly, he slid it all into the bag and pulled the drawstrings tight.

Rude was finishing his meal just as Mo took an experimental sip from his flask.

“Woah, dude, isn't it kinda early?” Reno teased.

“It's happy hour somewhere in the universe.” Mo replied. Tasted like whiskey. Wasn't rum or moonshine, but he'd take it. Hell, when had been the last time he had moonshine? That peach-flavored stuff from the... oh, shoot, what party had it been? Whatever party it was, he was sure moonshine would be a welcome friend in an hour or so.

Possibly less.
Chapter 7

Can anyone guess/figure out what Mo's shoulder-tattoo is from?

Reno laughed as he gulped down the contents of his flask. “It ain't that much, yo!”

“Not that much is two dirty Shirleys with a bowl of pretzels on a Saturday night. You're trying to teach me the history of a whole goddamn planet in one afternoon.” Mo replied testily, pushing the now-empty flask into his pocket.

“Yeah, and we got a doctor appointment after this.” the redhead cackled.

Mo pushed the book in front of him off the table, making Reno wheeze with laughter.

He was way too sober for this shit. He needed those two dirty Shirleys followed by at least six shots of something hard and straight and a bottle of something aged at least forty years before he was anywhere near not too sober.

Tears in his eyes as he struggled for breath, Reno picked the book up and put it back on the table. “Listen, I'm not one for books either. How about we skip this and just get the whole medical thing over with?”

“Yes. Before I flip the goddamn table across the room.”

“You got most of the important stuff anyway. So it's no big deal.”

Mo rolled his eyes, following Reno back to the elevator.

“So, usually people go to medical for checkups and physicals, but given the whole thing with you, we're heading up to the Science Department to see creepy ol' Professor Hojo. But I'll be right there, so don't worry!”

“Are you going to hold my hand and kiss my boo-boos, too?” Mo asked tartly as the elevator slowed.

“Only if you want me to, yo!” the redhead laughed as the doors slid open. Mo was fully prepared to get out, but noticed that someone else was coming in, instead. “Hey there, General!” Reno greeted.

General? Mo tipped his head, looking the newcomer up and down as Reno's greeting was stiffly returned. The guy didn't look military, really. More punk than anything, with the long silver hair and black leather coat. He wasn't even wearing a shirt under the coat.

Green eyes landed on Mo, and he couldn't help a gasp of surprise.

Those were cat-eyes.

“Oh, yeah, Mo, this guy is Sephiroth. The toughest of the tough.” Reno grinned, drawing his
“O-oh... hullo...”

Silence fell over the elevator as it began to move again.

The newcomer, Sephiroth, hadn't pushed any buttons, Mo noticed. Was he going to the same floor as them?

“So,” Reno piped up, drawing his attention once more, “What's the story behind the tattoo?”

Mo blinked, looking down at his right hand. A butterfly was printed across two of his knuckles, a delicate blue and yellow design.

“Oh... nothing much, really. My... my old friend... Lucius. He was always teasing me about two other tattoos I have, and how both of them are rather trashy. So he challenged me to get one that was classier and one that was cryptic.” he replied, stammering a bit at the mention of Lucius's name.

“So where's the cryptic one?” Reno grinned. Mo noticed the feline green gaze of their fellow rider on him as well.

Sighing a bit, he turned so he was facing the wall and lifted his hair up. From Reno's interested noise, he knew the eye with it's three tears was visible, just under his hairline.

Turning back around, he explained, “The first two, I don't even remember getting. It was one of my first times getting truly drunk, so the stories behind them are lost.”

“Nice. Any others, or is that it?” the redhead asked.

“One other. On my shoulder, here. A quote from something I heard years ago that stuck with me. I... was bored and lonely, so I visited the local parlor.” he admitted, resting a hand over his left shoulder.

“What quote?”

“'May we all be human. Beautiful, stupid, temporal, endless.'” Mo recited, smiling softly. He couldn't for the life of him recall what it was from, half-pissed when he heard it, but it had struck a chord at the time. When he'd gotten it tattooed on, he'd been in a similar state, just drunk enough to make poor choices, but sober enough to remember it.

Reno chuckled, apparently amused. Sephiroth didn't seem... to react at all, turning away.

Silence fell again, broken only by Reno's idle humming.

“Interesting to see a Turk going to the Science Department.” Sephiroth suddenly said, making Mo jolt a little.

“Ain't for me.” the redhead said dismissively, waving as the elevator stopped again. “C'mon, Mo, let's get this over with, yo!”

Mo couldn't help but swallow nervously as he followed the Turk out of the elevator. Sephiroth followed behind him, making Mo aware of the fact that they were roughly the same height. Given the man's sturdier build, however, Mo was certain he looked like a string bean in comparison.

He found he recognized the man waiting for them. The hunched white coat with glinting glasses
and a crooked grin.

So this was Professor Hojo.

He took back everything he said earlier about giving blood to the creep, he'd take being grilled in Veld's office.

“Mr. Tesla, wonderful to see you again.” the professor greeted.

“Is it?” he mumbled.

“Sephiroth, go sit somewhere, I need to tend to this first.” Professor Hojo waved, moving forward to grab Mo's arm. He vaguely heard a soft noise of surprise as Reno offered to take his bag while the physical was taken. “Take off your shirt and shoes, they'll just be in the way.”

Mo nodded awkwardly, doing as he was told. Reno exploded with laughter as he took off the shirt, making him look back at the redhead in confusion.

“You weren't kidding when you called it trashy, yo!”

“Oh, lay off. I was young, stupid, and drunk.”

Reno just guffawed at him as Professor Hojo yanked him over to a table. For the older man he appeared to be, the professor had quite a grip.

“Now, Mr. Tesla, why don't we start with the basics. Your age?”

“Uh, thirty-five.”

“Everything of your medical history that you can recall.”

“... Everything...? I mean... I've had, like, six different strains of flu... my appendix was removed after rupturing not long before I turned twenty... ah... then... alcoholism?”

The man made a noise of disgust at the last item, but didn't say anything.

His height and weight were taken— he'd lost four pounds, apparently, that wasn't good— and his reflexes were checked. Sight was checked. Hearing was checked. Pulse and heartbeat were recorded. Blood was drawn.

Finally, everything was done. Reno was informed that Veld would be contacted if the professor needed Mo again as he put his shirt back on.

As they left, Mo became aware of someone staring at him. Unable to help himself, he turned to look—

Sephiroth's burning green gaze made him hesitate, frozen in place, for a moment.

Gulping, he hurried after Reno.
“What now?” Mo asked, tilting his head.

It was the day after... everything, it seemed. After his apparent Lazarus act, after getting acquainted with the Turks, everything. He was currently sitting with Reno, who was still his assigned babysitter, on a floor he’d been told was a break-area for Shinra employees, with a large tree taking up most of the space. Despite being a smart-mouth and a chatterbox, Mo was finding that he rather liked Reno.

“Hear me out,” the redhead said, holding up his hands, “I snooped through your sketchbook. And some of those drawings are really realistic. You said you were attacked by a guy in your world, who apparently had a high-level exit materia on him, but materia doesn't exist in your world. So if he came from this world, maybe he'll end up being some guy us Turks are trying to hunt down, and we can figure out why you were sent here.”

Mo shrugged, opening up his bag even as he did so. “I don't know. The man just seemed insane to me. I don't think he ever said an actual word, just jabbered and shrieked.”

“Still, worth a shot, yo!”

Mo nodded, flipping to a clean page in the sketchbook and picking out the pencils he wanted.

Reno jabbered on about this and that as he drew. Mostly about the sort of childish ‘macho’ things Mo expected to hear in a locker-room, those being women, booze, and fights. He didn't mind the booze parts quite so much, but being gay made women less interesting, and he didn't care for violence all that much. Every now and then he made the appropriate noise in response to Reno's babble, but Mo was focusing mostly on his drawing.

He decided to draw the upper part of the chest as well as the head, in case the shoulder was anything important. Drawing full-body would be too much, but he could at least get the important things down. The face. The hair. The messed up shoulder.

“Done.” he declared, cutting Reno's rant off.

“Well then, let's see it!” the redhead grinned, making grabby hands for the sketchbook.

Mo couldn't help but smile, sliding it over to the younger man.

The grin quickly dropped.

“Reno?”

“... You're sure this is the guy?”

Slowly, he nodded. “I may have drawn his hair-length wrong, or made his nose too sharp... but yeah.”

Reno put the sketchbook down, flipping the cover shut. Mo wasn't sure he liked the deathly serious expression on the redhead's face. Without a word, Reno pulled out his phone and dialed a number.

Mo found himself holding his breath as Reno waited.

“Hey, chief. Listen, okay? I asked Mo to draw the guy with the exit materia... well, I think we need
to come down there and show you. Not busy, are you?"

Reno nodded, humming, and hung up.

“Come on. We gotta go see Veld.” the redhead ordered, standing up. Mo nodded, collecting his sketchbook and following the Turk.

Just minutes later, the two of them were entering Veld’s office. Tseng was in there as well.

“Reno tells me you have a drawing of your attacker for us.” Veld said calmly from behind his desk.

Nodding timidly, Mo flipped open the sketchbook and handed it over.

Silence.

He swallowed nervously.

Veld handed Tseng the sketchbook. “You're sure?”

“M... minor details may be off, but yeah... why? Who is he?”

The Turks exchanged looks.

“You've never seen him anywhere else?” Tseng asked, handing the sketchbook back.

“No. The first time I ever laid eyes on him was when he came barreling through the window at the bank, screaming nonsense and waving around a gun and that... materia. Can someone tell me who he is?!”

“Why don't we do better than that,” Veld suggested, standing up, “We can introduce you to him.”

Wait, what.

Mo blinked, stupefied, as Veld pulled out and flipped open his phone.

“Lazard. We have someone here who Commander Rhapsodos needs to meet. Could you please send him to the meeting room on floor sixty-six? We'll be up in just a bit. Thank you.”

Mo mouthed soundlessly, too many questions running around his head and refusing to be vocalized.

“If this drawing is who you say it is, then it asks a lot more questions than it answers. We're going to introduce you two, and if you recognize him, or if he recognizes you, then we may potentially have a problem on our hands.” Veld told him.

“What?! I don't understand!” Mo managed to wail. Reno gave him a small pat on the back, but it didn't really make him feel better.

“You'll see.” the leader of the Turks said grimly.

“Will I?” he answered miserably.

None of the three answered, instead leaving the room and guiding him out. He was taken back to the elevator, which he was sure he'd seen more of by this point than anything else in the building. Seventy floors to the place and his favorite room so far was the goddamn elevator.
It didn't take long for them to get up to the sixty-sixth floor. Veld took the lead, followed by Tseng, and Mo was thankful for Reno walking next to him. The serious air was suffocating as they moved through the halls.

“Here.” Veld said suddenly.

Mo wasn't given a chance to do anything, steered somewhat forcefully into the room by Reno.

His gaze landed first on Sephiroth, who was regarding all of them curiously. From there, his eyes found—

He jerked back with a gasp, stopped only by Reno's grip on his wrist.

“No— Why?! I don't understand!” he pled, trying to avoid looking at the red-clothed man reclining in one of the chairs in the room. “Why is he here?!”

“What's going on now?” the psycho from the bank frowned.

He was cleaned up. His clothes were much more than rags now. His hair was clean and neatly combed. His skin looked healthy, not sickly pale. He wasn't covered in cuts and blood and sludge.

But that was definitely the loon who'd held up the bank.

“Mr. Tesla, this is Commander Genesis Rhapsodos of SOLDIER.” Veld said calmly as Reno carefully tugged Mo into the room and shut the door.

“What's going on? Who is this?” asked another stranger, powerfully built.

“This is Mo Tesla. Just about three days ago, he appeared in the Science Department without any warning. He proceeded to fight off four of their personnel before he was subdued. Fragments of an exit materia were found clinging to his clothes, and we believed him to be working for AVALANCHE, or some other anti-Shinra cell. However, even under measures to ensure we got the truth, he denied such affiliations.” Veld explained.

“To be specific,” Tseng added, “He lacks knowledge of Shinra, AVALANCHE, and things such as materia and mako.”

“What rock has he been living under?” the newly-dubbed Genesis snorted.

“Not one on this world, if our assumptions are correct.”

Silence fell over the room. Mo had stopped trying to run away by this point, instead choosing to stand as far away from Genesis as he could. Reno stood nearby, between him and the door, but also between him and everyone else.

“Could you please elaborate?” Sephiroth requested after a minute.

“Mr. Tesla here has no knowledge of anything that one would expect him to know. However, he appears to have a relatively comprehensive understanding of an entire world and history that are just too elaborate for something like a mental wipe and reconstruction. Trying to find any evidence of such things turns up negative, as well.” Tseng said. “Combined with his sudden appearance, it's the most logical explanation.”

“And this has what, exactly, to do with me?” Genesis drawled.

“His story says that before showing up here, he was attacked by a guy with a gun and a materia.
The guy was apparently insane and never spoke, just yammered nonsense and howled like an animal. Since he's apparently a good artist, I asked if he could sketch the guy out.” Reno said, sounding incredibly grim.

The redhead turned to him, holding out a hand. After a brief moment of confusion, Mo handed over the sketchbook. It was flipped open to the proper page, put on the table dominating the room, and slid over to the trio.

“... It's Genesis.” said the currently nameless individual.

“My shoulder.” Genesis said with a frown, sharp eyes landing on Mo. “How did you know about that?”

“I... what? It was messed up at the bank, dripping gunk...” he replied weakly.

“We've been keeping it quiet, no one should know about it.” the man insisted.

Mo backed up the last step he was able, shaking his head as his back hit the wall. “I don't know, okay? I just... I'm lost, I'm confused, I just want to go home and forget this... this... this fever-dream insanity!”

Genesis stood up, making the unnamed man step forward a little. Wordlessly, Genesis took off the long red coat he was wearing. From there, he pushed up the sleeve of the knit shirt underneath, and peeled away dressings for some wound—

The smell of rot and chemicals just reached Mo, making him shudder and gag.

It wasn't like it was at the bank. A large cut, glistening in a sickly manner, dark and ugly. The skin surrounding the wound was mottled, grotesquely pale with black veins and scabs. It looked like it was necrotizing. It didn't drip with muck and sludge, but looked like it could start at any time.

“No one outside of this room and a few in the Science Department should know about it, so how did you?” Genesis demanded, glaring at Mo.

“Because I stopped you from shooting a child in the face?!” he replied, the tiniest beads of anger swelling up in him. All he'd done was try to keep everyone alive, why was he the villain here?

“You—”

“Enough!” Veld barked. “Reno, take Mr. Tesla somewhere else.”
“Slow down, yo, lemme catch up!” Reno complained.

No, you speed up.” Mo replied, popping open his third bottle.

The redhead had brought him back down to the Turk floor, and the two were camping out at Reno's desk while they waited for Veld, or Tseng, or someone to call them. When Mo had refused to settle down after the stressful encounter, the Reno had broken out his stash of beer, offering to share. Mo was already two and a half bottles in, perched on the edge of Reno's desk while the Turk had spun his chair around backwards.

“Jeez, really shook ya, huh?”

“I don't,” Mo replied as he finished the third bottle and accepted the half a sandwich offered, “Understand anything that's going on. For all I know, I died in the bank and I'm in some kind of purgatory because I didn't go to church often enough and I drink like a fish. I don't understand and at this point all I care about is clearing my fucking head.”

Reno just shook his head, chuckling. “Sandwich any good?”

He pointed at the redhead with what was left of the thing. “If you just pawned bad food off on me —”

“Nah, but I swiped it from the guy a few desks over. If it's any good I need to remember that so I can steal his lunch again.”

“Bum. Tastes fine.” Mo said, finishing the sandwich and reaching down into the open desk-drawer to pull out another beer.

“Don't I get any?” Reno pouted, just opening his second.

Mo leaned over and clonked the top of Reno's bottle with his own.

“No, you monster!” the Turk screeched as his beer foamed over. A couple of his coworkers walking past snickered as he pushed his head down to gulp down what he could.

“Fight me, boy.” Mo said, gulping down his beer and fishing out a fifth before Reno had even recovered from deepthroating his bottle.

“Aw, c'mon, beer-bonking's just cruel.”

“And I'm in a state of catatonic shock so bad that if I don't get properly intoxicated within the next five minutes I'll probably go into cardiac arrest.” Mo replied evenly. “Did you actually steal the other half of the sandwich?”

Reno kicked the floor so he was scooted out of Mo's reach, declaring, “You bonk my beer and now you'd deprive me of my lunch? A man has his limits, yo!”

“Fair enough.” he shrugged, leaning back on the desk and sipping at the beer in his hand. “So does every Turk have a stash of booze in their bottom drawer, or are you the exception to the rule?”

“Everyone's got their vices, yo. Can't speak for everyone in the office, but I'm not the only guy with a twenty-pack in the desk.”
Mo made a big show of counting the five empty bottles, the two they were drinking, and the remaining five in the drawer.

“Har-dee-har, Mr. Comedy. Here, pass me another one.”

Sitting up, Mo grabbed a fresh beer from the drawer and leaned forward to swap it with the empty bottle Reno was holding out.

“So, what's going to happen now?” he sighed as Reno used the back of the chair to pop the top off.

“Gonna hafta wait for the boss and see.” the redhead shrugged.

“Something happen?”

The two of them looked up. Leaning casually against the next desk with a smile was the other redhead from when Mo had first left the labs.

“Yo, Cissnei. Want a beer?” Reno offered, gesturing to the drawer.

“No thanks. What's up?” the young woman smiled.

“Well, Mo here apparently was attacked by Genesis. He hasn't been lying to us about anything else, all the stuff we've used comes up negative, so chances of him making this up are slim.”

“I'm drunk, not delusional.” Mo said with a touch of indignity as he tipped his head back.

“Just waiting on the boss and Tseng to see what's going on. Oh, and creepy old Hojo.” Reno shrugged.

“You really think he'll need me for something again?”

“Well, I can't say I've interacted with him much, but he doesn't seem like the type to let things he's interested in go. You were literally dead and handed over for an autopsy when you woke up. Even I'm curious about that, honestly. It's completely unheard of.” Cissnei commented.

“Call me Lazarus.” Mo muttered, rolling his shoulders. He felt so much more relaxed now, the alcohol kicking in. Five beers wasn't good hard liquor, but it was something, and it was scratching his addiction's itch at the moment.

“What now? Lazarus?” Reno asked, scooting closer.

“Lazarus. He was a figure in Christianity... which you probably don't know what that is. Okay. Well, back in my world, there are... Oof, probably hundreds of religions. I don't know, I've always been rather agnostic. But one of the biggest religions in the world is Christianity, a monotheistic religion that revolves primarily around the teachings of a man called Jesus of Nazareth, or Jesus Christ. Jesus was supposedly the messiah and the son of God, and would go around performing miracles. Walking on water, turning water into wine, things like that. Well, in one of the many stories about Jesus, a friend of his, called Lazarus, died. His family went to Jesus and begged him to do something. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and went on his merry way. Several years later, after he was executed for rebellion or some shit, he came back to life as well. I dunno, like I said, I was never religious. Didn't exactly read the bible and all it's tales of the holy trinity.”

“So it's... a common thing in your world?” Cissnei frowned in confusion as he finished his current beer.
“No. Only in stories or myths. But everyone on the damn planet is so obsessed with living forever they look for the truth in every goddamn urban legend and children's campfire tale. Like, come on, people. When you're dead, you're dead.” he replied as he lined up all the empty bottles.

“Unless your name is Mo Tesla, apparently.” Reno grinned, scooting closer.

“Piss off, unless you wanna get beer-bonked again. I've got seven empty bottles and longer arms than you.” Mo warned, grabbing two of the empty bottles. Reno promptly scooted as far away as he could, making Cissnei laugh.

“Wait, does that mean you're done?” the male redhead frowned.

Mo sighed, putting the bottles down and leaning back again. “It's tempting to clean you out, it really is. But I get the feeling there's gonna be a lot more to my day, so I best maintain some semblance of sobriety. I can get properly drunk later, when there's nothing to do. Until then, I'll just keep your desk in mind when I need a quick pick-me-up.”

“Wow, that's... a lot of self-restraint.” Cissnei commented, looking genuinely impressed.

“If I had half the self-restraint you're lauding me for, I would've gone dry several years ago.” he said with a dry smile.

“Better than most, then. You say you're an alcoholic, but every really bad alcoholic I've met goes until there's no more to be had, whether that means supplies are gone or they can't pay for more.”

“Twenty percent of alcoholics are undiagnosed because they don't fit the stereotype. I'm thirty-five, live alone, am stable financially, hold a relatively decent job, and had okay relations with my family, in comparison to the old drunk who mooches off some relative, can't hold a job, and is piss-poor broke.” Mo sighed.

He knew the numbers. He knew he had a problem. He knew, logically, he should get help. But admitting that out loud... was harder than looking in the mirror and beating himself up about it. It was also hard when he reflected on that month of sobriety, or even the past few drinkless days. Drinking helped him sort out his emotions, helped him concentrate, helped him think and grounded him. When he was sober, everything was jumbled up and he didn't know how to act. His head got clouded and he was easily distracted. Logically, part of that was probably withdrawal. But at the same time, he'd never been good with emotions. He never knew how to act or define his feelings.

Excuses excuses.

He was an alcoholic. Putting high-functioning in front of it just made it sound like he was better, when really it just meant he was good at hiding it and good at weaseling out of stopping. So what if he could separate his drunk self from his usual self? So what if he could hold his job and was financially stable, instead of leaning heavily on someone? So what if he could go a few weeks without a drink? He always made up for those days he didn't drink by binging next time he did. What was he doing now? Five beers in and tempted to go for six. Then seven.

“Had okay relations? So... better, worse?” Reno probed.

Mo sighed, drawn out of his thoughts. “Dead. Car-crash. All three died instantly. I was told it looked like they were on their way for a surprise visit. I get the feeling it was for an intervention. Two years ago.”

“...Oops. Sorry, yo.”
“It's okay. We weren't... the closest. But they were never neglectful or abusive. When I decided I wanted to be an artist, they were supportive.” Mo shrugged.

“Still, sorry. People get tetchy about family, yo.” Reno said, daringly scooting closer.

Mo shrugged again.

Cissnei spoke up now, saying, “So you say Commander Genesis attacked you?”

“Well... less of attacked me and more of happened to crash into the building I was in, wave a gun around, and make to shoot a kid before I tackled him and got the gun away. And then he threw me off and threw the exit materia at me. Of course... he looked different. Sick. His skin was pale, but not like mine. His hair and eyes were dull. Wore rags.”

Reno snorted. “That guy?”

Mo tipped his head.

“Yeah, I suppose we didn't quite get to that in your education, huh... Genesis Rhapsodos is one of the most stuck-up and flamboyant bastards out there.”

“Not the type to yammer nonsense and scream like a mad dog, then.”

“Nope.” the male redhead replied, popping the word out.

“Tesla.”

All three of them stood up straight at Veld's voice.

Behind the man stood not only Tseng, but Sephiroth.

Mo was starting to rethink his decision to leave Reno the last four bottles.
To say he wasn't happy would be an understatement, but saying it was the worst thing to ever happen... while an overstatement, it probably wasn't too far off.

Tomorrow, Mo was told, a number of things would happen. But the big one that was concerning him was that Professor Hojo had found the mako in his blood to be unstable. He had the equivalent of a SOLDIER stabilizer shot in him, and unless he was given the rest of the treatment there was a good chance he would die.

Mo sighed, drawing his knees up to his chest and thumping his head gently against the wall. For the time being, he was kept in a small cell. A plain room with just enough space for him to move around, and an equally plain cot attached to the back wall. He was told that with consideration, maybe that would change. But for now he was a suspicious character who needed to be watched.

He understood, to some extent. He was no expert on how this sort of thing worked back home, much less in this place, but... in the end, he understood.

But right now Mo missed home.

His small, admittedly rather crappy house in Rosenberg that he'd bought primarily for the basement. The basement was his studio, it held all his supplies. He didn't have much, but he'd fought tooth and nail to get what equipment he did have, make sure it was good quality and wouldn't kill him right off the bat. A small fire-retardant case holding all his flammable items, several small chests sorting out his tools, a shelf with his less traditional tools and items... He wasn't one set type of artist. Sculptural things called his name quite loudly, but he also enjoyed painting, drawing, pottery, and working with fabrics. A lot of his pieces tended to involve skulls, since he was so fond of the shape and how they looked. He knew that skulls were somewhat stereotypical, given his appearance and occupation... but they were fun to work with. There were so many ways to play with them.

Another sigh left him.

No use dwelling on it now, Mo reflected. Either he was dead and not going back, or trapped in a strange world with chances of return being slim to none. He'd have to roll with it the way he did with misbehaving clay.

With that in mind, he grabbed his bag and pulled out his sketchbook and pencils.

He'd never get to sleep worked up like this, but chances of getting a drink to unwind... astronomically low. So he could doodle around until he fell asleep.

Flipping past the mug-shot Reno had asked him to draw, Mo smoothed out a clean page.

His pencil tapped against his cheek. His nose. His lips.

A mouse.

Okay, a mouse. What about a mouse?

... Trapped in a bottle.

No. No, that was typical and done to death.
... A terrarium. A terrarium in a sealed bottle of... something, it didn't matter... with several dark and looming figures surrounding it. And a shot-glass full of butterflies in one of the figures' hands.

Okay, he could do that.

Lightly, barely there, he sketched the layout of the picture on the page. Here, the table with the bottle. Here, the hands of the figures reaching for the bottle or clutching the table. Here, the shot-glass, and the trail of butterflies leaving it.

Happiness in a bottle, stave off the darkness for one more hour...

Note to self, Mo decided, make sure to turn this sketch into a full-sized painting. Bright and vibrant colors for the bottle and glass, emitting a soft, warm glow that hardly penetrated the murky darks of the figures surrounding them. Yes, that would look fairly nice, he thought as he held the tip of his tongue between his teeth, carefully working details into the terrarium.

Chances of someone purchasing it were slim. Not a lot of his art actually sold.

Of course, if he was dead, killed protecting people at the bank, then for all he knew his pieces back home were being sold like hot cakes. Artists who died tragically tended to get really famous for the next few years at least. The problem was that he had never been anyone terribly big, so his work was likely on it's way to some landfill if he never returned.

Mo pushed those thoughts away, focusing on the drawing before him.

He'd put a lizard in the bottle. A lizard, some stones, leaves, flowers, and a butterfly. He hoped it wasn't already too much detail in too small a place. If it was, hopefully the shot-glass of butterflies would help even it out. It wasn't like he'd drawn the bottle incredibly small, but it was a cramped and contained area.

Without really thinking about it as he started in on the butterflies, Mo began to hum. It was 'Rasputin,' one of the only songs he knew any of the words to. He didn't even know all of them, but humming the tune was easy enough. Easy, mindless, and pace-setting.

Mo missed home.

Missed the monotony of his routine, missed trudging through town when he couldn't get a cab to take him to work, missed Mr. Everson's crude words and derogatory greetings to his staff. Missed greeting the bartender at the Kitchen Sink after work, missed browsing through paints and sketchbooks at the local supermarket.

Missed Lucius.

His pencil broke, and he closed his eyes.

He should have seen it coming, he berated himself. He'd known Lucius since college, he knew how... how...

Twelve years was a long time to know someone. Longer than Lucius kept most people around. Mo had thought he was special.

Apparently not.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Mo decided that was enough drawing for now. He closed the sketchbook and put his pencils away. Tucking the things away in his bag, he stretched out on the
cot. Lying on his belly, Mo crossed his ankles and folded his arms under the pillow.

Five beers wasn't good hard liquor. They wore off too easily.
“How're you feeling, buddy?” Reno greeted.

“Nn.” Mo replied, not feeling very articulate at the moment. He was scared, anxiety tying his tongue in knots. Tying his guts in knots.

He was going up to the labs to get his mako shots. There were going to be people watching, observing the process. Among them would be the Turks he'd already met and the SOLDIERs he'd encountered. Executives from other branches would be watching as well.

Practically a live show, wasn't he?

“C'mon. Back up to the labs.” Reno said with a comforting smile, reaching out to take his arm.

He wasn't in the borrowed Turk clothes anymore. He was in the scrubs that SOLDIERs apparently wore when getting their shots. He didn't know what these mako shots had to do with SOLDIER, Reno hadn't gotten that far with teaching him. He knew that mako was apparently the lifeblood of the planet, and was the condensed form of this Lifestream.

It honestly sounded like something out of a Tolkien novel, not that he'd really read any of them. But Tolkien seemed more appropriate than in the Potterverse.

And this fantasy novel stuff was going to be injected directly into his blood.

Out to the elevator.

Up to the Science Department.

Oh, he wanted to puke.

Mo swallowed, trying to soothe his nerves. Reno patted his back as the elevator doors slid open.

Oh, he had an audience.

Mo pointedly looked down at his feet, trying to calm his racing heart.

That was a lot of people.

“How're you feeling, buddy?” Reno greeted, coming closer with his usual twisted grin. “This way, please.”

Reno stepped away, flashing him a grin of reassurance as the professor took him.

Mo didn't feel at all reassured.

He felt even less assured when he saw where Hojo was leading him.

“Um, are all the straps necessary?” he squeaked out, eyeing the tilted platform covered in leather. It looked like there had been claw-marks buffed out of the metal recently.

“Yes, of course. If you thrash about, it'll disrupt the process.” the professor tutted, waving him off.

... Made sense, he supposed.
Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Mo stepped up, turning so his back was against the slab. The metal was cold through the thin clothes he was wearing, making him shiver. A small flock of scientists—he assumed—scurried forward and began strapping him down. With each buckle secured, Mo felt more and more like a rat about to be dissected, or Frankenstein's monster about to be electrocuted.

“All prepared, Professor Hojo!” one of the white-coated flock—like sheep—called out as they backed away.

Oh, he was being forced to look at his audience like this. It wasn't hard to pick out the Turks, in their clean suits, or Sephiroth and Genesis with their long leather coats. All eyes were on him.

His nails scraped lightly over the metal as he curled his hands into fists. He could feel slight indents that his fingers followed almost perfectly. So there had been scratches that someone tried to buff out. That wasn't reassuring at all.

“Are you ready, Mr. Tesla?” Hojo grinned. The man was holding a syringe that was almost cartoonish, large and filled with glowing green fluid.

Swallowing again, Mo rasped out, “As ready as I'll ever be.”

Rather than watch the process, he chose to close his eyes. He'd only get riled up if he watched.

There was a slight pinch on both his arms. He grimaced, guessing that was a pair of needles.

Then it started to burn.

Mo bit his cheek, trying not to wince. It wasn't like there was anywhere for him to go. He clenched his fists tighter, trying to measure out his breathing.

He could feel it sliding into him. Feel it tracing his veins, filling him.

It hurt.

“W-wait...” he gasped, trying to arch his back.

No one seemed to hear. More flowed into him. Like sentient sludge, merging with his blood and replacing it.

Someone was talking.

No, not just someone.

He opened his eyes, confused. There had been a lot of people gathered around to watch this, but surely not that many?

Everything was green. Everything glowed.

“Stop...” he choked out.

“Mr. Tesla?” someone said. They sounded so far away, lost in the sea of voices.

It hurt. It hurt it hurt it hurt, it hurt so much, it was wrong, this was bad.

“Stop, please, it hurts...!” Mo begged, gasping for breath and trying to strain against his bonds. There was so much talking, who was talking?!
There was a blot of darkness in the green glowing.

No.

If he focused, it was three, all grouped together.

It hurt so much, he wanted it to stop.

Something creaked.

He was burning, dying from the inside out, he wasn't supposed to do this, wasn't supposed to be here, wrong wrong wrong—

He threw his head back, colliding roughly with the metal, and screamed, trying to tear his way free.
Chapter 12

He was floating.

I know this place, Mo thought to himself.

Dark, with thick, twisting banners of green. Quiet chattering, too distant for him to properly make out.

On a hunch, he turned.

The woman, impressive and awe-inspiring, seemed to hover, slightly above him.

“Well are you?” he asked.

“It isn’t important, Mo.”

His eyes widened.

That voice... it was more like a chorus of voices, really, but the one leading the charge sounded like his mother. A voice he hadn't heard for almost three years now, failing to speak to his family at all for a year before they died.

The woman reached out. Confused and admittedly intimidated, Mo tried to retreat, but for once he did not have the reach advantage. One hand took his shoulder, firm but gentle, and the other brushed against his cheek. It was soothing.

“I know you don’t want to be here. But I needed someone to ensure things would go right this time. I can't keep turning the clock back on her.”

“What? On who?” Mo asked, bewildered as he lifted his hand to brush against her fingers.

“The Crisis.” came the unexpectedly dark response, making him shudder. “Her influence is limited, but will inevitably grow unless someone puts an end to her.”

Mo raised his hands, backing away and out of the woman's grip. “No, I don't know what you're asking, but it sounds violent and I'm a pacifist.”

She smiled softly, drifting closer. “I know,” she said gently, “That's part of why I chose you.”

Mo closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. He was talking to a drug-dream about apparently being the chosen one. Great.

Of course, the woman spoke with his mother's voice. Guilt personified?

But then why didn't she look like his mother?

Opening his eyes, he found her waiting patiently.

“What do you mean, you chose me?” he asked carefully.

She held her hands out. Mo gulped, understanding the action as a gesture to take them. Slowly, warily, he placed his hands in her own. He felt small and powerless when he did so.
The banners of green bulged and swirled closer, making him jerk, but the woman held him still.

One banner spun closer, part of it peeling open, almost like an eye. Contained in the green threads was...

“Hey,” he said, voice cracking.

“We're sorry,” the officer said, ‘Your family was just killed in a traffic accident. I'm sure you saw it on the news.’

‘Are you sure it was my family?’ his voice replied.

‘The three were Gerald Tesla, Katie Tesla, and Ted Tesla, correct?’ the officer asked, showing off a set of state-issued IDs.

‘... Yeah... Those are theirs...’

‘We're sorry for your loss, Mr. Tesla.’

The banner slid shut again, spiraling away. A second one came close.

‘Sorry, can I help you?’

“No... no, please...” Mo begged, feeling tears well up in his eyes. He tried to tug away, but the woman held tight.

‘Vicky... It's me, Mo... listen, it's... it's the anniversary of my family's death, and—’

‘Lemme stop you right there, bro.’ Vicky said condescendingly, patting his shoulder. ‘That thing you and I had going on was fun and all, and I'm not gonna lie, you put out well. But you just aren't my type.’

‘Wh... Vicky, what're you saying?’

‘I'm saying that ladies love gay men, and the two of us were an eye-catching pair walking around town.’

He didn't think it was possible, but his heart broke again upon hearing those words. It had already happened, just a week ago, but... but clearly he wasn't as over it as he thought.

‘Vicky-dearie! Come on, let's go back to bed! Oh, who's this?’ crooned the woman that teetered out of the apartment and onto Vicky's back.

‘Don't worry about it, Melissa, no big deal. You just go get comfy on the bed, yeah?’ his boyfriend answered with a grin. Even though he closed his eyes and looked away, he could still remember it clearly. ‘Sorry, bro. Them's the breaks. If you check out Craigslist, though, I bet you'll find tons of sissy-boys begging for you to bone them.’

The door closed. Even though he wasn't looking, he could tell the memory had ended, and a new one was starting. Even though he wasn't looking, he knew what memory it was from the familiar chatter and squeak of a rag polishing glass.

‘Hey, Mo!’ Lucius's voice rang out.

‘Lucius. I was getting worried about you.’
‘Yeah, well, I forgot.’ his friend shrugged.

‘That's okay. How are you?’

‘Well, I'm not staying long. See, I actually stopped by to tell you something.’

He didn't need to look to remember standing up, concerned for his friend.

‘I'd really appreciate it if you never talked to me again.’

A choked sob left him as he tugged uselessly at his hands. “Please,” he begged, “Stop, no more... no more...”

‘Lucius, what are you saying? I mean... you're joking, right?’ his memory pled.

‘We had a good run, Mo, but nobody hangs out with artists any more. I mean, what's even the point of art in this era? All it does is take up space.’

‘Lucius, please, don't do this to me...’

‘Sorry, but I already have. Don't call or come over again, because we aren't friends any more, okay?’

He had fallen to his knees by this point, weeping.

His hands were released, and he hid his face in them.

A gentle hand stroked through his hair, and the woman spoke again. “I chose you because you had nothing to lose. There would be no holes left behind, no broken hearts. Everything you had there slipped away.”

“So why rub it in?” he demanded between hiccups, still hiding in his hands.

“That isn't the only reason I chose you. There are those in your world aware of and fond of this one —”

“So take one of them!” he screamed, looking up to her with tears blurring his vision.

She shook her head, looking regretful. “They would not be objective. Their infatuations would blind them, and only lead to more chaos. You have no ties to this world, and can view it objectively, starting from the ground up.”

“Ma'am,” Mo snuffled, getting shakily to his feet, “I'm an artist. Art is subjective, one of the most subjective things out there. Calling me objective is like calling Hitler an angel.”

“Was he, too, not an artist?” came the calm reply, making him falter. The woman smiled gently, brushing his bangs from his face before continuing to speak. “You are an artist. You create things, but not for yourself. You are not a selfish person, making beautiful things with your own two hands for the enjoyment of others.”

He shook his head, turning away. “I'm weak. I'm petty. I... I'm a drunk, for crying out loud. I don't even know if you're real!”

A soft laugh. His mother's laugh, the way she'd laugh when Ted regaled them all with an embarrassing story from school before kissing him on the forehead and chuckling about her silly boy. She never laughed like that for Mo.
“You're stronger than you think, Mo.”

“I can't stop drinking, what makes you think I can stop this... this Crisis woman from doing anything?” he shot back, refusing to look at her.

“You stopped the copy from hurting anyone.”

He blinked in confusion.

“At the bank. I saved that copy from one of the times I turned time back. I sent it to find you.”

That made him turn around. “You... sent that guy?”

She dipped her head.

But before he could say anything more, she reached out, startling him.

“This is the last time you will see me, Mo. Please, stop the Crisis, and make something beautiful.”

She pushed—
Yes, I know, Mo's using the term shark-tank incorrectly, but it's his ‘pet name’ for such things.

He shot awake, gasping.

He couldn't sit up. Crap, not this again.

He was going to throw up. He was going to throw up and choke on his own vomit because he was tied down to wherever the heck he was this time.

Stomach heaving, Mo tried to keep it down, writhing in desperation.

Someone said something, but he couldn't make it out over his gagging and whimpering. Hands scrabbled for the straps holding him down before someone yelled. The ghost of a blade slid over his wrists and ribs. Mo didn't put too much thought into it, lunging to the side and vomiting.

A shudder ran through him, tears filling his eyes, and his mouth was flooded with something worse than bile. The only thing he could think of to describe the taste was decomposing skunk, and the consistency was... not like any chunks he'd ever blown before. It was horrible. It burned.

Someone was holding his hair back and rubbing between his shoulders. While it didn't exactly soothe any of his current agony, having the moral support literally behind him helped.

Finally, after what felt like at least five minutes, he was reduced to spitting the residue from his mouth, coughing and whimpering. Blinking the tears away from his eyes, he turned his attention to the gook he'd just throw up.

Ew.

Mo crinkled his nose in disgust. It looked like tar, and stank like something several days dead left out on the highway during summer.

“Well, that's pleasant.” someone remarked.

“Gen.”

Blearily, Mo lifted his head to see who was talking.

It was Genesis and the as-of-yet unnamed SOLDIER. Genesis was standing away from the bed, a hand over his mouth and nose. The other man was sitting on the bed behind him, one hand still on his back.

“H'lo.” Mo offered, voice clicking a little from how dry his throat had gotten.

The nameless SOLDIER turned away for a second, turning back with a plastic cup of water. Mo smiled gratefully as he took it, cradling the cup to his chest like a baby animal.
“Can't we just leave?” Genesis asked impatiently. “Whatever that is stinks.”

“Do you think you can walk?” the unnamed man asked, tone far gentler.

Mo paused after taking a sip of his water. “I... think so?”

He was given a gentle smile. The straps on his hips and legs were undone, and he was helped up. After a moment spent just standing, Mo nodded that he was fine, and the trio left the room.

“What even was that? Nausea and vomiting are common after getting mako shots, but not like that.” Genesis declared haughtily.

Mo shrugged his shoulders weakly. He had no previous experience with such things, so he couldn't say. For all he knew, puking up tar was the norm.

“How do you feel?” the other man asked as they came into what looked like a waiting area of some kind.

“Like roadkill. Better than hungover, but not by much.” he replied before sipping at his water again. His answer earned a chuckle as they all sat down. “Um... I don't think I caught your name...?”

“Just call me Angeal.” the man told him, patting his shoulder.

Mo nodded.

His stomach hurt. Like, not just from the puking, his stomach hurt a lot.

Confused, Mo settled his plastic cup between his knees and lifted the hem of his shirt. A mass of bandages greeted him, making him hurry to push the shirt-hem back down in alarm.

“I'm impressed you didn't die on the spot. Most things tend to perish instantly from my firaga.” Genesis declared from his seat.

Mo felt the blood drain from his face. “I... I blacked out again...?”

“You didn't do any real damage. You tore free and tried to make a break for it, but we stopped you. You put up a bit of a fight before you just... stopped.” Angeal explained.

“... I died again, huh...?”

“... Yes. You were declared dead for almost six hours. About an hour ago, though, you suddenly came back to life. You didn't wake up, but your vitals just restarted.” Angeal told him, watching carefully as he picked the cup back up.

“Yelled like a lunatic while you were fighting. Said you weren't anyone's exterminator and that you'd been tortured enough, why couldn't you just die peacefully.”

Mo almost dropped the cup at Genesis's words.

“Are you okay?” Angeal frowned.

“It's just... both times I've been declared dead, I've had dreams about this woman... it's coincidence, right, that this time she was asking me to put an end to something, and that she brought up a lot of painful memories...”
The two SOLDIERs exchanged a look. Mo decided he didn't want to decipher it, instead gulping down the rest of his water. Thankfully his mouth no longer tasted like death.

“... That is... quite the coincidence.” Angeal nodded.

Mo fiddled with the now-empty cup.

He didn't understand. They were just dreams, right? And if he was blacking out, then wasn't it safe to say that his still-awake body was picking up on them?

He heaved a sigh.

Someone approached, standing before them.

Tseng.

“If Mr. Tesla is awake and in decent condition, it would be appreciated if he joined the board meeting.”

He hated it already.

“I can't.” he said, drawing his knees up to his chest, “I'm dehydrated and puking tar and apparently caught a fireball with my stomach.”

“Oh, don't be a baby.” Genesis scoffed, standing up.

“I really really don't want to...” Mo groaned, pressing his forehead to his knees.

“Mr. Tesla.” Tseng said flatly, clearly unamused.

“You're asking me to walk into a shark-tank. I've done it before, selling my work... I hate it. I always need a long drink afterwards.” he protested weakly, voice muffled by his legs. “Only this time I'm not selling my work, I'll be selling my body and soul, not even as a package deal...”

“Mr. Tesla.”

“... Reno's better than you anyway, he's nicer and more fun.” Mo complained, crumpling the plastic cup in his hand as he unfolded and stood up.

“I'm sure I'll survive.”

Mo took a deep breath, nodding that he was ready. Tseng seemed content with that, turning away. Mo shuffled after, vaguely aware of the two SOLDIERs following him. He was unhappy and miserable. He apparently had a huge burn on his stomach, which had apparently been full of pitch until just a few minutes ago. He was blacking out and having weird dreams that made him go berserk while blacked out...

And now he was being made into chum for the shark-tank.
This was far from the worst shark-tank he'd been in, but far from the best.

The people composing it seemed relatively content to fight amongst themselves, their attention rarely on him. They were in the room where the Turks had introduced him to the SOLDIERS. Sephiroth, Angeal, and Genesis stood along one wall. Tseng and a few Turks he wasn't familiar with stood along another. Mo himself was standing in the little free space near the door, but he was aware that if he tried to make a break for it there were at least four Turks out there. And where the hell would he go, anyway?

He found he recognized most of these people from watching his mako shots. Then there was Veld, eyes closed and hands steepled. Hojo didn't seem to be paying any attention, going over some folder of papers. Everyone else was... a stranger.

The fighting was all over the place, he couldn't pick anything out.

Someone barked for attention after a while, and the room fell into some semblance of order.

“So, Mr. Tesla, is it?” declared the blonde man sitting at the head of the table.

Swallowing, he nodded timidly.

“So we're told that you came from another world! What's the story behind that?”

Gulping, he opened his mouth and closed it soundlessly once or twice before speaking.

“I... I'm afraid I don't understand, sir. There isn't much of a story to tell, unless... unless you're asking for what happened before...?”

A chorus went up, telling him to tell the story. Like children begging for a story around a campfire, Mo thought.

Slowly, he repeated it once more, explaining the events at the bank. Standing in line, doing nothing until a stranger had crashed through the thick and possibly bulletproof glass at the front. The child crying, the man pointing his gun. Stopping the loon and tossing the gun away. Getting thrown off and having the exit materia apparently broken over his head. Waking up feeling hungover and talking to Tseng before passing out once more. Then, at their request, he explained a little about his world.

“Well,” said a younger blonde man, sitting just to the side of the first, “It sounds like there is little that world would have to offer us.”


Recalling that Reno had said Shinra was an electric company at it's core, Mo spoke timidly up.

“We don't have mako energy, but instead... burn fossil fuels, or use green energies like hydroelectric dams, solar panels, and wind farms. Some parts of the world get by just fine with no electricity at all, instead using base materials and techniques to get by. Some of those parts struggle to get by, but others are doing well enough that governments ban interaction with them.”

“And that's exclusively what your world gets by on?!” one man gasped, looking incredibly excited.
“Well... yeah. It's what we have. And we're trying to turn away from fossil fuels, since they're a nonrenewable resource... but I hear certain green energy businesses are pretty lucrative. I don't know for certain, and I don't know which... I'm... just a secretary.” Mo answered, rubbing at his shoulder anxiously.

His reply sent some titters of interest through the room, making him reconsider trying to run for it. Even if he didn't get very far, it would at least show he had no interest in this nonsense, right?

“Well, that aside, Mr. Tesla,” someone else said, “You were given the treatment of a SOLDIER Third, but gave our top three Firsts some trouble. You're clearly a formidable fighter—”

“No!” he yelped, not liking that train of conversation. “I-I-I... I'm not a fighter. I don't... I don't... I'm a desk-jockey and a studio artist. Not... not SOLDIER.”

“Hm, just as well, really. Even I can tell just by looking that he nowhere near meets the physical requirements!”

That sent up a round of laughter, making Mo want to curl into himself and cry. Or hide. Or die. Any of the three, really.

He didn't want to be here. He would've been just fine sitting in the room he woke up in, puke-filled or no, and being told later what this whole thing was about. He hated these kinds of scenarios with a passion. They were nerve-racking and noisy and he always left them needing a bottle of rum to soothe him. He was already itching for his flask, but that was in his bag, which was who-knows-where. Without it he could feel himself slowly becoming a wreck already.

“Well, anyway, with SOLDIER treatment we can't exactly let you wander off. AVALANCHE and Wutai both would love to get their hands on that secret.” someone said seriously. “So, what should we do with you, Mr. Tesla?”

Mo shuffled his feet uncertainly. He was still in scrubs, feet bare against the plush but ugly carpet.

“I... I don't know. I mean... I want to go home, but... I don't know how. And I'm not going to ask you to try recreating whatever happened, because I don't remember everything that happened. So... I guess I'm just... stuck here.” he said weakly.

“Well, with his unusual reactions to mako and materia, further research should be done. We don't know if he'll hold up even with the full treatment.” Hojo declared, sounding far too giddy for Mo to be comfortable.

“And, to be perfectly frank, I think it would be a bit of a waste to have a SOLDIER-strong individual unable to operate as such. Perhaps he should be trained.”

Now Veld spoke up. “Mr. Tesla knows next to nothing about Gaia or it's history. Someone will have to take responsibility for his education.”

“He'll need an ID and a job. He can't just leech off of the company forever.”

Being discussed like he wasn't even there. Well, Mo couldn't call it a new experience.

He felt weak. His head was... fuzzy.

... He was going to throw up again.

Mo clapped a hand over his mouth, just barely suppressing a shudder.
“Mr. Tesla?”

That was Sephiroth.

“I'm gonna throw up...”
Chapter 15

Mo liked Angeal. Angeal seemed like the sturdy and dependable kind. After he'd announced his nausea to the meeting, Angeal had left his spot on the wall to guide Mo to the nearest bathroom. The man was now holding his hair back and rubbing between his shoulders again as he hunched over the toilet and coughed up more black guck.

“Better now?” Angeal asked gently when he sat up and wiped at his mouth.

“... I think... that's it... It felt like I was squeezing the last bits of paint from a tube...” he mumbled, wiping his hand on his pants. His mouth tasted like death and decomposing skunk again. He probably was in desperate need of a toothbrush.

“Can you stand?”

After a moment, Mo braced himself on the wall and stood with a grunt. Angeal kept a hand on the small of his back, waiting for the verdict.

“... Sitting sounds wonderful, but I think I'll be fine...” he sighed. Ugh, his breath tasted nasty.

As he flushed the toilet, getting rid of the nasty black sludge, his stomach chose that moment to demonstrate whale mating-calls.

Looking down at his gut, Mo informed it, “You just finished purging toxic waste and you want food?”

Angeal snorted with laughter, making Mo blush.

“Come on, wash your mouth out, it'll help you feel better.” the man said with a comforting smile as he guiding Mo to the sink.

He didn't just stop at washing out his mouth, scrubbing his face clean. He hadn't showered in a while. His hair was starting to get greasy, and he felt disgusting, now that he thought about it. Washing his face would at least help make him feel better for the time being.

As he finished that, he looked up in the mirror.

A panicked yelp left him, drawing Angeal's attention.

His eyes had changed again, bright blue with a dark rim. No more brown so dark it could have been black. Just blue.

“What's wrong?”

“M-my eyes... it... it looks so damn wrong, having blue eyes... I mean, Tseng warned me it would happen, so did Reno, but... I hate it. I... I've lived my whole life being teased for how dark my eyes are, now they're suddenly neon blue, and... I hate it.” Mo explained, hiding his face in his hands and feeling childish. He was thirty-five, for crying out loud.

A gentle hand patted his shoulder. “Sorry. You didn't exactly choose this, did you? I imagine seeing such a drastic change in yourself is rather scary. Most of us look forward to it, and a lot of SOLDIERS boast when they finally get the mako-glow.”

Mo didn't reply, trying to gather himself.
Angeal must've seen that as needing further reassurance, because the man said, “If you were to ask me, though, it makes you look quite striking.”

He jolted a little, looking up at Angeal with wide eyes. A gentle smile greeted him.

“... Th... thanks...” he mumbled, not entirely sure how to respond.

A kind and handsome man complimenting his eyes. Vicky had done the same thing.

Vicky had been an asshole.

Mo gulped, quietly telling Angeal that he felt better. The SOLDIER nodded, and they started back for the meeting room. However, it looked like the meeting had ended by the time they got there. Veld and a few of his Turks were there, and so were Sephiroth and Genesis, but no one else.

“... So... um...” Mo all but squeaked.

“The current decision is to allow you to work here at Shinra headquarters. You will be assigned an apartment and given an ID shortly. You will be under surveillance to ensure that you're not one of our enemies. Additionally, you'll be seeing Professor Hojo for checkups and testing, and training with SOLDIER so your treatment doesn't go to waste. You'll be in the archives on weekends until your knowledge of Gaia and current events is deemed satisfactory.” Veld informed him, standing up.

“Okay... and... work?”

“A job has been found. You said you were a secretary, correct?”

Mo nodded. “Yeah, I screened Mr. Everson's paperwork and kept track of his appointments and things...”

“You don't start immediately, but one of our executives mentioned that they were looking for a new secretary. It was decided that you'll work for him.”

Veld nodded to the SOLDIERs, then gestured for Mo and his Turks to follow him.

“Good luck.” Angeal called with a smile.

Mo waved awkwardly as he left the room, trying to squash the butterflies in his stomach.

He'd just been dumped by Vicky and he was getting flustered over the first seemingly kindhearted man he encountered? What kind of idiot was he, asking for heartbreak like that?

No, things would be better if he worried about everything else, first.

His stomach whined.

Food and a shower were at the top of the list, followed by five shots of whiskey to calm him down after the shark-tank.
Chapter 16

“So this is your place!” Reno declared with an unnecessary flourish. Mo found himself smiling all the same. “Not very big, not very fancy, but you've got a kitchen and a bathroom. Hey, looks like you got a TV too, yo!”

“As long as it has basic amenities I’m sure I'll be fine. My place back home was four rooms and a basement.” Mo told the redhead as he looked around.

He'd been given a Shinra-issued ID card— a touch fancier compared to his old driver's license, when tucked together in his wallet— and a key-card that'd get him into his apartment and allow him to use the elevator. He'd also been given a new phone— a flip-phone, which made him smile at the nostalgia— with a few numbers already put into the contacts. Now Reno was showing him to his apartment, and would go over a layout of all the floors in the building with him after that. The redhead had then declared that they would grab Rude and go shopping. When Mo had protested, saying that he had no money, Reno just smiled and said that he and Rude could cover this round of expenses, and they'd just call in a favor when they needed it.

The apartment was bland and plain, unused. It smelled... plastic-wrapped, in a way. Like Mo and Reno were the first people setting foot in it at all. Mo saw a kitchenette, larger than the one at his old home. An open door led into the bedroom, and he guessed that the closed one was the bathroom. They were standing in an open main room, with two bookshelves, a couch, a glass coffee table, a tall lamp, and a wall-mounted TV. There were a few plastic-wrapped books on one of the shelves. They looked like manuals of some kind. The remote for the TV and a channel-guide sat on the coffee table. There was a window with blinds and curtains both drawn taking up a big portion of the farthest wall.

“Not bad, yo!” Reno grinned, wandering into the kitchen-area. Opening a cabinet, he exclaimed “Wow, how old are these?”

“Canned food or something?” Mo guessed.

“Yep! Layer of dust on 'em, though.”

“I'm sure that however old they are, with enough heat they'll be perfectly edible.” he replied, moving over to look. Reno was poking at what looked like three cans of soup, one of mixed vegetables, and something that might have been beans. Pulling down one of the soup-cans, a cartoony yellow bird greeted him from the label. “The hell is a... cho... chocobo?”

“A big bird. You can ride 'em, use 'em for labor, show 'em, race 'em... they come in different colors, too, but yellow's pretty common.” Reno waved off.

“... So feathery bipedal horses. Okay.”

The soup-can was put back and the two resumed poking around the apartment. There was a coffee-maker in the kitchen that Reno said was pretty good, and a few towels stacked neatly in the bathroom. The bed in the bedroom had a pair of pillows on it but nothing else. The closet had clothes-hangers for days, and a couple drawers that were clearly for things like socks and underwear. The main room and bedroom both had an ugly abstract painting hung up on one of their walls. Mo had already declared that he was going to need supplies to make some real art to hang up, making Reno cackle.
All in all, not too bad of a place. Close enough to home that Mo almost felt like he was, in fact, at his place.

Reno's phone suddenly rang, and the redhead hurried to answer it. While he did that, Mo turned to glare at the ugly canvas on the wall.

About eighteen by twenty-six inches. Primarily black and white, with splashes of red and smears of brown. Geometric blue shapes filled the leftmost third of the canvas. It made his head hurt to look at for too long, trying to make sense of the blue lines that zigged and zagged over, under, and through red splats. And the brown smears just looked like old vomit, in all honesty. An ugly piece, probably mass-produced. Better than the orange and green monstrosity in the bedroom, though. The one in the bedroom looked like someone had stuffed an oompa-loompa in a blender and left the top off so it spewed everywhere.

Mo had nothing against abstract art. It was when it was cheap, mass-produced splats of paint that everyone lauded as high art when two-year-olds could make better that he had a problem with it. It had no emotion, no meaning, and looked like garbage.

“Okay, so,” Reno declared, drawing Mo's attention back to him, “Rude's waiting for us down in the lobby. So I guess we'll go over the floors later, and head out to shop now!”

“You're too nice.” Mo sighed, shaking his head.

“Watch out, yo, that favor will rob you blind!”

“That's part of what worries me.”

The redhead laughed, waving for them to go. Smiling, Mo followed the Turk out of the apartment and to the elevator. Once again, he found himself listening to Reno's almost mindless chatter and making appropriate noises as the elevator went down. Reno was an immature chatterbox, but Mo couldn't say he minded. Even if the Turk turned out to be less of a good friend than he appeared, Mo appreciated him at least being here while he adjusted to... everything.

The lobby, it turned out, was large and spacious... and absolutely teeming with people. Reno had to tug him out of the elevator when he froze up, overwhelmed at the sheer number of people after the past few days.

It didn't take long to find Rude, standing by the entrance. The man looked the exact same as when Mo had seen him last, intimidating and stern.

“So, we're shopping for clothes and getting some food, because you're gonna die without those, yo!” Reno declared.

“Meh.” Mo replied, earning a snort of amusement.

“And if you're good, we'll get you beer!”

“Boy, I'm older than you by almost fifteen years, don't treat me like I'm six. I'll go up to your desk when you aren't around and clean you out.”

The redhead gasped, looking indignant. “Who told you such slander! I'm clearly twelve years your senior!”

“Tseng.”
“The traitor!” Reno wailed melodramatically, making Rude shake his head as they left the building.

“Don't worry, you're still my fav— woah.”

Mo was struck by how dark everything was. He'd been told it was early evening right now, but it was... dark. Street-lamps and neon signs lit up the streets, and the sky was black. Was there just that much smog? Just that much light-pollution?

The streets looked like cobblestone. For how advanced everything in the company headquarters was, everything out here seemed almost antiquated. It was marred by the neon and fluorescent lights, but really... even the vehicles rattling past looked old.

“Welcome to Midgar!” Reno said with a grin, slapping his shoulder and making him stumble. “Come on, this way!”

Mo found himself walking between the two Turks, looking around with wide eyes. Reno pointed things out, explaining what they were and giving his opinion on them. A few times the redhead would let out a wolf-whistle and point out a woman he thought looked hot. The man seemed shocked when Mo informed him he was gay, eyes wide and jaw dropped. He recovered quickly enough, though, asking Mo if he was hot. When Mo informed him he was very attractive but not his type, Reno promptly asked if Rude was hot, earning a shocked splutter from his partner. Mo gave a slight shrug, admitting that Veld was handsome. As they reached the first store, Reno declared that Mo had balls of pure steel to ogle Veld.

“I'm not ogling him!” Mo protested, cheeks pinking. “I'm saying he's more my type than either of you are! I like the strong and dependable kind, and just from looking he appears to be a steadfast man! Of course, knowing my luck he's straight, married for twenty years, and has four kids.”

“Didn't the boss have a wife in Kalm?” Reno asked, looking at Rude.

“See?” Mo challenged. He then looked around the store. Clothes, it looked like. “So, where to?”

Reno grabbed his wrist, tugging him towards the back. “I don't get why the men's stuff is always in the back, yo. Pain in the ass.”

“Marketing,” Mo replied simply as Rude followed them, “Women are more inclined to go shopping for clothes casually, so they put the women's things out in front where it's easy to see.”

“Makes sense. So, what all are we gonna need to get you... Something to sleep in, for sure.”

“Sweatpants for cold nights, boxers for warm ones.”

The redhead laughed, “Sexy!”

“Lech.” Mo replied, rolling his eyes. A thought then occurred to him. “Am I going to need a uniform for work?”

“Not really? Secretaries kinda get a little more free reign over their clothes, as long as they look professional.”

Mo nodded, looking over the racks around them. “So a simple button-up and slacks with black shoes... and maybe a vest of some kind?”

“Sounds good, yeah.”
They left the store with a set of sleepwear Mo was confident he'd never wear, two sets of his new work outfit, loose-fitting clothes for testing with Hojo, some workout clothes, and three sets of casual wear. Mo was already setting aside the gray shirt and red pants as his art-clothes. He didn't know if he'd get the chance to really do anything more than draw for a while, but it was an old habit.

Another hour later, and they were heading back to the headquarters building.

“Are you sure, yo?” Reno frowned.

“Two energy bars for breakfast, plus things for sandwiches if lunch-breaks are a luxury I'm not allowed, and instant noodles for nights when I can't make it to the canteen. Plus the stuff already in the apartment, then this should tide me over for a month.” Mo nodded. It wasn't much, but it should hold.

“You know your metabolism will be higher now that you're halfway to being a SOLDIER? Those guys eat, like, four times as much as everyone else, yo!” the redhead warned.

Mo couldn't help but give a wan smile. “Well, if my appetite is increasing four times over, I imagine I'll be fine. I'm better about eating regularly than most alcoholics, but regularly doesn't always mean properly.”

“You're gonna die.” Reno said flatly, leveling a look at him as they reached the building and entered the lobby. “You are straight-up gonna die. Your stomach'll eat you from the inside out.”

“I'm sure the resident mad scientist will enjoy the show.”

That actually got a small scoff of laughter from Rude, even as Reno shook his head.
“I am suddenly highly suspicious of everything you say and do.” Mo declared as Reno bustled into the apartment, laden down with a box of pastries and two bags of what was clearly alcohol. The redhead just grinned.

After returning to the Shinra building last night, Reno and Rude were called away for work. Mo had returned to his new apartment on his own, calling a contact listed as Tseng to let the man know he had gotten back and ask if he should do anything. He was told to just settle down and rest. So he had unpacked everything and put it away, made himself a sandwich, and fallen asleep on the couch while doodling a little Reno riding on Rude's shoulders while the two were chased by a fire-breathing dragon.

He'd just been woken up by someone hammering on his door, and had hurried to answer. Reno had said nothing, just shown himself in.

“Why all this?” Mo asked with a frown, not touching anything even as Reno laid it all out on the counter.

“Well, I figure you're gonna need it, yo! Today I'm giving you a tour of the place, introducing you to important people, and then we go back down to the archives for more books!”

“I hate everything and everyone.” Mo sighed, flipping open the box of baked goods and picking out a white-frosted donut. Reno just cackled evilly, flouncing over to the couch. “Lemme take a quick shower and get dressed...”

He scarfed down the donut and moved into the bedroom as Reno picked up his abandoned sketchbook, looking carefully at the drawings. As he came out of the bedroom, a change of clothes in hand, he snorted at the sight of Reno with a pencil behind each ear and one balanced on his lip.

“You break any of those pencils, you'll be getting me a new set.” Mo warned before stepping into the bathroom and closing the door.

He dropped his clothes on the floor and stripped down, nudging the rumpled, dirty pile closer to the shower. If needed, he could step out on them and not break his neck slipping on the wet floor. One of the towels was put nearby as well, if he needed to jump out or rub soap from his eyes. The apartment had come with a few toiletries, and Reno and Rude had included other necessities in the shopping-spree last night. Mo couldn't deny that he was thankful for the razor and shaving cream. He'd always been a relatively beardless kind of guy, his facial hair never making it far past stubble. When it did, it just looked unattractive.

Tempting as it was to take his time in the shower, really enjoy it, Mo figured he and Reno were probably on a schedule here. So he didn't waste any time standing around in the warm water, washing his hair directly after getting it all thoroughly wet. He skipped the conditioner, going straight into washing his face properly after he got done with the shampoo. He didn't think he'd used conditioner at all since he was... like... seven, being bathed by his mom. He knew it was healthier and all to use the stuff, but... well, to be perfectly honest, he just didn't like using it. He rather liked having coarse hair, in comparison to the silky smoothness conditioners promised. And if he had to shower more often because his hair got dirty faster, or trim it more often because it was prone to splitting, that was his business.

The huge scar on his abdomen made him stutter a bit. The bandages had been removed, and he'd
been told not to do anything too strenuous, but the wound was relatively healed. He couldn't imagine what it would have looked like when it was fresh. Bloody, most likely, raw red and exposed muscle or something like that. Now it was a sort of flushed, angry pink that was shiny in the right light. It would probably fade as it continued to heal, but it was still... scary. A huge starburst of scar-tissue that completely covered his lower torso. He noticed that his navel looked shallower, and wondered if that meant his skin was pulled tighter or something.

Because he really needed to be even more underweight.

Once he was clean, Mo stepped out of the shower and grabbed his towel, rubbing himself down quickly. Wrapping it around his waist, he went to shave, standing at the sink. He almost decided not to, unable to meet his reflection's gaze. He hated that his eyes were no longer his own familiar brown, were now this fantasy novel electric blue. But if he was going to be wandering around and potentially meeting the person who he was to be a secretary for, he best look professional. So instead he focused on his lips—chapped, bitten, split—as he shaved, carefully dragging the razor over his skin and removing the stubble that had started growing in.

Face smooth and clean, Mo finished drying off, combing his hair and getting dressed.

The second he left the bathroom, he was assaulted by a widely-grinning Reno.

“Dude, you have to let me have this! It's hilarious!”

Mo blinked several times, utterly perplexed, before he realized Reno was brandishing his sketchbook, flipped open to the doodle of the two Turks.

“Oh, that... it's just a lazy doodle, I was bored...” he mumbled, looking away.

“It's amazing, yo! I love it! Please?” Reno begged, eyes wide.

Mo opened and shut his mouth several times before saying, “How about this. I'll clean it up and make a more formal drawing of it, and then let you have it? It's all scratchy and half-done right now, letting you have it so incomplete would feel wrong.”

Reno grinned even wider, nodding furiously.

He couldn't help but smile softly as the redhead hurried to put the sketchbook and pencils in his bag. The last time anyone had been so enthused about anything he'd made... was probably Lucius, back in college. Lucius, excited for the realistic drawings of belly dancers Mo had drawn for fabric studies, begging for a full-color rendition of one that he could hang up on his wall. Mo had obliged, happy to give his friend something that he would like and appreciate. He wondered if Lucius still had the picture or if it had gotten thrown out.

Swallowing the lump growing in his throat, Mo pushed those thoughts away. Reno was babbling happily about how he couldn't wait to get the picture, he was going to frame it and stick it on his desk. Mo smiled again, moving back into the kitchen for more food and booze. He didn't know what any of these brands were, but he trusted Reno to have picked out decent things at least.

A bottle of beer and two muffins later, Mo was filling up his flask with rum while Reno found room for everything in the fridge.

“So I'm no slave-driver, yo. I figure we'll take the tour, introduce you to people as we go... then we'll head to the canteen and take a break, eat lunch. Afterwards, down to archives and whatnot for class!” Reno grinned broadly as they left the apartment.
Mo groaned.

“Oh, just a heads-up, I won't always be your teacher and escort and stuff. Being a Turk is pretty unpredictable, so there may be days where I don't show up at all.”

“Like last night?”

Reno nodded. “Exactly like last night. Things can pop up and we need all hands on deck, or maybe someone needs an extra bodyguard, or AVALANCHE decides to open a new supply-line... who knows.”

Mo nodded in understanding as they headed for the elevator. There were a couple of women already in there, discussing... love-issues, it sounded like. They stopped when Reno and Mo stepped in, though, eyeing Reno distrustfully.

“So, I figure we'll start from the top down, that way we can just fly through the boring stuff at the end and go straight to lunch. Sound good, yo?” Reno asked casually as he leaned against the wall, ignoring the women.

“I suppose?” Mo offered with a helpless shrug. “I mean... will it really take that long? It's pretty early...”

“Fuck if I know, but it makes sense to me!” the redhead grinned, earning tuts from both the women.

The women got off the elevator shortly after that, leaving the two of them alone all the way up to the sixty-ninth floor.

“So, the top floor is the president's office. People don't really go up there, so we won't bother. But this floor has the big executive offices, including your new boss, the VP.” Reno said, pointing towards the back of the floor from where they were. “Come on, wanna see?”

“I imagine I should.” Mo sighed.

“Come on, where's your excitement, yo?” Reno teased.

“Yaaay.” he replied, deadpan.

The redhead muffled his snort of laughter in his elbow, disguising it as a cough.

Together, they moved back through the floor. It was relatively quiet, with few people around. Mostly assistants or secretaries walking between the offices and their desks.

“So the big dogs tend to have two offices. They have their private one up here, and then a second one on their floor. Some of them stay up here, others stay on their floors so they can oversee things. Your boss just has his office here, since he's the VP and kinda serves to screen people trying to get upstairs.” Reno explained as they approached an office that seemed... bigger than the others. The redhead tapped on the door. After a moment, there was a call to come in. “C'mon, let's go.”

They passed through an anteroom of sorts— his future workplace, he noted— and into a large, cushy office that could only be made more lavish by covering things in diamonds.

Rising up from the desk by the large floor-to-ceiling window was the young blonde man from the shark-tank.
As Mo took in his cold smile and perfect white suit, he felt a chill go down his back.

He suddenly missed Mr. Everson, crude words and all.
Chapter 18

“Aaaand we're back at the canteen! So, what'd you think?” Reno grinned as the elevator slid open.

“I've already drunk half my flask.” Mo replied flatly.

“Aww, it ain't that bad!” Reno chuckled as they joined the lunch-line.

“It was. It is.” he said stubbornly as they collected trays.

“Okay, so, what about your new boss?”

Rufus Shinra. The son of the president of Shinra Electric Power Company, vice president at only nineteen.

“He scares me and I miss my old boss, because at least I was able to read him and he was human, not... human glacier hybrid.” Mo said as they went to hunt for seats, trays of food in hand.

Reno snickered at his description, pointing to an empty table across the room. The redhead then sprang ahead to reserve the spot, Mo following carefully after.

“Yes,” the Turk nodded as Mo sat across from him, “Rufus is kinda a brat, but what're ya gonna do? At least as his secretary you'll get a decent paycheck.”

“I'm going to cry myself to sleep with a bottle of vodka every night, that's what I'm going to do.”

Reno snorted, almost choking on his food, before asking, “Dude, how'd you get to be such a pushover?”

Mo gave a weak shrug. “Emotions are hard. I can't always identify what I'm feeling, don't always know how to react to what I'm feeling or how to express it. It's easier when I'm drunk, things just roll out that way. So it's easier overall to defer to people who know what they're doing.”

He couldn't tell what the expression Reno was making meant. Sighing a little, he looked down at his food and began to eat.

After a minute, someone sat next to him, making him jolt in surprise.

“Yo, Cissnei.” Reno grinned as Mo clutched at his chest.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you.” the female redhead smiled.

“N-no... I was lost in thought...” he stammered.

“Oh? What about?”

“A pinch of this, a fistful of that, a smattering of everything in between...”

He gestured vaguely, earning a snort and a smile.

As Reno began to chatter again, apparently directed at Cissnei, Mo swung his bag around into his lap and pulled out his sketchbook. Might as well work on Reno's picture while he had a down moment.
Let's see, he thought, was just a dragon enough? Or should he include a small horde of cartoony monsters chasing the duo? It looked good with just the dragon, but maybe he should include a one-eyed ogre with a club and a werewolf or some other furry beast?

After a moment, he lightly sketched in the outline of an ogre and some kind of big quadruped. Nudging Cissnei with his elbow, he drew her attention.

“What do you think, is the dragon enough, or should I add in a couple more monsters?” he asked, gesturing with his pencil to the areas he'd fill in.

There was a moment of silence, and then Cissnei broke down giggling.

“Oh, Goddess, it's adorable! Is that Reno and Rude?”

“You can't have it!” Reno declared fiercely, figuring out what they were talking about. “I already asked, it's mine, I have dibs!”

Waving her coworker off, Cissnei said, “I think just the dragon is fine, but maybe add in just a little bit of background?”

Nodding, Mo delicately erased the outlines and sketched in a line across the page, putting a few little hash-marks and ovals to stand in as grass and rocks. “Like that?”

“Perfect. I can't wait to see the finished product.”

“It'll be on my desk,” Reno told the other Turk, “In a gold frame so everyone can see it.”

“You're ridiculous.” Cissnei said, not without a note of fondness, as Mo worked a few more details into the picture, cleaning up and sharpening his lines. “So, what're you two up to?”

“After lunch we're heading down to the archives 'n stuff. Getting Mo all up to speed.” Reno waved. Mo groaned, giving the dragon a few sharp teeth around the burst of flame.

“Well, I'm not busy at the moment. I could come along and help out. I imagine Reno isn't the greatest teacher, after all.”

Even as Reno objected to Cissnei's so-called vile slander, Mo was lifting his head. “If you think you can help me understand then I personally would welcome your presence.”

She smiled, gently bumping her shoulder against his. “It's settled, then. And if I'm still free when we're done, I'll come by your apartment and make hot chocolate.”

“Can I hug you? I want to hug you.” Mo said.

With a playful giggle, the woman turned to him, arms open.

“No fair! How come she gets hugs and I don't?” Reno pouted.

“Because you've been demoted to third-favorite. Cissnei is now my favorite Turk.” Mo replied as he leaned against Cissnei and wrapped his arms around her.

“Third?! Who's in second?!”

“Rude.”

“Aww, c'mon, I brought you donuts and beer!”
Mo smiled, releasing Cissnei and sitting up. “Yes, but you're holding a huge favor over my head and she's a sweet little angel.”

“She is not!” Reno whined loudly as Cissnei laughed.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

I have to admit, after encountering Cissnei I somehow picked up the headcanon that she makes the best saucepan hot chocolate, but doesn't get to make it often. I dunno, that's the vibe I get from her.

“You don't have much of your own yet, do you?” Cissnei smiled as Mo closed the door behind them all.

“No, not yet...” he sighed, kicking his shoes off.

“Here, I'll get started on the hot chocolate.”

Cissnei had stayed throughout the entire history lesson. While she had actually helped, Mo still found himself hopelessly confused. He was starting to suspect that it was just because he'd had the history of one world drummed into him for so long, this history was simply clashing too much. With his luck, someone would quiz him and he'd get the two worlds conflated somehow.

On the way to his apartment, Cissnei had stopped by her own to pick up the things she needed. So now she was taking over the kitchen while he and Reno settled down on the couch. Mo pulled out his sketchbook to continue working on the drawing for Reno. He'd gotten things cleaned up during lunch, and had managed to work a little bit during the lesson. He had a few details left to work in, and then he could start shading and finishing up.

As he worked, Mo realized that Reno was hovering over his shoulder, watching with wide eyes. He paused, turning to look at the redhead. Reno gave a cheeky smile and waved.

“Hi. You need something?” Mo asked.

“I wanna watch!”

“You're seriously invading my personal space, and I can always change my mind.”

Reno promptly scooted to the other end of the couch, making Cissnei laugh from the kitchen. It was Mo's understanding that she was making saucepan hot chocolate, so he was looking forward to that. It certainly smelled good.

By the time she was done, bringing over three steaming mugs topped off with marshmallows, he was finishing the last details of the picture.

“Wow, that's amazing.” Cissnei admired as she sat between him and Reno.

“Thank you.” Mo said softly, unable to keep himself from smiling.

It only took a minute longer before Mo was signing the drawing. His signature went in the lower right-hand corner, out of the way and unobtrusive, but visible. It looked like it said ‘MoT,’ or had a seven in place of a T. But it was his signature, and he'd been taught to sign all his work, no matter what.
Carefully, carefully, Mo tore the page from the sketchbook and passed it to Reno.

“Dude,” the male redhead grinned as Mo finally took a sip of his hot chocolate, “It's perfect! I love it!”

“I'm glad you like it.” Mo smiled. “Cissnei, this stuff is amazing.”

“Thank you very much. I don't get to make it very often, and call me sappy, but I think it tastes best when you share it.”

He allowed himself a small chuckle as he blew carefully on the drink.

For a while, the three of them were all silent, content to sip at their hot chocolate and unwind.

“So you're start working tomorrow, huh?” Cissnei asked.

“Yeah. And apparently I'll be getting a call sometime in the next few days about testing with Hojo and training with SOLDIER. I'm... not looking forward to any of it. Rufus is scary for a teenager, Hojo is a creep... and I'm a pacifist so training with warriors just sounds like hell.”

“Wait, really? A pacifist?” Reno asked, looking at him in confusion. “But didn't you fight with the Genesis lookalike?”

Mo shook his head as he drew his legs up. “I was trying to restrain him. I had no intention to fight or hurt him. I wanted to get the gun away, pin him down and keep him from hurting anyone... but I'm a skeleton wrapped in white leather with a few gallons of liquor somewhere in the abdominal area. He had the weight and muscle-mass needed to throw me off.”

Reno spluttered with laughter at Mo's description of himself, but Cissnei just frowned.

“Why, though? Wouldn't it have been easier to just wait for someone who could stop him?” she asked.

Mo stared into his mug.

After a moment, he sighed. “Maybe. But... was I supposed to just sit by and watch while the poor kid's head was blown off? I... I wasn't even thinking about it, I was already moving before I could think about it. I just wanted to... to keep everyone safe. To make sure no one got hurt. And I guess I figured if I ended up dead on the floor, it was better than a mother losing her baby like that. I... I didn't... have anything left.”

Like the woman in his dreams had said. He'd had nothing. His family had died, his boyfriend had never loved him, and his only real friend had ditched him. He'd had a shit job where no one really knew his name and a shit house with only a handful of belongings.

When he thought about it, he began to wonder if he'd been trying subconsciously to die.

“Hey... I'm sorry...”

Blinking, Mo realized he was crying.

That was all it took.

His legs unfolded, and he leaned forward to put his mug on the coffee table. Resting his elbows on his knees, he hid his face behind his hands, fingers laced, and sobbed. He'd lost everything. But when he really thought about it, there had been nothing to lose.
And yet, ending up here, in this world, he was still losing things. His goddamn eye-color. His mind, apparently, given his unconscious fits of violence. Trying to rewrite everything he'd learned about history to fit a world that he knew nothing about. He had nothing to lose and yet here he was, still losing.

Maybe he'd just been bottling things up for the past few days. But now everything was just coming pouring out and he couldn't stop it. Sobs and hiccups shook him like a ragdoll, breaking his voice into a hundred tiny pieces as he struggled to breathe. His stomach hurt, skin feeling too tight around his guts.

Face obscured by his hands, he didn't see when Cissnei hugged him. He only felt it, her rubbing his shoulder and pressing her cheek gently against his head. She hummed softly, tunelessly. She smelled clean and warm, like a sunny spring day. Ordinarily, he'd find the scent soothing, but right now he was just too much of a wreck. Mo was vaguely aware of Reno leaving, slipping past and out the door. But he didn't have the strength or the courage to ask the man to stay.

He howled with grief for reasons unknown.

He wanted a drink.
Chapter 20

... Ugh.

He felt sticky and gross. His face especially.

A disgruntled groan left him as he shifted about. Why did he feel sticky and gross, especially his face?

“Oh, are you awake?”

“No, ‘m dead ’s fuck...” he replied, throwing both his arms up over his face.

... Wait a minute.

Mo removed his arms, cracking his eyes open.

“... Cissnei?”

The redheaded woman smiled down at him. “You had a mood-swing. It's pretty common along with nausea after mako injections.” she informed him gently.

For a moment, Mo just stared blankly up at her.

Then, in a rush, it all came back to him. Groaning, he closed his eyes and put his arms back. “Did you... stay here all night...?”

“Well, you are supposed to be under surveillance. Under the influence of a mood-swing, who knows what you would’ve gotten up to.”

“You didn't have to... jeez...”

Cissnei chuckled from above him. “But then who would wake you up?”

“... Nnhuh?”

“You start work in less than two hours.”

It took a moment for that to sink in.

“Shit!” Mo hissed, leaping up from the couch. He promptly tripped over his own feet, tumbling to the floor with a loud curse. With Cissnei laughing in the background, he ranted, “I meant to set an alarm, to actually sleep in the damn bed, of course I would end up crying like a baby on someone's lap, goddammit!”

Fighting his way into the kitchen, Mo tugged open the fridge. He grabbed a can of beer first, the pop of it opening soothing. Throwing his head back, he gulped the drink down and tossed the can into the sink. He could see about recycling later, right now he had to get ready and go.

“Not the first time this has happened?” Cissnei asked as he took out the box of goods Reno had brought over yesterday. There were so many left, had the man really thought he would eat all of it?

“Every time I get a new job, I swear! Stupid drunk ass, gonna get fired on the first day one of these days...” Mo grumbled, scarifying down something that looked and tasted like a danish. He also
grabbed a scone-looking thing and two donuts, pushing the box and the fridge shut and running for the bedroom. When he came out again, he had his new work clothes and no baked goods. Cissnei had moved into the kitchen, making him pause and invite her to the box before bolting into the bathroom.

Again, there was no long, indulgent shower. That was a privilege one woke up early for, not overslept on the couch. Mo scrubbed himself down, washed his face and hair, and got out. He shaved, dried off, combed his hair, and dressed.

Shit, he hadn't made a lunch yet, and where the hell was his wallet?

As he burst out of the bathroom, he skidded to an abrupt halt, staring at Cissnei.

She smiled, holding his tote bag and wallet. “I made a couple sandwiches, they're in the paper bag in here.” she informed him.

“If I was straight, I'd propose to you.” Mo said, unable to help but smile back. He gave the woman a quick hug as he thanked her, taking his things. The redhead just shook her head at him with a smile as she left the apartment.

Once he'd gotten his shoes on and left as well, she was nowhere to be seen. He didn't have the time to dwell on it too much, racing to the elevator. Two others were already there waiting, and offered bland greetings without looking up. One just sipped at her coffee while staring at the doors of the elevator. The other one just turned the page of his book without looking like he was actually reading. Mo couldn't help but sigh. He'd probably rushed around enough in his panic that he had time to spare now...

The elevator arrived with a ding, doors sliding open. Mo actually recognized one of the two in there already as one of the scientists from Hojo's lab, and nodded timidly. He got no response as he and the two from his floor stepped into the elevator.

However, all eyes went to him when he swiped his card for the sixty-ninth floor. Gulping a little, Mo kept his gaze down and shuffled to the back of the elevator.

The elevator emptied out little by little. Eventually, it was just Mo, going up the last few floors from the Science Department, and he allowed himself a small sigh, running a hand through his hair.

The doors opened again, and he stepped out.

Thankfully, none of the other secretaries seemed to notice or care.

Risking a glance at the clock nearby, Mo barely withheld a sigh of relief when he saw he still had ten minutes to spare.

With that in mind, he was calmer as he moved back towards Rufus's office. Because it was his first day, he knocked before going in.

“Mr. Tesla. You don't have to knock.” Rufus remarked from in his own office area.

Mo sent a polite smile back. “Since it is my first day on the job, it's more professional to announce my presence and let you know I'm here. Additionally, if a secretary is ever absent, their employer should know, as they handle calls, people, and paperwork that would otherwise be sent straight through without needing to be. So it's only proper that you know when I arrive and when I leave, Mr. Shinra.”
“Rufus. Mr. Shinra is my father.”

Mo kept his smile as he nodded. “Do you have any specific directions or instructions for me? A planner I should use, people to blacklist, anything of the sort?”

“... Not particularly. I trust you to keep things under control.”

He nodded again, trying very hard to ignore the chill going down his back. With the conversation done, Mo closed the door to the office, blocking the antechamber off from the world for a moment. Once the latch had clicked, he allowed himself one last sigh.

Was Rufus really only nineteen? What on earth— or rather what on Gaia— had the boy been through to make him so cold and intimidating?

No, he shouldn't be thinking about things like that. He should be focusing on work.

Mo moved over to the desk that was set off to the side. It took a moment to figure out, but he booted up the computer there and set his bag down behind the desk. Sitting down, he looked around his new workspace.

To the other side of the room, there were a few chairs. For visitors to wait in if Rufus was busy, he recognized that from Mr. Everson's office. A bookshelf behind him that looked mostly for show, packed with... all kinds of random books. Jeez. Oh, look, there was another ugly abstract painting hanging next to the shelf. What was it with Shinra and ugly mass-produced pieces that weren't even technically art? The little glass paper-weight on his desk was more artistic than that. And speaking of the desk... there was the computer, the lonely paperweight, an in-tray and an out-tray, the desk-phone, a plain black cup of pens and pencils... Going through the drawers, he found a box of manila envelopes, a box of standard envelopes, and thing of stamps, an ink-pad and stamp-block, a small stack of post-its, and an empty planner. Tucked into the way back of the bottom drawer was a rather beat-up novel that looked to be of the raunchy romance kind. Mo raised an eyebrow and put that back.

After a moment he moved it into the top drawer. If he ran out of things to do, it was a time-eater. His sketchbook was in his bag, but he wanted to save the paper left in it now. He didn't know when his first paycheck was coming, let alone where to buy a good sketchbook or what it would cost.

Ah, the computer was on.

Okay, first things first, where was his planner? In addition to his ID and key-card, the Turks had given him a couple emails. One for personal use and one for work. The work one redirected all of Rufus's emails to him, until he deemed them worth Rufus's attention...

Flipping his planner open to the very back, Mo scanned across the various things he'd scribbled down over the months he'd owned it. There, his username and password. Okay, so...

There weren't a lot of emails. Really, that wasn't too surprising at the moment, since he'd just started working. And without any paperwork or calls at the moment...

Right.

Mo rolled his shoulders.

This, at least, was familiar territory.
“Shiva, are you really reading that?”

It took Mo a moment to realize he was the one being addressed. Blinking, he looked up to find one of the other secretaries standing over him, staring at his book.

It was still his first day of work. After several hours of writing down meetings in the planner, sorting emails, and reading the few papers that came in, Rufus had informed him that he had an hour-long lunch-break to do what he wanted with. There was a lounge-like area on the floor, or he could go to the canteen, or the recreational floor, or the break floor... or out if he thought he could manage it.

Without a Turk around, Mo figured the on-floor lounge was his best bet. He'd taken his bag and the book he'd found and headed over. It seemed like most of the other secretaries were already there, so he'd slunk off to an unoccupied corner. It was... painfully obvious that he was the only male present.

The two sandwiches Cissnei had packed were wolfed down quickly, leaving him with... nothing to do. But the old feeling of not wanting to work still had settled in quickly. Familiar territory brought about those Pavlovian instincts, he supposed.

His fingers had itched for his sketchbook— or his flask, but Cissnei had apparently taken that out of his bag, bless and curse her— so he'd settled down in his chair with the book from the desk. Now he was face-to-face with one of the other secretaries. Apparently his reading material was... questionable.

“Well... I've nothing else to read, and this was in my desk, so why not...?” he offered timidly.

The woman scoffed, rolling her eyes. “That smut-book is only good if you're a horny teenager or a lonely old biddy. No one in their right mind reads that trash.”

Mo shrugged, marking his page and closing the book. “Well... I don't have anything else right now... but when I have the money, what would you recommend?”

“Well, personally I would recommend the Lonely Traveler trilogy. It draws inspiration from the play adaptation of Loveless, so naturally it's amazing.”

“... What's Loveless?” he asked.

Every secretary seemed to hear, and gasped in horror.

“To whatever gods exist, I have made a grave mistake and hope you forgive this agnostic drunk for his sins.” Mo mumbled, shrinking back in his chair.
All of the women present started talking at once. From what Mo could make out, Loveless was a poem— made into a play— it was a best-seller— it was Genesis's favorite— the most amazing piece of literature ever— and he must've been under a rock to not know it.

“... I see... I guess I'll have to buy a copy...” he said once all the talk was done.

“So... what do you know, since Loveless is foreign to you?” the first secretary asked, with her arms crossed.

Mo looked sheepishly down at the book on his lap. “I was... never really one for literature. I mean... maybe I could recite Porphyria's Lover if I had to... and some of the monologues in Romeo and Juliet inspired a few of my paintings and sculptures...” he admitted.

“... What?” one of the women said blankly.

... Oh, shoot.

He had completely forgotten he was in a different world.

Shaking his head, Mo lied, “They're both rather obsolete works. The first is a poem, and the second is a play, a romantic tragedy. I haven't encountered either for a long time.”

Okay, so it wasn't entirely a lie. A half-lie.

“Well, I doubt either is as good as Loveless. I think I have my old copy in my desk, I just got a new special edition so I don't need it anymore. Let me get it.” the one standing over him declared.

As she sauntered off, Mo noticed how lavish she looked compared to the other secretaries. She wore more jewelry, and her nails were the longest. Her lipstick and nail-polish were matching shades of red. If he had to guess, the stones in her jewelry were diamonds. A quick glance around made him wonder if her clothes were the highest quality.

... So she was the queen bee around here, then.

Instead of cutthroat suburban moms it was cutthroat secretaries.

Lovely.

He wondered if it was too late to quit.

A minute later, the secretary-queen came swaggering back, a cream-bound book in hand. Without any preamble, she dropped it in his lap, making him jump a little.

“It's good. Anyone who doesn't like it is insane.”

A chorus of agreements went up.

Mo nodded, picking both books up. “Right,” he said, putting them in his bag, “I'll be sure to give it a read. I think I better go now, though. Mr. Shinra gets a lot of calls and emails, I best stay on top of that.”

Which was polite-speak for he'd take the terrifying teen over the secretary snakepit.
Mo paused as his stomach gurgled hungrily.

Frowning, he looked over at the time.

Just past midnight. His first day of work had ended at about eight, and he'd eaten at the canteen. Was he hungry again because he was up so late?

At first, he had been tired, taking off his work clothes and collapsing on the bed. But then he'd grown restless, and had wandered around the apartment for a while before sprawling out on the couch with his two new books. While that queen bee secretary had called the one from his desk a smut-book, Mo was actually finding it quite enjoyable. It was a little glurgle-y at times, but otherwise very well-written. Loveless sat on the coffee table, ready to be read when he was done with the other. A few cans of beer sat next to it, half of them already emptied.

His stomach made more noise, clenching painfully.

... Well, he still had that big box of things Reno had brought over yesterday. Having just one thing from there wouldn't hurt. He'd have a turnover or something, finish his beer and his book, and go to bed.

Mo stood up with a grunt, marking his page and heading into the kitchen. Opening the fridge up, he pulled out the box and examined the contents. There were still a few donuts, two muffins, a couple turnover-type-things, three danishes, and what looked like a cinnamon roll. After a moment of deliberation, he took the cinnamon roll and one of the turnovers. That should be plenty.

Returning to the couch, Mo jumped over the back and landed awkwardly on the cushions. He put his treats down on his lap as he resumed his sprawl, and licked his fingers clean of stickiness. Picking up his book, he found his place and continued reading. He kept one hand free for beer and baked goods, humming idly.

Mo was licking his fingers for the last time as he finished the last page of the book.

“... I think John was the better man, personally.” he informed the words on the page. “He wasn't rich, true, but he was loyal even when you said those horrible things to him.”

Well, that was it for the night. It was getting close to one now, and he really ought to get to bed.

Sitting up, Mo put the book down on the table. Drink the last beer of the night, use the bathroom, go to bed. He'd likely wake up late in the morning, so he should get everything together and be ready to just run out the door.

But as he finished off the last can of beer he'd gotten out, Mo noticed how his stomach was clenching. It wasn't making noise, but it was still seizing painfully.

... He was still hungry?

Mo shook his head. Eating too much before going to sleep made it impossible to do so. Use the bathroom, get in bed.

With that in mind, Mo got into the bathroom. He washed his face a little, hoping it would help take his thoughts away from his begging stomach.
But it didn't.

... Okay. Okay, he could handle this.

He'd have another beer, another donut, and get in bed. Simple as that.

But when he went to grab one of the donuts, Mo found himself grabbing all three of them.

“No.” he said sternly, not entirely sure who he was addressing.

After a moment of internal conflict, Mo put everything back and grabbed the open bottle of rum. He'd just drink that down and call it a night. With a belly full of alcohol he'd be less inclined to want food. Treat his addiction, fill his gut, and with the depressant qualities of alcohol he'd be out like a light. Easy fix.

... Might as well read Loveless while he was at it, keep himself from thinking about it and getting worked up.

Sighing a bit, Mo moved to the couch and sat down. Picking up the book in question, he noted that it was relatively well-worn. In better condition than the glurge-filled romance he'd just finished, but definitely one that had been read and handled often. Flipping idly through before actually reading, he found that certain passages had been underlined. Huh. Okay, he wondered if that meant she was part of a book-club or something that had done a study on it.

Taking a mouthful of rum, he flipped back to the beginning and started reading.

Almost an hour later and he'd finished both rum and book.

He was still hungry.

How was he still hungry, he'd just had almost a whole bottle of rum?! Come to think of it, he didn't feel at all... well, to be perfectly frank, he was nowhere near buzzed enough, considering today he'd had six beers and a bottle of rum!

And now, Mo realized, he was starting to itch impatiently. He wanted to do something, anything.

Standing up, he began to pace.

Why was this happening? He didn't understand. He was scared.

From the corner of his eye, he caught his half-there reflection in the dormant TV screen.

His eyes looked like they were glowing.

Only his hands clapped over his mouth kept him from screaming in shock.

He'd completely forgotten. Reno had warned him, hadn't he? That his metabolism would spike up, and he'd eat more? Reno had warned him, and he'd brushed it off, oh, fuck...

What did he do?

Without thinking about it, Mo pulled out his phone, scrolling through his short list of contacts—... No.

He'd been a burden enough already to the Turks. They had to follow him around, keep an eye on
him, teach him everything he needed to know about this world... Could he really call them up at
two in the fucking morning to hassle them about something that... that people apparently
underwent voluntarily?

Especially after his whole breakdown last night?

Mo was preparing to close his phone when he noticed the name he’d stopped on.

... Was he that desperate? Was he really so desperate and terrified that...

Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Mo pressed call.

He put his phone to his ear, closing his eyes and listening to the tone.

This was insane. Stupidly insane. Did he really think the man would be awake at this hour, let
alone—

“What is it?”

Well, never mind.

“Professor Hojo?” Mo all but squeaked.

There was a beat of silence.

“Well, Mr. Tesla, to what do I owe this pleasure?”

This was such a stupid idea.
“No,” Mo growled, glaring as he pulled his knees up to his chest, “Shock yourself. I said no more fucking shocks. My wrist has a burn on it.”

Hojo waved him off, scoffing, “You’ll heal. One of the benefits of SOLDIER, you’ll find.”

“Lovely.” he replied sarcastically from his place on the floor while Hojo wrote something down.

So far, he'd learned that in this first week or so where he adjusted to the mako in his system, there would be a variety of side-effects. He was going to have spikes in energy, his appetite would roller-coaster around, he'd have mood-swings and nightmares, and there was a very good chance he'd get at least one migraine. Once the mako settled, his senses would be elevated, he'd be stronger and faster than before, his metabolism would be higher and his appetite larger, and he'd heal faster. Hojo had also informed him that SOLDIERs 'couldn't' get drunk. Mo had replied that he was sure with the right resources he could prove that wrong.

He'd been told that if he wanted to arrange for a day where they did that, Hojo would allow him to choose his preferred alcohol for the testing. Mo was pretty sure it was a trap to get him drunk off his ass and vivisect him, but at the same time the idea of free unlimited rum was horrifically tempting.

Mo had been in the labs all night with the professor. During his call, he'd expressed his concerns—brushed off as normal—and then asked if... possibly... the man wanted him for anything right at that moment. If Hojo was feeling at all tired, he certainly didn't show it. All Mo knew was that he probably needed to start heading back to his apartment to get ready for work, and he was finally exhausted.

Shitty timing, really.

“Hm, I suppose you'll be pulled away soon if I don't let you go.”

... So in addition to being a cartoony mad scientist, the man was now a mind-reader?

“Very well.” Hojo huffed. Gesturing for him to stand up, the man said, “We'll draw your blood and take your heart-rate. If you can make it here tonight at nine, we can pick up where we left off.”

“... Should that be the schedule for testing, then? Every other day starting tomorrow at nine?” Mo asked as he stood up, holding out his arm.

“I suppose a day of rest and recovery between experiments would be ideal, yes. Fine. I'll inform the Turks of our arrangement.”

He was signing his own death-warrant, he was sure of it.

As he left the floor, Mo couldn't help but sag against the walls of the elevator.

He was tired. Drop-dead dog-tired to the bone. And he was going in to work like this. Oh, ugh, he regretted everything.

The elevator dinged, startling him awake.

That tired, huh? He didn't think he'd been that tired since college... what, twelve years ago?
Something like that...

As he came up on his apartment, Mo realized Reno was standing in front of his door, knocking.

“Hey.” he called gently, drawing the redhead's attention.

“Hey yourself! Jeez, you look like hell! And where were you?”

Mo groaned a little as he opened the apartment up. “Hojo. Couldn't sleep, wanted to do something. Regret so much right now.”

“I bet!” Reno declared as Mo flopped over on the couch. “Dude, you have work in two hours!”

“Uh-huh. Lemme use one of those hours to nap.” he grumbled into the cushions.

“If you think you can afford it, yo!”


There was a stretch of silence where neither of them spoke. He felt himself starting to nod off.

“So...” Reno said awkwardly, snapping Mo awake and drawing his attention. The younger man looked... uncomfortable. Concerned, Mo propped himself up on his elbows, which seemed to prompt Reno into speaking again. “I'm sorry for bailing the way I did night before last. I'm not really good with grief or other shit on that side of the spectrum. I didn't want to make things worse, and Cissnei looked like she had it under control.”

Mo shook his head, pushing himself up into a sitting-position. “You aren't obligated to do anything like that. Neither of you are. While I appreciate you both being around and I enjoy your company... I understand that... that we aren't really friends. You're doing your job, which currently involves me. If you don't want to hang around then I can't make you. Not without... a violent display or something.”

Reno vaulted over the back of the couch, landing perfectly next to him. “Ordinarily, I'd say you're right, but you're a pretty chill guy. I don't mind. Wouldn't call us friends just yet, but we can get there.” the redhead said, pulling something out of his pocket. Passing it to Mo, he continued, “Anyway, I got you those to apologize for bailing out. I hope they're okay? I mean, I noticed your pencils have little codes on the sides, and you use like six of them for one drawing.”

Mo blinked, confused and curious. Looking down, he found a small pouch like the one he kept his pencils, pens, and erasers in. Gingerly picking it up, he pulled the bag open—

“You didn't have to.” he said instantly, unable to help pulling some of the pencils out to examine them.

“I mean, black and white is cool and all, but I figured you could use some color or something.” the Turk shrugged.

Mo smiled, carefully shaking out all of the colored pencils and fanning them out. He had no clue if these would blend well, and if they did he'd need to make a few blending stumps or something. But whether they did or didn't, the colors were very pretty, vibrant and bright.

“You're too nice, Reno. Thank you.” he said softly, sliding the pencils back into their bag.
“Don't mention it, yo. Hey, were you serious about that nap?”

“I mean, I would really like to be, but if I go to sleep now I won't wake up.” Mo said with a hint of a sigh, staring longingly towards the bedroom. After a moment, he shook his head, preparing to get up. “No, I'll just have to tough it out. I brought this upon myself.”

“Why don't you do it? I'll stick around and shake you up when there's an hour left. If you're tired, you're more likely to have more mood-swings and be unpredictable in general. Makes more sense to let you grab a few winks than send you off to be unpredictable near the VP.” Reno said with a smirk.

“You're a doll when you put your mind to it.” Mo smiled gratefully, standing up. He wobbled a little, but steadied himself quickly enough. Tired unsteady was nowhere near as bad as plastered stupid unsteady.

Putting the colored pencils down next to the two books and empty rum-bottle, Mo headed into the bedroom. He managed to put his wallet and phone on the bedside before collapsing. A very long, rather obscene sigh left him as he nuzzled into the sheets. Oh, he was tired. It was only an hour of sleep, but he was going to make it count. He'd deal with everything else afterwards.
Chapter 24

The ringing of the phone snapped Mo awake.

He'd have been fired four times over if anyone had seen him nodding off any of the times he had. Going to see Hojo had been a stupid idea made by a stupid person. At least Reno had been kind enough to let him nap for an hour and then wake him up. But an hour was an hour, not nearly enough to revitalize him, so his head kept bobbing downwards while reading through emails or papers.

Checking which line the call was coming from, Mo picked up the receiver. "Vice President Shinra's office, how may I assist you?" he asked.

"This is Mr. Tesla, correct?"

... Um, okay?

"Speaking. Is there some way I can assist you?"

"Not quite. My name is Lazard. I'm the director of the SOLDIER program."

Oh. Okay. It made a bit more sense now. He remembered Reno telling him a bit about the man, but they hadn't been able to meet him during Mo's orientation. Which was a shame, really, he sounded like a pleasant person. Better than the other directors he'd met— Scarlet was the worst so far, in his opinion. Palmer and Heidegger tied for second, and the Urban Development director had been so all over the place that they might as well have not met. Reeve? Wasn't it? Mo had been unable to form any sort of opinion on the man. But Lazard had been in a meeting, so Mo hadn't met him yet.

"I see," Mo replied, "To what do I owe this call?"

He thought he heard a chuckle on the other end of the line, but it could have been his imagination.

"I received notice that Hojo has arranged a schedule for your testing, which leaves a schedule for your SOLDIER training."

His heart leapt up into his throat.

"You see," Lazard continued, completely unaware of Mo's internal panic, "It was agreed that you will only be trained by our Firsts. This is due to how your strength and aggression appear to go up under high-stress situations. We wouldn't want to endanger anyone unable to handle such scenarios should they occur. However, our Firsts are often out on missions, meaning you will not have one consistent trainer, and creating a fixed schedule for you will be almost impossible."

Closing his eyes, Mo nodded. Remembering that Lazard couldn't see him, he answered, "I understand. So I should be prepared to receive calls to come train at any time?"

"That would be ideal. I'll speak to the Turks about getting your number to the Firsts, and you'll be called when they're ready to train you."

"I see. Thank you for the notice, sir. Will that be all?"

"Yes. I'm sorry to disturb you. Please have a pleasant day."
“You as well.” Mo answered as he hung up.

The call done, Mo turned back to his work.

... But couldn't concentrate.

Resting his elbows on the desk, he pressed his face into his hands.

He was going to be trained for combat by specialized military veterans. He was going to be shown how to hurt people and expected to have a basic understanding at least of how to do it himself. They were going to expect him to become one of these SOLDIERs.

... Was it too late to run away, he wondered. Too late to flee into the wilderness and never return? Find a farm or something, offer his work as a laborer?

... Of course it was too late. He had just been discussing a blossoming friendship with Reno this morning. Lucius may have scarred him in terms of platonic relationships, but Mo was only human. He desired acceptance and contact as much as anyone. So far Reno had been a reliable source of camaraderie. He'd never be able to just up and ditch his only sort-of-friend in a strange world and take off. He'd probably die a day into the venture, anyway.

Maybe that was part of some thing the Turks were doing in order to watch over him. Force him to become dependent on them, make him firmly imprint on Reno so he'd never go against them or Shinra. It's what he would have done, personally.

No, no, he couldn't focus on that.

Sitting up, Mo pulled his flask out of his pocket and downed a mouthful.

He was at work. He had a job to do. He could wallow in misery later, after whatever Hojo wanted to do was done. But for now he had to focus on what he was being paid to do. There were calls to take, calls to make, things to sort, reminders to give...

Mo took another mouthful of his liquid courage before closing the flask and putting it away.

Rolling his shoulders, he turned his gaze to the open planner on the desk.

Okay, there was nothing in the book for the current day. Two meetings in three days. A slot next week where Rufus was apparently going out to meet someone for lunch. That was it for the planner, put it away.

Next... no new emails at the moment. Okay. Nothing in the out-tray. Two papers in the in-tray. Reading over them showed they were identical, company memos addressed to all personnel. Okay, one was probably for him, but he should check and see anyway.

Picking up the phone, Mo pressed to talk to Rufus. He waited one moment... two... three...

“Is something the matter?”

“Not at all, Mr. Shinra—”

“Rufus.”

“— but my lunch-break is about to start and I'm wrapping up all my loose ends for the moment. I have a pair of memos here issued to all personnel, should I bring them in to you before I go or leave them here on my desk?” Mo answered, ignoring the correction. Given the difference in age
between them and that Rufus was his boss, calling him his first name would be... ill-advised, Mo thought.

“It sounds like one of them is yours... Leave them on your desk where I can see, I'll get mine on my way to lunch.”

“Of course, Mr. Shinra.”

“Rufus.”

Mo didn't reply, hanging up. He put the papers together, slightly staggered, and put them on the corner of the desk closest to Rufus's door. Standing up, he grabbed his bag and left the office.

He was going to the canteen for lunch today. He didn't take long when eating, so it would be a simple in-and-out meal, then he could come back up here and test the colored pencils Reno had given him or doodle until break ended.

As he stood in front of the elevator, waiting for it to come up, Mo wondered if he should see about getting extra portions with his lunch. It might prevent another meltdown like last night, and if he ate more regularly maybe it would help him cut back on his drinking. Eat more, have less room for alcohol.

“Where are you going?”

Oh no, it was the local queen bee...

“Down to the canteen,” he answered, not looking at her in hopes she'd go away, “I don't have a lunch today and I can't afford to go out.”

She was standing next to him, why was she standing next to him.

“Well, I had been planning to go out, but I can't abandon you down there, can I?”

She was trying way too hard to sound magnanimous.

Offering his polite smile reserved for working, Mo asked, “Sorry, but did I catch your name?”

She smiled, white teeth and blood-red lips. “Heather. Yours?”

A social queen with red lips and nails named Heather. If she had two lackeys that followed her around and wore green and yellow, he swore to criminy...

“Mo Tesla. Ah, thank you for the book. It was a very interesting read.”

The elevator dinged, doors sliding open.

“Interesting?” Heather frowned as they stepped inside. “Interesting? It's amazing!”

He shrugged awkwardly, shuffling his feet. “I... guess literature just isn't my thing. I'm a very visual person... I think most artists are...”

The woman harrumphed at him, crossing her arms over her chest. “Unappreciative of true art, you mean.”

Watch it, woman, he'd make one of those violent demonstrations he promised Reno.
A few more people got onto the elevator before it reached the canteen. Heather crinkled her nose in distaste, making Mo want to shoo her away as they joined the lunch-line.

He was able to get extra food on his tray, thankfully, and surveyed the place as Heather complained next to him.

“Yo! Over here! Mo!”

A smile touched his face at the sight of Reno all but standing on a table, waving his arms around. Rude and Tseng were there as well, apparently acting like they didn't know the redhead.

“What are you doing?!” Heather demanded in shock, grabbing his sleeve when he tried to head over.

“Going to sit.” he answered plainly.

“Those people are from General Affairs!” she hissed back. “No, we'll sit over there.”

Heather tried to pull him towards a table filled with women, almost exclusively. Mo pulled his arm free, shaking his head. “I happen to like those people. I know them and have no problem with them.”

“You don't just sit with the Turks!”

Mo took a deep breath, closing his eyes. “Heather, how old are you?”

She spluttered indignantly.

“Because playing cliques the way you are, acting like my boss when you clearly aren't Vice President Shinra, telling me who to sit with... it's all very childish and stupid. I know and like Reno. Rude is nice, and Tseng is cold but I could warm up to him. If you don't want to take a chance getting to know them, sit with your girlfriends and I'll sit with my boyfriends.” he informed her, heading towards the table marked by Reno.

Thankfully, Heather didn't pursue him. Hopefully that meant she'd just leave him alone.
Chapter 25

Nine. Time to head up for a promised hour and a half at least of testing.

Mo was in the elevator, wearing his loose-fitting clothes, with his phone and wallet the only things he had on him otherwise. He'd just eaten, and once he got back to his apartment he was showering and collapsing. Maybe getting a drink before collapsing. He'd see how things went.

The doors opened, and he stepped out—

Only to promptly bounce off a brick wall with a faceful of silver silk.

It wasn't really a brick wall, he saw as he backpedaled in confusion. It was Sephiroth, currently turning to look at him with an indescribable gaze.

“Sorry,” Mo mumbled, throwing his eyes to the floor, “Wasn't paying attention.”

“Excused.” came the level, even reply.

He kept his head down, apologizing again as he stepped around the man.

But when he picked his head up and looked around, Hojo was nowhere to be seen.

“He's in an argument.” Sephiroth said flatly.

“Oh... okay...”

“Though I suppose argument implies that the fight goes both ways. Unfortunately for Hollander.”

He had no clue who that was but nodded anyway as he moved to sit at the edge of the table he had last time. It looked like Hojo was set up to start over here already, might as well wait here.

He just about jumped through the roof when he turned and found Sephiroth had followed him. A glimmer of what might have been amusement pulled at the man's lips for a second when he jolted, clutching at his chest.

“You people have a real fondness for stopping my heart...” Mo muttered.

“You are aware of the arrangements concerning your training?” Sephiroth asked, feline-green gaze boring into him.

He gulped, nodding.

“Good. You'll start tomorrow at six.”

“Wait... I'm supposed to be in the archives...” Mo frowned.

“You won't be training all day. We'll return you to the Turks when training is done.” Sephiroth informed him, leaning against the table next to him.

Mo nodded, feeling his stomach churn. He was not looking forward to that.

“Angeal will not be present, as he already has an apprentice. Genesis may need to leave at any time, since the war in Wutai is reaching a turning point.”
“... There's a war going on?”

Sephiroth nodded without looking at him. He didn't elaborate, and Mo couldn't decide if he was grateful or not.

He hated violence. He hated the idea of people being hurt, especially by other people. And starting tomorrow he was going to be trained to hurt people.

His gut lurched, and he felt the blood drain from his face at the idea. His grip tightened on the edge of the table—

He jumped off and away from the table as it cracked under his hands. Sephiroth now stood at attention, gaze riveted on him. Mo couldn't help but whimper, shoving his hands into his armpits and hunching in on himself.

“Oh, what's going on now?”

A wild Hojo appears.

“I... my nerves got the better of me. I'm still... the whole elevated strength thing is new, still, and... I'm sorry...” Mo stammered, feeling his heart racing and his head pounding.

“Tsk. Calm down, being agitated will only interfere with our tests.” the scientist waved off. “We will continue to test your thresholds tonight. The three times you've gone into a violent headspace, it was under incredible stress to your body and mind. Twice it was followed by death. Finding the exact point where you begin to go into headspace and then the point where your subconscious takes over completely are the current priority.”

“Wait, so the things last night were you trying to force me into...?! No! What if I'd snapped?! I could have hurt you!” Mo wailed, hands dropping to his sides in his shock.

Hojo waved him off again, saying, “I know what I'm doing, boy.”

Mo turned an incredulous gaze to Sephiroth, who was still standing nearby. He was given an eye-roll and the quietest scoff.

So the man regularly disregarded his own safety for whatever reason, then?! What sort of insane mad scientist did Hojo think he was?! The original Tesla?! Mo was in no way related to Nikola Tesla, but anyone of his world who didn't know about the eccentric inventor was seriously under a rock! Was that what this was, some Tesla-style eccentricness?!

Mo put his face in his hands, wondering if he should have brought his flask with him.

“Was there something you needed, Sephiroth, or are you just in the way?” Hojo asked, making him lift his head up again to look between them.

It might have just been his imagination, but Sephiroth's gaze seemed to harden.

“I wish to observe the testing you do with Mr. Tesla. Knowing his limits for pain and stress will help streamline his training.” came the steely reply, making Mo's blood run cold.

Hojo didn't seem to notice or care, waving vaguely towards the wall. “Fine, just stay out of my way. Stand over there or something.”

Hnn, Mo could taste the lightning from the storm-clouds surrounding the general. He watched
warily as the silver-haired man followed Hojo's lazy order, gulping. Sephiroth really didn't like Hojo, huh?

Blinking, he noticed Hojo shuffling closer.

“Aw, not more shocks...” he groaned, holding out his arms all the same.

“Yes. Only this time, you'll be answering questions. When you get a question wrong, you'll be shocked. Every answer you get wrong, the voltage will go up.”

... Hadn't that been a psychology experiment? He felt like he'd gone over this in the psychology class he'd taken sophomore year of college. Shouldn't he be given a tap-out? Wasn't that something required in whatever code of ethics existed?

“What kind of questions?” he frowned as Hojo attached the wires to his forearms.

“We'll start off simple, but go up in complexity. Are you ready, Mr. Tesla?”

Mo's eyes flickered over to Sephiroth as Hojo pressed a couple small pads to each of his temples. For monitoring his brain, he supposed.

If he lost it... went into this violent headspace Hojo talked about... then the general could stop him, right?

Heaving a sigh, he nodded. “Ready as I'm going to be.”

The twisted grin made him shudder, trying to back up a bit.

The first question almost blindsided him. “What's your full name?”

After blinking in confusion, he replied, “Mo Tesla?”

“Your age is?”

Mo leaned over slightly, peering at Sephiroth. He was given a lazy shrug.

... Okay then.

Closing his eyes, Mo settled back in his place on the table. “Thirty-five years of age.”

“Your current occupation is?”

“Secretary to the vice president of Shinra Electric.”

“And your blood-type?”

That one really did blindside him, eyes opening wide. Hojo wasn't even looking at him, fiddling with something on the table.

“Uh... A positive? Gah! What was that?!?”

“That, Mr. Tesla, was your first shock. The correct answer is O negative.” Hojo grinned.

Shit. That was already a lot stronger than last night. His fingers were curled into claws and refusing to uncurl. His left arm felt stiff, like if he tried to extend or further bend it, his elbow would shatter. There was a throbbing in his temple.
“Shall we continue? The director of the Turks is named?”

“Veld Verdot.” Mo hurried to answer, closing his eyes and licking his lips.

He hoped he survived this.
Mo licked his fingers clean of sugar and stickiness, shoving the baked good box in the trash as he checked the time again.

Only just turning five.

He should shower real quick, perk himself up and calm his nerves.

The testing last night had taken a lot out of him. Questions had gone from his personal information to things about the company to world history to complex biology and physics questions. He had stopped answering at some point, writhing in agony and howling unhappily. Mo was fairly certain Hojo had only stopped because Sephiroth had stepped in. The very corners of his vision had been green, which had greatly excited Hojo and made Sephiroth frown. Hojo had scribbled away like a madman on some clipboard or another while Sephiroth made sure Mo was okay.

He'd collapsed directly getting back to his apartment.

But anxiety and mako-induced appetite swings had him waking up at four. Stomach snarling and mind whirling, he'd grabbed his sketchbook, the box of baked goods, and a four-pack of green glass bottles Reno promised were good. Sprawled on the couch, he had alternated between doodling, stuffing his face, and chugging beer. The page in the sketchbook was covered with drippy black monsters fighting various little heroes with outlandish weapons. The box was shoved in the trash. The bottles were empty in the sink.

And Mo was going to be trained to kill in an hour.

Yeah, a quick shower, just to steel his nerves, sounded good. Ice cold, so it helped him wake up.

He didn't want to fight. The last time he'd willingly engaged in violence of any kind had been middle school. He'd been trying to stop some teenager from picking on a group of younger kids. His arm had been broken, and he'd been concussed. But at the same time, he'd somehow broken the nose of the teenager, and torn the guy's cornea pretty badly. The pain from his own injuries combined with the knowledge that he had just about blinded someone... they had scared him, and Mo had never truly engaged in a fight since then. The idea of using his own two hands to knowingly cause someone harm... repulsed him, really.

Would he be able to go through with this training?

Mo hurried to push all those thoughts aside, feeling his stomach churn. If he kept going down that rabbit-hole, he'd throw up. And he'd done plenty of that in the past week that he'd been here, thank you very much. Doing it any more would make him look like some kind of emetophile. Mo wasn't one to kink-shame, but no.

The cold shower only took him fifteen minutes. If he was going to leave at five-thirty and be on the SOLDIER floor by or before six, then he had fifteen more minutes to burn.

At first, his mind went to food, but he wasn't as hungry any more. And he got the feeling he'd want to save the remaining alcohol in his fridge for tonight. There was the TV that he had yet to turn on? Or he could start rereading one of his books?

No, he decided at length, he wanted to draw. Properly draw, not just doodle like he had been. The little characters were cute enough, but right now he wanted to properly make something, and the
sketchbook was all he had.

As he flipped to a clean page, Mo took careful note of how many pages he had left. The thing looked to be about half full. Maybe after studying for the day he could ask one of the Turks if there were any good art stores in Midgar, and once he got his paycheck he'd take a look. Until then, he'd just have to look for other ways to keep himself busy or burn through his energy.

After a moment of thinking, Mo decided that he wanted to draw something for Cissnei. He wasn't terribly familiar with the young woman, but she'd stayed to help him through his mood-swing. She'd teased Reno with him, helped with the history, made hot chocolate, and comforted him while he went through a mental break-down. He felt he owed her something.

He wasn't going to have time to get anything super complex down. But he could at least get started with the basic outlines, blocking out where he wanted things to go. He could properly work on it later.

Mo kept one eye on the time as he carefully put down the first lines, creating a torso, arms, and head. He knew what he wanted to do, and he hoped she would like it when he finished it. It had been a while since he'd actually drawn anything for anyone. Valentine's Day, he thought. Not too terribly long, but still several months.

Five-thirty. Time to go.

Mo put the sketchbook and his pencil down, standing up so he could grab his key-card and shoes.

He reached the forty-ninth floor just minutes later.

... And realized that he had no clue where exactly he was supposed to go.

Well, good thing he was just about half an hour early, he could look around until he found out.

It didn't take too long for him to find a small directory on one of the walls. Looking over it, he decided that it was most likely that he was supposed to be heading to the training room.

From there, it only took a minute to find that.

Opening the door and peering inside, Mo found himself face-to-face with Genesis.

“You're early.” the redhead remarked.

“I got restless... figured it was better to get here ahead of time than later...” he mumbled, looking down. He could still remember the attack on the bank with perfect clarity, and even if Genesis was rather different, that face was still the same. Not to mention how... upset Genesis had seemed when presented with Mo's drawing.

“Whatever. I'll be back shortly, so just stay in here and don't touch anything.”

Mo nodded, stepping aside and letting the man pass before shuffling into the training room. He noticed there were scorch-marks on the walls and floors of the large room, the smell of hot metal filling the air. Genesis had apparently thrown a fireball at him, too... was the man some kind of magician? At this point, Mo couldn't tell if he'd be surprised or not. With getting teleported to another world, developing some kind of alternate personality, and everything else that had happened in the last week, he wondered if anything would ever surprise him like that again.

... And now he just needed to wait for the news that he was incubating six different kinds of alien
eggs and was a mother. Some kind of nonsense like that.

Mo stood in the center of the room, trying to gauge it's dimensions. But his mind wasn't in too analytical of a mood, still too focused on the fact that he was going to be learning how best to go about hurting someone.

Really he'd rather drink himself to death than that. Maybe he could call Hojo up and act on that offer to see if they could find where exactly SOLDIERs got drunk. He was going to need it after this, he was sure of it.

The door slid open, prompting him to turn around. Both Genesis and Sephiroth were coming into the room. It sounded like Genesis was ranting about something while Sephiroth looked vaguely amused.

After a moment, Genesis became quiet, visibly composing himself while Sephiroth turned to Mo.

"Are you sure you're capable of training at the moment, Mr. Tesla? You left the Science Department in rather poor condition." the general commented.

He offered a crooked smile, showing off his forearms. The burns from the shocks were already fading, a testament to his new healing factor.

"I'm fine. I guess I built up some immunity from the night before."

That seemed to shock both men, making them look at him with wide eyes.

"You were with that loon two nights in a row?!!" Genesis demanded.

Mo instantly recoiled a little, looking down at the floor. "I... couldn't sleep. I was restless, and wanted to do something, and... and I didn't know who else to go to."

"Nerves of steel... I mean, Hollander's useless, but I'll take him over Hojo." Genesis muttered.

Sephiroth shook his head, coming closer. "Well, if you're up to it then we shouldn't put your energy to waste. What do you know about self-defense?"

"That I can do absolutely none." Mo replied, voice flat as he watched Sephiroth warily.

Without warning, Sephiroth punched him.

No, not punched him, Mo reflected as he doubled over, holding both his hands to his face. That hadn't felt like knuckles. He'd been decked before, you didn't spend as much time in bars as he did and not get decked at least once. But that almost felt like the heel of the man's hand.

"Really none." Genesis scoffed.

"Sorry, I'm not exactly a black belt." Mo bit back, feeling tears leak unbidden from his eyes. Jeez, that hurt! Why, exactly, had that been warranted?

"Unfortunately, he's right. We'll have to start from the ground up with your hand-to-hand."

Sephiroth commented.

At least he didn't have to be offensive with hand-to-hand, Mo consoled himself. He could learn the offensive moves and never use them.

He didn't have to hurt anyone with hand-to-hand.
Gulping a little and wiping the pained tears from his eyes, Mo stood up straight and gave the two his attention.
“Where are you going?” Genesis called irately as Mo retreated across the room.

“Right here,” he called back from his corner, “The last two times I encountered those things were highly unpleasant and I’d rather not.”

The objects he was referring to were materia. Genesis was currently holding a bangle with three small materia set into it. Two were green, and one was red. It had taken him a moment to recognize them as materia, given how small they were, but once he saw how they reacted to the light he got it.

They had just finished his hand-to-hand training. He was sore all over and felt like he had more bruises than skin. His lip was split twice and his nose had just stopped bleeding. At some point both of the SOLDIERS had decided to take off their long leather coats. Mo wanted to know how they worked as well as they did in those tight leather pants, and why the hell Sephiroth wasn’t wearing a fucking shirt. It didn’t help that both of them were admittedly attractive men, even if he preferred the more... rugged type to their pretty-boy builds and faces. And they hadn’t broken a sweat in the... what, hour that they’d been showing him how to throw and block punches.

Now, though, they were moving on to the next thing, since there were apparently three things he needed to become... decent in.

“I’m not just going to hand you these, they’re my personal materia.” Genesis scoffed.

“I don’t care, I’m still standing over here.”

Genesis growled, glaring.

“Mr. Tesla, please.” Sephiroth said plainly, not looking at either of them. Oh, lordy, it looked like the man was digging out more materia. Fuck him sideways, Sephiroth, put that away...

Groaning, Mo moved forward. He still kept several feet between him and Genesis, not wanting to get too close to the materia.

“Better. Now, what do you know about materia?” the redhead asked, adjusting how the bangle sat on his wrist.

“Maybe we should start skipping those questions and just assume I know jack-diddly-shit about everything you’re trying to teach me?” Mo replied, reaching up to rub at his eyes. He was sore, he was tired, he wanted so many drinks, he still had the archives after this shitshow...

A small tongue of flame crackled past his ear, making him yelp and jump away.

“I advise you not to get snappy with me.” Genesis said dangerously, one of the green materia-marbles glowing brighter.

Mo swallowed nervously, stepping back more.

“No, get back here.”

“What do you expect?” Sephiroth said with a chuckle, coming closer. Mo watched warily as the silver-haired man held out a green sphere. “Materia are stones formed from the Lifestream. Natural
materia form around mako-springs, but take a very long time to do so. Most materia in circulation are made from mako-stones by Shinra.”

“Like diamonds.” Mo blurted without thinking.

Over Genesis's scoff, Sephiroth said, “To some extent, yes. A decent enough analogy. Materia come in five types, identified by their colors. Green are magic materia, and allow the user to cast spells. Red are summons, and can call creatures to aid you in battle. Yellow is command materia, and allows use of abilities that don't fall under the same category as the magic from green. Blue are support, and enhance the effects of other materia. Purple materia are called independent, and work similarly to blue, without needing other materia. Understand?”

After a moment, Mo recited, “Green is magic, red summons creatures, yellow is command, blue is support, and purple is independent. Right?”

Sephiroth nodded, pushing the green stone in his hand forward. Gulping, Mo reached out with shaking hands. The general waited patiently for him to take it, not saying anything even as Genesis grumbled in the background.

Eventually, Mo was cradling the green stone in the palms of his hands. It was smooth and cool to the touch. He swore he could hear a quiet murmur, but... in his head. It was unnerving.

“There. Finally. Now watch.” Genesis ordered, drawing his attention. The man held up the hand with the bangle—

Mo just about dropped the green materia in his hands as one of the little green stones lit up even brighter. A ball of flame appeared in Genesis's palm.

“Materia is used by concentrating and sending out a shock from your mind. It can be very taxing and uses a lot of stamina.” the man said with a smirk, waving his fingers to dismiss the flames. “That one that Sephiroth gave you is a barrier, one of the least destructive materia there is. It'll be hard for you to get out of control with that. It's not even mastered, not that you'll be able to summon more than the weakest spell.”

Mo noticed Sephiroth giving a roll of his eyes, but the upwards quirk of his lip suggested it was amused.

“Well, go on. Try it. Focus on the materia and see if you can't call a barrier forth.” Genesis waved.

Mo resisted the urge to stick his tongue out at the man. Instead, he closed his eyes and tucked his chin against his chest and took a deep breath.

Focus on the materia, huh? Okay...

There had been the murmuring when he first took it. Maybe he should start there?

Deciding on that, Mo exhaled slowly, relaxing as he rolled his shoulders.

But without warning, the murmur rose, becoming louder. Mo started in surprise, almost dropping the thing again. Hearing Genesis scoff again and feeling both their eyes boring into him, Mo took another deep breath. Gritting his teeth and spreading his feet to what felt like shoulder-width, he tightened his grip on the cool green orb and reached for the quiet murmur in his head.

Once again, the murmur grew louder. More like chattering between several people.
Feeling a bead of sweat drip down his nose, Mo clenched his jaw and reached deeper. He could feel the materia growing warm in his hands. Not unbearable, not painful. He could keep going.

He felt like he could hear Sephiroth and Genesis saying something, but couldn't make it out.

He could keep going. He could do this.

The chattering swelled and grew louder, becoming a song—

Mo gasped, shuddering and falling to his knees. It was hard to breathe, he felt winded, his head was pounding, his stomach was churning, his hands were burning...

“Mr. Tesla.”

Shaking still, Mo lifted his head and opened his eyes. His vision was blurry, tinged with green. Despite that, he could just make out Sephiroth kneeling on the floor not too far from him.

“Are you with us, Mr. Tesla?” Sephiroth said.

“... Ye...” Mo croaked out, giving his head a shake in effort to clear his vision and his head. Oh, his throat was so dry...

“Impressive. Casting a Wall on his first try, he might almost be as good as me.”

That was Genesis. Blinking, Mo managed to bring the world back into focus. There was a shimmering veil between him and the two SOLDIERs, opalescent and transparent at the same time.

“Oh...” he breathed, unable to contain his awe. It was beautiful.

The hot orb in his hands seemed to trill proudly.

“Okay, that should be it for materia. Drop the Wall and we can move on.” Genesis ordered.

“... How?”

“Don't focus as much. Try to draw away gently.” Sephiroth instructed.

“M not focusin' at all! Mind's too hazy!” Mo objected, words slurring and hissing a little.

“Please, there's no way you're holding up a barrier-spell that strong without focusing on it!”

Okay, that was it. He'd already put up with the man literally beating him up, he didn't need this crap.

Both men looked startled when the materia bounced off the inside of the shimmering veil.

“Did you just... try to throw that at me?!” Genesis demanded, eyes wide.

“No, I tried to blow you a kiss, can't you tell?” Mo growled, ignoring the strain on his throat.

“Well, it should drop in a moment, since you're no longer in contact with the materia.” Sephiroth said, standing up as Genesis bristled.

As if on cue, the veil flickered out of existence.

Sephiroth didn't say anything else, coming closer. Mo noticed that he was wearing one of the bangle-things too, but it looked like all of the marbles on his were green. One of them sparked
brightly, and Mo sighed as a warm light washed over him. The aches and soreness he felt from the hand-to-hand washed away. He could feel his twice-split lip unsplitting, and rolled his shoulders with a satisfying pop.

“That's enough with materia. We'll get you water and get started on swords.”

Oh. Great. Whatever nice mood had come with the apparent healing quickly left.

Mo shifted so he was sitting cross-legged instead of with his legs everywhere like a newborn fawn. He rested his cheeks on his palms and his elbows on his knees. It took a lot of effort not to scowl as he watched Sephiroth move. Genesis joined the man at what looked like a weapon-rack.

Jeez. He was way too sober for this horseshit. But of course, now he couldn't get drunk, or at least not like he used to. And that was just aggravating.

Blinking, Mo realized he was being offered a water-bottle. He muttered a thank-you and took it. He chose to ignore the advice to drink it slowly, throwing his head back and chugging the cool water down.

“Fine, if you get sick don't blame us.” Genesis quipped.

Mo growled, casting a glare his way.

“Can you stand?” Sephiroth asked, taking the empty water-bottle away.

After a moment, Mo pressed his hands against the floor. With a slight grunt, he got his feet under himself and pushed up. At first he wobbled a little, but it didn't last long.

Sephiroth nodded, pressing something into his hand.

A sword.

Without a second thought, Mo threw the weapon across the room.

Both men stared as the blade clattered noisily.

“... Pick it up.” Genesis ordered.

He crossed his arms over his chest. “No.”

“I said pick it up.”

Mo couldn't help but bristle. “And I said fuck you! I'm not a fucking toddler, don't treat me like one! I'm not using one of your fucking murder sticks for anything!”

Genesis bristled right back, the stone on his bangle starting to light up.

Sephiroth stepped between them, hands out. Turning to Mo, he said, “Mr. Tesla, please.”

“No! Screw you and screw this! I'm a fucking pacifist, I won't be made into a heartless killer just because your stupid boss says it'll be a waste!” Mo screamed angrily, swatting the general's hand aside. He was tired, he was hungry, he had more fucking history after this, he hated everything.

“You're... what?”

“Read my lips, bitch! Pac-if-ist! I will not intentionally or knowingly cause harm to an-y-thing! I've
been... I've been putting up with it, I let you use me like a punching bag, I took your verbal fucking abuse, but you'll have to kill me before I touch that stupid piece of metal again!” Mo howled in reply to Genesis's confusion, gesturing with his hands to punctuate his words even as he fumbled for them. His throat was raw. His eyes were burning.

Fuck, he was crying.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

He spun away, hiding his face in his hands as he breathed heavily, trying to hold in a twisted and mangled sob.

But it wasn't any good, and his ugly cries filled the room.
Mo buried his head in the pillows.

After his breakdown in the training room— another fucking mood swing, fuck that noise— the Turks had been called, and he'd been escorted back to his apartment, wailing and sniffing most of the way there. He was sprawled out on his bed now, hiding his head like an ostrich as he tried to steady his breathing and calm down. Someone— Cissnei, probably— was sitting on the bed next to him, rubbing his back as he hiccuped.

He hated this. He felt like a moody toddler. He wanted these mood-swings to be done and over with already. He wanted his appetite and energy levels to even out. He wanted to regain some semblance of normalcy. But he couldn't, because he was stuck here with who-knew-how-much glowing green guck swimming in his veins. He wanted drinking to work properly, he wanted to not be scared by his boss or bullied by his coworkers, he wanted to go home.

Thinking about all of that nearly renewed his sobbing and wailing, but he managed to get it under control.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, he pulled his head out from under the pillows and rolled over.

It was Cissnei. She smiled gently at him when he looked up at her. No longer able to rub his back the way she had been, she reached carefully over to Mo's face and began picking his hair away. Ugh, he was gross. Plastered with sweat and tears and probably snot.

“You're so nice...” Mo mumbled, reaching up to rub at his eyes. “Putting so much effort into a useless old drunk like me...”

“You're not useless.” Cissnei chided.

“I'm going through something that people apparently line up to do, and... and need you and Reno to coddle me through it every step of the way. If that isn't... pathetic and useless, then I don't know what is.”

The redhead clicked her tongue at him. “That better be the mood-swing talking, mister. You didn't ask to get the SOLDIER treatment, and you're a long way from home. It's perfectly natural to need a little help here and there.”

Rubbing at his face one more time to remove what he could of his slimy grossness, Mo rolled onto his side, propping his head up on one hand. “Definitely my favorite Turk. Totally worth Reno's demotion.”

Cissnei spluttered with barely-restrained laughter, shaking her head at him even as she smiled. Mo couldn't help but smile back. Just like Reno looked better with his laid-back and sly expressions, Cissnei looked better with an easy, unconcerned smile on her face than worrying over him.

“So, what's going on?” he asked once her laughter ended.

“Well, it looks like Reno and I had been the only two to know that you're apparently a pacifist. So if training you to fight like SOLDIER will result in greater stress for you when that's what we want to avoid, we need a better solution. It's agreed widely that not training you would be a waste of the treatment, since it is rather expensive, so Tseng is with General Sephiroth and Commander Genesis in Director Lazard's office now. They're discussing alternatives for you training-wise. Reno and
Rude are in the other room waiting, because once you're feeling up to it we're supposed to go up and join them.”

Mo sat up, frowning. “I tried. I really did. I figured I could learn the things, demonstrate that I knew them, and call that it. Never use them again. But those two... they may be cute and they may be the top fighters or whatever, but they're shit teachers.”

Cissnei smiled as she stood. “Well, neither of them are exactly people-people. Commander Genesis just doesn't like people, and from what I understand, General Sephiroth was raised by Hojo.”

... Wait.

Mo raised a hand, pointing to the ceiling in silent question. Cissnei nodded.

“You know what, he's excused. He can be as shit a teacher as he wants.” he said, shaking his head in disbelief. The idea that the cartoony mad scientist could raise a hamster, let alone a person, without killing and dissecting it was almost too much.

And Sephiroth's apparent great dislike for the man made all too much sense now.

“Who's a shit teacher?”

Both Mo and Cissnei looked to the door. Reno was poking his head inside, looking like a curious child.

“Sephiroth and Genesis.” Mo replied, scooting to the edge of the bed so he could stand up.

“Makes sense, yo.” the male Turk nodded sagely before vanishing.

“... He is so damn random...”

“Part of his charm, I'm afraid.” Cissnei said, helping him stand up.

“It really is, though. I doubt it's ever boring with him around.” Mo replied, rubbing at his face again. Ugh, the sweat and tears were drying, he was just going to need a full shower at this point. Cissnei seemed to notice, asking, “Do you want to wash your face before we go?”

... It would probably help him feel better, if nothing else.

“Yes, please.” he nodded.

She smiled, and they left the bedroom. Mo waved vaguely to the pair of male Turks on the couch as he headed to the bathroom.

He didn't close the door as he turned the light on, not really seeing a need to. He was just washing his face, after all.

But because of this, he could hear the other three— two, Rude didn't seem to talk at all— talking. Not about work or about him, just... talking. Cissnei scolding Reno for rifling through Mo's sketchbook. Reno claiming platonic immunity and privilege. Cissnei reminding Reno that Mo called her his favorite. Reno's overly dramatic cries of despair to the cruel world.

It was nice. The Turks were essentially a secret investigative force, or so he'd been told, doing the dark and dirty work for the company. Hearing them be... human... it was nice.
And it had nothing to do with the warm domestic feeling, he told himself as he turned off the water.

Absolutely nothing, he repeated insistently, smothering the hopeful spark in his chest as he dried his face.

They were working. He was their job. They were nice to him, yes, and he'd talked about this stuff with Reno already, but that was no reason to get him hopes up. Once he was determined to no longer be a threat and had properly integrated into this world, they would move on.

Mo Tesla just wasn't good relationship material, platonic or otherwise.

Lucius and his three failed romances has taught him that.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

If you don't know what it is, ‘For The Love Of God’ is an 18th century human skull coated in platinum and over 8000 diamonds.

Also, while Lazard is the director of SOLDIER, I don't think he would force Mo to fight. They're only supposed to train him so he's not wasting the treatment, and it was never specified how exactly he was to be trained.

When they stepped into the office, Mo's first thought was that it was Rufus behind the desk, making him falter a little.

But closer examination showed it wasn't. There were obvious differences, like the choice of dress and length of hair. This man wore glasses, as well. His hairline was shaped different, and his features weren't as sharp as Rufus's. Instead of the brilliant blonde of his current boss, the man behind the desk had a paler hue, less striking but still attractive. His eyes were a slightly darker blue, and his shoulders seemed broader.

A relative, perhaps?

As he and his Turk escort came to a stop, the man stood, smiling. It was genuine and kind in comparison to Rufus. Mo felt none of the chills he did with his employer.

“It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Mr. Tesla,” the man said as he approached, “I'm Lazard Deusericus, the director of the SOLDIER program.”

Mo bobbed his head demurely as he shook the offered hand. “Likewise.” he murmured.

“How are you adjusting to life here so far? It must be very jarring, going from one world to another without any warning.”

Mo rubbed at his arm uncertainly. He didn't want to complain. Things were rough, but he'd already said that he wasn't going to ask these people to send him home. He couldn't even remember how he got here, much less explain it. How could he expect them to recreate a process he didn't know or remember?

“It's... a rocky start. But I'll get there.” he said after a moment.

Lazard smiled at him. “From the sound of things, you're coming along well, so I'm sure it won't be long.”

Mo couldn't help but give a small smile back as the man returned to his desk. Reno, Rude, and Cissnei moved to stand by Tseng, who was silent in the corner. Genesis and Sephiroth stood against a wall, staring him down.

“Now, Mr. Tesla... during your training this morning with Sephiroth and Genesis, you claimed to be a pacifist?” Lazard asked, becoming serious but not losing his kind undertone.
He liked this man, Mo decided. He'd just met him, knew absolutely nothing about him, but he liked Lazard.

Nodding, he replied, “Yes, sir. I... find the idea of violence horrifying and pointless. The last time I willingly engaged in a physical fight was when I was very young, and... both myself and the other boy ended up in the hospital. I lost the fight, but tore his cornea almost beyond repair. Knowing that I had almost blinded someone with my bare hands... well, to a young boy, it was a very...”

He didn't want to say it was a traumatic experience. That felt like it would be undermining people who had actually undergone trauma.

“But when you appeared in this world and two times after, you've become incredibly violent.”

His head snapped up in horror at Lazard's words. “That isn't me! I mean... I would never do the things that... It's horrible! I wouldn't hurt people that way, or lash out like that! I may on occasion snap at people, or throw things or break them, but everyone does that, you can only take so much before doing so! But... kicking someone when they're down is... deplorable! I... I never want to end up like that again if I can help it!”

The man nodded, gently saying, “Then what do you want, Mr. Tesla?”

That was easy.

“I want to make people happy. The way my brother did.”

That made a few looks go across the room.

“Your brother?” Sephiroth asked, tilting his head.

“Ted,” Mo nodded with a wry smile as he looked down at his feet, “He was two years older than me and everyone's favorite. Hell, he was my favorite. Everyone just lit up whenever he was around... and... if possible... I want to make people smile the way he always did...”

It was a worthless dream. Nobody lit up around him. Who would? He was a thirty-five-year-old alcoholic who'd rather get drunk and hot-glue sequins on a cow-skull than socialize. He stayed shut up at home with bottles of liquor, only leaving for work, groceries, or to see Vicky or Lucius. Who in their right mind would truly light up like he was the sun upon seeing him? Lucius hadn't been a real friend, and all three of his relationships had crashed and burnt.

... He was still very proud of that cow-skull, an homage to 'For The Love Of God.'

“That's a very noble desire, Mr. Tesla.” Lazard said, drawing his attention. The man was smiling kindly. “SOLDIER is a fighting-force, true, but I doubt any of us have any desire to force you against your moral compass. So instead of training you to fight, why don't we train you to defend and protect?”

“Meaning?” Genesis asked from against the wall.

“With just our top three Firsts, SOLDIER has plenty of combat power. However, this does paint something of a scary image. Mr. Tesla is not formally a SOLDIER operative, but has proven to have the power of one when pushed. Rather than work to become a weapon, like most people unfortunately see SOLDIERs as, he can work to become a shield. It's a more passive route, but that way he doesn't have to hurt anyone, and can defend both himself and others from attack.” Lazard said. The man then looked back to him, still smiling. “Do you have any objections, Mr. Tesla?”
He opened and closed his mouth several times before shaking his head.

Well, how about that? He certainly hadn't expected anything like that to happen. He'd been expecting a rough order to man up and stop being a sissy. People underwent this treatment willingly and here he was getting special treatment, they weren't going to stop training him to fight because he was a pacifistic pansy. But instead... well, this.

Lazard nodded, saying, “I believe that settles it. I have no reason to keep you, and after the work you've already done today, making you train more would be cruel.”

Mo bobbed his head, still reeling from the decision as Reno stepped forward and tweaked his sleeve. Rude followed them both as the redhead led the way towards the elevator.
“Have you thought about wearing a ponytail?” Reno asked as Mo stepped out of the bathroom, pulling a comb through his damp hair.

“What, and look like you?” he shot back with a teasing smile.

“Excuse you, I'm incredibly sexy! All the ladies trip over themselves to get me, right, Rude?”

“No comment.”

“Holy crap, he speaks!” Mo exclaimed, staring wide-eyed at Rude. “I seriously thought you were mute or something!”

Reno laughed uproariously as Rude just lifted an eyebrow.

Laughter stopping, Reno continued, “Seriously, though, I think you'd look more like Tseng.”

“I'd rather not. Tseng's okay, I don't know much about him, but I think his style is his. Chances of me pulling it off are so slim they don't exist.”

After speaking with Lazard, Reno had informed Mo that he didn't feel like sitting around in the archives. He got the feeling he was being coddled again, but was grateful at the same time. The day had been hectic enough already and it was only just turning ten. Instead, Reno and Rude had taken him back to his apartment, and Reno had shooed him into the shower. Mo was indulgent with this one, taking his time and unwinding.

Combing his hair as he walked, Mo came to sit next to Rude on the couch. Reno was poking around the apartment as if it wasn't the exact same as when he saw it last.

“So, since we're giving you the day off, what should we do, yo?” Reno asked from the kitchen-area.

“I dunno... I mean, I have a drawing I'm working on, but that's probably not exciting enough for your refined tastes...” Mo replied, stretching out. He wasn't wearing a shirt just yet, rather delighting in the slight chill to the air after his hot shower. The cool against his heated skin was nice.

“That depends, yo! What's the drawing?”

“For Cissnei.”

The redhead was promptly on the couch, flipping through his sketchbook.

“Hey, who said you could do that?” Mo asked in mock grouchiness.

He used to hate people riffling through his drawings without permission. Lucius had worked some of that out of him, making him mind less. But when had he become so okay with it that he deliberately tempted Reno into doing it?

“This one?” Reno asked, making Rude crane his neck to see. “What is it, I can't tell...”

“Right now? A bunch of lines blocking out my layout so I know what I'm doing and where I'm doing it. But when I'm done, I'm hoping it'll be something beautiful.” Mo replied with a smile,
plucking the sketchbook from Reno's hands and passing it to Rude.

“Are you using color?” Reno asked with a sly smirk.

“That was my intention, yes. You got a really good set of colored pencils. They blend beautifully, and I can get such a wide range of darkness from them.” Mo nodded, gently elbowing Reno's side.

“Art ain't my sh*tick, but it sounds like I did well!” the redhead preened as Rude handed the sketchbook back. “But seriously, what's it gonna be?”

Smiling, Mo reached out and grabbed the pencils lying on the coffee table. “I'm trying to draw her, in a way. I already drew you two, and she's a very sweet girl. I want to thank her for putting up with me.” he explained.

“You sure you ain't straight?” Reno asked with a grin. “Cuz you're sure sweet on Cissnei, yo.”

“Gayer than a festival of rainbow unicorns. She's a very nice person. If I had to apply a label for my feelings towards her, they'd be in the fraternal range.” Mo replied, letting Reno rest his head on his shoulder. He carefully fleshed out the skeletal body he'd created earlier.

“Nice. What am I?”

“The family pet.”

Rude just about choked trying to stop his laughter as Reno sat bolt-upright and complained. Mo just smiled, starting to work on the face. He wanted a serene expression, like she was sleeping. Hair spread out everywhere. Hands up, as if gripping sheets. Like that, there. And... a nightgown, delicately draped...

“Woah, you work fast. All that while I'm whining about being called a dog?” Reno admired, drawing him out of his head.

Mo couldn't help but smile. “I was thinking more along the lines of a cockatoo.”

At the blank expressions both Turks gave him, he explained, “A cockatoo is a kind of tropical bird known for both it's beauty and intelligence. They come in many sizes and colors, and can mimic human speech. A lot of people compare them to feathery toddlers because of how they talk and the tantrums they throw.”

After a moment, Reno leaned in close and asked in a low voice, “Did you just call me a birdbrain?”

Mo kept quiet, still smiling.

“You did! You called me a birdbrain, you little shit!”

“Takes one to know one.” Mo chuckled, adding roots and a trunk to the picture. He didn't want to get too detailed, having naked pencil-lines marred colored pictures, but he wanted to lay the base down, if nothing else...

“Oh, wait, I see what you're doing! Dude, art may not be my thing but damn that's nice!”

He smiled, carefully laying down barely-there dots to map out abstract constellations.
Chapter Notes

This one is admittedly more a filler chapter than anything, but it introduces Mo to the concept of the Cetra, so I deemed it important enough to include.

Also, don't trust my numbers or my science/history. I'm an artist, like Mo. I make things out of metal and plastic, I don't absorb things like ancient human history very well.

“Oh, Mo! It's amazing!” Cissnei gasped, holding her hands over her mouth as he presented her with the picture.

Reno and Rude had ended up watching him draw for the rest of the day yesterday, and he and Reno had bantered back and forth for... longer than he ever had with Lucius. Now, he was in the archives, waiting for Reno with Cissnei.

The picture was of Cissnei. He'd drawn her upside-down, going off the edge of the page. She looked asleep, eyes closed and smiling softly as she reached up to grip invisible sheets. She wore a carefully colored nightgown that depicted a star-filled night sky, and the spread-out waves of her hair transitioned into tree-roots. The tree they grew into had pale yellow blooms scattered about the green leaves, and tiny hummingbirds with magenta throats that flitted right-side up between them.

“I can't take this!”

“Please. I want you to have it. I... I've been a real mess, and you stayed with me and put up with me both times I melted down. I can't thank you any other way at the moment, and it feels wrong not doing anything... I know that right now, I'm just part of your job-description, but you've been so nice, and... everything was horrible before I even got here. You and Reno both have been making me feel better, you've been around and steady and reliable, and even if it's only because you have to, I'm grateful.” Mo replied, looking down at his feet.

After a moment, he felt her take the page from him.

“You didn't have to. Thank you, Mo.”

He smiled softly, peering at her through his bangs. She smiled back before her gaze was torn back to the picture in her hands.

“It's wonderful... what are those? Around the flowers?”

“Hummingbirds. Small birds, no bigger than my thumb, who feed only on flower-nectar and beat their wings so fast you can't see them moving. They're the only birds who can hover in place, and move very fast. Not as fast as peregrine falcons, the fastest creature known to man, but certainly fast.” Mo explained.

“They're pretty. Thank you.”
“What’d I miss?”

“Hi, Reno.” Mo greeted, turning and heading to the table they seemed to always use.

“Oh, he gave you the thing!” the male redhead grinned, trotting after Cissnei as she followed Mo. “Should take him outta the office and throw him in advertising or something, yo!”

“By advertising, I'm going to guess you mean propaganda.” Mo hummed as he sat down, Reno plonking a handful of books down on the table.

“More or less. But all that aside, today we're going over the Cetra!”

“Cetra?” he echoed in confusion.

“An ancient race that existed before the world as we know it,” Cissnei supplied, “Said to be able to communicate with the planet and Lifestream directly, and perform magic without materia.”

He blinked in confusion, his mind drawing up images of Cro-Magnon elves.

“Yep. The Cetra went extinct a real long time ago. We don't have a whole lot left on them, so most of what we'll be going over will be speculation and shit. A lot of what we do know is that the Cetra were wiped out by something called the Calamity. We know absolutely nothing about it, just that it was bad and all the Ancients are gone because of it.” Reno shrugged.

“... Were they... human?” Mo asked, frowning slightly as he tried to refine the image in his head. The Cro-Magnon elf was brandishing a stick and yelling gibberish to summon waves of fire. It was fighting a goopy black monster like the ones he'd doodled yesterday morning.

“From what we can tell, more or less.”

Less Cro-Magnon, more D&D wood elf.

“You look confused.” Cissnei noted, banishing the little figment from his mind.

“Sorry... it's just that back home, humans were descended from... well, several races, actually. The big one was the Cro-Magnons, known as modern man, but there were at least two other paleohumans— I think that's the word— that some people have DNA from. The Neanderthals and the... Dan? Don? Din? Don? Something starting with D-ovans. I don't know much about the second kind, we didn't go over them... at all in school, just Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons.”

“Huh. Do tell.” Reno prompted, tipping his chair back with a genuinely curious look.

Mo blushed a little, ducking his head as he admitted, “An anthropologist or paleontologist would probably be better to ask... but I remember being taught that the Cro-Magnons introduced diseases to the Neanderthals that wiped them out, as well as fighting wars and crossbreeding to the point that Neanderthals became obsolete and then extinct. But there are still people today who carry Neanderthal genetics... like me.”


“So you're like some equivalent of Cetra?” Cissnei asked at the same time.

Mo shook his head. “No, not at all. The Neanderthals were... for lack of any better words, cave-people. Really, the Cro-Magnons were too, but the Neanderthals were... built differently, not so drastically that they were weird, but... ugh, it's been years, I don't remember it all. But I think it
was... something like six percent of all modern humans have some Neanderthal in them? And my family lineage is primarily European—so from this itty-bitty continent full of itty-bitty countries—and has some Neanderthal in our ancient ancestry. Of course, this means we're more prone to certain diseases or things like depression. So really it's nothing special, I just have a little more caveman in me than John Doe. I found out by participating in some study that paid me forty bucks and emailed me the findings.”

“You sure don't look like you're built differently.” Reno smirked.

“Ooga booga.” Mo said drily, examining the books on the table.
This may be the last chapter for a while, since I'm going back to college tomorrow. I have a small handful more written already, but my ability to update between moving in, buying supplies, and starting classes will be... questionable.

“So, out of curiosity,” Mo said as Hojo put the wires and pads on once again, “You seem to already know what you're doing?”

The professor didn't answer.
“J'mean, you already had what happens to me broken down and a process for testing down. Have... have you encountered similar things before?”

Now the man responded, saying, “That's none of your business, boy. Just focus on answering the questions.”

Mo groaned, but nodded.

He managed to go for longer this time before his peripherals washed green and he couldn't reply. Hojo didn't stop, though, and Sephiroth wasn't here to step in this time. Mo was left howling and convulsing on the floor as Hojo shocked him again and again. The green in his vision grew more saturated, starting to swallow everything—

By some stroke of luck, he managed to yank the wires off with his thrashing.

He went limp on the floor, panting and heaving as Hojo moved around. He could hear the man chuckling and muttering to himself. The green was slowly fading, but he was exhausted, pushed to his limit. He couldn't move if he wanted to, sweating out on the cold metal floor. He thought it was metal. Might be linoleum.

Cold, clammy hands grabbed his arm, forcibly turning him so he was on his back. Hojo stood over him, grinning wildly. In one of his hands was a needle full of mako. Mo felt his eyes widen.

No.

No no no.

He couldn't move. He couldn't get away. He didn't want this, he never agreed to this. But everything was either tense, locked in place from the shocks, or completely melted and loose from the sudden release. There was no way he could stop the sharp point advancing towards his skin.

The green wasn't completely gone from his vision. Black marred the mako-filled needle.

He needed to move, get away, move move move move move move move move move move—

With a savage, guttural cry, Mo wrenched his arm away, swinging wildly. Hojo jerked back in surprise, and Mo's flailing caught the needle, knocking it away. He heard the glass shatter, but paid it no mind. Through some miracle, he scrabbled to his feet.
He had to move, get away.

Not the elevator. It'd take too long. He didn't know where the stairs were, or if there even were any. His only choice was further into the labs.

Lurching a little and banging into at least three things on his way past, Mo took off. He vaguely heard Hojo yelling, but ignored him.

Get away get away get away.

He skidded down a hallway, just about tripping over his own feet as he ran.

Turn, run, turn, turn, run.

... Where was Hojo? He couldn't see him.

Footsteps.

Hide hide hide.

There, a door. Lunging over, Mo fumbled for the handle. It came off with a snap. Hissing curses with what breath he could catch, he shoved the door open and haphazardly put the handle back in place. It wouldn't hold, but hopefully it would fool anyone walking past.

The door shut, and he leaned against it, trying to steady and quiet his breathing. The room was dark, the door was shut, please please please...

The footsteps came closer.

Mo pressed a hand over his mouth, squeezing his eyes shut and praying to whatever deities existed and would listen that the person would walk past.

They stopped.

A clatter.

“What in the— dammit, who the hell...?”

It wasn't Hojo. But whoever it was, they were outside.

They pushed.

“The hell— who's in there?!”

Mo stepped away from the door. It went flying open, and someone in a white coat sprawled across the floor with an awkward cry.

“Who in the—”

“I'm sorry,” Mo pled, cutting the man off, “I just need to hide, please, just for a little while...”

The stranger stood with a grunt, glaring. Mo gulped nervously, backing up a pace and bumping into what felt like a cabinet. The man was just about a head shorter than him, portly and with a full beard of dark brown. In comparison to Hojo and all the other scientists—or lab hands, whatever they were—he wore a t-shirt and jeans under his lab-coat. A far cry from the formal suits he'd seen.
“Who are you? I don't recognize you.” the man grumbled, still glaring.

“M... Mo Tesla...”

It seemed to take a moment for his name to sink in. But once it did, the man lit up in an almost greedy manner.

“Mo Tesla? The man that showed up out of nowhere and went berserk?”

He winced, but nodded.

The man gave a triumphant laugh and slammed the door shut. “Stay as long as you like! Can't believe I finally get to meet you!”

The lights flicked on, forcing Mo to blink at the sudden brightness. It looked like the room was a small and messy office. The man was rooting through a sloppy pile of papers on the desk at the back wall, mumbling... cheerfully? Gleefully? He couldn't tell...

Standing up straight, the man spun around. “Professor Hollander! Pleasure to meet you!”

Gulping, Mo nodded.

Hollander... hadn't Sephiroth and Genesis both talked about this guy?

“So, what had you all riled up? Why are you hiding?”

“From Hojo. He... he...”

He trailed off, dropping his chin to his chest in confusion.

“... I can't remember what he did...”

“Shiva! Have anything to do with that?!?”

Hollander was pointing to Mo's forearms. Looking down, he found large patches of burnt skin, smears of blood surrounding them.

“He was shocking me. Testing my pain threshold. But... it was after that—!”

“Hey! What's wrong?!” Hollander demanded in alarm as Mo's knees hit the floor.

“I... I'm exhausted... I... don't think I could move... if I tried...” he replied as waves of fatigue suddenly crashed over him like a tsunami over a rowboat. He was completely worn out. Everything felt heavy. He wanted to sleep.

“Alright, alright, I'll call the Turks to come get you in just a minute. But I need you to listen,” Hollander said, sounding almost desperate as he dragged a rickety chair closer, “You're listening, right, boy?”

Mo nodded blearily, unable to focus his vision. “Well 's I can...” he mumbled.

“Right, good. Genesis is sick, and as his doctor I need to find a cure.”

The gash. He remembered the wound, ugly and foul. It was hidden under the sleeveless sweater the man wore.
“And I think your blood might be the key!”

Mo blinked in tired confusion. He’d checked out for a moment there. What was Hollander talking about?

“So I'll need you to lay off your poison for a week. A week, you hear? Stay sober that long, and then call me! We can do a blood transfusion then!”

Confused but tired, Mo nodded. He'd agree to whatever at the moment, Hollander had said he'd call the Turks to take him home...

His head dipped, eyes sliding shut.
Chapter 33

Rufus employs ‘rule by fear’ tactics. I can totally see him taking advantage of a person's uneasy footing and sexuality to intimidate them. Especially since Mo is already rather openly uncomfortable around him.

The other secretaries were tittering as he walked past, giggling behind their hands.

Okay. Clearly Heather hadn't taken to how they parted during lunch last week and spread some rumor or other.

Mo didn't react, moving to the back and into his office-space.

The previous night had been... stressful, to say the least. He remembered testing with Hojo going too far, but not what exactly had happened. He remembered meeting Hollander and making a deal with him. He sort of remembered Rude half-carrying half-dragging him back to his apartment. But at least he slept soundly. And he'd woken up early enough to both eat breakfast and take an indulgent shower. A fairly good morning so far, considering what the night before had been.

His biggest concern right now was his deal with Hollander.

Mo knew he could go dry for a week. He'd done it for a month before. But that was back home, where his stressors were nothing more than bad weather, poor traffic, and inflation. Could he manage it between work, history, testing, and training? He hoped so, he might not remember the details but he remembered that he was going to be giving blood. It would take at least a week for the alcohol in him to flush out enough to do that.

He announced his presence to Rufus and sat down, booting up the computer.

“So, how are you adjusting?”

Blinking, Mo looked up. Rufus was leaning against the doorway separating their two offices.

“Well enough, sir.” he replied, folding his hands on his lap. “Did you need something?”

Rufus shook his head with a smile that was more of a smirk. Straightening up, the boy came closer and held out a crisp white envelope. “Not particularly. But you've already proven to be a very efficient employee, so I wanted to thank you for your hard work. Employed for two days and I already don't want to let you go.”

He definitely wanted something, Mo decided as he cautiously took the envelope. It was unsealed, and Rufus seemed to be waiting for him to look...

It was a financial statement. He remembered the Turks setting him up with a financial account, but he'd had literally no reason to touch it yet. He hadn't gotten paid yet, or tried to buy anything on credit. He was told that the rent for his apartment would come directly from his paycheck, and—

Holy mother of fuck.
A direct deposit had been made to his account and while he wasn't an expert on the monetary system of Gaia yet, that was five zeroes.

“I— You— What?” he mumbled in shock.

A hand landed on his shoulder, making him tense. “You were taken from your world without warning and landed in ours. I'm just trying to help you out.”

Help out or indebt him? Mo felt ice cold and paralyzed, unable to look up at Rufus.

“I... thank you, sir...” he managed to force out.

“Not at all. Though... I did hear something interesting from Scarlet's secretary.”

If that was Heather then he had no guilt putting her in his least-favorite secretary position next to her boss in least-favorite director.

“Is that so...?” Mo asked, still not looking up.

The hand on his shoulder rubbed gently. Alarm-bells all over the place started going off.

“Mm-hmm. I heard that there was a possibility that you might not be attracted to the fairer sex.”

A mixture of relief and ice-cold panic flooded him. If that was all the rumor Heather spread, he had no complaints. No, not entirely true. His nearly-underage boss was coming onto him. A pretty big complaint, in all honesty, even if it was the only one.

“... Well, Mr. Shinra, I can't say that's wrong...”

“Rufus.”

Oh shit. The boy just forcibly turned his chair, leaning over him with that smirk trying to be a smile.

The alarm-bells shifted into an air-raid siren.

“It's Rufus, Mo.”

Nope.

In a display of athletics he didn't know he possessed until that very moment, Mo shot up and out of his chair—narrowly missing Rufus— and vaulted over the desk. Jumping over the back of the couch in an awkward sprawl was one thing, but leaping over a desk to avoid what was shaping up to be a predator was another.

From there, he made a beeline to the door. The first open desk he saw, he bolted over to.

“Where's Heather?” he demanded breathlessly.

Giggling, the woman pointed. Mo nodded, following her finger to his new destination.

He didn't bother knocking, just opened the door and ducked inside, closing it behind him.

“Oh, hello. To what do I owe this pleasure?” Heather smiled from her desk.

Ugh, it stunk of too much perfume in here.
“You did this,” Mo said, pointing, “You take responsibility.”

She leaned back in her chair, grinning like the cat that swallowed the canary. “You mean that silly rumor going around? Sorry, but I had nothing—”

“I don't care that you told people I'm gay, because I am gay!” Mo burst out, shutting her up.

“You... are? And you aren't trying to...”

“Hide it? No, I'm on the market, why would I hide that I'm gay, that would be counterproductive. But that's not the issue! The issue is that I just got sexually harassed and need somewhere to hide!”

Heather frowned in confusion as Mo moved to sit on the floor next to her desk. Shit, he hadn't let go of the bank-statement.

“... Men can't get harassed.”

“I imagine you're one of those people who says men can't get raped, either,” Mo said tartly, “Like a man can't be held at gunpoint by another man, told to drop pants and not make a noise or get his brains blown out, and then be brutally raw-dogged in the back of an alley.”

Heather's voice dropped to a whisper. “... Have you... been raped before...?”

“No.”

“Then why are you in here crying that you have been?”

“Did you have a brain tumor for breakfast?” he quipped, knowing full well she wouldn't get the reference. Holding up the statement, he said, “I was harassed, not raped. Though I suppose the shoulder-rub could be seen as molestation if you squint.”

Heather took the statement, and Mo put his face in his hands.

“... From his personal account?!”

“Because I've only been employed for two days and he already doesn't want to let me go, he said while cornering me at my desk.” Mo nodded into his hands.

“That's money you pay to hide a baby or have sex, not thank a diligent worker!”

He wasn't even going to ask.

Sitting up, he let the back of his head thump against Heather's desk. “He's practically half my age and my boss. For a teenager, he's absolutely terrifying. If I try to tell anyone, chances are I'll be the one who gets burnt. It's way too early for this bullshit and I'm far too sober to deal with it.”

A flask appeared in front of his face.

Huh, Heather hadn't struck him as the type.

His hand was halfway to it when he shook his head. “I can't, I'm giving blood in a week...”

The flask was retracted, and the statement fell on his lap.

“What exactly did he do? I mean...” Heather trailed off.
“If he’s your type, go get him, cougar. But I’m not into power imbalances and ice kings.” Mo informed Heather flatly, letting his eyes slide closed. “He was touching me in an overly personal way, caging me in and addressed me in a far too casual manner considering our relationship.”

“... It sounds to me like you’re overreacting. If it’s really that bad, just ask your General Affairs friends to do something about it.”

“Fuck you, Heather. Fuck you with genital warts. Overreacting or not, it’s still your fault and I’m hiding out here until I feel I can face him again.”

She harrumphed, the clicking of computer keys filling the room. “You should thank me for helping you come out.”

His eyes opened, and he twisted to glare at her. “Heather, I’ve been out. I’m so out my sexuality is growing flowers and running a garden club.”

She stopped typing, looking at him in exasperation. “That makes absolutely no sense, Mo.” she informed him condescendingly.

“It made perfect sense,” Mo shot back as he settled down, “You’re just an empty-headed bimbo.”
Angeal doesn't strike me as the type who, if he saw someone who looked sad or miserable, would walk past. Mo just isn't used to kindness like that, and he's already had a stressful morning.

Mo blinked in surprise as someone sat across from him.

Angeal.

“So I'm told you tried to throw a materia at Genesis.”

He blushed furiously, ducking his head.

Lunch-break hadn't come fast enough. Mo had spent all his time in the office worrying that Rufus would reappear. The second the clock informed him it was time for lunch, Mo had just about bolted to the elevator, ignoring the giggles and whispers of the other secretaries. At least it appeared that Heather had kept the little episode this morning to herself.

But that aside, he hadn't spotted any of the Turks, so he was sitting alone... or had been.

“Don't worry, it sounds like he deserved it.” Angeal said with a chuckle. “But not many people have the guts to think about trying that, let alone following through with it.”

“Well, I wasn't thinking.” Mo admitted, still not looking up. “I was just... fed up and he was being... mouthy.”

Another chuckle. “He can be a bit much at times, but he isn't bad. We've been friends since we were kids. It just takes some getting used to him.”

Unsure of what to say, Mo just nodded. He couldn't figure out if the vaguely orange mush was supposed to be some kind of mashed vegetable or pudding of some unknown flavor.

“So... a pacifist, huh?”

Now he looked up, squaring his shoulders as he did so. “That's right.”

Angeal offered a smile. “That's a very noble mindset. Surprising to find here at Shinra.”

Mo couldn't help but smile wanly back. “Good thing I'm not technically Shinra.”

Holy crap look at Angeal's tray. No wonder the canteen-workers didn't bat an eye when he asked for extra food. Was that how much SOLDIERs ate? Was that how much he was going to eat? That was almost scary...

“It'll be interesting to train with you,” Angeal said, capturing his attention again, “Working solely on defense and endurance isn't the typical SOLDIER method. But I'm glad to hear we don't have to force you into anything. And I know you aren't technically SOLDIER, but having a long-lasting
defender would be good in the field.”

Mo blanched. “I... don't think I'd ever be able to set foot on a battlefield. I... I'm weak in more than just my physical strength.”

“For getting this far, I think you're stronger than you're making yourself out to be.”

That pinged somewhere in him. Hadn't... hadn't the woman in his mako-induced death-dream said something like that?

... Well, it was a common enough phrase. He wouldn't be surprised.

“What happened?”

Blinking, he looked up.

Angeal frowned, reaching across the table to take Mo's hand. He felt his heart leap up into his throat, breath hitching a little in surprise. The man pushed his sleeve up, exposing the wound that hadn't fully healed yet. Chances were it would scar.

“I'm testing with Hojo every other night. We're... working to find my pain and stress thresholds, so we can better understand my... the... going berserk.” Mo explained as Angeal examined the injury, carefully prodding and touching. “It's fine. I can't even feel it anymore.”

“That doesn't make it okay. The mako in your systems probably hasn't settled yet, and likely won't for another three or four days. You may be healing fast, but doing things that result in injuries like this might undermine that whole process.”

Mo swallowed, trying to undo the knot that had formed in his throat.

Slowly, carefully, he reclaimed his arm and pushed his sleeve back down.

“You are okay, right?”

He cast his gaze down towards his tray again. The orange mush was half-gone. He hadn't even realized he'd been eating while they talked.

“I'm as fine as I can be. Nothing has happened that I haven't been expecting or agreed to. It's... scary and new, but I don't want to burden anyone. I just have to adjust and keep moving forward. If I don't... things will be less okay. So... I'm not totally fine. But give it a little time and I will be.” he replied after a moment. Angeal didn't say anything, so he took a bite of the orange mush. It faintly tasted like rutabaga. It needed pepper.

“Give me your phone.”

... Wait, what.

On autopilot, he obeyed, but his mind was still whirling. What was going on?

Angeal took out his own phone as well, glancing between them as he searched through and punched something in.

“There. I know Shinra can be overwhelming for people from this world, I can't imagine what it must be like for you. If you ever want to talk or if you ever need anything, just give me a call, okay?” the man smiled, handing his phone back.
Mo looked at his phone's screen. The name Angeal Hewley now stood at the top of his contacts.

Dumbfounded, he nodded. Angeal smiled.

"Out of curiosity, what did you do before arriving here?"

No, stop. He was still reeling from the apparent swap of numbers.

"Why are you being so nice?" he blurted out, head spinning far too much to keep it in.

"Hm?"

Blushing, Mo pushed his head down, letting his bangs fall in a curtain of near-black. Fumbling a little, he explained, "I-I mean, I'm a complete stranger... you've no reason to be nice to me... just because you'll be working with me, you don't have to even pretend to like me... but you're giving me your number, asking if I'm okay, these things that... things that no one is under any obligation to do, and I'm so confused."

There was a chuckle. Not cruel or unkind. Good-natured.

"I may not be obligated to do any of it, but I can hardly walk past someone who needs it. Even if you say you don't, I imagine you do. You left everything behind, and you're starting over completely. Besides, you looked absolutely miserable."

Mo opened his mouth to say he did have people to talk to, but the words died in mouth. Reno and Cissnei... he already talked to them about these things. They weren't friends yet.

"... Thank you." he all but whispered, putting his phone away.

"Don't worry about it."

Taking a deep, shaky breath, Mo shoveled another forkful of what might be mashed rutabaga into his mouth.

He was already worrying about it.

"So, what did you do?"

Lifting his head up but not meeting Angeal's gaze, Mo said, "I was the same thing back home that I am here, more or less. A secretary and an artist."

"So at least something is familiar, huh?"

His lips quirked up in a smile for a brief moment. "Yeah... something is."
Mo thinks about his own death in this chapter. This isn't meant to be interpreted as suicidal thoughts, but rather tired sarcasm stemming from his frustration, lack of self-worth, and depression combined with literally everything else. It isn't super intense and in-depth, just a little bit towards the end, but a heads up anyway.

Mo lay sprawled out on the bed, staring at the statement in his hand.

What was he supposed to do with this? It felt wrong. Like hush money.

Money to hide a baby or have sex, as Heather put it.

He hadn't had any more interactions with Rufus afterwards. But it was only the first day of the week. Tomorrow Rufus had two meetings. Mo was supposed to remind him of both, make sure he was prepared. It was what secretaries did. And on the last day of the week Rufus was meeting someone for lunch. Again, Mo was supposed to remind him.

So much had happened in just a week. It was only his second week living in this world. If every week was going to be like this... he best be prepared. His lifespan would likely get knocked down a bit from all the stress, but surely he could manage? Chances were it was just that he'd just gotten here... like when he'd just moved to Rosenberg. Everything had been hectic and chaotic and stressful then, too.

Yes, he told himself, but there was no Hojo back home.

He wondered what was going on back home. If he'd been declared missing or dead. People had to have gone through his house by this point. Mr. Everson had undoubtedly gotten a new secretary by now. Probably Pauline from downstairs. Which he couldn't be too upset about, Pauline had been with the company longer than he had. And if he wasn't going back anyway then it didn't matter.

Sighing, Mo let his arm drop.

He felt like shit.

He wanted a drink.

He needed to be sober for a week, he reminded himself. He was giving blood. He might not remember why, but he remembered agreeing to let Hollander take his blood for some kind of transfusion.

As for the feeling like shit... he could take another shower? Get something to eat? Draw? Call Reno, see if he was available to go shopping or something?

No, shopping implied that he was going to use the money Rufus had given him. He didn't want to touch that. Not yet, at least.

His mind strayed to the new number in his phone.
No. Angeal was kind and polite, but Mo didn't want to burden the man.

The recreational floor had a gym, he recalled. Reno had all but glossed over it, just kind of waving his hand at all the different things the floor had.

Maybe he should make a habit of going there when he wasn't studying, testing, or training. If he was going to be training, no matter how he was training, he should probably be in better shape. And the training was going to be sporadic, not on a fixed schedule. So if he did absolutely nothing between sessions, wouldn't it all be for naught? It would probably help if he could at least run a mile or something.

Besides, exercise would help with energy levels and sleeping. He remembered that from... somewhere. Exercise helped stamina and sleep, if nothing else.

Right. It was late, but maybe he should do that? Work off this shitty feeling and desire to do something, start setting up some sort of exercise routine?

Heaving a sigh, Mo closed his eyes.

No. Not tonight. He could swing the idea by the Turks tomorrow or something.

Right now he was tired and overwhelmed.

Rolling onto his side, he cracked his eyes open to stare at the financial statement.

Five-hundred thousand gil. He wasn't sure what that was in dollars, but he got the feeling it was a lot. And Rufus didn't seem like the type to just throw money around. The boy was cold and calculating, but not... carefree like that. There was something to this little windfall. He just knew there was, but he couldn't figure it out. There was some catch, and he was going to trip over it if he didn't figure it out.

His eyes closed again.

He felt like shit still.

Okay, time to get up and make some of those instant noodles. If he wasn't going to fall asleep, then he was going to do something... semi-productive. He'd put some food in his belly, wash his face, and go to sleep.

Groaning, Mo swung himself up and off the bed. He took the statement with him as he left the bedroom, tossing it on the coffee table as he passed. Moving into the kitchen-area, he got some water going on the stovetop and grabbed the noodles from the cabinet. They were essentially ramen, from what he could tell. Opening up the package, he confirmed that. Ramen, but without the flavor-packets.

That was fine, he told himself.

Breaking up the noodles into a bowl, he checked the water. Not boiling yet. Simmering, it looked like.

Just a few minutes later, he was stirring the noodles around in the bowl, thoughts wandering.

He wondered what training would be like from now on. Was he still going to work with materia? Or swords? He supposed that as long as it was purely defense, he could work with swords. He'd have to see if he was still that mindset when the training actually took place, but for now, at least,
he could say it'd be fine.

Were the noodles soft enough?

Scooping one out of the bowl, he dropped it in his mouth and chewed thoughtfully.

Done enough. Okay, best drain the water out, then.

Using his spoon to keep the noodles in his bowl, Mo gradually tipped the steaming water into the sink. Once that was done, he carried the bowl over to the couch. He found himself propping his head up on one of the couch-arms, curling around the bowl on his side.

So he was tired. He just couldn't feel it with how much his head was thinking.

Sighing, Mo took a spoonful of noodles.

He wanted things to go back to normal, but he'd already decided that he was staying here. He'd have to adjust to a new normal, even if that normal involved ugly scars on his forearms to match the large one across his stomach. Even if it involved swords, sorcery, and sci-fi.

Didn't want to see Hojo again. Seeing him tomorrow night.

Didn't want to see Rufus again. Seeing him tomorrow.

Wanted to spend more time with Reno and Cissnei. Didn't want to be a burden.

Wanted to be drunk. Wasn't allowed to drink right now. Couldn't get drunk on top of that.

His eyes closed as he chewed on his mouthful of noodles.

He might take Hojo up on that offer after giving Hollander his blood. He wanted to get drunk. Not necessarily to the point of puking or blacking out, but if he wasn't ever going to get drunk again with his new SOLDIER metabolism, he wanted to try drowning everything one last time.

And it was an excuse to not get shocked.

He snorted.

Drink to death or get shocked to death. Obviously he was going to choose the former. If Hojo was going to be the death of him, Mo would at least choose the manner of death he experienced.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Sleepless in my dorm for some reason, so here's the last of my pre-written chapters in hopes that if I mindlessly upload it I'll get tired!

Of course.
Of fucking course.

Mo drummed his fingers against the desk, bouncing his knee as he glared at the in-tray. It wasn't the in-tray's fault, or the stack of papers in it.

No, rather it was Hojo's fault. Because Hojo was the one who oversaw and administered his SOLDIER treatment.

The energy spike had him wanting to get up and do something, not sit here and sort through papers and emails. He hadn't gotten a single thing done yet, too busy fidgeting and fighting to stay. In. The. Chair.

It was just his luck.

Growling a little, Mo turned to the computer.

He was being paid to work, so he was going to work, high energy be damned!

It felt like he was doing some kind of interpretive modern dance under the desk as he read through the emails. His feet scuffed across the carpet or kicked wildly. His heels pumped up and down. His knees bounced frantically. His thighs opened and shut. He mixed and matched the actions at random, not really paying attention except for when he knocked against the desk. Instead, Mo was trying to force himself to concentrate on the screen before him. He had to read the same line three times over for it to sink in more times than he would have really liked.

But finally he got through all of the emails.

Okay, check the time...

Forcing his legs to be still, Mo picked up the phone. It only took a second for Rufus to answer.

“Yes, Mo?”

“Sir, you have a meeting in thirty minutes. If there is material you need to have for this meeting, I would advise collecting it now and heading down to the meeting room in ten minutes so that you are early and can review things in advance.” Mo said, fighting to keep his voice professional as he began to flex his toes and tap his pen.

“I see. Thank you for the warning. Is that all?”

“Yes sir.”
Without further ado, Mo hung up. He still had more work to do.

Legs bouncing all over the place, he typed up responses to a few of the emails. The rest were deleted or passed along as needed. By the time he was getting to the in-tray, Rufus had emerged from his office. Mo very deliberately kept his head down, fidgeting completely halted.

He could feel the boy's gaze on him, unmoving, for a solid five seconds before Rufus actually left to go to the meeting.

He let out a long sigh of relief, returning to the papers. His pen tapped furiously against the desk and his knee knocked against the side.

Work, dammit. Don't get distracted.

Stay in the chair. Stay at the desk.

This paper was trash, it could just get shredded. This one needed Rufus's signature and the president's. This one just needed to be reviewed before being sent back out, he could do that himself. Another one here for the shredder.

The phone rang.

Mo instinctively looked up to check which line it was as he reached out... but it wasn't the office phone.

Oh. It was his phone ringing.

Taking it out, he checked the caller-ID. There was no name. He didn't know it.

... It could be important.

After a moment of deliberation, Mo flipped the phone open and accepted the call.

“Mo Tesla speaking...?”

“What're you doing?”

It took a moment, but he recognized the voice.

“I'm... at work. Is there—”

“Well, stop working and get down here. We need to work on your materia skills. You have twenty minutes.”

And with that, Genesis hung up.

Shit.

Okay, well, Rufus was in a meeting, so he'd have to leave a note...

Digging out one of the post-it pads, Mo grabbed a pen. He wrote a careful note, explaining where he had gone and why. He added in a reminder about the second meeting.

Okay. There.

Standing up and grabbing his bag, Mo carefully placed the note on the door to Rufus's office. He
made sure it would be roughly eye-level with the teen before he left. He ignored the giggles once
again as he headed to the elevator. It looked like the only way to shut them up would be to prove
that the rumor was true and waltz in here with a boyfriend seeing him off to work.

Well, that wasn't happening for a while. He told Heather he was on the market, and he was, but he
was still raw from being dumped by Vicky. Vicky hadn't been like Jonathan or Tyrone. Mo had
genuinely thought they could have a working relationship, that maybe one day they could get
married. Vicky had really pulled the wool over his eyes.

Well, he thought bitterly as the elevator stopped, letting him move to his apartment, he hoped
Vicky was happy with his bubble-brained bimbo.

Stepping into his apartment, he shook his head.

If he lingered on thoughts like that, he'd start drinking without even thinking about it. And if he
was going to be giving blood, he couldn't keep going down that road.

Gulping and forcing his mind to be blank, Mo hurried to get changed. Out of work-clothes. Into the
training outfit.

He had wanted something to do.

As he got up to the proper floor, he realized that he had no clue how much time had passed, and he
raced to the training room. He just about tripped as he came in, barely catching himself.

Genesis stood in the center of the room, glaring at him.

“... I'm late, aren't I?” Mo mumbled.

The man didn't answer, jerking his head. Mo obediently moved closer.

“I'll be deployed to Wutai at the beginning of next week. And I somehow doubt Sephiroth or
Angeal will place enough emphasis on working with materia when they train you.” Genesis said
haughtily.

Not sure what to say or do in response, Mo shuffled awkwardly.

Genesis pulled something out, holding it for Mo to take. He saw that it was a bangle, with three
green marbles set into it.

“I've been authorized to give this to you for training purposes. Because you're still under
surveillance, we aren't too worried about you misbehaving with it.”

Slowly, Mo nodded. “Aah... does it go on your dominant hand, or...?”

He was waved off. “It doesn't really matter. I don't. Sephiroth seems to switch back and forth.
Angeal doesn't use bangles.”

After a moment of deliberation, Mo slid it onto his left hand. He was right-handed, so wearing
things like this made more sense on his left. Like a watch.

The second the bangle rested on his wrist, Mo heard murmuring again. He opened his mouth to ask
about that, but just as quickly shut it.

“What?” Genesis growled in obvious annoyance.
“Am I supposed to hear talking in the back of my head when I handle materia? It's quiet, like low murmurs, but still... there.”

“It's a good thing I pulled you from your desk. If you can hear the materia that clearly, combined with that powerful spell you cast last time, then you have a natural affinity for magic. It's not something a lot of people have, so feel proud. Most only hear them when activated.”

Mo nodded, looking down at the gems now sitting on his wrist.

“I'm not expecting you to be able to, but can you tell me what each of them does?” the redhead asked, turning and walking a short distance away. Was he going to circle like a buzzard...?

... Yes, yes he was.

Closing his eyes, Mo turned his attention to the quiet voices in his head. They were softer, weaker than the barrier one he'd used on the weekend. He wondered if it had to do with the size or something else.

To his surprise, he found that there were three completely separate murmurs, each one a different pitch and cadence.

Experimentally, he reached out—

“One of them's a barrier!” he said in surprise, finding he recognized that particular murmur.

“And?” Genesis prompted.

Swallowing, Mo turned from the barrier to the next set of murmurs. He was able to tell it was a barrier just by brushing against it, but he'd used a barrier before. Was he familiar with these other two at all?

He set his mind to the second set of quiet mumbling.

“The next one... is that... is that the one that Sephiroth used after...”

“After you tried to throw a materia at me?”

Mo jumped at the venomous voice right in his ear, eyes snapping open. “Did I offend you in a past life or something?” he demanded, trying to calm his startled heart.

“No, you offended me in this life.” Genesis replied darkly, stalking into view.

Taking a deep breath, Mo asked quietly, “Is this about the materia or... or that I accused you of trying to kill a child?”

The man stopped, turning to glower.

“He looked like you! I'm not the one who... who cloned you or whatever! I was saying what I saw and what happened!”

Genesis suddenly frowned, stepping closer. “Why are you suddenly talking about clones?”

Mo shrugged. “I heard it in a dream. I think it was that death-dream I had after getting my mako shots, but I don't remember. It was a dream, and the woman in it was a figment of my imagination.”

After a moment, Genesis resumed his circling. Mo closed his eyes to go back to figuring out the
third materia, but paused when he heard the commander speaking.

“My friend, your desire is the bringer of life, the gift of the goddess... Even if the morrow is barren of promises, nothing shall forestall my return...”

Eyes opening, Mo asked, “That's... Loveless, right?”

Genesis's pacing stopped, just out of sight. “You know it?”

“A copy was forced on me when my coworkers found out I knew nothing about it. It's... interesting, and very well-written, but I'm just more of a visual person. But... I may go back and create illustrations for some of the passages some day. The images they presented were beautiful, even if poetry and literature in general aren't my strong suit.” Mo admitted.

There was a stretch of silence.

Before Mo could turn to look at Genesis, the man said, “You've one more materia.”

Right, right...

He closed his eyes one more time, seeking out that third murmur.

“It... feels tired. It's very quiet.” he commented.

“Good enough. The three materia you have there are relatively non-combative. You have barrier, restore, and seal. All of them are at their most base levels. Today we'll just be working on your control, but after I'm sent to Wutai I expect you to have leveled at least one of them up once. That means you'll likely need to come in here on your own time and practice.”

Oh. Homework. He could handle that.

“So you already know what barrier can do. It's a defensive materia that casts spells to repel physical and magical damage. At higher levels, it can even reflect damage back.” Genesis said, striding back into view and stopping. Turning to face Mo, he continued, “Restore is a healing materia. As you experienced, it heals wounds and can sometimes restore energy. Seal is a semi-offensive materia that deals little to no damage, and can perform two spells. One is Sleep, which should be fairly self-explanatory. The other is Silence, which can prevent the targets from casting spells of their own as well as muting them.”

He liked these materia, he decided, gently running his fingers over the stones in the bangle. For a brief moment, the murmurs seemed to get louder.

“Now,” Genesis said, recapturing Mo's attention, “Last time you successfully cast a high-level spell, the highest that materia was capable of. However, you were unable to drop the Wall. So now I want you to see if you can't cast Barrier, the lowest level spell, and drop it.”

Shit teacher. Genesis was a shit teacher. Angeal had vouched for the man, but he was just a shit teacher. Sephiroth was too, but had an excuse. He'd have to see about Angeal.

Sighing, Mo closed his eyes and turned his mind to the murmuring in his head. It only took a moment for him to pick the barrier's voice out, and he began to repeat the process of immersing himself in it—

Oh.
He wasn't able to go as far as he had with the other one.

A trill of shameful apology seemed to race through the murmuring for a moment, but it made sense. If these materia were weaker than the other one, then wasn't it only natural they weren't able to reach that incredible level of song?

The apology turned into gratitude. Mo couldn't help but smile a little.

The voices of the restore and seal seemed to grow softer, and the barrier hummed. In his head, Mo hummed along.

He could feel himself casting it, this time. A small pull in his mind, a spark that raced from somewhere in his temple down to his fingertips. It drained him, but not to the point of collapsing. More like a pleasant tiredness after a good day.

Slowly, his eyes opened. A small gasp left him when he saw the faintly shimmering... well, shield, for lack of a better word, hovering in the air before him. It wasn't the opalescent dome of the Wall, but was still impressive, geometric shapes linking together to create a white-tinted shield.

“Eventually, you won't need as long to cast, and should be able to do it effortlessly. But for now, see if you can't drop it.” Genesis ordered.

Mo frowned, trying to figure out how to do that. After a moment, he decided to try closing his eyes. The barrier was still humming, so... maybe try drawing away? He hadn't noticed it was still active, but now that he was thinking about it he could feel a slow, almost imperceivable drain...

It took a little more work to disengage from the barrier's voice than it had to get into it. But after a minute, he managed. Opening his eyes, he saw the shield fading away, Genesis nodding.

“There. Now, if you don't work to maintain a spell, they tend to have a lifespan that runs out. You seem to unconsciously maintain your spells somehow, which would be useful on the battlefield but is inconvenient otherwise. You'll have to learn to turn that on and off.”

... Okay then.

“Now, do it again.”

Ugh.
Chapter 37

Today had been uneventful. Nothing noteworthy had happened, and Mo couldn't tell if he was grateful or apprehensive.

But all that aside, it was late now. He'd gotten off work, he'd eaten, he'd let the Turks know where he was going and what he was doing...

Which led him here, to the training room on the SOLDIER floor, sliding the bangle onto his wrist.

Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and reached out for the materias' voices. It was even easier to single out the barrier, humming softly as he coaxed it to do the same. It happily obliged, and he opened his eyes just in time to watch the spell slide into existence.

Okay, now to drop it.

The doors slid open before he could, making him snap around.

Reno and Rude came in, the former grinning and waving.

“Oh. Hey.” Mo smiled.

“Materia, huh?” Reno smirked, trotting closer.

“That’s right. Genesis wants me to have... leveled up at least one of them after his deployment to Wutai.” he replied with a nod. “I'm... kind of focusing on the barrier.”

Speaking of, he still needed to drop that.

“Nice. What all you got?” the redhead asked as the spell flickered away. He was getting better at cancelling them, but still wasn't perfect.

“Aah... barrier, restore, and seal. I've never used the seal, and only used the restore once... They're all... I guess their most base levels?” Mo answered, holding out his left hand so Reno could see.

“Wanna try the seal out?”

“... On what...? Doesn't it require a target...?”

Reno clapped a hand to his chest in mock indignation. “I'm right here, yo!”

Mo raised an eyebrow.

“Don't worry, Rude'll make sure you don't do anything naughty, and I bet it won't last that long anyway!” the cheerful Turk waved off.

Mo looked to Rude. The stoic man just shrugged.

“... Well, okay then...”

Reno grinned widely, sitting down cross-legged on the floor. Mo took another deep breath, closing his eyes again.

The barrier leapt to attention, but Mo gently nudged it aside, reaching for the sleepy mumbling of
the seal. It grew a smidgen louder, faster.

Mo let the breath out slowly.

There was that drain, traveling from his head to his hands—

A thump made him jump, eyes wide.

Reno was now sprawled out on the floor. Mo stared with his eyes wide, blinking rapidly in confusion. He looked up to Rude, but the man hadn't reacted.

Inching closer, Mo carefully reached out with a foot and nudged Reno’s ribs.

The redhead jolted to life, grabbing Mo’s leg with a roar. He jerked away in shock, screeching and kicking.

Reno cackled, clutching his belly and rolling back and forth in hysteria.

Mo scowled, closing his eyes. He reached out to the seal again, humming to cajole it into action. It rose up, and he felt the drain start up again. It was stronger this time, and pulled down through his arm towards the bangle.

It was different from the barrier, which resulted in him being drowsy. The restore had left him tired in a more physical sense.

The seal, instead of doing either of those, seemed to pop and detach.

There was another thump.

Opening his eyes, he saw Reno sprawled out once more. Touching the Turk with his foot resulted in nothing. He nudged again, harder and almost turning the younger man over. He was rewarded with a snore.

“If you're foxing again I'll kick you.” Mo warned.

Absolutely no response.

“He's out.” Rude said flatly from his position by the wall.

“... Oh. So it worked, then.”

... It felt wrong to just keep training with Reno sprawled all over the place like a mutant starfish.

Mo reached down, hooking his hands under the redhead's arms. Grunting a little, he dragged the Turk over to his partner's feet. Rude didn't react at all, but Mo felt better. Returning to the center of the room, Mo rolled his shoulders.

Barrier up.

As he cast the spell, he realized something.

When he was casting something like Barrier or that one Cure, the pull and drain of energy seemed to stay with him. When he'd cast on Reno, the pull and drain had left him.

Barrier down.
Turning to Rude, Mo asked, “Do you... mind if I try something?”

He got a raised eyebrow in response.

“I'm... I'm not gonna do anything stupid, I promise. But is it possible to cast spells from a barrier materia over other people?”

After a moment of silence, Rude nodded.

Smiling his gratitude, Mo stayed facing the Turks and closed his eyes.

After all the work yesterday, calling to the barrier materia was becoming a breeze. He wondered if it was possible to build up an affinity for just one kind of materia, or even specific pieces of materia.

There was the pull and drain—

It popped and detached.

The geometric shield of Barrier hovered in front of the two Turks. It looked somewhat smaller. Remembering what Genesis had said about him unconsciously maintaining his spells, he wondered if that had anything to do with it. It wasn't feeding from him when placed over someone else. And when he tried to drop it, he found that he couldn't.

“So... spells from materia are dependent on the energy given to them? The more you give, the stronger you cast?”

Rude nodded again.

“So... I wonder if that's why that first time...”

At the conscious Turk's questioning look, he explained, “In my first training-session, Sephiroth gave me a high-level barrier materia, and I was told to try casting something. I... managed a pretty high-level spell. I don't know how, but... I remember trying to prove that I could cast at all, that I wasn't worthless, and... I wonder if I unintentionally put my all into the spell?”

Rude spoke up again, surprising him. “If you're that carefree with the energy you have, it could be dangerous. You'll have to learn how to control that.”

Mo swallowed nervously, nodding.

Right. Time to see if he couldn't cast Barrier with his eyes open this time.
I've never had blood drawn before, just so you know. Just other people describing the sensation to me.

The rest of the week was relatively uneventful. Before he really knew it, Mo was standing in the labs, wondering where the hell to find Hollander. Hopefully he wouldn't run into Hojo along the way.

“Can I help you?”

Blinking, Mo realized that one of the white coats was standing nearby, staring at him.

“You're not due with Professor Hojo for another hour and a half.” the man informed him.

“Right. I'm... I'm looking for Hollander?” Mo asked timidly.

“Why?” the maybe-scientist replied with a frown.

“I agreed to do something... he said to call him when I was ready, but never gave me his number...”

“... Right.”

He was beckoned closer and given directions to Hollander's office. Apparently the man didn't leave there very often, so it was rather guaranteed Mo would find him there. If not, he had an hour and a half to wait for the man to return. Aimless wandering was ill-advised, though. So he was to go there, stay there or with Hollander, and then get back here for Hojo at nine.

Thanking the man, Mo went off to find the other professor.

He recognized the office door rather easily. The knob was attached with duct-tape and too much glue.

There were voices inside.

Gulping, Mo knocked gently.

The door was flung open, revealing a rather frazzled-looking Hollander—

“What is he doing here?” Genesis scowled.

“Hear me out!” Hollander all but yelled, yanking Mo into the office and shoving him towards Angeal. The room was not made for so many people. It was cramped, borderline claustrophobic. “The degradation is in part due to a component in the SOLDIER treatment! Mr. Tesla's body somehow purged itself of that component, but maintained it's SOLDIER attributes!”

His mind flashed back to the tar-like stuff he'd thrown up after first getting the mako injections.

“So you think Mo has the key to curing Genesis?” Angeal asked, a gentle hand holding his
shoulder steady.

“If nothing else, he's the first step! Which is why we're going to try a blood-transfusion!” Hollander snapped, grabbing a fistful of papers from his desk and gesturing for them all to follow him.

“Oh, that's what you wanted...” Mo murmured.

“He didn't tell you?” Angeal asked with a slight frown.

“He did, but I was... loopy from something that Hojo did, so I can't remember. Just that I was to go dry for a week before coming back and giving blood.”

“And you did, right?!” Hollander snapped accusingly as they moved into somewhere that looked more like a doctor's clinic.

“Yes I stayed sober, I'm not an idiot.” Mo snapped back, glaring at the portly man.

Hollander flinched, hurrying to start setting things up. Genesis gave a slight growl, shrugging off his coat and handing it to Angeal. Mo just stood awkwardly and watched before Hollander gestured for him to lie down on one of the two cushioned tables in the center of the room. Genesis laid down on the other, and Angeal went to sit in a chair against the wall.

After a minute, Hollander clattered over, pulling a mess of equipment behind him. Muttering under his breath, the man started setting things up between them. Genesis watched with sharp eyes, and Mo with his own tired, somewhat confused ones.

But Hollander's quiet yammering started to get to him, and he closed his eyes, trying to force himself to go limp. He twitched when flighty hands picked his arm up, rubbing cold cotton across his skin that left him tingling and most likely sanitized. Shortly after, there was a stinging that made him jerk, eyes opening. Hollander wasn't even looking at him, fussing over Genesis. Glancing over at Angeal after noting the tube coming from his wrist, Mo took a deep breath and closed his eyes again.

He could feel when the drawing started. He'd never given blood before, but he could feel the pressure under his skin changing, particularly in his arm. It was disconcerting, and made him gurgle worriedly.

“Are you alright?” Angeal asked. Still across the room, judging by the distance of his voice.

“... I've never done this before. It feels... weird...” Mo answered, warbling slightly at the discomfort.

“You're fine, don't be such a baby.” Hollander scoffed.

He was unable to help asking, “Are all scientists assholes or is it just something Shinra looks for in workstaff?”

He couldn't tell which of the Firsts it was that snorted. It might have been both. Hollander just spluttered and then stomped off across the room. Was the man wearing sandals? It sounded like his shoes were flip-flops when he stomped like that.

“... You're working with your materia, right?” Genesis suddenly asked sharply.

“Yes.” Mo sighed, opening his eyes and turning his head. He watched the red tube coming out of
his skin, followed it up to the bag between the tables and skated down the second tube to Genesis's arm. “I can cast Barrier without closing my eyes now. I don't have the chance to use the restore or seal very often, though.”

“Hmph. I imagine not, no.” the redhead said haughtily, crossing his legs.

“Gen mentioned you were proving good with materia.” Angeal piped up.

Turning his head and craning his neck a little, Mo nodded. “I... guess I just have an aptitude for it... but control is hard...”

“He unconsciously maintains his spells, keeps feeding them without realizing it somehow.” Genesis commented.

“What?! Really?!” Hollander barked, suddenly materializing over him and making him yelp in shock. “I've never heard of such a talent, it may be completely unique!”

Shrinking back into the table a bit, Mo mumbled, “Well, I... I dunno how I do it... I was told it could be dangerous, too, so I need to learn to stop...”

The man vanished from view again, muttering again.

Mo heaved a sigh, letting his eyes slide closed again.

Give blood, see Hojo. Get shocked, back to the apartment. Shower, bed.

It was a simple plan, it covered all his bases—

“What is going on here?”

Mo sat bolt-upright at the cold, sharp question.

Hojo stood in the doorway, glaring at Hollander. Mo noticed that Hollander seemed to have... deflated a lot. It looked like Genesis was bristling, the way cats would when they felt threatened, and Angeal looked wary. He swallowed nervously, unable to tell if his dizziness was from blood loss or fear.

“I asked a question, Hollander.” Hojo said, voice dark and icy.

Now Hollander seemed to straighten up, trying to puff his chest out in defiance. “What does it matter to you? Since when do you have any interest in any of my work at all?”

If Mo could pick up on that small voice-break near the end, everyone with ears could.

Hojo's gaze turned to him, making him flinch. He felt like he'd just been slapped, as if he were a misbehaving child.

“I... I shouldn't be too long...” he mumbled, casting his eyes down and bowing his head in submission.

“Don't bother. You'll be useless if you're drained.” came the scathing reply.

“... Should I come in tomorrow instead...?” he offered meekly, hunching his shoulders.

“Fine. See to it that you properly replenish yourself, or you'll be just as worthless then as you are now.”
With that, Hojo left. Mo kept his head bowed and his shoulders hunched, like a beaten dog.

“... Why do you willingly subject yourself to that lunatic?” Genesis asked darkly.

Gulping as he lay back down, Mo answered, “He's helping me find the point where I... I go berserk. I want to understand it, knowing where it happens is as good a place as any to start.”

“Bah!” Hollander scoffed. “I wouldn't trust Hojo as far as I could spit! He's likely saying that to trick you into letting him have his way with you!”

He made it sound like Mo was starting a relationship with the mad scientist.

Shaking his head to rid it of that image, he answered, “I don't know. He seems to have some idea of what he's doing, and it's all consistent. I'm pretty sure that's what we're doing.”

Hollander just scoffed.
I love Vincent, I really do, but I'm not planning on introducing him in this story. This is probably as close as we'll get.

Mo blinked.

There were papers all over the spot he usually sat in. All over.

But two in particular had caught his eye, side-by-side as if for comparison. One was for... Subject V? And the other was for Subject M?

What now?

Subject M was apparently describing... him. His height, weight, age, blood-type, colors, medical history.

Wait, so who was Subject V?

Unable to help himself, Mo picked the papers up.

They were the same height. Different weights, so... V probably had a more sturdy build. A positive in comparison to his O negative. Mo was put down as pale, V was listed as on the light side of fair. V had black hair to his dark brown, and mahogany or red eyes— Hojo had put down both for some reason?— in comparison to his... blue, now. He was so used to saying brown...

Hey, Hojo had listed both brown and blue for him, too.

Oh, this guy was younger, too. Twenty-seven.

No, he amended, noticing the dates at the tops of both papers. If V was still around, he was turning forty-eight soon.

So they were apparently similar in basic construction. That couldn't be the only reason Hojo had been comparing their papers...

Mo kept reading, and found himself becoming more and more horrified. His own paper didn't have much on it. But Subject V had apparently been a favorite of Hojo's one time. The notes filled up the front and ran onto the back. They ended in a frustrated-looking scribble that Mo managed to decipher as saying the experiments were a failure.

The notes on his page started... very similar.

Fear didn't begin to describe it.

Terror. Sheer gut-wrenching terror, blinding panic.

His head picked up, eyes scanning for any sign of the professor. He couldn't see the man, so he began backing away. He hadn't put the papers down. He didn't think he wanted to.
He had to get out of here.

Mo spun around, dashing to the elevator and mashing the down-button. It cracked a little under the force he used, but he didn't care. It was all he had not to sob in relief when the elevator got there quickly, forcing his way in before the doors had even opened all the way.

He was terrified, had to get away get away get away...

The doors slid shut, and...

... Where did he go?

He didn't know where to go, who to talk to...

After a moment spent trembling in silence, Mo pushed the button for the Turk floor.

Where else was he supposed to go? Who else was he supposed to talk to? Almost everyone he knew was a Turk. They were supposed to be watching him, making sure he behaved, things like that, so... they were his best bet.

But once he got to the floor, stepping off the elevator, Mo was only able to slide down the wall next to it. Head in his hands, crumpled papers on the floor next to him.

He was so scared.

“Mr. Tesla.”

Lifting his head, he looked up. “Veld...”

“Why are you here?”

He cringed a little, wondering if this was a bad idea. “I... Hojo was late to our meeting, and he left a bunch of papers all over the place... I was bored... curious... so I started looking through some of them...”

“Those, I take it?” the man asked, pointing to the sheets on the floor next to Mo.

Nodding, Mo picked the pages up and held them out for Veld to take.

He stayed silent, hugging his knees to his chest as the Turk director read over the notes.

“... You took these from Hojo?”

“I want to stop testing. I'm scared. I-I know that it's childish and that... that it was part of an agreement, but he already... I already have one spot in my memory where I know he did something but can't remember what. I...”

Mo trailed off, aware of the fact that he was starting to cry. He must look so pathetic. He was thirty-five, a grown man, crying in fear about a visit to the doctor.

A psychotic evil doctor, he reminded himself.

“Subject V...”

Mo blinked. “You know him?”
Veld didn't answer, his scowl deepening as he turned the page over. “Killed in action my ass...”

Huh? What? Had Mo stumbled onto the key to unraveling some conspiracy theory or something?

“Mr. Tesla, go to your apartment and stay there until I send someone to check on you. You won't be doing any more testing with that lunatic if I can help it.”

He hurried to obey, scrabbling up to his feet as Veld turned and walked away. Back towards his office, most likely.

Who was Subject V? Why had Veld seemed so agitated? Did he know whoever this person was?

His phone rang as he pushed the button for the elevator.

Hojo.

The doors opened, but he was frozen, staring at the caller-ID. What should he do? Ignore it? Pick up? He hoped he could ignore it. Or was there a block number option somewhere on this?

Gulping, Mo chose to ignore it. He shoved the device back into his pocket and got in the elevator.

Go to his apartment. Stay there. Wait for Veld to send someone to check on him. Stay there until they got there.

The tone ended.

Mo sighed in relief—

It started ringing again.

He didn't need to look to know that it was Hojo again.

Fear was certainly getting chummy with him tonight, wasn't it?

He ignored the ringing until he'd reached his apartment. Then he pulled his phone out and started searching for options to silence or block or both.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

So I may or may not be including a li'l bit of a headcanon involving Rufus in this story.

“I mean, I'm not going to testing with him anymore, right? So shouldn't it be fine?” Mo asked with a frown as he stepped out of the apartment.

Reno shook his head, looking deathly serious. “That creep's almost as good at making people vanish as we are. Just because he got told no doesn't mean he won't try anything. You are a kinda high-profile character, even if all the excitement has died down, but we can't take any chances. We're almost done with you, security and history both, but creepy old Hojo doesn't just let things go.”

He suddenly appreciated being escorted to work a whole lot more.

But then the last part made him say, “Almost done? Really?”

Reno nodded again as they reached the elevator. “You're less of a security-risk than a piece of paper, yo. And you've learned most of the basics when it comes to history and current events. You'll still be watched because of your treatment and how confidential that is, but no more than other SOLDIERS.”

Mo was quiet, fidgeting with the strings of his bag.

“What's wrong?”

Reno had noticed his fidgeting and silence.

Looking dedicatedly at his feet, Mo asked, “Am I going to see you again at all? After the Turks no longer need to bother with me?”

“Sure! There's the canteen, the break floor, the rec floor... hell, you've got my number and know where my desk is!” the redhead grinned, clapping him on the shoulder as the elevator arrived and they stepped in. “Won't always be available, but when I am I'm easy to find, yo!”

Mo smiled up at Reno through his bangs, unable to find the words to express his gratitude.

He couldn't recall telling anyone about Lucius and what happened literally the night before he arrived. He was sure he'd get pitying looks and apologetic words if he did tell anyone. But...

Well, he was starting to be grateful that Lucius had left him. Reno was a member of what amounted to a secret police force, and yet he'd been more honest and sincere than...

When Mo really thought about it, Vicky had done a better job deceiving him than Lucius had. He'd known Vicky for just over three years and had been working up the guts to propose. Lucius he'd known for twelve years and had always known was a fickle person who changed everything on a whim. While it had hurt and he'd thought that maybe, maybe he was special, Mo knew deep down that he'd been waiting to be cut off. Otherwise he would have fought harder.
Reno was different. Mo liked Reno, he hoped that one day the redhead would call him a friend.

Funny, how he had to literally lose everything before seeing how poisonous it all was to begin with.

As they arrived on the sixty-ninth floor, the women began their tittering, some of them outright laughing as the two of them walked past.

“What?” Reno hummed, looking around.

“Heather tried to spread a rumor about me.” Mo answered.

“Do tell.” the redhead grinned.

“She tried to spread the rumor that I'm gay.”

“Uh, don't these lovely ladies know that you are?”

The laughter and tittering stopped.

“They do now. You free tonight?”

Reno burst out laughing, hanging from Mo's shoulder. The women buried their faces in their work. Mo couldn't help but smile, opening up his office.

“Dude, dude, no, stop... I mean, if you wanna hang out, I know some great bars, but you're too much, yo!” the redhead wheezed, tears in his eyes as Mo sat at his desk.

“I wouldn't mind. If you really are free tonight, and wouldn't mind dragging me around.” he murmured.

A crafty look came into Reno's eyes. “Y'know, some of the places I know play games for cash. I bet between us we could get a pretty good sum.”

Mo snorted, rolling his eyes as he booted the computer up. “Reno, I likely wouldn't know these games. Unless you mean these places have betting-pools for beer pong, anyway.”

“Aw, drinking games are easy! I'll treat you!” the redhead pleaded, dropping to his knees and resting his chin on the edge of the desk with a pleading expression.

Grinning, Mo reached out to push Reno off the desk, sending him sprawling. “I'm the one who asked, you great goof, but I'm not saying no to someone paying for my drinks.”

“Right, you got no money anyway.”

Oh, he hadn't told Reno—

“He does.”

Mo felt his blood run cold, and he bowed his head.

Reno popped up again, saying, “Hey, Rufus. What's that you were saying?”

He wasn't looking, but he was willing to bet that Rufus was casually lounging against the doorframe between their offices, smirking in effort to smile, arms crossed. He could feel those icy eyes on him, boring into his shoulders.
“Mo has plenty of money.”

“Huh? You get paid early, yo?”

Mo shook his head slowly, not looking back.

“I gave him a little gift last week.”

Reno was looking at him, a mixture of expectation and concern on his face.

“... The vice president made a direct deposit into my account of five-hundred thousand gil.” Mo said softly.

There was a small stretch of silence.

Reno gave a long, low whistle. “Nice, Shinra. Dunno why you'd do a thing like that, but nice.”

“Mo's a very good worker. I would like to keep him around as long as possible, and want to help out in any way I can.”

The look on Reno's face said he didn't entirely believe that statement, but was in no position to fight it.

“Well, I have to work now. Thank you for getting me up here safely, and I guess we'll see about tonight, huh?” Mo said, feeling how forced his smile was.

After a moment, Reno nodded, giving a two-finger salute. “Yep, seeya!”

Mo turned to the computer, opening up his work email as the Turk left. For a full minute, there was silence aside from the clacking of his keyboard. He had hoped that Rufus had gone back into his office, but a hand on his shoulder dashed those hopes.

“Stop!” he yelled, unable to take it any longer as he jumped up, chair clattering to the floor. He was backed into a corner like this, but if he'd jumped over the desk last week he could do it again. “Just stop! What do you stand to gain from this?! From harassing me and treating me like I'm something less than human?! Why are you doing this to me?!”

Rufus looked surprised at his outburst, hand still out and up as Mo tried desperately to hold onto his tears.

“If you... if you keep doing this, I don't care what repercussions I'll face, I'll ask the Turks to help me find some other job... I... I won't work like this. I refuse.” he continued when the teen said nothing, voice wavering in his struggle not to cry.

Rufus dropped his hand, surprising Mo by chuckling.

“I'm surprised, Mr. Tesla. I didn't think you'd actually stand up to me like that.”

What...?

“But if that's how you feel, then I'll stop. I had thought it would help to have a friend in the office, but I see that's not what you want.”

Mo shook his head as Rufus moved towards the door. Kneeling down to pick his chair up, he said, “You're not gay, sir. I may be under the influence more than is really healthy, but you've no interest in me. Not like that.”
The boy was just full of surprises today, pausing in the doorway and admitting, “I don't think I've ever held that kind of interest in anyone,” before vanishing into his office.

Mo sat down slowly, staring at the closed door.

... Did Rufus just come out as ace to him?
“Wheel of Fortune, Sally Ride, heavy metal, suicide! Foreign debts, homeless vets, AIDS, crack, Bernie Goetz, hypodermics on the shores, China's under martial law, rock-and-roller cola wars, I can't take it anymore!”

Reno laughed drunkenly, all but hanging between him and Rude. “It's good, you're good!”

Mo shook his head, smiling as he stopped singing to reply, “You're drunk and deaf, I'm tipsy and out of key. I think I messed up half the words somewhere or other, too...”

In the end, Reno and Rude had both been free, so they took Mo out for the night. And, just as Reno had predicted, between the lot of them they managed to win a lot of money from betting pools on various drinking games. Reno had often been pulled away by Rude, the silent man making sure his friend didn't die. But Mo had taken advantage of his new metabolism. Part of him was screaming about the damage to his liver, his kidneys, his heart, his brain— but the rest of him was pushing that part aside. If he was processing alcohol like water, then he'd take whatever euphoria he could get. If that meant six rounds of the same drinking game as his opponents passed out, but drinks on the house for the game? Six rounds of Midgar drinking games, three of Wutaian origin, one from someplace called Nibelheim, five from Mideel, six from Junon... plus the one beer-pong tournament. And the random drinks Reno and Rude bought him. If he had been his normal self, Mo was sure he'd be dead. But he wasn't normal anymore.

It was late now, and they were heading back to Shinra. Reno was drunk enough to need help walking. Mo was pleasantly buzzed. Rude was the designated sober one. But Mo had been feeling good, getting to this point of intoxication after a week of sobriety and his damn new metabolism. He'd ended up humming ‘We Didn't Start The Fire’ as they walked, only for Reno to challenge him to actually sing.

It was nice.

Doing something so normal and asinine, and doing it with someone.

“Nah, you're good, you're good... can't sing worth shit...”

Oh, Reno couldn't sing worth shit. Mo just chuckled, starting in on ‘Uptown Girl.’ He didn't know the words to very many songs, but Billy Joel was a weakness of his. He didn't sing often, either. He used to sing all the time when he was a kid. But he guessed he just wasn't in the mood more often than not. Didn't have the time. Didn't have the energy.

It was nice, being able to sing again, feel good like this.

As they were moving into the lobby of the Shinra building, though, Mo found himself toppling over as someone body-slammed him.

“Oh, crap! Sorry!”

He'd barely hit the ground before someone was yanking him back up, just about giving him whiplash. He found the culprit to be a young man with gravity-defying hair and the same bright blue eyes as him. A worried expression adorned the man's face as he dusted Mo off, yammering out apologies.

“It's fine, it's fine...” he murmured, lifting up his hands in a... confused defense against the
fluttering fingers smoothing out his clothes.

Bright blues looked up to him with a sheepish grin. “Really sorry! Won't happen again!”

And with that, the stranger took off running.

Mo stood still, blinking in confusion until Reno burst out laughing.

“The hell just happened?” Mo asked, moving back to his place next to the Turks.

“You got bulldozed by a SOLDIER kid! The look on your face was priceless!”

He rolled his eyes.

Reno was incredibly giggly as they headed to Mo's apartment. He got the feeling that the redhead was a slap-happy kind of drunk. Physically still very capable, if a little off-balance, but far too easy to amuse.

The two dropped him off at his apartment, then headed out to... presumably go to their own places. Mo waved and bade them goodnight, then set about getting ready for bed. He started with a shower, making the water a pleasant lukewarm temperature.

It was nice, he reflected as he started in on washing his hair. To be able to trust people and enjoy himself with them. To smile this much.

To know he wasn't a burden.

His smile dropped a little, movements faltering.

He used to have trouble getting out of bed. He still sometimes did. Not like other people, who just wanted five more minutes, he just... wondered if it was worth it. And he always wound up getting up, because otherwise someone else would have to do his work. Someone would have to collect his papers for him. Someone would be inconvenienced, all because he couldn't drag his drunk ass out of bed, off the couch, across the floor...

Knowing that there were people who... at least valued him a little...

Mo was still smiling as a few tears rolled down his face. He only knew they were there because of the ache in his eyes.

Reno, Rude, Cissnei... they were all so good to him. He hoped he could repay them properly some day. Do something for them the way they'd been doing so much for him.

Closing his eyes, he tipped his head back and let the shampoo suds fall down his back.

Even if a way to go back was found, would he go? He had nothing back on Earth. But here on Gaia... he had a fresh start if nothing else. Like turning a page over to use the clean side after a failed drawing on the other.

He could feel more tears squeeze out as he hugged himself and leaned against the wall.

Hope.

Pure and genuine, a small spark almost buried under all his muddled emotions and half-hearted dreams. But it was still there.
How long had it been since he had felt something so good?

Was there still a chance that he could heal? Could he be happy again, the way he had been as a child?

He should get out of the shower, go to bed, he was wasting water.

Swallowing down the happy, hopeful lump in his throat, Mo finished showering. He couldn't help but happily hum as he left the bathroom and went to bed.

Maybe. Just maybe...
Chapter 42

He had an email.

Blinking in confusion, Mo paused and sat down before leaving the apartment. Flipping his phone open, he selected the email and began to read.

It was kind of funny, how these flip-phones could send emails but not texts. Reno had told him that fancy models existed that could send IMs, but were usually reserved for people like the Turks. There wasn't even half of the extra stuff found on smart-phones. That in itself was actually really nice. Mo had never really been one for all the goofy apps that were churned out every other week. He just never saw the point to having six different camera-apps and five different versions of both Flappy Bird and Candy Crush.

The email was from Angeal.

The man was training with his apprentice today, and wanted to bring Mo in as well. He'd apparently already talked to Rufus and the Turks, so Mo had the whole day off from work. Instead he was going to be training with Angeal and... the puppy?

Did Angeal have a dog?

Well... it was a good thing he'd read the email before leaving, otherwise he'd be wasting Angeal's time...

He hurried to change out of his work-clothes and into the ones set aside for training. He made sure he had his bangle and a bottle of water in his bag before leaving, glad he'd bought the pack of water alongside the case of beer. After the... talk with Rufus, he'd been... slightly less hesitant about using the money Rufus had given him. Not enough to go out and spend it on anything extravagant, but he'd gotten water-bottles, beer, and food for snacks and the like in case he had any more hunger attacks. Everyone told him the mako had settled, so his appetite would simply be larger, but he wasn't taking any chances.

It was horribly tempting to finally get those canvases and paints to replace the ugly pictures hanging on the walls, though.

Not now, Mo chided himself as he left the apartment. He was going to train, not draw.

He still hadn't gotten around to going to the gym like he told himself he should, but... he couldn't tell for certain, but he thought the little barrier materia was getting close to leveling up. If nothing else, it was much easier to cast with, but he hadn't found a way to stop his unintentional feeding the spells.

Pushing those thoughts aside, Mo headed up to the SOLDIER floor of the building. By this point he knew the way to the training room well enough he was sure he could do it with his eyes closed.

Coming into the room, Mo returned Angeal's greeting—

“Oh, it's you.” he noted in surprise upon seeing the other occupant of the room.

Angeal raised an eyebrow as the young man pointed to himself, saying, “Wait, me? I know you?”

Mo wobbled his hand back and forth. “About two nights ago you bulldozed over me in the lobby.”
“Wait— That was you?! And you remembered me?! How come I don't remember you?!” the spiky-haired male demanded, eyes wide.

“Because your attention-span is short?” Angeal suggested with a small, playful smirk.

“Angeeeeeeal!”

“Well,” Mo admitted as he shrugged off his bag, “I think the only reason I remember you is that your hair defies the laws of physics. How much product do you use to get it to stay up like that?”

“He doesn't. He wakes up like that.”

Mo leveled a blank stare at Angeal, who was still giving that playful smirk, arms crossed over his chest. “... I can't tell if you're joking or not.”

“I brush it!”

The protest was weak. The guy woke up like that.

Angeal gave a small chuckle, then said, “All joking aside, this is Mo Tesla. Mo, this is my apprentice, Zack Fair.”

The young man bounced closer, offering a hand and a grin. “Nice to meetcha! And, uh, sorry about knocking you over last time.”

Very young. His cheeks were soft still. Not enough to be babyish, but youthful and telling of his age.

Mo smiled politely back, shaking the offered hand. The boy had one hell of a grip. “Don't worry about it.”

“So, what're we doing today that you called in someone else?” Zack asked, turning to look at Angeal.

“I'm actually training Mo, too. Myself, Genesis, and Sephiroth are in charge of his training, as he's... a special case.”

“Huh? Really? You're in SOLDIER too? But you're so small!”

“Small? I'm taller than you by at least an inch.” Mo replied, raising an eyebrow.

“I mean, like, skinny! Aren't there weight requirements and things?” Zack asked with wide eyes, turning to look at Angeal.

Weight requirements... and he was underweight by at least two pounds... good thing he wasn't a formal SOLDIER, it was be unfair to break all the rules for him and no one else...

“That's part of why he's a special case. Mo received the SOLDIER treatment for reasons other than to join SOLDIER. However, when he was given the option to join, he declined because it would go against his moral code. So a compromise was reached— he would be trained so the treatment doesn't go to waste, but only in defensive forms and styles, and he works in the offices.” Angeal explained.

Zack nodded, seeming to accept that with a question of, “So we're doing defense today?”

“Hand-to-hand.”
“Oh, okay!” Zack said as he bounced into the center of the room.

Mo glanced to Angeal, then followed the younger man.

“Okay, Zack, take up your stance. Mo, try to copy him.” Angeal instructed.

“Right!”

The young SOLDIER slid naturally into a fighting-stance, knees slightly bent, turned to the side, hands up... jeez, he was gonna mess so much of this up...

Frowning, Mo tried to replicate the pose. It wasn't like figure-drawing, where if he needed to figure out an angle he could pose to get a feel for it and then sketch it out. No, this was different.

Angeal nodded, coming closer. “Not bad for a first try. But here.”

The man stood behind him, holding his shoulders. Mo felt his face heat up, unable to help the flutter in his chest. A foot nudged against his ankle, sliding his legs a touch further apart, and his nose was so red he could see it—

“Mo, you okay? Your face is really red!”

Shut up, Zack.

“Don't be embarrassed. It was a good first try,” Angeal said with a smile, moving back into view, “Now, Zack, this should be review for you, but it won't hurt to go over it again. Mo, just do your best, and I'll step in to help you when needed.”

Oh. Great.
“Okay, that's enough for today.”

Mo didn't care how melodramatic it was, he collapsed on the cool floor.

Zack laughed, saying, “I guess it's a good thing you aren't in SOLDIER!”

“Hush, Zack. Mo doesn't have your energy or endurance. It's good that he made it this far.” Angeal chided.

Angeal was far from being the shit teacher both the others were. Mo would go so far as to say the man was a good teacher. Zack was certainly receptive to everything the man said. He got the feeling that the only shitty thing in this lesson was himself.

The bed wasn't even cold and Angeal likely wasn't even on the table, but that didn't change the fact that Mo was a lonely homosexual and Angeal was a kind and handsome man. He was raw from Vicky, not ready to enter into another relationship just yet, but if a ten like Angeal was going to stand behind him and touch him, he was going to get flustered. It didn't matter that said touches were even less than platonic, adjusting how he held himself or nudging his feet and hands into place.

He needed a drink.

Needed ten drinks, he thought to himself as he got up off the floor. Just needed two whole bottles of wine. Something rich and mellow that he could sit in a nest of blankets with and slowly drain away over the night. Two bottles of wine, nest of blankets, sketchbook and pencils, he was liking this plan. If the Turks were done with him, maybe that should become his weekends or something. Come up with ideas, raw sketches for what to do when he finally got the materials to replace those ugly abstract paintings.

Zack was bouncing on the balls of his toes as he chattered to Angeal. They'd just been training for how long now? And the kid was still energetic?

“Why don't you take Mo to the canteen for lunch? If you're still up for more after that, you can come back here and pick out one of the VR missions.” Angeal was saying as Mo came closer to collect his bag.

“Okay, I know I'm out of shape, drastically so, but is Zack human?”

Angeal clapped a hand to his mouth, barely muffling a snort, and Zack gave a rather Reno-esque gasp of indignation.

“That was mean! Come on!”

“You were begging for more training. I get loving your job and all, but most people call it quits at an hour of exercise, two if you're a fanatic. And okay, military, but still.” Mo answered.

Zack stuck his lower lip out as Angeal turned away, shoulders shaking. But the young man then lit up, shocking Mo by grabbing his wrist.

“Come on! Let's go eat!”
... What was his attention-span?!

Mo found himself practically horizontal for a moment as Zack took off. Barely managing to get his feet under him, he stumbled along after the energetic SOLDIER.

“Slow down! I'm exhausted, you're going fast enough you could outpace a cheetah!” he complained.

Zack suddenly stopped, and Mo went careening into his shoulder with a grunt.

Zero to sixty and back again in the blink of an eye, holy hell...

“What's a cheetah?” the younger man asked, head tilted to the side as he called for the— they were already at the elevator?!

Blinking for a few moments, Mo tried to gather his thoughts.

“A cheetah is... a predator that lives... primarily in savannas. They're like big cats, with golden fur covered in black spots. They primarily eat... uh, gazelles, I think, which are these very delicate deer-like creatures with brown fur and black antlers... and cheetahs can run very fast. Not for very long, but for the short amount of time that they can maintain it, cheetahs reach incredible speeds.”

“Shiva! And where do they live?” Zack asked, eyes wide.

He kept forgetting that this wasn't his world.

“Aah... well, they're endangered, so...”

“Aw, that sucks.” the young man said with a mournful expression. Mo felt horrible for his half-lie, but he didn't think going around telling everyone he was from an alternate universe was...

Ah, the elevator was here.

“Do you know a lot about things like that?” Zack asked as they stepped in. The few people in there shuffled to the side, glancing at Zack with wide eyes.

Mo rubbed his shoulder, murmuring, “I wouldn't say a lot...”

“Either way, that's still cool! Where're you from, to know it?”

“Uh... you probably haven't heard of it. Most people haven't...” he tried to deflect.

“Didn't strike me as a backwoods kid!”

Mo raised an eyebrow as the elevator stopped and another person stepped on. “Thirty-five is hardly a kid.”

Zack's eyes went wide. “You're that old?!”

He scoffed a bit, leaning back on his heels. “You make me sound like I'm fifty-three instead of thirty-five.”

The elevator opened again. The canteen this time.

As everyone filed out, Zack explained, “I think it's that you're so willowy, it makes you look like you're still growing in a way. Like you're closer to my age.”
“And how old are you?” Mo asked, raising an eyebrow again as they took trays.

“Sixteen!”

He just about dropped his tray in shock. “Nuh-uh.”

“Yup!”

The soft cheeks made sense now. Zack was younger than Rufus! What was he doing in the military, kids that young should be mooning over girls or boys, griping about not having enough allowance, getting excited about moving out of their parents' home in just a few years... Zack was practically a child. Children shouldn't be fighting.

“That young... it's absurd.” Mo muttered as their trays were stocked up.

“Well, I think you're probably the oldest to ever get the SOLDIER treatment! I mean, Angeal's only twenty-two.”

Again, he almost dropped his tray. “Is everyone in this building younger than twenty-five?!”

Zack laughed good-naturedly, leading Mo over towards a less-populated table.

As they sat down, Mo found Zack similar to Reno again. Both of them were chatterboxes, though it looked like Zack was better about taking bites between words. Both were energetic, though he was positive the SOLDIER topped the Turk.

“Yo!”

Speak of the devil—

“Oof!” Mo grunted as he was body-slammed, nearly falling over. “Reno, careful!”

“Put on a few pounds!” the redhead cackled, clapping a hand to his shoulder. “I see you're replacing us Turks with SOLDIERs!”

“Reno, I consider you my first friend here. Replacing you would be a monumental task.” he said sincerely as he righted himself.

“Who's this?” Zack asked, head quirked to the side as he looked at Reno with wide eyes.

Mo suddenly understood what puppy Angeal had been referring to in the email this morning.

“Reno, from General Affairs. He's the one who's been showing me around Shinra and Midgar, taking care of me while I get settled in.” Mo introduced, swatting Reno's hand away from his tray.

“Oh, nice.” Zack grinned, nodding.

“Practically a couple at this point, huh?” Reno said with a cheeky smile, wrapping an arm around Mo's shoulders.

“You said no when I asked you out, now suddenly you're proposing?” Mo shot back with a raised eyebrow.

“My love, I was repressed, and didn't know how to react to my feelings! Please, I beg of you, accept me!” Reno trilled in a shrill falsetto, fluttering his eyelashes as he rested his head on Mo's shoulder.
Mo spluttered with laughter, almost choking on the food in his mouth.

“Wait, what?” Zack asked, looking confused.
Mo blinked, frowning.

That was... wrong.

He was going over Rufus's finances. The boy was busy in his office going over papers that needed his signature and his father's. But there was...

Maybe his math was wrong. He'd never been much of a math person, after all. Better check it again, maybe he'd missed a figure somewhere...

No.

Mo felt his frown deepen.

There was no denying it. A rather large sum of money was missing from Rufus's finances. Looking at the money currently available and the spendings for the past four months—the boy really needed to tend to his ledger—there was gil missing. Quite a bit of it.

... Okay, Mo told himself, maybe there were purchases Rufus didn't record. If he hadn't touched the ledger holding his financial information for four months, then it stood to reason that not everything had been... well, kept track of.

But that much money... what could he possibly be spending it on?

A sugar-baby or a doomsday device, some part of his mind piped up.

Choosing not to wonder how young that sugar-baby would have to be, Mo instead picked up the phone...

Actually, maybe it would be better to show him?

Sighing, Mo stood up, taking the ledger with him.

Ever since apparently coming out to him, Mo couldn't say he'd had much trouble with Rufus. He still got chills around him, and felt like he was in danger of some kind, but there was no more harassment. No more overly friendly touches or saccharine words.

That didn't mean he was looking forward to this.

“Come in.” Rufus called when he knocked.

Holding the ledger to his chest, Mo slid into the large and lavish office. He was struck again by how impersonal the place was. It was lavish, but in a show of power. There weren't many personal belongings that Mo could pick out.
“Is something the matter?” the blonde asked, not looking up from the papers he was reading.

“... Not to sound condescending, but you should keep better track of your finances.” Mo answered after a moment, walking across the floor to stand before the desk. Putting the ledger down, he waited for Rufus to look up at him before continuing, “Even if you have plenty of money to spare, not touching your ledger for months is a bad habit, and can quickly run even the richest of people into the ground.”

Rufus raised an eyebrow, leaning back in his chair and steepling his fingers. “Duly noted. Of course, that is part of why you were hired, Mr. Tesla.”

Swallowing anxiously, Mo replied, “And it's because I'm your employee that I need to point out the big chunk of missing numbers.”

A blink.

Mo flipped the ledger open and pointed to the page. “I checked it a few times. You've got quite a bit missing that isn't recorded. So either you've been making purchases that aren't in here, or someone's trying to cash in on your financial account. Given the sheer amount of purchases... there's so much money missing that I personally cannot think of what you would be buying. If that is the case, though, I would advise at least making a note of such things in the future. You are the vice president of a large company, keeping track of something as simple as finances is even more important in your position.”

He was fully aware of the fact that he was lecturing someone he listed as incredibly scary. Only Hojo and Sephiroth sat above Rufus on that list at the moment, with Hojo firmly on top. But this was important, and part of his job. He could drink it away later, after he'd addressed this issue. Go to his apartment instead of the canteen for lunch, eat in there and chip away at his reserves of beer.

“... I see. Thank you for bringing this to my attention. Perhaps we should discuss it more later? Say... tomorrow night?”

Mo felt every muscle in his body grow tense.

The teen noticed, and waved him off. “Don't worry, I won't try that again. I wouldn't want to risk sending you into that rage of yours. It'll be purely business.”

“... Right. I... can't say I have plans...” he murmured awkwardly, looking down, away from the ice-blue gaze on him.

“Wonderful. I'll take care of arrangements, you just stay available.”

Mo nodded, picking up the ledger and leaving the office.

He couldn't explain it, but he had a bad feeling about this upcoming dinner.

Like... really bad. His gut had started churning, and his head was pounding, mouth dry in a sticky way.

Don't think about it, he screamed at himself. He'd get sick if he stressed out about it too much like this. It was just dinner and business. They were going to have dinner and talk about what had happened in Rufus's ledger. Nothing more.

Repeating that to himself over and over, Mo forced himself to get back to work.
“Hey, aren't you leaving?”

Mo blinked, looking up. Heather and a handful of the other secretaries were looking at him in confusion.

He was sitting in the lounge area, waiting for Rufus. It was the day after he'd pointed out the financial discrepancy. The evening of the business dinner-date. Work was just finishing up.

“Ah... no. The vice president is taking me to dinner, and asked me to wait here while he finishes up... what?”

Heather came closer, a morbidly curious expression on her face. Leaning down, she asked quietly, “Are you and Mr. Shinra... dating?”

... What.

Apparently he said that out loud, because one of the other secretaries piped up, “You do have days where you come in late or leave early, or just don't show up. More than any of us could get away with.”

“And rumor has it that you were just handed the position as his secretary.”

Mo shook his head, closing his sketchbook. “No. Just no. That's... if he were any younger or I were any older, that would be statutory rape. And both of us are off the table for each other. He's ace and I don't care for snowmen like him anyway.”

Heather sat down in one of the other chairs, crossing her legs as she said, “Well, he is cold, but he's young. Rich. Good-looking. It's understandable to desire him.”

“Did you not just hear me say that he's ace? And dating someone based on those traits alone is shallow.” he frowned as the other secretaries began sitting down as well.

“Ace?” one frowned.

“Asexual. And in addition... I don't date people who harass me, even if it was a misunderstanding.”

“No, he's dating that Turk!”

Heather raised an eyebrow. “That redhead?”

Mo snorted, rolling his eyes as he slid his sketchbook back into his bag. Clearly he wasn't getting any more drawing done right now. “Reno's straight and not my type. He's a friend, nothing more.”

“So what is your type, then?”

Mo tipped his head back. “Stable. Dependable. Kind... Loyal. Honest.”

He didn't think he'd ever said those last two before in response to this question. He'd never really needed to, but... well. Vicky had proved that maybe he needed to.

“Well, that's boring.”
Mo blinked in shock at Heather's words. “Excuse me?”

She was examining her nails as she answered, “There's no risk in such a lover, so no reward or thrill. A dull romance that will peter out quickly.”

Murmurs of agreement went up, accompanied by sage nodding.

“... Sorry, but I’ve been through three failed relationships. I don't want... thrill. I want someone who will stay by me, love and support me. Who won't... challenge my views and call me a dumb whore when we disagree on the most asinine things. Who won't go behind my back and invite others into my bed and throw my money away on them. Who won't... who won't deceive me for three years, using me as a sex-outlet before dumping me on the anniversary of—”

He clapped his hands over his mouth, squeezing his eyes shut.

“The anniversary of what?” Heather prodded.

Slowly, his hands lowered. Once he felt his tears abate, he opened his eyes.

“My last boyfriend, Vicky... I was working up the courage to propose... we'd been together for three years, and on the anniversary of my family's death, I went to see him... I didn't want to be alone that night... I should have known something was wrong when he didn't want to move in and live together after three years, but I was blind. He wasn't even gay, he was using me, because... because ladies love gay men, so he'd been parading me around to get... I was so stupid, I should have known...”

It hurt.

He covered his face with his hands and bent over, trying to stifle his sobs.

He'd been planning on how best to propose. He'd been at the bank to redeposit the money he'd withdrawn for getting a ring.

But who would love him? An underweight drunk who had to fight to get out of the bed in the morning, debate whether or not it was worth doing anything. He wasn't worth the effort of a lover. Wasn't worth the time, the effort, the everything that went into getting together. He couldn't even hold onto a single friend.

There was Reno, some part of him piped up.

Reno didn't consider him a friend just yet, the rest of him replied. That was a one-sided relationship.

“Am I interrupting something?”

Mo shot up, scrabbling at his eyes. “No, not at all... it's... just a sad story...”

Rufus raised an eyebrow. “What kind of sad story?”

He shook his head. “It's nothing, really. Should we go?”

The teen stared a moment longer before nodding and turning away. Mo followed after him, slipping his bag into place on his back. The bangle clinked against his empty flask as he did so. He hadn't gotten to train with it much lately, but was confident that the little barrier only needed to be used one more time before leveling up. If he wasn't training with it, it stayed in his bag, ready and
waiting to go train... though he admit that once or twice he'd slipped it on just to hear the familiar murmuring. To think that once he'd been terrified of the voices materia had, and now found them... comforting.

Or at least found these ones comforting.

Rufus led him to a staircase he hadn't known existed, in the back of his office. It was probably a personal entrance and exit, Mo thought as he took it the plain, rough walls and steps. That way the president and vice president didn't need to mingle with the commoners in the elevator or anything like that.

“So... where are we going?” Mo asked, uncomfortable with the silence as they stepped out into what looked like a parking garage.

“Don't worry about it.” Rufus waved off, heading over to one of the nicer cars.

These cars were more modern, he noticed. Not by a lot, compared to things in the streets, but... sleeker. More like old Lincolns than model T Fords. Which he wasn't objecting to, really. He was an Oldsmobile man himself, raised alongside his mom's Cutlass, but old Lincolns and the black Cadillacs that looked like Al Capone should be driving them struck chords.

Blinking, he noticed Rufus sliding into the driver's seat of... what was possibly the nicest car there.

“You drive?” he asked in surprise.

The blonde raised an eyebrow at him and gestured to the passenger seat. “Why wouldn't I?”

No seat-belts. He hoped roads were safe.

Blushing a little as he closed the door behind himself, Mo admitted, “You seemed more like the kind to be chauffeured around than do it yourself... or, I guess, the stereotype says you should...”

Rufus scoffed as he started the engine. “I'm not my father. I much rather do things for myself than rely on others when they could turn on me.”

... Right. Shinra controlled most of the world, and there was a war going on. Rufus was pretty much a prince, set to inherit an empire that covered the map. Much like a prince, he probably had to deal with things like assassins or kidnappers. It made sense to be self-reliant. It was self-defense.

... But...

“Then why did you ask to hire me? Having a secretary is the opposite of doing it yourself. The point of a secretary is to have them do half your work for you.” Mo pointed out.

Rufus chuckled as he steered them down mostly empty roads. “The work you do is largely telling other people to stop pawning their work off on me. And, to be honest, you don't strike me as much of a threat.”

That was both a relief and concerning.

He wondered where they were going. It looked like they were leaving Midgar.

“Of course, there was your little display when you were given the mako injections, but taking everything else about you into consideration...”

As Rufus trailed off, he commented, “Thankfully it only happens when I'm physically and
mentally pushed to the brink. The idea of... going insane and hurting people is... nauseating.”

“So it's a Limit Break.”

The teenager likely interpreted his silence as confusion, which was accurate.

“Limit Breaks are something that SOLDIERs, monsters, and particularly strong individuals are capable of. When they're pushed past their limits, the energy in them aligns just so for a short time, allowing them to perform some special move or other that they wouldn't normally be able to. It's my understanding that SOLDIERs are taught to draw on their past experiences to strengthen these Limit Breaks, which can also effect what exactly the Limit Break does.”

... That sounded... ridiculous. Beyond the fantasy novel Lifestream and sci-fi military troops. Like a finishing move from a fighting game. He didn't know. He wasn't much of a gamer. Tetris and DDR composed most of his gaming experience, with sprinkles of Space Invaders here and there.

They were out of the city now. Looking back, Mo could see a tiered mass of darkness and light, like some kind of monstrous marble cake.

“... Mr... I mean, Rufus... where are we going...?” he asked, feeling far too much like this was some kind of internet-date gone wrong.

“Don't worry about it.” the blonde smiled, not looking at him.

... Was the car-door locked?

This was almost as stupid as calling Hojo at two in the morning.

He vaguely heard a shout of surprise from Rufus as he opened the door, pushing himself out.

Action-flicks made it a lot less painful, he reflected as he landed on his shoulder with a snap.

A cry of pain left him, back arching. He likely wouldn't be drawing anything for a while.

The car was a ways away, but slowing down as he struggled to his feet. Turning.

The bangle.

With his good hand, he swung his bag around, pulling it open.

He needed restore. Needed barrier. If he could manage it, seal.

The car stopped just as he got the bangle on, swinging his bag out of the way. He was casting Cure as the door opened. It didn't fix all the damage, he could feel it, but his shoulder was less messed-up than it had been.

“You're being ridiculous, Mr. Tesla.” Rufus called. He was behind the headlights, but still visible in his white coat. Thanks to the SOLDIER enhancements, Mo was willing to bet. Why was he standing so shielded behind the car-door, though?

“I don't trust you.” Mo called back, voice wavering. He knew he was crying from what was most assuredly breaking his shoulder. He was scared. Tired. Sober.

“Why not? You've no reason to be afraid, Mr. Tesla.”

There was some sort of faint thrumming noise. He couldn't place it.
“Just come back here. I have a few materia, I can fix your shoulder, and we can forget all about this.”

The thrumming was louder. It sounded almost like a blender, just... deeper. Lower.

“Not until you tell me where you're planning to take me!” he yelled, trying not to panic.

Rufus was quiet for a moment. The sound got louder.

“You really are a good worker, Mr. Tesla. Everything sorted without error, sent and delivered promptly, messages taken flawlessly... But you're too good of a worker. Anyone else who had been looking at that ledger would have seen that it was four months behind and just assumed I was lazy with my records.”

He was holding something, Mo realized. Holding something hidden behind the open door.

“They would have made an entry for unknown purchases and called that it. But you focused on it, drew attention to it. And you're too cozy with the Turks for me to feel safe with that.”

A shotgun.

The Barrier was barely up in time, the shot splashing off and making the shield shudder.

The noise was even louder. He realized that he knew what the sound was, too.

A helicopter.

Rufus fired again, and Mo felt the strain the tiny materia was under. The song it hummed jolted and shuddered, tired and pushed as far as it could go.

Come on, he pleaded with it, just a little more, just a little longer.

Before he could send more energy into the spell, pain exploded in his lower back. His eyes widened, and the spell dropped. He staggered, falling to his knees.

He was bleeding. Badly. He could feel it soaking his clothes. The restore he had would do nothing.

Green tinging his vision, he looked up to find Rufus approaching. “... I trusted you...” he choked out, tears running freely down his cheeks now.

The helicopter was pretty much above them, wind pulling at their hair and clothes.

“Do you trust snakes, too, Mr. Tesla?”

Gritting his teeth as he went down to his hands, Mo replied, “I... don't blame snakes for biting... I blame the people... who stepped on them... What did I do to you...?”

He wasn't sure how much of that Rufus actually heard. The helicopter was so loud now.

He was so tired. Should he be this tired from getting shot? He couldn't focus. Couldn't support himself with his injured shoulder. Vision blurring and tinted at the edges, he found himself pitching to the side. It hurt. Everything either burned in agony or was numb.

There was someone with Rufus, glasses glinting.

He was so tired...
It's, uh, worth mentioning... that most of what I know about Before Crisis is secondhand knowledge? Same for the original game... and I don't know much about Dirge of Cerberus... I got into the Final Fantasy VII fandom via Advent Children getting shown by chance at an anime club I went to. Afterwards I started reading up on stuff, and got the chance to play Crisis Core once...

This is why there's a Creative License tag.

The first thing to cross his mind when he woke up ended up being blurted out.

“Not this shit again...”

If he could have, he would have jumped when someone appeared over him. A rather rugged looking man with a green bandana.

“Come again, Shinra?” the man growled darkly.

“Waking up in strange places tied to the bed with strangers standing over me. One of these days it'll be some kinky rapist, I bet.” Mo griped, closing his eyes against the pounding in his temples.

“... Huh?”

“This makes... three times in a month, I think?”

His mind was foggy. Everything he thought he was blurring out. He felt like a rubber ragdoll.

... That made no sense.

“Who's doing that now?”

“You, for one.” Mo answered bitterly.

What had happened? Rufus had been driving him out into the middle of nowhere, when... he'd jumped ship, broken his shoulder. Started yelling at Rufus. Then... there had been a helicopter—

“I was shot in the back.” he blurted out, eyes opening.

“You think we're going to take on a fucking SOLDIER head-to-head with some insane power like yours?!?” the man challenged harshly.

“I'm not a SOLDIER!” Mo snapped back.

He got a snort and an eyeroll. “With those eyes? You expect me to believe that sack of shit?”

“He isn't.” a cool, vaguely amused voice said.

The bandanaed man turned away. “Oh, isn't he?!”
Mo Tesla received the SOLDIER treatment out of necessity. He appeared with the equivalent of their stabilizer shots already in his system, and needed the complete treatment before it deteriorated and killed him.

Stepping into view was another man. Short brown hair, glasses, a mixture of white and gray clothes.

“You... you were there when Rufus...” Mo murmured, vaguely recognizing the newcomer.

He was given a rather clinical smile. “Impressive. Most wouldn't be able to remember events after being hit with such a concentrated dose of tranquilizer.”

Aah. That explained the rubber ragdoll feeling.

“I have some experience with intoxication.” he replied drily.

“Yes, the notes and records Mr. Shinra gave us do say that you're an alcoholic. The metabolism of SOLDIER must disagree with you immensely.”

... What? Who were these people? Why had Rufus... handed him over to them? How had the teen gotten...

“Who are you? Why am I... why did Rufus...”

The second man continued to smile as he answered, “We're members of AVALANCHE, a group that Shinra's vice president kindly decided to fund.”

The missing money. Rufus was funding a terrorist organization.

“He brought you to us because of your... specialness. After all, it's not every day someone from another world appears and reveals power enough to give SOLDIER elites trouble.”

“Hold on, what?!” the first man demanded. “I wasn't told any of this!”

“It wasn't important that you know. If it's that hard to believe, go ask to be shown the video.”

Bristling, the first man stomped away, snarling and cursing. Mo filed away some of the more colorful ones he picked out of the mess for later. He wasn't quite sure what a grashtrike was, but that one certainly sounded interesting.

Smiling again, the second man sat down on the edge of the bed. “Well, Mr. Tesla, it's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Fuhito.”

“... What do you want with me...?”

A surprised blink. Then a chuckle. “To the point, aren't we?”

Mo looked up at the ceiling. This place was a far cry from the clean and pristine Shinra facilities. That looked like rust and water-stains. Concrete and old metal.

“You appeared in this world without any knowledge about it, and Shinra was the one to teach you about the world. But they didn't tell you everything, did they?”

Mo couldn't help but scoff. “No one ever tells anyone everything. Look at me and Rufus.”

“Fair enough, I suppose. But you know that they monopolize the power market with mako-energy,
“So I'm told.” The stain directly above his head looked like a rabbit.

“Did they tell you that using mako-energy is killing the planet?”

... So AVALANCHE were eco-terrorists, then. He didn't think he'd been told that. Interesting.

“Everything will kill a planet, Fuhito,” he said wearily, “We don't have mako where I'm from. It still kills the planet. But people need to live somehow. And that doesn't answer why I'm here.”

“You have the potential to be strong enough to give the top three fighters of Shinra trouble subduing you. With strength like that, AVALANCHE could bring Shinra to it's knees.”

A dry laugh left him. “Then you're wasting your time. I won't fight anyone. I'm a pacifist.”

“You're a— I see.”

The bed creaked as the man stood up.

“Ow— Hey.” Mo groused, picking his head up as his arm was pricked. Fuhito had pulled a needle out of somewhere and was drawing blood. “What is it with you people and my blood? Buncha vampires...”

“Well, as someone from a different world, you're very interesting. Your blood is the most likely place to have the answers to any questions anyone might have.”

Mo let his head thump back down. “Better have the cure to cancer in it with how much people like taking it. Whatever.”

He was too sober for this nonsense. His head hurt. His back hurt. His shoulder hurt. His heart hurt. He just... wasn't in the mood for anything.

Fuhito left, and he was alone.

Closing his eyes, he swallowed several times.

He probably had another new scar. One across his lower back. Probably connected with the one from Genesis and made a belt.

He felt like he should have seen it coming. The same way he felt like he should have with Lucius.

It wasn't fair, he wanted to scream. He always tried to be his best for others, why was he always the one getting betrayed or thrown out? He knew he wasn't ideal. He knew there were far more desirable people in the world than him. But he tried. He tried his best.

Clearly his best wasn't enough.

He squeezed his eyes shut. His hands curled into fists, and his teeth sank into his lip. He took deep breaths through his nose, trying to calm down. Throwing a fit wouldn't get him anything.

His thoughts turned to Shinra. He wondered how his disappearance was being taken. Chances were it was causing a larger stir than back home. With his luck, Rufus had told everyone that Mo attacked him before willingly running away with AVALANCHE. There was probably a shoot-to-kill order on his head now.
Just when he'd thought maybe he could settle down and live a decent life here, too. He wondered what past life he'd sinned in so much to be given this.

He just wanted...

“Stop.” Mo told himself, voice breaking a little.

He just wanted to be happy again.

Yeah, well, his mind snapped bitterly, clearly that was never on the table.

A soft whimper left him.

He tasted blood. He'd bitten his lip too hard.

He wanted to go home.

He wanted to drink until he passed out.
Mo is: tired, hungry, displaced (squared), betrayed, sober, and in pain. If I was in his shoes, I'd scream too.

His stomach growled. For lack of anything better to do, he growled back.

He didn't know how long it had been since he'd woken up tied to an AVALANCHE bed. He wanted to say about a day at this point. After Fuhito had left... nothing.

He was hungry. He was thirsty. He needed to use the bathroom. His shoulder and back hurt. He could feel his hands shaking from withdrawal settling in, even though they were pressed against the thin sheet beneath him.

On top of that, he was convinced that he was starting to go crazy.

Time dragged by. The only thing for him to do was sleep. Or delve into his thoughts, but that was... no. Or sing, or talk to himself. But he wasn't in the mood to sing, and talking to himself was like delving into his thoughts.

So his eyes traced pictures in the stains on the ceiling instead. The rabbit directly above his head was now named Jeremy.

Even when he'd first appeared in this world, things had been better. At least people had come in and out of the room and let him know that the world existed. Time passed, and so did people. Here... for all he knew, it had been only an hour since Fuhito had left.

More than an hour. It had to be.

... Right?

“Jeremy, am I insane?” he asked, desperate for... something. Anything. He'd take the sound of his own voice at this point, talking to a blob of rust left by water seeping through whatever building they were in.

Of course, Jeremy didn't answer.

“Not even good enough for my imagination to supply you with a voice... just how shitty of relationship material that I am, huh? Not even imaginary friends want me.” he said bitterly.

The door scraped open. “Who in Odin's name are you talking to in here?”

He didn't recognize the voice. Couldn't see the owner. Just a guard for the room, most likely.

“The rust on the ceiling.” he answered, shifting his hips the little bit that he could.

“... Huh?”

“What else am I supposed to do? Take a walk? I'm bored and Jeremy is the most interesting thing
in this room right now.” he said, voice probably a little nastier than he intended.

His stomach howled angrily.

“And I'm beyond caring for your bullshit too.” he informed his abdomen.

The door scraped shut again, hinges screeching. Mo had to clench his jaw to keep from begging the guard to come back, talk to him, exist and keep him company. He wasn't a guest, he didn't get to ask for shit.

His gaze went back to Jeremy. He wondered if he should make a backstory for the rust rabbit. Nothing complex, just something to distract himself.

Because his mind was a dark place. Being left alone there wasn't good for his sanity.

He had no clue how long it was before the door shrieked open again.

The smell of food hit him first. He couldn't keep his stomach from snarling ferally, clawing at him from the inside. His mouth watered, forcing him to swallow several times. He couldn't even identify what kind of food it was, all he knew was that it was food and he was hungry.

“Why haven't you tried to escape?"

The voice was young. Feminine. Rough in a way that was more tired than anything.

“Why bother?” he replied. “All I had was at Shinra, and by this point they've probably labeled me a traitor, so I'll die if I go back. I may not have much to live for, but that doesn't mean I want to die.”

“Hn.”

The first man from yesterday appeared in his vision, scowling fiercely.

To Mo's surprise, the restraints holding him down were undone.

For a moment, he didn't move. Slowly, experimentally, he lifted the arm of his uninjured shoulder. Nothing happened, no one objected, so he sat up—

Pain exploded across his midriff, making him clap a hand to his mouth and bite down to muffle a scream. A strangled whimper was produced, tears welling up and leaking from his eyes.

Yeah, his injuries still hurt.

“What's wrong?”

What's wrong was that he was shot in the back, but he didn't currently have the mental facilities to say that. Weren't SOLDIERs supposed to have an advanced healing rate?

His hand was bleeding now. Slowly, he unclenched his jaw, teeth leaving his flesh. His mouth was filled with liquid copper, as if he'd melted down pennies and tried to drink them. He was still crying freely.

“... Was the bullet ever taken out?”

That made him look up.
“Wait, do I know you?” he asked in confusion.

The female speaker was young, with brown hair. There was something about her features that... he couldn't place, but seemed awfully familiar.

She stared back for a moment, then turned to the man. “Shears, was the bullet removed? It doesn't matter how fast he can heal if the bullet wasn't removed.”

“I dunno. I'll ask.”

Thing better have been removed. If not then he probably had lead poisoning by now or something.

The woman moved closer. Mo noticed she was holding a bowl of something that steamed slightly. His stomach growled with renewed force, just about turning itself inside out to get the food.

When he didn't move, she stepped closer again, setting the bowl down on his lap. It looked like some kind of porridge. Or stew. One or the other.

He didn't move still. Part of him was waiting to see if it was a trick. The other part of him was screaming that he had to go slow or he'd make himself sick.

“It's good,” the woman told him bluntly, “And it's filling, so it should be enough to tide you over for a little while.”

That was all Mo needed to hear.

Slow, his mind screamed at him, go slow!

Slow be damned, he was hungry.

He managed to keep himself from wolfing it all down like an animal, but he was going fast enough that the man— Shears, the woman had said— told him, “Stop and breathe, or you'll never keep it down.”

At that, he stopped, actually panting a little. His hand was still bleeding sluggishly. It was probably smeared on his face. But his stomach wasn't as loud anymore.

“Mo, isn't it?” the woman asked.

He nodded, looking her over. There was a sword at her side, he saw. And the way she looked... he swore, he knew her from somewhere. Specifically the crease in her brow and the hard glint in her eyes.

“Why were you with Shinra?”

He gave a soft snort. A twinge of pain ran through his lower back, but not like before. “From what Fuhito said... whenever that was... you already know roughly why I was with Shinra. I appeared in their labs and needed an eye kept on me... a place to stay, someone to teach me how the world worked...”

“Why didn't you try going home?” she asked.

“... A few reasons. First and foremost, I don't know how I got here, how could I ask anyone to send me back? But then, also... I... don't exactly have anything to go back to. My family's dead. No friends, no lover. Shit job that's easy to keep filled. And then...”
He clenched his fists and grit his teeth, looking down at what was left of his food.

Then he'd started making friends. For the first time in his life, he was sure. Actual, genuine friends.

“It's better that you aren't with them. They're monsters.”

Frowning, he looked up.

“If you can work with us, we'll keep you safe. You can be part of AVALANCHE. You're strong, you can help us fight back.”

A sigh left him, and he shook his head. “Said it once, I'll say it 'til it sticks, I refuse to knowingly or willingly cause harm to a living creature. I'm not a fighter.”

“Aw, bullshit!” Shears snapped. “Tell it to the guy whose ribs you kicked in!”

He jumped up, bowl clattering to the floor. His shoulder and back objected, but he ignored the pain as he faced Shears. “If I could, I would! But I can't, not when there's likely a shoot-to-kill order on my head and I'll likely end up staring down the barrel of my friend's gun! And I was never told where to find him, or who he was so that I could apologize! But knowing that I did that, that something inside me reared up and took over—I wasn't awake for that! I was unconscious! I would never do that, I would rather shoot my brains out than hurt someone like that!”

He was crying.

He turned away from both of them, climbing over the bed so he could stand in the furthest corner with his face in his hands as he broke.

He always tried to hold it together, but everything was just too much right now.

Mo Tesla let go and screamed into his hands.
In this chapter and the next, Mo is going to be in a bad place. He's going through advanced stages of withdrawal and his depression has come in swinging. His mind is not in a good place and at this point his body isn't either.

You have been warned.

It turned out that only part of the bullet had been removed.

“I know some people like keeping things like that...” Fuhito offered, holding out the little dish.

Mo turned away, worn out and no longer in the mood to talk. The bullet had been removed. His shoulder had been fixed up. He was probably going back into the room with Jeremy in a minute.

He was tired. He was shaking. Withdrawal was hitting him over the head with a fucking sledgehammer. At this point he was hoping for the bottleache to kill him. It would be a mercy, he felt, provided he didn't come back again. He wanted to lie down and not get up again.

Chances were he was never seeing anyone from Shinra again, unless it was on the business-end of a weapon.

People were talking around him. He ignored it. Chances were it wasn't important, anyway. And he just didn't care.

He wanted to sleep. He was tired. His head hurt. He couldn't stop shivering. His mouth was so damn dry.

“Hey, I'm fucking talking to you!”

Mo blinked, head jerking back as he looked up. Shears was glaring at him.

“Come on, you're going back.”

It took a moment for that to sink in. Groaning, he got to his feet. His shoulder felt much better. His back hurt, but it wasn't blazing pain like before, more like a dull throbbing.

He didn't care.

Shears and two guys with guns walked him through several halls and herded him into Jeremy's room. Shears pushed at him until he was at the bed, lying haphazardly down. The man made a noise of annoyance and manhandled him until he was straightened out. Mo didn't react, didn't move, as he was tied down once again.

He could tear through, in theory. If he could rip his way out of restraints designed to hold the world's strongest, then he could probably rip out of these.

But did he want to? Was it worth the effort?
No. Not at all. It was easier to just be tied up.

Shears said something. He wasn't paying attention. The man seemed to realize this, throwing his hands up in the air and storming out. The door slammed shut in a way that suggested it would take a little muscle to open again. The room was plunged into darkness. But Mo found that it wasn't as dark as it could have been. Realistically, he knew that it was probably black as pitch, but he wasn't wholly normal anymore.

His eyes found Jeremy easily. He just had to tip his head back, as if he were going to sleep, and look straight up.

Yeah. There was the rabbit.

He couldn't bring himself to avoid his own thoughts. He was too tired.

So he sank into a metaphorical tar-pit that he'd typically done his damnedest to avoid.

He wasn't worth anything. Nobody loved him and nobody wanted him. Why would they? He was nothing more than a pencil-pusher, a desk-jockey. He sat behind a desk, in front of a door, and answered the phone. When he wasn't in an office, he was locked up in a basement making worthless crap that no one cared to look at. When he wasn't there, he was draped over a barstool and getting plastered. He hadn't bothered talking to his family at all for a year before they died. Or maybe they hadn't talked to him? In which case, he'd been too cowardly to reach out. And they'd died trying to come fix him. Which would have involved rehab, which would have meant money on their part.

He was crying again, tears leaking down the sides of his face.


He sniffled, blinking a little in effort to chase away his tears.

... Huh?

Had Jeremy... just moved?

Was he hallucinating?

... No... no, he couldn't be. He could go a month before he reached anywhere near that point.

That was before, dumbass, his brain reminded him. That was before he got the mako pumped into his body like cream into a twinkie.

But he'd gone a week without drinking a drop after that, he protested. It had only been a few days now, hadn't it?

The mako hadn't been fully settled.

The realization hit him like a brick, eyes opening wide.

The mako hadn't fully settled into his system for that week of sobriety. But now it was. So chances were... oh, fuck...

... Why the hell was he so worried, his inner demons piped up, reaching out of his mind's dark corners. Why the hell did he think it mattered, they asked as they wrapped cold hands around his throat and shoulders. Why was he so bothered about his metabolism going speed of light when he
wasn't worth the food it took to keep him underweight. When no one would miss him anyway.

Mo opened his mouth. He needed to call for help. No matter what he said, delirium tremens was scary. It was painful. It was lethal. Even if he had the body of a SOLDIER— supposedly— if he didn't get help, didn't get treatment, there was a good chance he would die. And who knew if he would come back this time. In video-game logic, this was life three, and he was pretty much out of credits.

But he couldn't bring himself to call out.

With sobriety came depression.

There was a monster on his chest and he was damned if he got it off, damned if he didn't.

Tears flowed with renewed force.

Jeremy was moving over him.

His chest hurt, like something was pressing down on it.

He wasn't sure when he had closed his mouth, but he couldn't unlock his jaw now.

His fingers were curled into claws, digging into the mattress under him, he could feel the stuffing.

He could hear his blood pounding not just in his ears, but in his brain.

Jeremy wasn't alone, pushing out of the ceiling with a horde of rust monsters.

He needed help.

His back arched, a high-pitched whine strangled in his throat before making it past his grinding teeth.

He couldn't let go of the mattress.

He couldn't breathe.

Jeremy reached down.

It wasn't real, he told himself desperately. It wasn't real, it wasn't real, he was hallucinating.

The rabbit punched a hole in his chest.

Mo screamed, jaw cracking as he opened his mouth wide. Something snapped. His hands clawed at his chest, trying to drag skin over a wound that wasn't there.

A bang, and everything was suddenly too bright. He was blind, but he felt hands all over him.

Jeremy's monsters, delirium screamed, fight them off! Don't die!

Help, his logic screamed, calm down! Don't die!

There were too many conflicting messages. He couldn't think. There were hands. He couldn't tell if they were helping or hurting. Everything was on fire. Everything hurt. He couldn't breathe, he was screaming too much. It was too bright, he was crying too much, he couldn't see. There was noise, but there was a disconnect somewhere and he couldn't decipher any of it. It was just noise.
He hurt. It hurt, it hurt, it hurt hurt hurt hurt hurt hurt...

He didn't want to die.
Chapter 49

“It hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts!” he cried pitifully, rocking to and fro in the arms holding him. His shoulder kept bumping against a firm chest, and it felt like there were knees trying to squeeze down on his hips and keep him from rocking. There was a blindfold over his eyes, blocking out most of the light. Not all of it, but enough that it no longer stabbed his eyes with thousands of needles.

“Can't you hold him still?” someone asked. He knew the voice, he knew he did, but there was still too much disconnect in his brain. He couldn't put a name down.

“Shut up! He thrashes if I hold too tight, and he won't stop rocking!” another voice snapped, right in his ear now. Again, he knew it, but couldn't think at the moment.

The harshness of the second voice made him keen in distress, trying to pull away. But his limbs wouldn't cooperate, too heavy and too long. He couldn't find his balance, couldn't get his brain to control things the way they were supposed to be.

“Hey, hold the hell still!”

He was being addressed.

“I can't, it hurts... please, it hurts, my chest, it hurts... make it stop...!” he whined, needing to force the words out.

“We know, Mr. Tesla. We're trying to help, but you need to hold still. We can't help if you don't hold still.”

He sobbed, trying to stop moving, but he was in pain. He hurt. If he moved, he didn't hurt. He didn't register it as much.

Someone somewhere said something he couldn't make out. He just kept rocking, crying in agony and chanting his pain.

There was a new voice now, asking, “What's going on?”

“Remember how the file said he was an alcoholic? I think we greatly underestimated his metabolism. He's undergoing delirium tremens. If we can't calm him down and medicate him, there's a very good chance he'll die.”

“But he won't hold fucking still!”

“It hurts!” he wailed in defense, bumping against that chest. “It hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts!”

“... Let me try something.”

The arms wrapped around him loosened, holding him in name only now.

A soft, gentle sensation draped over him, making him sigh. It was like having a warm blanket put on after stepping out of a howling windstorm. His chest hurt less, and he felt the tension leaving his body, turning him into jello.

“Much better... I'm going to grab your arm now, so don't panic.”
He nodded, feeling like a bobble head as he did so.

Cool fingers wrapped around his wrist. Despite the warning, he still jerked in shock. But it was very easy to relax again, no longer panicking. His chest still hurt, but it wasn't the horrible agony of before.

His skin was pricked, and he felt the needle sliding into his arm. He groaned at the sensation, resting his cheek against the chest supporting him.

“O-oi! Who said you could fucking do that?!”

... Shears. It was Shears, Mo remembered.

“I'm sorry... I'm just so tired...” he mumbled, closing his eyes behind the blindfold.

“We'll need to keep an eye on him. He's still at very high risk of a relapse. Physical contact will help keep him stable, and we'll have to figure out if we're going to set up a medication schedule or if we're going to let him drink. Either way, amounts would be... large, to say the least, in order to compensate for his metabolism.”

He still couldn't connect that voice... too tired, too hurt...

But the pain wasn't as great as before. The gentle warm feeling was fading away, but the pain was lessened considerably. There were voices fluttering back and forth around him, but he couldn't catch them.

Instead, the demons lurking in the dark corners of his mind rose up and slunk forward, petting over his throat.

He really was worthless. Couldn't even call for help when he was on the verge of death. And those drug-like death-dreams had told him to save the world. Save the world, and he couldn't even save himself. It was laughable.

Pathetic. Stupid. Useless.

A soft sniffle left him. He didn't think anyone heard.

Good, depression cooed, because then he'd just be burdening them with more problems. They were already dealing with his withdrawal problems when they easily could have left him to die. They could have outright killed him instead of taking him, but they didn't, and that made him a mouth to feed, a back to clothe, a head to shelter. Even if they were terrorists, they didn't need that. They had their own issues.

Waste of space. Waste of oxygen.

Another sniffle as he clenched his jaw. He began to rock again, trying to distract himself and keep from bawling like a baby.

“Hey, what the hell's wrong now?”

Shears noticed. How could he not, the man was holding him, propping him up.

He couldn't hold back his whimper. “I'm sorry,” he breathed, “I'm a worthless human being, I don't deserve anything... you have no reason to keep me alive and I'm eating through things already... stupid, pathetic waste of space that can't even call for help...”
“Huh? What's that mean?”

Mo choked a sob down, explaining in a wavering voice, “I felt it coming, I knew I needed help... but I couldn't get the words out... I didn't see the point...”

“Why the fuck not?!?” Shears demanded.

He didn't have an answer, crying quietly as he pressed the side of his face against the man's chest. Shears was warm. He smelled like sweat and sand and old fabric.

More talking fluttered around, like birds. He barely heard it.

“Give him here.”

His head was starting to clear up, so when that voice appeared again, the one that had... that had used a restore on him, he vaguely realized, it was the brunette woman with the sword. He was lifted up, and Shears vanished. Instead, smaller hands and a more delicate frame took his place.

“You sure, Elfé?” Shears asked. His tone was concerned, devoted.

Elfé, huh? It was a pretty name...

“I'll be fine. He's in no condition to fight. You two can go on and leave if you want.”

After a moment, Mo heard a door creak shut. He was left alone with Elfé holding him.

She was more delicately built than Shears, but no less powerful. He could feel it, thrumming under her skin like a materia-song. She smelled like sand and wind and something he couldn't name.

“... Why did you think I'm familiar?”

It took a moment for the question to sink in. He tipped his head back, bumping against her shoulder.

“... The way you scowl... it looks like... like... like Veld.”

It clicked a fraction of a second before he said it. The hard glint in her eyes, the pull of her lips, the crease of her brow... it all looked exactly like Veld's.

“Who?” Elfé asked flatly. It felt like she was combing through his hair, but he couldn't be sure.

“Veld. The director of the Turks. I don't know much about him... he's stern and strict, but he was always... he kept me safe. When Hojo sacred me, Veld... he didn't brush me off, he told me to stop seeing the man... If he wasn't... I'm told he has a wife and kid. I dunno. He...”

Mo trailed off, not sure what else to say. There wasn't much, really. He didn't know a whole lot about Veld.

“Even though he works for Shinra, you still seem to like him. To like them. Shinra are monsters.”

He needed the blindfold off.

With shaking, tingling hands, he reached up. He poked himself in the eye at least once before successfully pushing the thing off. Elfé didn't stop him, thankfully.

The light was still bright, forcing him to blink several times, but he managed to look up at her
without crying out. Because of how bright everything else was, her features seemed incredibly
dark.

“Not all of them,” he defended quietly, “Not all of them are monsters. A lot of Shinra is people
looking for work. Shinra... if they're as awful as you say they are, then there's a rotten core, but it's
wrapped in plenty of salvageable things.”

She seemed to stare down at him for a while before looking away.

“Is it really, though.”
Mo was quiet, focusing on his breathing.

He didn't know what drug or medication or whatever it was that Fuhito had apparently given him, but it was working. He wasn't hallucinating, wasn't shaking, wasn't throwing up, wasn't in pain...

He sighed a bit.

At the moment, he was in Jeremy's room. He was curled up on the bed, no longer tied down. They said that if he had another attack, or felt one incoming, he needed to get to the door, get help—that was an order—and tying him down was clearly pointless anyway. So he was curled into the fetal position on his side, a thin sheet draped over him as he focused on his breathing.

Because that was better than returning to the tar-pit. Better than letting the demons crawl out of their dark corners. Better than that.

In... out... in... out...

The door creaked open. He let his eyes slide open as well.

Without any warning at all, something smacked sharply against his hip. He yelped in surprise and shot up, or at least tried to. The sheet tangled around him, and he had to flail wildly for a minute before he could see again.

It was Shears.

Mo automatically looked down, curling into himself a bit.

"Aw, don't gimme that crap!" the man snapped.

Mo was in the process of looking up when something was shoved in his face. Not just under his nose, but pressing against his face and smushing his nose. Pulling back a bit, he found it to be his sketchbook and pencils.

"What...?"

"Shut up and take them!"

Shears didn't give him the chance to try, dropping them on his lap. He fumbled to catch them both, almost badly damaging his sketchbook. He noticed there was a dark brownish stain on the corner, and felt a twinge of phantom pain in his back.

"... Thank you..." he murmured demurely.

"Are you okay?"

That made him look up, confused. Shears was... well, the last one he thought would be asking that. The man seemed so angry and hated everything to do with Shinra so vehemently...

Scowling, Shears pointed to the sketchbook. "Half of those pictures do not scream mentally okay, and the shit you said when you were off your rocker didn't either. Are you okay?"

Mo opened and closed his mouth a few times before looking back down. He found himself
opening his sketchbook up, turning to the page he planned to make into a painting. The terrarium in a bottle surrounded by dark figures.

After a moment, he sighed, “No, I'm really not...”

Shears was just full of surprises, plonking down on the end of the bed with his arms crossed over his chest. “And?”

“... and I haven't been for a very long time... I kinda doubt... I ever will be again...” Mo admitted, carefully tracing the wings of the butterflies.

Happiness in a bottle, stave off the darkness for one more hour...

“What made you like that?”

So much, honestly.

“Genetics. Getting bullied as a kid. Learning I was gay in a world that would happily lynch me for it. Always being second best, but I can't blame Ted, he was my favorite too...”

“... Who?”

“Ted,” Mo smiled wanly, “My older brother by two years. He was... perfect and cool and everyone loved him. I would always get sorta... passed over, but I didn't blame him. Rather, I was happy for him, because someone as awesome as Ted deserved the spotlight. But it was... kinda inevitable that I would start to feel it.”

There was a stretch of silence. Mo moved his finger about the page, just barely dragging the very edge of his fingernail over the lines so he wouldn't smudge them.

“... How'd he die? With how you talk, it's obvious he did.”

Shears was perceptive, wasn't he?

“... He and my parents... I'll never know the real reason why, but I highly suspect they were planning to drag me to rehab... to get me sober... but they never made it. There was a car-crash, and... it turned into a pile-up. But... in the end, it's my fault they died. If they hadn't been coming to fix me, clean up my messes, they'd still be—”

A palm connected with his cheek.

Mo stared with wide, shocked eyes at Shears as his cheek burned.

“Don't pull that shit! You have no guarantee they'd still be alive, do you? For all you know, they would've gotten themselves in some other accident!” Shears snapped angrily. “And if you feel so goddamn guilty about it, then stop wasting away! They were trying to give you a second fucking chance, you should live it out!”

Blinking, Mo reached up to touch his cheek. It felt hot.

Without thinking, he asked, “What about your family?”

The other man faltered for a moment, then squared his shoulders.

“Shinra killed my family. That's why I fight them. AVALANCHE is my new family, and all of us hate Shinra.”
Mo looked down to his sketchbook again. Turning the pages, he found the doodles of fantasy heroes fighting black blobs.

“... Heather didn't kill your family.”

“Huh?”

“Heather,” he repeated, “She didn't kill your family. She's just a secretary, like me. There're a lot of people working for Shinra, and most of them are likely just there for jobs. I mean... Heather's a bitch and I don't like her, but she's not... Do you hate her, or the other secretaries?”

Shears opened and closed his mouth a few times before saying, “That's different.”

Mo smiled wanly. “Is it really?”

Shears glared.

Mo continued to looked through his sketchbook. The later pages all had color, a testament to how much he loved the pencils Reno had gotten him. He wondered if the redhead really had no experience in art.

“... I'm going to miss him...” he said aloud.

“Who?”

“Reno. One of Shinra's Turks. He... when I think about it, he was my first real friend. I'm going to miss Cissnei and Rude too, but even if I told him he was my third-favorite, Reno was... he was special. And now the only way I'll ever see him again is if he's the one who kills me...”

“You have no way of knowing that!”

He slammed his sketchbook shut, unable to look up. If he did, he was confident he would cry.

“... Rufus is the vice president of the company... there are... perhaps twenty witnesses that can say with certainty I went out alone with him... Are you telling me he wouldn't say I attacked him and fled willingly...? That... Shinra wouldn't put out an order for my head...? Because I don't think it's possible for me to get drunk enough to believe that...”

“So quit moping around and join AVALANCHE!”

It was his turn to square his shoulders now, looking up with bleary eyes that threatened to spill over at any time.

“I had just figured out how to be happy again. AVALANCHE took that from me. And you really think I could join that?”
He didn't know what had inspired this picture, but here he was drawing it.

It was Elfé, really. Only he'd put a Dungeons and Dragons twist on things, not that they would be too out of place in this world. The most out-of-place thing was probably the elf-ears he'd given her. He'd turned her into a wood-elf, and was working on the horde of enemies she was cutting down. There were a few looming eldercaps in the background, with a dead drow on the ground as she crushed a beholder's eye underfoot. Something snakelike made a shadow in the foreground. He was trying to get the motion just right in her clothes. He wanted it to look like she was whirling about, a spinning cyclone of death, but he couldn't get it just right. That was why he was taking a break from that and working on her enemies.

He didn't know how long he'd been with AVALANCHE. It was almost impossible to tell how much time passed in this room. He was medicated now and then, which helped keep him from experiencing withdrawal but not how badly he wanted a good pint of lager followed by shots of something hard as hell. Shears had stopped by two more times after delivering his sketchbook. People came by to feed him or walk him to the bathroom. It could have been a week. Could be more, could be less. He really, truly couldn't tell.

The door opened.

“Hey, come on!”

Sighing, he put down the sketchbook and pencil. Standing up, he left the room. Shears and the two with guns, again. He wondered where they were going.

As they walked, Mo noticed they were going down a route he wasn't familiar with. There was a faint breeze, too.

Shears kicked open another door—

Mo winced, lifting a hand up to shield his eyes in the sudden brightness. The wind almost swept his breath away, making him shiver. He would've stopped to adjust to the new environment, but was prodded forward.

Outside, his mind chirped helpfully. Sunlight. Natural ambient air.

He knew what it was, he chided, it was just so damn sudden was all.

He walked until someone yanked on the back of his shirt, indicating he should stop.

Blinking, he managed to adjust to the bright sunlight.

It was breathtaking.

It looked like wherever they were was built into a canyon or something, and while he'd only seen it in pictures Mo already knew the Grand Canyon had nothing on this. Purples, oranges, reds, streaks of pink, hints of blue, with a faint and soft green layer at the bottom. It was jagged, but in a natural way, crumbling and forming towers and castles out of stone. If he looked up the canyon in one direction, he could see what looked like an old observatory. It was a distance away, just close enough tossed but too far to make out details.
It also explained the sandy qualities that Shears and Elfé's scents both had.

“This is Cosmo Canyon.”

Still shielding his eyes, Mo turned. Elfé, Shears and Fuhito stood not too far away.

“It's one of several bases we have around the world. Here we're close to the leading researcher into the planet and the Lifestream,” Elfé said, “And if Shinra is allowed to continue doing what they are doing, then everything will die.”

His eyes were finally adjusting. He let his hand fall, looking out over the canyon as the wind swept past. The air was fresh. Clean.

“So you want to take Shinra out. What then?” he asked.

“The planet will heal.”

“I was referring to the power vacuum.”

That earned nothing but silence.

Mo turned to look at them again. “Don't... you have plans after that? An alternate power source, a new government?”

“Those are up to the people to sort out.” Fuhito declared.

“No!” Mo yelled, earning wide eyes. “No, that would just be an invitation for anarchy and chaos!”

Elfé held out a hand, silencing Shears before he could yell back. “Explain.”

Mo shook his head, running a hand through his hair. “Shinra is everything right now, right? Energy, government, military?”

A nod.

“ Aren't they also jobs, food, education, healthcare, protection?”

No response.

Mo continued, “I try to stay out of politics, I try to avoid conversations like this. I'm weak that way. But I do know that people used to living easy don't appreciate having luxury taken from them. And what about things like people in ICU? Don't they need the power Shinra provides? The vaccinations Shinra makes for children? The food they deliver, how many people will starve? There won't be government, so people will abuse whatever power they have, civil wars will start up everywhere. Who will discipline them? Keep criminals in order? No one, because it will have been left to the people. People who won't know what they're doing, until the only one who does rises to power and creates an even worse dictatorship!”

His voice was rising. He'd started to pace a tiny bit, gesturing wildly.

“Then what do you suggest?” Elfé demanded sharply. Her hand was resting on the hilt of her sword.

“Have alternatives!” Mo said, throwing his arms out wide. “Develop your own power sources, create your own government! Make your own company, and become the competition!”
“Suppose there isn't time?”

She had come closer for some reason.

“There's always time if you—!”

He had grabbed her arm, trying to make a point.

Song.

It rushed through him, hammering wildly in his mind. Loud, powerful, unrestrained, primal. Somewhere, distantly, it pinged in him as a materia. But it was so loud, so dominating, so present, what the hell kind of materia was it?

As if in answer, something roared, surging closer—

He just barely managed to yank away.

He was exhausted, falling to his knees, panting and gasping. He couldn't feel his arm. It was completely numb.

“Hey! What the hell?!?”

Shears had rushed forward. Fuhito too. It looked like they were fussing over Elfé. His ears were ringing.

“What... what did you do?”

She sounded stunned.

Forcing himself to look up, Mo found her eyes wide as she looked between him and her arm.

“What... what the hell... What materia is that?!” he managed to force out, clutching his arm in effort to assure himself it was still there. He was sweating, too. Not heavily, but enough that he noticed. He was so tired, he couldn't catch his breath...

“What did he do?” Fuhito frowned.

“I... I don't know. I... I don't feel tired.”

No, but he did. Ugh, his legs were jello. He couldn't feel his arm, couldn't catch his breath, couldn't stand. Wasn't that lovely.

“You... why did you ask about the materia?” Elfé asked.

Before he could answer, something crashed into being behind him. It hit hard enough that a shockwave spread outward and almost knocked him over. He could smell the fire, undoubtedly singeing the landing site.

Ears ringing now, Mo twisted to see what had hit.

He felt his gut drop as red leather and black feathers rose up out of the small, smoldering crater.

“G... Genesis...”
Chapter Notes

Genesis is a fascinating character, and I'm a big fan of the man he's based on. But he's also an asshole and has a personality I personally find hard to write.

Also, does anyone have an opinion on Mo encountering either a wild chocobo or a bunch of cactuar? It's something I want to write, but has no big impact on the plot, really...

Mo felt like he was at the bank again, for a moment.

Genesis was clearly in much better condition than the clone or whatever at the bank. He wasn't yammering nonsense and that was clearly a sword, not a gun. But the man was pissed. Very, very, very pissed. And with the smoking, sparking crater he was striding out of, Mo was glad he was already on his knees, because he would've collapsed again otherwise.

There was a wing.


Genesis had a singular wing flexing behind him, coming from his shoulder.

The wounded shoulder.

The guards by the door yelled. Mo guessed they would have opened fire, but Genesis beat them to the punch with a rather large fireball. The smell of fabric, flesh, and hair being burnt joined the hot metal smell Genesis's landing had created.

“This bastard...!” Shears snarled.

Hearing a soft hiss, Mo snapped back around. Elfé had drawn her sword.

“Wait—”

His plea was never finished.

It didn't take much to guess that the loud snapping was Genesis's wing. The whirlwind of black feathers that happened directly after only confirmed the guess.

There were so many of them, it was absurd. They whipped about as if alive, scratching and stabbing. Mo was forced to duck his head and raise his good arm up to protect himself from the surprising sharp shafts.

A strong arm wrapped around his midriff, and the ground fell away. He felt like his breath was left on the ground too as the world suddenly became very small.

Panic set in quickly, and Mo clung to the arm holding him, fingertips digging into the leather. He turned his head, eyes shut tight as he tried to ignore the fact that if Genesis dropped him there was
definitely no coming back. He didn't have a problem with heights, not really, but he'd rather not be suspended in the air by only someone's arm.

The wind stung. It whistled in his ears, pulled at his hair and clothes, bit at his skin. It was cold, and they were so high up he wasn't at all surprised.

To be honest, the fact that Genesis had a wing and could fly wasn't that surprising to him. After all he'd seen and experienced in this world, the idea of people having wings wasn't too far out there. It was how sudden it was that he was shocked.

They were going down. He could feel it. Going down and slowing down.

Mo opened his eyes just in time for Genesis to drop him.

He hit the ground hard. Not hard enough to break anything, but enough to bang him up and knock the wind out of him. He rolled messily a few times before coming to a complete stop, gasping and groaning. Sitting up, he spat a few times to get the sand and dirt out of his mouth. He knew already he wasn't getting all of it out, he'd have sand in his teeth for weeks.

Getting up, he saw that Genesis had dropped him in the middle of nowhere. A desert, it looked like. It was hot, and he could see for... miles, it seemed.

Genesis landed gracefully before him.

Before Mo could react, the point of the redhead's sword just barely brushed his throat.

“W-wait...” he croaked fearfully, taking a step back.

“Of all the thing to happen,” Genesis said darkly, “You run off with AVALANCHE.”

“No—”

“Attacked Rufus and fled, or so I'm told. Ran willingly with them.” the man continued, pressing forwards and forcing him back. “Of course, the position I found you in didn't look like you were there willingly. At their mercy, more like.”

He opened his mouth to try objecting again, but tripped over something and went sprawling backwards, throwing up a cloud of dust. He coughed and went to sit up, but found the sword at his throat again. More insistently this time, the edge pressing under his jaw in warning.

Or in promise.

“So... What will you tell me, I wonder?”

He didn't say anything, swallowing nervously as he looked up at Genesis. From this angle, with the sun flaring in a halo around his head, eyes bright and wing curved around them, he looked intimidating. Striking. Powerful.

This man was all three of those things, Mo reminded himself.

“Do you promise... promise you'll believe me? Because... I already know how it looks. I already know whose word I'm going against. I... am nothing and no one to this world... So do you promise to at least listen...?” he asked quietly.

After a moment of tense silence, Genesis stepped away. Mo waited for a moment before pushing himself up into a sitting position. He tucked his legs under himself and looked up at Genesis. The
man was watching him expectantly.

“Rufus asked me to balance his ledger. He hadn't touched it for months, and... I noticed there was a lot of gil missing. A lot, an almost stupid amount. I... I pointed it out to him, and he said we should discuss it over dinner the next night. So... we left. And I didn't question it. But then we left the city. Really left the city, we were far out... I panicked and tried to get away... but I was shot in the back, and when I woke up next, I was with AVALANCHE.”

Genesis moved closer. “So you're saying that despite having the SOLDIER treatment, you were overwhelmed and kidnapped.”

“Yes!”

He was grabbed by the shoulder and thrown forward. Another mouthful of sand and dirt.

Before he could push himself up, he felt something cold push the hem of his shirt up. It didn't take a genius to figure out that sharp point was the sword again. He held still.

“Well, that's classy.”

... Tramp-stamp.

“I was drunk, young, and stupid.” he defended, face red.

“Emphasis on stupid.”

“Okay, that's a bit much, you hear nothing from me about your life-choices.” Mo snapped.

Genesis didn't answer.

After a moment, his shirt was dropped. Deciding to risk it, Mo rolled over and sat up.

“The scar certainly says you were shot. By a powerful rifle, at that. How much of the bullet is still in there?” Genesis asked, examining him.

“None, now. They took it out.”

The redhead nodded, circling. What was it with him and circling? Was he a vulture in a past life?

“... You gave me blood.”

... What now.

“And the day I deployed, I was sick. It was brief, in the morning. Foul, disgusting. Like after you got your injections.”

He remembered that. Decomposing skunk tar.

“... But it wasn't enough. I was better for a while, but then it stopped. Part of the degradation was cured, but it started to advance again afterwards.”

Mo slowly got to his feet. He was covered in sand. He was tired. He was sober and likely needed medication or a bottle of vodka soon.

Genesis looked at him, eyes sharp and making him flinch. “There is an order to kill you in Shinra. But I need you alive. I need you alive, because you are my cure.”
He was still and silent for a moment.

“... What if it was just luck, though? What if I'm not your cure?”

Genesis shook his head. “My friend, the fates are cruel. There are no dreams, no honor remains.”

He knew this part.

“The arrow has left the bow of the Goddess... right? From Loveless?” Mo murmured.

“Yes.” Genesis turned to him. “I am planning to leave Shinra. I returned from the war to retrieve you. But if you fight me, then it'll be easier to leave you and seek an alternative cure.”

“... Wait. Why? The, uh, leaving Shinra part?” he frowned in confusion.

“Because they are poison.”

Oh, deja-vu. Go join AVALANCHE, boy.

“Okay, everyone hates Shinra. What's your reason? Why exactly are they poison? Should we just go back to AVALANCHE and ask them to recruit you?” Mo asked, reaching up to rub at his temples.

“They're poisoning us. They lie and create monsters, putting DNA in SOLDIERs, in us, to make us into inhuman things.”

... Well okay then.

“If my blood can fix that, though, purge the... oh...”

“What now?”

He couldn't give blood for transfusions anymore. He was too dependent on alcohol and medication. That was no good for transfusions.

“Hey.” Genesis snapped, drawing his attention back to him.

“... My blood isn't any good anymore. I'm poison too. I... I would need to go completely dry, first. And that would require a professional program. But... when I am dry and sober, no longer on medication or anything, then I can be used to purge out Shinra's poison! But if you leave, aren't you abandoning the other SOLDIERs? As... as a commander, aren't you obligated to take care of them?”

Genesis opened his mouth, but then closed it again. He seemed to be confused, or uncertain, stepping back.

“Hey—”

Genesis's wing snapped open, and the redhead took off.

Mo coughed, waving off as much of the kicked-up dust as he could.

Looking up, almost blinded by the sun, he saw Genesis flying away.

“... I'll just walk, then.”
The desert was so vast his call didn't even echo.
Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

I went with cactuar because my friend made a very cute and silly suggestion...

Mo stopped again, squinting and shielding his eyes as he looked around.

The sun was going down. Not enough to be sunset just yet, but soon, he was sure.

The desert was huge and he was alone. He was inadequately dressed, under-equipped, and unsure of what nasties might be in the sand. His feet were blistering. His arms were sunburnt, which meant his face most assuredly was too. His mouth was dry and felt like it had a fine coating of sand. He didn't know how much of the pain in his chest was from walking so much, impending delirium attack, or impending heat stroke. He'd never had heat stroke before, did it affect the chest?


If he wasn't dying anywhere else, he was most assuredly going to die here. Alone in an empty wasteland of sand.

No, the way Genesis had talked...

Genesis flew away, dumbass.

Heaving a heavy sigh, Mo kept walking, bare feet sinking ankle-deep into the hot sand. His blisters hadn't popped yet, and he prayed that they didn't until he was out of the sand. That would be the ugliest infection of all time, his feet would just need to be amputated...

His only hope at the moment was to keep walking, hope he was walking straight. Eventually, he would find the edge of the desert, or at least find somewhere suitable to rest. His hopes weren't high enough to hope that he'd find help. No, he was on his own.

Warnings about his hallucinations melded with ones about mirages. If he saw anything, there was no way he could trust it until he touched it. Otherwise he would end up chasing after something that didn't exist and kill himself faster.

He needed shade. He needed water. He needed food. If he wasn't medicated or drunk, he would die from withdrawal.

He needed a breather.

Climbing to the top of a sand-dune, Mo crouched down to take a break.

Okay, so the sun was setting to his right. That meant that was west, and his left was east. So behind him was north, and he was heading south.

He had no clue if that meant anything, if it was good or bad or the same as any other direction. But he had a heading now, so in theory he could stick to it and go relatively straight. Ish. Heavy on the ish part.
His lips were dry and chapped. Licking them did absolutely nothing, except press grains of sand into the cracks. Grimacing, he stopped trying that and spat. He knew the amount of sand he was clearing from his mouth was nothing, but it made him feel better.

There was a line of pink across the horizon to his right, distorted and rippling by the shimmer of heat-haze.

He needed to keep moving. He could probably get more traveling done by night than anything else.

Groaning at the pain in his body, Mo stood up again. He was stiff and tired. Curling up and never getting up again sounded fantastic right about now.

None of that, he scolded himself. He'd turn into a mummy to be discovered centuries from now if he did that.

Sliding carefully down the dune, Mo kept moving. It felt like a few of the blisters on his feet had started to pop. He wondered if he should take his shirt off and tear it up to wrap around his feet. But wouldn't the rubbing from the fabric pop more blisters? And the fabric was saturated enough with sand that it likely wouldn't make a difference.

Idly, he wondered how much of his body's water-reserves were being lost just by his harsh panting. Probably a lot.

It didn't take much longer for him to start staggering, trembling from head to toe. Every blister on his feet must've popped by now, oozing lymph fluid and making more sand stick to his feet. Just breathing hurt. His head was pounding angrily, ready to split open like an egg. The sun had started to properly set, dying everything rich hues of orange and purple between solid black shadows, and the air must've been getting colder but he was so hot he just couldn't feel it—

“Oof!”

He fell forward, tripping over something big enough his foot was still caught on it. His forehead scraped against something, and stars exploded across his vision at the impact.

It took him a moment to get up to his hands and knees. Even in the dying light, he could see the sticky glisten on the rock under his head. He'd cut his forehead, and pretty badly from the looks of things.

... A rock.

Twisting around, he saw that was what his foot had caught on too.

Wiping away the blood threatening to fill his eyes, Mo dragged his feet underneath himself. With shaking hands and tingling fingers, he picked up the rock that had hurt him.

It wasn't sandstone. He wasn't a geologist and he wasn't in the best state of mind, but Mo was pretty damn sure this dark rock wasn't sandstone. It matched the one he'd tripped on.

Blinking slowly, he noticed there were more scattered ahead of him.

... He didn't think they were meteorite pieces. And he wasn't seeing any glass. Right, there would be glass scattered around from where the impact would have burnt the sand?

Wiping his forehead again and gritting his teeth against how dizzy he was, Mo stood up.
He had to be close to something. Just a little further, he told himself. Just a little further. He could make it.

Dropping the rock, Mo kept moving.

As he did, the sun died, and the stars came out. There were enough filling the sky to turn it silver and blue rather than black. He kept getting distracted, looking up and not paying attention to where he was going. It caused him to fall more than once.

The rocks were getting bigger. They looked more like land-formations than anything else now. Or at least they were starting to. Several times, he stopped to breathe, resting against them. They were cold to the touch, and he continually pressed himself to their surfaces when he stopped to rest. It felt good against his super-heated skin. He could see his breath in puffs of steam, but he didn't feel cold. His shivers were from exhaustion and withdrawal more than falling temperatures.

He was tired. He was hungry. He was thirsty. Everything hurt. His vision was blurry.

A squeaking noise reached him.

It likely wasn't real, he told himself. A mirage or a hallucination, not real.

But as he kept going, stumbling from formation to formation, the sound got louder. It was like... rubber squeaking against rubber. And there was... something else, like...

Hey.

Mo stopped, staring and willing his vision to clear up.

There was something green under those rocks there, beating on the sand desperately.

Mo stood still, swaying back and forth as he watched.

It was a mirage, or a hallucination, he wasn't in a good state of mind, he screamed at himself.

But it sounded like it was in pain.

Giving up, he moved closer. The thing noticed him approaching and began to beat on the sand even harder.

“Wha'inth...?” he mumbled, standing over the thing. It looked like it had been standing... maybe on top of this smaller rock formation here? But the ledge or whatever had crumbled, trapping it underneath.

It was a cactus.

A cactus with a face.

It went still as he crouched down to better examine it. It looked like the face had been carved out, and the expression was... shocked. Wide-eyed, open-mouthed.

There was no way it was real.

He reached out to touch it, but jerked his hand away with a hiss when he was swatted. It was real, alright, and definitely a cactus. Why was he not surprised Gaia had sentient plants?

... Well, either way. It was alive and it was trapped. He couldn't just leave it here like this. That
would be cruel.

Shuffling over to the side, Mo began moving the rocks. They weren't absurdly big, but they were rocks and they were big enough. Plus he was... in less than peak condition.

Pushing, shoving, lifting and rolling, he gradually cleared the rocks away. He cut his hands on the sharp, jagged bits a few times, and probably bruised his shoulder with how he had to slam against a few of them. But eventually he got down to the last rock, and rolled it off the sentient cactus.

The thing sprang up, smacked him sharply on the ass, and took off running.

Mo blinked in shock before howling, “I didn't consent to that!” after it.

Jeez. Suggestively assaulted by a cactus. Was he sure he wasn't already delirious?
Chapter 54

He was being followed, he realized as he came to stop against another rock.

He hadn't gotten very far from where he freed the cactus. Far enough that he had to squint to make it out, but that was it. He was on the verge of collapsing, just far too tired to do much else. His stomach was making odd noises and clenching painfully, his chest hurt like hell, his head was pounding...

Sitting down for another breather, Mo contemplated passing out. Burrowing into the sand a bit and falling asleep there. He could keep going in the morning.

There it was again, movement from the corner of his eye. Chances were he wasn't really being followed, it was just—

Never mind.

The cactus was peering at him from behind a rock. Mo kept very still, watching from his peripherals. After a moment, the thing sped to a different rock, a closer one.

His eyelids were drooping, but soon enough the cactus was hiding behind a boulder no more than ten feet away. He waited until he was certain it was looking and experimentally patted the ground next to him.

Nothing.

Well, guess it wasn't that interested. Or wasn't that intelligent.

Groaning a little, Mo laid himself down in the sand. The rock at his back would hopefully provide some shade when the sun rose. But for now... for now he just wanted to sleep.

Curling up, he rested his head on his arm, cupping the back of his head with his fingers. He closed his eyes, idly wondering how many months afterwards he'd be scrubbing sand out of his skin.

Probably not as long as it felt like it would be, but still a long time.

There was a quiet squeaking above him, making him open his eyes.

The cactus started and fled.

Mo kept his bleary eyes open, waiting.

Sure enough, the cactus came back, standing over him as if it was curious. It was more of a green smear above him as he struggled to breathe. His tongue felt so dry. Like crumbly chalk. It stuck to the roof of his mouth. And his chest hurt so much. He couldn't stop shaking.

Well, if the cactus was just going to stare at him with it's carved-out face, then he was going to sleep. He undoubtedly still had a lot of walking to do when he woke up, it would be better if he was well-rested...

It felt like he'd just barely closed his eyes when something splashed over him, waking him up and making him splutter. Blinking away the sandy water, he saw the cactus standing over him. It was holding a leaf, and a relatively big one at that.
What in the name of...

Before Mo could properly question anything, the thing sped away.

Well, okay then.

Looking up at the sky, he noted that the stars had moved. Not a whole lot. Not drastically. Just enough for him to notice was all.

He licked his lips and just about cried when the tip of his tongue came away wet. Most of the water that had been poured over him had soaked into the sand or his clothes, but there was a little bit that remained in beads on his skin. It was blessedly cool, though he could feel the heat of his sunburnt skin returning with a vengeance.

A few seconds of relief, but maybe with it he could sleep better...

Just as he rearranged himself, closing his eyes, there was the soft noise of something sliding through the sand. His eyes reopened just in time for another faceful of water.

The cactus had come back yet again.

It knew where there was water, Mo realized. It was fetching water in that leaf— not a lot, far from a lot— and throwing it over him. It was trying to help.

Repaying the favor, perhaps?

Grunting, he rolled onto his hands and knees. The cactus squeaked, waving it's leaf as if brandishing a weapon as it hopped backwards. But it stopped when Mo didn't move, panting from the exertion.

After a moment, it dashed away.

Fast little bugger, Mo thought to himself. Not wanting to push himself too hard, he started to crawl in the same direction. He could no longer see it, but it had definitely headed in this direction.

He didn't get very far, on the verge of collapsing again by the time it got back. The water was splashed over him a third time. But instead of dashing off so fast he couldn't follow this time, it only went so far before jumping up and down, squeaking and waving the leaf. Waiting for him to follow.

He'd been this close to water. This close to a well, or a spring, or whatever water-source it was, and he hadn't even known.

Praise whatever deity had created this sentient cactus.

Going was slow. Three more times, the cactus ran off the fetch water. Once Mo had completely collapsed, panting from exhaustion. The cactus had stood over him, waving the leaf like a fan, until he was ready to get up and keep going.

The sand faded away, turned to stone. Tufts of grass and scraggly bushes started taking over, worked into the cracks of the stone. And he could hear it.

A stream, it sounded like. Small, but present.

Hearing it gave him enough strength to drag his trembling body the last little distance. The cactus seemed to dance triumphantly when his hand landed in the water, making him smile.
It was a stream. It looked like it sprang up here, and flowed downhill. Plants grew in clusters around it. In the starlight, it shone silver. He could smell how cold it was, the relief around his hand borderline orgasmic.

It took a little work, but Mo arranged himself next to the stream, splashing his face and shoulders with water, scooping up handfuls to dump over his head. The cactus had run off again, but Mo couldn't say he minded. The favor had been more than repaid, if you asked him.

He was still tired. Still hungry. Still shaking and hurting in the chest. But he was washing away the worst of the sand, cleaning it out of the blisters on his feet and the cuts on his hands and forehead. His mouth no longer felt like it was made out of chalk. He felt significantly better, really. And it wouldn't be the most comfortable thing, but he could easily curl up under one of the scraggly bushes and sleep there.

Squeaking and his shoulder being prodded had him turning around, water running down his arms.

The cactus was back again. This time it was holding what looked like a pair of yellowish carrots.

Mo blinked in confusion at the thing, and it squeaked insistently, holding out the carrots.

“Oh... thank you...” he murmured, voice rasping a little as he took the root-vegetables. He had absolutely no clue if these were edible for humans, or if they were poisonous... but his stomach let out a loud growl.

The cactus danced around as he rinsed the carrots off in the stream, squeaking as if it was singing.

Okay, here went nothing...

He bit into the first vegetable with a crunch.

It was a carrot.

A laugh left him, making the cactus look at him as if confused.
Chapter 55

He was woken up by squeaking.

Groaning, Mo rolled onto his side and blinked his eyes open.

The cactus waved from next to the stream. Smiling, Mo waved back. For a moment, he just lay there, watching the thing scrub at more carrots in the stream.

The little thing was so intelligent. It didn't seem like it, really, but it was... it had identified that he needed water, it had led him to water, it had found an apparently safe food-source for him... Taking care of him.

Ordinarily he would feel guilty or look for ways to repay the kindness. But he was so damn tired and just at a loss regarding the cactus. It really had no reason to be so nice to him. If there had been any debt from him removing the rocks that had trapped it, it was more than repaid.

Grunting, Mo pushed himself up.

He was shaking. It took so much effort to get to his hands and knees.

After spending a moment to stabilize himself, Mo dragged himself over to the stream. The cactus splashed across to offer up the carrots, making him smile again.

Thanking the cactus-creature, Mo began to eat the carrots. It wasn't exactly the largest or most filling of meals, but it was food. And since the two from last night had yet to kill him, he could assume they were safe to eat.

His hands were shaking badly. He almost dropped the first carrot several times, but he managed. The cactus squeaked, patting his back.

... Huh. Last night, the cactus had been covered in spines and needles. But now it was smooth. It didn't hurt to touch.

... Maybe they were retractable?

A shadow passed overhead. The cactus began quivering, squealing in fright and plastering itself to his back.

“Can you not sit still and stay out of trouble? Every time I turn my back...”

Mo lifted his head with a sour expression on his face. Genesis was landing delicately on the other side of the stream. “I'm not the one who abandoned his so-called cure in the middle of the desert to roast alive.” he informed the redhead, biting into the next carrot.

Genesis blinked, looking surprised. “Are those... gyshal greens?”

“I dunno. Are they poisonous?” Mo answered, turning his head to look at the trembling succulent cowering behind him.

“... No, but they're... bird-food.”

“Forgive me for being starving and on the verge of a delirium attack. This cactus took better care of me than you.”
An utterly perplexed look on his face, Genesis hopped daintily over the stream and stood behind Mo. The cactus squealed in terror, jumping into Mo's lap and hiding it's face in his chest. He put down his carrot—gyshal green?—and patted it's... head with a trembling hand.

"...A cactuar. You're saying a cactuar took care of you."

"Yes. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Let me kill it."

Hugging the cactuar to his chest, Mo somersaulted across the burbling stream. "Why?! It helped me, saved my life when you left me to die!" he demanded, glaring over his shoulder at the redhead.

"It's a monster." Genesis replied, holding up a hand. Flames crackled to life around his fingertips.

"Says the man that looks like Lucifer's stepson!"

That made the man falter. Slowly, slowly, the flames died. Mo let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding and looked down at the quivering cactuar in his arms.

"It's okay, buddy... It's okay..." he soothed, gently petting and rocking. Once the thing had stopped trembling so violently, he let out a small sigh and turned his head to look at Genesis. "So...what now?"

The redhead shook himself out, feathers on his wing ruffling a little before settling perfectly.

"We return to Shinra. We convince them that you aren't the enemy and get them to treat you. Eventually..."

Excuse him, but he didn't appreciate that ominous last word or the way it trailed off.

"Alright," he sighed, standing up, "How do we do that?"

"Put the cactuar down."

"Leave Tapatio alone."

Genesis was silent for a moment, staring incredulously. "What?"

To be honest, he hadn't really thought before blurting that out. But the way it clung to him, and how it had taken such good care of him, it kind of deserved a name.

"What, do you have a better name?" he tried to deflect.

"Yes, no name. Put it down and shoo it off."

Mo put his arms around and his hands over the cactuar. "You can't make me. I put up with enough bullshit from you and everyone else, if I want to keep Tapatio then I'm keeping Tapatio."

His heart just about melted when the newly-named cactuar squeaked, arms wrapping around his neck in a childish manner.

Genesis put his face in a hand.
“... Fine. Keep the blasted thing. But we...”

The man jumped across the stream and wrapped an arm around his midriff, making him gasp as the huge black wing snapped open.

“... are going.”
They touched down and Mo ripped away from Genesis, all but dropping Tapatio. He was shaking too much to get very far, everything revolting against him.

Falling to his hands and knees, Mo emptied his stomach of it's meager contents.

His chest hurt. His head was splitting open. He was shaking so much, if he wasn't careful he'd fall in the puddle of sickness. He couldn't breathe.

Tapatio was bouncing around him, crying in distress. Mo felt horrible that he couldn't even lift his head to comfort his little friend.

Warmth wrapped around him, and he sighed. Mustering up the strength to throw himself away from the small spatter of vomit, he sprawled inelegantly across the dirt, panting in relief. Bleary eyes showed Genesis standing over him, a materia glowing brightly on his bangle.

Tapatio suddenly appeared over him, dominating his vision and squeaking in concern.

“All this because I shoved some rocks away... are all cactuar like this?” Mo asked with a weak chuckle as he reached up. Tapatio grabbed his hand and clung to it as if he was dying. In a way, he supposed he was, but the thing didn't need to mourn yet...

“Not really. Some do keep them as pets, but they usually end up running away before long. What was that about rocks?” Genesis replied, glaring a bit at Tapatio.

“When I found him... he was trapped under a bunch of rocks. I couldn't... couldn't just walk past, he sounded like he was in pain... I thought for sure I was hallucinating, but I figured out he was real when he hit me... I couldn't leave him, I couldn't...”

The redhead scoffed at the story, wing ruffling. “You're too soft. That'll get you killed one of these days.”

Mo couldn't help but laugh.

He was tired. Genesis was casting some spell on him to keep him stable, but he was otherwise in the throes of delirium tremens again. He needed medication or something to drink. Otherwise he was most assuredly going to die today. Who knew what damage had already been done to his heart, how many years had been gradually chopped off his lifespan...

“... Stay here and stay out of trouble. I'll be back soon.”

Mo wanted to protest, but Genesis had already taken off, flying away. A handful of feathers were left drifting through the air.

“That guy...” he sighed, watching one feather drift closer in an awkward spiral.

Tapatio moved around, now sitting by his side and patting his chest. A tired smile adorned his face as he watched the cactuar.

“You guys usually run away, huh... so I wonder why you stayed...?”

Tapatio squeaked.
“... Hah... I said I wanted to keep you... but am I capable? I don't know anything about you... I was just trying to shut that brat up...” Mo murmured, lifting a shuddering hand to gently trace the sentient succulent's ridges. “I do owe you... literally my life at this point... you would have repaid everything with the water...”

The cactuar squeaked again, patting his chest more.

Mo chuckled, letting his hand drop and his eyes close.

Perhaps Tapatio was young. Infant young. And if that was the case, perhaps his kindness imprinted on the cactuar, and he'd unknowingly adopted a child. Or perhaps this was regional behavior, and the cactuars of that area were more tameable than others. He didn't know. There were a lot of possibilities. Probably more than his addiction-addled brain could come up with, to boot.

Tapatio.

It was a nice enough name. And it wasn't like anyone from this world would know the source of the it. The cactuar did look like a tequila mascot, though. It wasn't too surprising he'd blurted out such a name.

“You deserve better... I didn't give it much thought...” he murmured, making the cactuar look at him as if in confusion. He could only make guesses with that perpetually shocked expression.

A shadow moved over the sky.

Mo looked up just in time for Genesis to land at his head.

“Are you molting or something? So many feathers...” Mo muttered, watching as yet another feather drifted down towards his face. Tapatio waved frantically at it, blowing it off-course.

Genesis scowled down at him, holding something out. “Drink this. Once you have, we're taking off again. We'll reach Midgar by tomorrow evening.”

“We're that close...?” he asked, propping himself up on one elbow as he reached up to take the bottle Genesis was presenting.

“No. But I fly faster than most transportation, so we'll be there in half the time it would take otherwise.”

Confident, wasn't he?

Whatever, what was this bottle...

Unlabeled. Corked sloppily, by hands that didn't quite know what they were doing. Popping the stopper out, Mo sniffed at the contents—

“Did you steal from someone's backyard distillery?” he asked as the smell of something peachy, homemade and strong absolutely backhanded him.

“Shut up and get drunk. I didn't go through all this work just to have you die on me because you're so dependent on your poison.”

... Brat. He totally did. Mo hoped he'd left some kind of compensation.

Sighing, he sat up— Tapatio helped, pushing at his back when he faltered— and crossed his legs. Watching as Genesis prowled around in a circle, he took an experimental swig. It was strong, but
that he'd known already. The flavor was predominantly something fruity. Smelled peachy, and there was definitely an aspect of peach to the flavor. It definitely had some kick to it.

“If I weren't going sober I'd ask to meet the brewer...” he commented with a sigh. “Not great, but not bad, and I might actually be able to get drunk off this...”

“Would you just drink it?!?” Genesis snapped.

“Do you expect me to just chug it all down in one breath? There's no one betting on me putting it away in five seconds flat, so I'm taking my time with it. If I'm being forced to go sober for you, at least let me have this.”

“I already let you keep the cactuar. You only get to be so spoiled.”

Raising an eyebrow, Mo gathered Tapatio close and took another mouthful of moonshine.

At least he had the comfort of knowing he wouldn't be as spoiled as Genesis.

That was an almost funny thought.

With nothing better to do, Mo watched Genesis pace as he drank. The bottle wasn't huge. A little smaller than a growler. Or maybe it was just a standard growler for the area. But he was going to be drinking for a while, and there wasn't exactly anything else to do.

But about halfway through the bottle, he grew too antsy, the redhead's impatience wearing him down.

“Why are we going back to Shinra if you hate it so much? I'm not complaining, really... the best way to change a system is from inside, after all, but you don't seem like the kind to just change his mind...” Mo questioned.

Genesis stopped pacing.

“... You said... that as a SOLDIER and as a commander, I'm obligated to be there for others.”

... Oh. He had, hadn't he?

“Yeah. Is that... important?”

Genesis turned to examine him. His face looked... for once, instead of appearing as angry or generally annoyed and condescending... he looked lost. Small, and... young. Like a child.

Reminded of how old Zack and Angeal were, Mo wondered how old Genesis was. At this point... he wouldn't be surprised if the man turned out to be a boy the same age as Rufus.

“There is no hate, only joy, for you are beloved by the Goddess... Hero of the dawn, Healer of worlds...” the redhead murmured, turning away. “... I joined SOLDIER with the intent of becoming...”

“I'm listening.” Mo said gently when Genesis stopped.

“I wanted to become a hero. But now I find that all along, I've been a monster, and all I want is to strike Shinra down for corrupting me so...”

A hero. How... childish. It wasn't what he expected at all. It seemed so...

Mo stopped that train of thought, grunting as he stood. Tapatio squeaked in surprise, clinging to his
leg as he walked forward.

Slowly, hesitantly, he touched Genesis's shoulder. The lack of reaction encouraged him to speak.

“Monsters aren't defined by their physical appearance. They're defined by the actions they take. Monsters are the ones that take pleasure in dealing pain, in torturing others and breaking their hearts and souls. And heroes aren't defined by war, by blood, or by fire. They're made when they give themselves to others. It's the quiet things, unspoken and unseen, that make heroes. Anyone can be a hero. Monsters, as you define them, sometimes make the best heroes, because they're often more capable of the empathy and kindness required than the most perfect of humans.”

Genesis turned, examining him.

Crouching down for a second to pick Tapatio up, Mo continued, “Look, I don't like you. You're scary. You're conceited. You definitely didn't get spanked enough as a kid with how entitled you act. But not liking you isn't the same as hating you. I don't think you're a monster. Just... at a crossroads. It's easy to turn either way. It only takes a single step to start becoming either a monster or a hero. No one can steer you either way but yourself. But if becoming a hero is what you want... I would say being there for other SOLDIERs is a good place to start.”

Genesis didn't answer.

Mo didn't say anything else, returning to his spot on the ground to finish the growler of moonshine off.
Midgar stank.

It was logical. He'd been out in the desert for a day and a half, then airborne over a forest for another, and then over an ocean for the next. Of course the clean, pure small a of nature would differ greatly from the polluted stench of Midgar's tiered city.

“Almost there.” Genesis said suddenly, making him open his eyes to see where exactly they were.

... They were heading straight for a window.

“Wait...”

Tapatio was all but screaming in agreement.

“Hold on.” Genesis said with an audible smirk.

Fuck.

Mo closed his eyes again, holding Tapito and the arm across his chest tightly.

Genesis came to a stop, and he heard the crackle of fire.

The muscles at his back flexed and jerked as the redhead threw his apparent fireball. In any other scenario, Mo would've taken time to appreciate Genesis's form a bit. The brat might be, well, a brat, on top of everything else, but he could appreciate a man that took care of himself.

But that was any other scenario.

This scenario involved holding on for dear life as they crashed through a window splintered by fire.

As Genesis landed, Mo realized the window they just crashed through was the one in Rufus's office. Said boy was in the process of getting up from behind his desk, ice-blue eyes wide. The way his arm was moving, Mo could tell he had some kind of weapon that he was bringing up.

But Genesis didn't let him, already launching back towards the desk. Sturdy boots clattered against the wood, and Mo couldn't help but gasp as Rufus staggered back when Genesis hit him. A gun clattered to the floor, and then Genesis was dragging Rufus towards the window, holding him by the throat.

“Genesis, wait!” he yelled, Tapatio clinging to him in fright.

“I'm not going to kill him. Not yet. Block the door, we weren't exactly stealthy coming in.”

“What's with the 'we'?! I would've been perfectly happy with a ground-level door!” Mo yelled back, perfectly content to cower on the floor and ignore the bit about blocking the door.

“... So, Commander... to what do I owe the visit...?” Rufus asked. Mo was sure that the only reason his voice sounded strained was because he was being held by the throat over a seventy-story drop. Not because of the drop, but the hand on his throat.

“Why don't we start with your funding a terrorist organization, and follow that up with your
attempting to sell a SOLDIER to AVALANCHE?"

Rufus's eyes narrowed.

“Genesis—”

The door was kicked open before Mo could finish talking. He jerked in shock, head snapping about. It was Tseng, accompanied by a handful of infantrymen.

“Commander Rhapsodos, stand down.” Tseng ordered sharply.

“Admit it, Rufus,” Genesis said, as if there weren't six submachine-guns aimed at the lot of them, “You're practically a member of AVALANCHE, and you tried to hand them the key to SOLDIER treatments by taking advantage of Mo.”

“Commander Rhapsodos!”

“Genesis, come on, let's just be civil...” Mo pleaded, taking his eyes off the soldiers to look at the redhead.

Genesis turned to scowl at him, but his eyes widened in some reaction Mo couldn't name.

Everything became a blur.

Genesis was a streak of leather and feathers, streaking forward to stand between Mo and the infantrymen. The harsh chatter of automatic gunfire sounded, as well as the pinging of the shots ricochetting. Mo wasn't looking, though, eyes on Rufus as the boy fell, Genesis no longer there to hold him.

Sound stopped. Only the hammering of his heart as it migrated up to his throat. All he felt was Tapatio's spines tearing out of his leg, the terrified cactuar letting them out sometime when he wasn't paying attention. He didn't see anything but the window, with the very edges of his vision turned green.

Everything fell away as he dove out after Rufus.

The blonde was shocked. He could see it through the green haze that was starting to accumulate in his vision.

Would Genesis be able to get them? Or was he too tied up defending against the infantry?

He reached out, trying to grab ahold of Rufus.

He couldn't worry about Genesis. He and Rufus were on their way down from the sixty-ninth floor. He just needed to get to Rufus.

By some stroke of luck, Mo closed the distance between them enough to have his fingers brush against Rufus's shoulder.

Not enough, not enough, he needed to be faster, not enough...

Everything became bright green.

Anything that hadn't fallen away before did now.

His hands found the boy's shoulders, and he jerked him close. One arm went around Rufus's
shoulders, and the other his waist.

“Hold on. It'll be a rough landing.” he warned, breathless as they fell, the concrete below growing so much closer. Thankfully, Rufus didn't object or anything, wrapping his own arms around Mo.

Good. That made this easier.

He had to time this just right, or it wouldn't matter that he'd caught the blonde, they'd both spatter —

Now.

Tucking his chin against Rufus's shoulder, Mo pulled them into a somersault.

His feet slammed into the ground, the impact creating a large crater. Pain ran up his legs like fire, and he fell to the ground, still holding Rufus close. Everything was crashing back over him, sound and sensation, green trickling away from his sight. People were screaming, and it felt like his ears had popped or something. Everything below his waist hurt, especially his lower legs pinned under the rest of him and Rufus. His breathing was ragged, and he couldn't stop shaking. He hadn't let the teenager go, and he didn't think he currently could if he wanted to.

“Back off! Look out!”

Genesis, his fuzzy mind supplied.

As if on cue, the redhead was prying Rufus off him, depositing a crying Tapatio in his arms instead. The cactuar instantly began patting his face, squeaking and squealing. Combined with the yelling and babbling from onlookers gathering at the edges of his crater, it felt like his ears were being raped.

Swallowing thickly, Mo hugged Tapatio close, watching as the last dredges of mako-green crept from his vision. He noticed vaguely that Genesis was polluted with darkness in comparison to everything else.

“—swer me? Tesla! Are you okay?!”

Genesis was yelling. He could hear the words, he could understand them, but he couldn't process them.

Tapatio shifted on his lap, changing the pressure on his legs and making him cry out.

Genesis reacted instantly, pushing the cactuar into Rufus's arms and forcing Mo to lie down. Gloved hands touched his legs, and pain lit up every receptor he had, making him scream and the green flare up again for a brief moment.

As the redhead began casting some spell or other, Mo spotted a familiar face stepping into the crater.
... Ow.

His head hurt.

He groaned, lifting up a hand to rub at his eyes. He hadn't opened them yet, didn't want to. He was a little concerned about how bright it would be...

“You awake, yo?”

His eyes shot open, and he shot up. “Reno!”

The redhead looked at him with an unreadable expression. “Your legs and spine were pretty messed up from that jump. You're lucky Genesis was right there to fix you up until medical got down there.”

Mo blinked, feeling his spirits fall. “Aah... I see...”

“Don't think many people would've been able to pull that off. Pretty impressive.”

He was just Reno's job. Just a job, just a job, just a job...

There was a stretch of silence as he looked down. He was dressed in less torn-up clothes now, and it looked like there were a few drips in his arm, as well as pads to monitor his condition...

A hand clapped to his shoulder, making him jolt.

“Good to have you back, yo! And good job, thanks for making mine easier!”

... Wait, what?

Mo looked up at the grinning redhead, too many questions whirling around to properly be voiced.

“We'd been looking for the mole for ages! We kinda suspected Rufus was a traitor, but we didn't think the VP was gonna be allying himself with AVALANCHE!” Reno grinned, pushing his legs aside to hop up onto the bed. “I guess he was pretty shook up about getting tossed out a window like that, he confessed to everything after you passed out!”

“... really?”

Reno nodded, crossing both his arms and his legs. “Of course, we can't do much. He is the president's son, after all. So he'll be put under a strict house arrest for a while, then let out. Sucks, huh?”

... Mo did not consider himself a vengeful person. Salty and bitter at times, capable of holding and
carrying a grudge. But not vengeful.

“I would've demoted him to a janitor and given him a five-year sentence.”

Reno snorted and spluttered with laughter, thwapping a hand against Mo's leg.

... Yeah. He'd missed this guy.

“Oh, yeah, and Genesis ratted Hollander out. Apparently the man had been planning to desert and steal a whole mess of stuff from Shinra.”

... Oh. Huh.

“... Genesis had mentioned... when he was rescuing me, he said he had been planning to desert. But... I guess I talked him out of it? That's what he seemed to say, anyway. He couldn't leave the other SOLDIERs.” Mo admitted.

“Really? Well, I guess we'll hafta keep an eye on him, too... we already are, but that does change things... Oh, right! Due to circumstances, blah blah blah, just in case, yak yak, I've been reassigned to you to keep an eye on you and ensure what happened wasn't some sinister plot!”

Mo huffed out a small laugh, shaking his head. “Do I really seem like the sinister scheming type?”

Reno grinned, sticking his tongue out.

... Wait. Something was missing. What was—

“Tapatio?!” he panicked, head snapping about.


“My cactuar, his name is Tapatio... what happened to him?” Mo asked, a stone of worry settling into his gut. Genesis really hadn't liked the cactuar, and if that was a common sentiment, then there was a good chance someone had killed the poor thing...

“Oh, that! Genesis got all snippy when anyone tried to touch it, said you'd pitch one if it got hurt. He stomped off with it when medical came to get you. Want me to call him up and ask where it is?”

He nodded so hard his vision blurred. The Turk laughed.

Five minutes later, Mo had been released from his room in medical, and both he and Reno were heading to Angeal's apartment. Apparently Genesis hadn't wanted to deal with Tapatio, and pawned him off on the other SOLDIER.

Mo hadn't seen these apartments before. Just from the hallway and the doors, they looked much nicer.

“This floor is reserved for higher-ups. Executives, directors, big-name SOLDIERs, people like that.” Reno commented, apparently seeing his confusion.

“... Does all of Shinra live on-site?”

“Not even close, yo! Ah, here.”

Reno stopped him in front of one of the doors and knocked.
“So where do you live?” Mo asked, tipping his head curiously.

“An apartment complex about five minutes from here. I crash on lounge couches a lot, though.” Reno informed him with a cheeky grin.

The latch of the door clicked, and door swung open.

“Yo!” Reno greeted with a sloppy salute.

Mo opened his mouth to greet Angeal as well, but an earsplitting squeal cut him off. Before he could properly react, he found himself stumbling backwards as his chest was hit hard by something moving very fast. Crashing into the wall behind, Mo found a very upset Tapatio clinging to him, crying into his shirt.

“H-hey... it's okay, I'm okay... or do you not like strangers that much...? I'm sorry, I'm here now...” Mo stammered, doing his best to calm the sad succulent down as Reno cackled.

After a moment, he was able to sit up.

Angeal was standing over him, a hand extended.

Blushing a little, Mo accepted, using his other hand to hold Tapatio in place.

“Why don't you come in for a bit? From what I hear, you've had a pretty rough week.”

He wanted to punch Reno for that eyebrow-waggle as they followed Angeal into his apartment.
Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

Reno is totally the friend who rats you out to your crush. Anyone who thinks otherwise is on hard drugs.

Also, if my clumsy self can carry six plates, a bowl, and a glass, I think the coordinated and skilled SOLDIERs could manage three plates and a glass. Don't question my logic.

Angeal's apartment was much nicer than his. For one thing, it was at least three times as big. There was what looked like a hand-knit throw over the couch, along with a pair of matching small pillows. A camera sat on the side-table next to the couch. Not one of the cheap kind, either, a big clunky professional one. There was an assortment of photos in simple but elegant frames arranged about the place. Also arranged about the place were plants. Some were in hanging planters, some were small enough he could probably hold their pots in his hand, that one looked like a full-blown tree... and to top everything off the place smelled of baking.

Much nicer.

"Feel free to sit down, make yourselves at home." Angeal waved with a smile, moving into what looked like the kitchen. Bigger and nicer than his own kitchenette.

Once he was confident the man wouldn't hear, Mo leaned in close to Reno and hissed, "If you can't tell me this man's sexuality then you have failed me as a secret agent."

"Just my luck." Mo grumbled, making Tapatio reach up to pat his face.

"That or a cloistered monk." Reno added, heading for the couch.

"Monks have sexualities too, cloistered or not."

"Straight and a cloistered monk."

"So he is redundantly not on my table, thank you for driving that point home." Mo said, rolling his eyes as he joined the redhead on the couch. Tapatio patted his face more.

"What's going on?" Angeal asked, coming over to join them. He was somehow carrying three plates and a glass.

"Mo here wanted to know if you're gay." Reno declared with an evil grin.

Mo promptly moved Tapatio off his lap so he could reach out in attempt to throttle the Turk.

"... So I take it he's not just saying that?" Angeal asked as Reno cackled.

"I'm sorry." Mo blurted, face flushing red. He couldn't look at Angeal, positive the man was
sickened by him now.

Instead, a warm hand clapped to his shoulder, and he found himself offered a plate bearing a piece of pie.

“It isn't anything to be ashamed of. It's very bold of you to admit that you aren't interested in women and be open about it. I don't think most would be.”

He still couldn't bring himself to look up, but he found himself smiling shyly as he took the plate.

“So, you're adopting this cactuar, huh?”

He looked up now. Angeal was offering the glass to Tapatio. It looked like it was full of water, with a straw in it. “To be honest, I don't know which of us adopted the other.” he admitted.

Angeal chuckled, nudging Reno over so he could sit on the end of the couch with his own plate. “Fair enough. Do you have a name for it yet?”

Nodding, he replied, “Tapatio.”

“Where's that name even come from, yo?” Reno asked around a mouthful of pie.

“Aah... well, I wasn't thinking when I named him, I just yelled one out... but it's a brand of tequila back home...” Mo admitted sheepishly as the cactuar sipped at his water.

“Nice.” the redhead grinned.

“Well, if you visit the Golden Saucer, they do have a cactuar-themed drink.” Angeal said with an amused smile of his own.

Mo chose not to respond, taking a bite of his pie-slice.

“Mm!” he exclaimed in surprise.

“Good?” Angeal asked.

He nodded, taking another bite before he was even finished with the first. He didn't think he'd ever had a pie this good. He could tell it was apple, but he couldn't pin down the exact kind. The traces of cinnamon and ginger were really nice, and the crust just about melted in his mouth.

“I'm glad you like it. My mother taught me when I was young. It's still one of my favorite recipes.”

Mo smiled softly.

His mother had taught him and Ted how to make cookies once. Plain things, sugar cookies in the shape of butterflies. Ted's had come out perfect, and tasted better than their mother's. His had been burnt and misshapen. He'd gotten better over the years, but even now he was nowhere near as good as Ted's had been. He could boast that he made a better royal icing, but that meant nothing without a good cookie.

Such a normal thing, and he'd only done it once.

Angeal pulled him out of that memory by asking, “So, do you know how to care for a cactuar?”

“Er... no, not really?”
Reno snorted, earning him an elbow to the ribs.

Smiling, Angeal explained, “They aren't too complex. Most of what they need is water and sunlight. They don't need too much water, at that. They do need exercise, though, so you may want to find a place outdoors where he can run around a bit.”

Mo nodded, putting down his pie so he could move Tapatio into his lap. The cactuar squeaked, showing him the empty water-glass. As he took the glass to pass over to Angeal, he asked, “Do they get particularly big? Or is this about as big as they get?”

“I don't know. I've seen a few bigger than that, but most are about his size.”

Reno piped up, saying, “The largest recorded cactuar was about four feet tall, but no one knows if that's accurate. And it takes a hell of a long time for them to grow.”

So maybe in twenty years, huh?

Mo couldn't help but press a gentle kiss to Tapatio's ‘head.’ The cactuar squeaked at him, wrapping it's arms around his neck.

“He's really attached to you, huh?” Angeal chuckled.

“I don't know why. All I did was move some rocks so he wasn't trapped.”

Before any of them could say anything else, a phone rang. Reno shifted to pull it out of his pocket before excusing himself and leaving the apartment.

There was a moment of silence before Angeal shifted, drawing his attention. The man looked so serious. Almost grim. It was such a drastic change from the almost-fatherly air Mo had always encountered before.

“Genesis told me you're going to give him more blood to purge his degradation.”

Slowly, he nodded.

Angeal opened and closed his mouth, looking uncertain.

“... You said I could talk to you when I had a problem, you can do the same for me. I might not always be able to help, but if nothing else I can listen.” Mo coaxed gently.

Angeal ducked his head as if ashamed. “Would you do the same for me? Give me blood?”

“Are you degrading too?” Mo asked in concern.

“No. But... if it's something that's in the SOLDIER treatment, and Genesis and I are unique SOLDIERs... I... I would rather be safe than sorry.”

Angeal hadn't looked up, still radiating shame.

He couldn't stand it.

Putting Tapatio down, Mo scooted closer to the man and leaned in close. Wordlessly, he wrapped his arms around Angeal's shoulders.

“... I think that was our plan all along. Genesis talked about Shinra poisoning SOLDIERs, but if my blood can serve as a cure... I'm really a useless person, so if that's all I can do, then I'll give it
my all. I just need to go sober and stay that way, though I don't know how long that'll take. But... once I have, you and Genesis are first in line.”

Slowly, slowly, the rigid form in his grip relaxed. A gentle arm wrapped around his waist and squeezed once, just barely, before Angeal was pulling away.

“Thank you, Mo. Really.”

Soft eyes, soft voice, soft smile... Eleven out of ten, would smash.

If he wasn't straight, of course.

Angeal chuckled, stopping that train of thought before it left the station. “It's been a while since anyone has hugged me like that... I feel pretty childish.”

“Don't,” Mo advised, picking up his pie again, “Big people get hurt too, and it's natural to want comfort. It isn't childish at all.”

Angeal smiled, looking much more at ease now.

The door opened, Reno sliding back into the apartment.

“Something happen?” Angeal asked as they took in the redhead's serious expression.

“Well, they're getting ready to ship Rufus off to Junon for his house arrest. He's apparently asking to speak to Mo real quick before he leaves.”
Chapter 60

Mo couldn't help but swallow nervously as the elevator moved up.

What did Rufus want to talk about? What was there to talk about? Was there anything?

He gave Tapatio a tiny squeeze to comfort himself, earning a quiet squeak.

“You alright, yo?” Reno asked, nudging him.

“... Not really. I... I really don't want to do this.”

“You don't have to.” Angeal said gently.

Mo was quiet, head bowed so he was looking at Tapatio. The cactuar looked silently back.

“... It's... really tempting. But... I run away from so many of my problems. I can't do that forever. I can't keep drowning them out, either, if I'm going to stay on the wagon. So... it's best that I face this. Otherwise... I dunno.”

He closed his eyes, swallowing again as he felt tears well up in his eyes. It was childish, but he really didn't want to do this. He'd hoped he could have a decent working relationship with Rufus, and had been shot in the back for it. Everything had been taken from him by a boy. Even if it had been restored again shortly after, there was still a stretch of time where he had nothing, no friends, no family, because of Rufus's selfishness. He really didn't want to face the boy.

Angeal surprised him by reaching out to pat his back. “It'll be okay. You're stronger than you think, Mo.”

“And we'll be right here!” Reno grinned cockily.

That made him smile, reaching up with one hand to rub at his eyes. Tapatio hugged his neck again, and he smiled more.

The elevator came to a stop. The doors slid open, and Mo was reminded of the fact that this building was seventy stories tall as wind rushed in. A chill washed over him, and he shivered. Reno touched his shoulder, and he started out.

It was a helicopter pad. A helicopter sat surprisingly close to the edge, probably ready to take off and leave. There were people standing around, and he recognized almost every face from when he got his mako-shots. The different directors, the president, a selection of Turks, Sephiroth and Genesis...

Angeal moved to stand with the other two SOLDIERs, but Reno stayed with him as he approached the helicopter. Rufus was sitting inside, watching as they came close. It looked like despite being in his lap, his hands were cuffed. How could the teen look so cold and regal even though he was in trouble?

“I didn't think you would actually show up.” Rufus said once Mo was close enough.

“I almost didn't. But if I keep running away, I'll just end up going in circles. I can't afford to do that anymore. There are too many people depending on me.”

The blonde raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment. Instead, he said, “Because of me, you were
almost killed twice. Yet you still risked your life to save mine. I want to know why.”

Mo blinked. That wasn't what he had expected at all.

Tapatio shifted in his arms, drawing his attention. The cactuar squeaked, patting his shoulder.

It really was an unattractive noise, like rubber on rubber, but it was already so endearing...

“... I really hate you.” he said, looking back to Rufus. “Because of something selfish and petty that I don't entirely understand, you took everything away from me. I almost died more than twice, and in the end we can trace a lot of it back to being your fault. I think anyone else would've let you fall.”

“So why didn't you?” Rufus pushed.

He was quiet for a moment, examining the blonde. Even with all the sharpness in his features, it was still obvious he was young. He got the feeling Rufus would grow up to be one of those people who always looked younger than they were.

“... Even if I hate you... even if you've done awful things... you're still so young. You're practically a child, and I can't imagine what being in such a position of power at such a young age does to your psyche. Yet you seem to manage it well, and there's so much ahead of you. You have so much potential to change. Not just yourself, but others, too. And I guess... seeing all that potential thrown away in a stupid accident... it seemed like such a waste. I couldn't stand the thought of it all being wasted... couldn't stand the thought of all the potential you have, good and bad, thrown away like nothing. I may hate you, but even then, you're worth something. And as an artist, I want to see you prove that worth.”

There was silence as the wind shifted.

“... So you hate me that much, huh? I never thought I'd push you that far.” Rufus smirked.

“Everyone has their limits, in every aspect of their life. Be mindful of them, and you'll go far.”

Rufus didn't answer.

Reno touched his shoulder, and Mo stepped back as the helicopter doors were shut. The blades started to spin, cutting loudly through the air and fighting the wind. He watched, head tipping slowly back as the machine rose into the air. Tapatio pressed against him, probably intimidated by the noise, and he put a reassuring hand on the cactuar's trembling back.

Getting high enough, the helicopter turned and took off. He watched until it was very small against the sky, Reno touching his shoulder again.

Turning around, he was reminded how many people just watched that, and heard everything he said. His face flushed, and he looked down to the ground. Reno snickered, taking him by the elbow and steering him... somewhere.

“You show much more restraint than I do.”

That was Genesis. Peering up from behind his bangs, Mo found that Reno had taken him over to the SOLDIERS, and that Lazard was standing with them.

“You show restraint?” Mo murmured, earning a muffled snort from Reno and smiles from both Angeal and Sephiroth, surprisingly. Lazard seemed to be chuckling behind his hand. Genesis,
predictably, scowled and glared. “You already know I'm not... I have to be really pushed to get mean. You push me more than he does.”

The redheaded SOLDIER huffed, turning away.

Lazard stepped forward, smiling kindly. “It's good to see you back, Mr. Tesla.”

He nodded awkwardly. “Glad to be back...”

“I know it's sudden, but with Rufus under house arrest, do you know what you'll be doing for a job?”

... Aw, shit, he really hadn't thought of that.

He looked to Reno in alarm, who just shrugged.

Gee, thanks.

Lazard chuckled again. “It would need to be taken up with the Turks, but if you wanted, I wouldn't mind taking you on as an assistant. I don't particularly need an assistant or secretary, but it'll be a job for you, and easier for you to head to training with the Firsts than if you were stuck in an office where you had to check in and out with a supervisor.”

Mo's first thought was gratitude. The very next was confusion.

“I'll still be training?”

“Of course. And now that the war with Wutai is over, chances are sessions will be more frequent.” Sephiroth stated plainly.

“Oh... okay... ah... thank you?” he said, still utterly confused.

Lazard nodded. “Not at all. I'll bring it up with the Turks and take care of the formalities. I look forward to working with you, Mr. Tesla.”
“So, we should grab Rude and Cissnei, then head out to celebrate!” Reno declared as they got into the apartment. The redhead had told him that everything had been confiscated after Rufus's lie, but returned after the confession.

“Celebrate how?” Mo chuckled as he let go of Tapatio. The cactuar began to run around the apartment, exploring his new home.

“You know! Go out, get drinks, hit on people, have fun! We should totally do it, yo!” Reno grinned.

He smiled. “Actually, I kind of need to go shopping. I imagine I need to restock on food, plus I'll need a new bag and planner... maybe a sketchbook and drawing tools, if I can find some.”

“Oh, shit, yeah. AVALANCHE took your shit, didn't they?” Reno asked, grin turning into a thoughtful frown. After a moment, the Turk lit up. “New plan! We run and get you a new phone, new ID, then grab Rude and Cissnei, shop, then come back here and drink! Like a housewarming party!”

“Housewarming is for initially moving in, you goof.”

“Rewarming, then! Come on! It'll be fun, and tonight's the last night you'll ever be allowed to get drunk ever!”

... The man made a very compelling argument.

“... At least let me shower and change, first.”

The redhead grinned triumphantly, making himself at home on the couch. “We can get you canvases, too, so you can finally stop complaining about how shitty these paintings are!”

Mo had been on his way to the bedroom to find his clothes, but stopped and pointed to the abstract monstrosity on the wall. “That is not art. It isn't even abstract art. It's paint on a canvas. It has no meaning and no soul, it was done with no intention. All art has some meaning or intent, and that has none. Plus it's fucking ugly, and physically hurts me to look at. I won't even get started on the dead oompa-loompa in the bedroom. As an artist, this shit offends me.”

The redhead had begun to cackle halfway into the rant, and was just full-blown laughing. Rolling his eyes, Mo moved into the bedroom to complete his quest for clothing.

He couldn't deny a slight bead of excitement, though. He liked drawing, liked having a sketchbook that he could carry around and doodle in whenever. But after almost two months of just pencil, just sketchbook paper, he was itching for other media. Even if it was two-D, painting of any kind was still different from drawing. It was far from sculpture, the manipulation of found and preexisting objects he tended to lean on, but it was different.

Some small part of him piped up that if things stayed stable, he could look at rebuilding his small hoard of supplies. Get clay, get yarn and floss, get fabric, get string and beads, get pulp, get all the tools to go with each of the fields he played with. If things stayed stable, stayed peaceful, he could slide back into regularly making art.

As he left the bedroom, clothes in hand, it sounded like Reno was explaining what was going on
to... probably Tseng or Veld, on his phone. Tapatio had found the TV remote and was playing with it. The TV wasn't on or anything, but the cactuar was certainly amused with the device.

Going into the bathroom, Mo jerked to a halt for a moment when he saw his reflection in the mirror.

It was only natural, he supposed. He hadn't shaved for a while.

Reaching up, he rubbed his fingertips over his jaw.

Yeah, he really wasn't made to have facial hair. Oh, that felt horrible, it looked worse. Okay, the shower was getting postponed. This... sorry excuse for a half-grown beard that looked like a diseased rat, it was all coming off, now. Nasty.

“Why didn't you tell me I looked like I had mold growing on my face? Why didn't anyone?” he called out to Reno.

“Dude, you were kidnapped by terrorists! No one's calling you out because no one thinks that you were exactly given access to that kind of stuff, and it'll come off anyway!”

... Fair enough.

Closing the bathroom door, Mo shed his clothes and took care of shaving. He inspected his face carefully, running a knuckle over his cheeks, his jaw, his lip, everywhere. The razor didn't leave his hand until he was satisfied that he was completely clean-shaven.

Oh, that looked and felt so much better.

Okay, now a shower.

He more than took his time with it. After getting under the water, Mo realized that this was his first shower in more than a week. He'd been kidnapped, gotten sick, been stranded in a desert, and been flown across the world. Someone had cleaned him up after he'd saved Rufus, but not... it hadn't been an intense cleaning. His hair was nasty, his skin felt gross, and his mouth was in desperate need of brushing. So he didn't just clean himself, he scoured. The water was made as hot as he could bear, and he did everything at least three times. The first round washed down the drain in an ugly gray color, but by the time he was done... white.

Running his hand through his hair as he stepped out of the shower, he realized he would need a trim soon. It was getting a little longer, and his split ends were starting to get a little out of control.

Later, he told himself. Right now he needed to dry off, brush his teeth, and get dressed.

A few minutes later, he stepped out of the bathroom, tugging a comb through his still-damp hair.

“See? All cleaned up!” Reno grinned, bouncing up and off the couch. “Bet that feels a lot better, huh?”

“Much. I feel five pounds lighter, and I hadn't realized how disgusting my hair was until after the water hit me.” he smiled back, carefully combing his bangs so they were tucked behind his ears.

Reno grinned broadly, patting his shoulder. “So come on, let's go! Rude and Cissnei are gonna meet up with us in the lobby, and then we can get you shit!”
“So... why are you coming with, Tseng?” Mo asked, looking over his shoulder as they left the building.

“Because I don't trust Reno to behave himself.”

The redhead spun around, pointing. “I resent that, yo!”

“I dunno, maybe he has a point.” Mo smiled.

Reno gave an overly dramatic gasp as Cissnei laughed and Rude snorted. Mo wasn't looking at Tseng anymore, but he heard a soft chuckle coming from the man's direction.

Reno and Rude walked on one side as they walked, and Cissnei on the other. Tseng followed close behind them, calmly declining their invitations for him to walk with them properly whenever they were given. They received a few odd looks as they went, people probably gawking at someone so comfortable with the Turks. Mo couldn't say he minded too much, though. He was just happy to be with his friends again.

First, they took care of the groceries. He'd been eating in the canteen a lot, so there wasn't too much to get. A few things for sandwiches, some things for snacks. Reno took care to get lots of alcohol, though, commenting that even if they didn't drink it all tonight, he'd take it back to his place.

With those in hand, they went next to a clothing store. Again, he didn't need much. A new set of work clothes, primarily. But Tseng had informed them that this would be the best place to get a good wallet and bag. The wallet hadn't been too much trouble, a plain brown one with a zipper along the edge to hold it shut when folded. The bag, however, was giving rise to a little debate.

“I don't need anything fancy,” Mo said, shaking his head, “Just something that will hold a planner, a sketchbook, and a pencil-pouch.”

“Well, you deserve something nice, so why don't you get something a little fancier than your old bag?” Cissnei replied, gesturing to the more expensive bags the store had to offer.

“I don't think deserve is the right word. All I need is a simple tote that'll hold my things and be relatively unobtrusive.”

“But that's so boring, yo!” Reno objected, reaching out to rifle through some of the bags. “Ooh, how about this one?”

The bag the redhead was holding up was a shoulder-bag with brass fixings and embellishments. It was a mixture of off-white cream fabric that looked incredibly silky and what looked like diamondback snakeskin.

“Hell no. More your style than mine.”

“Enough.” Tseng surprised them all by pushing forward and flicking quickly through the selection. After only a few moments, the man backed out, pushing a bag towards Mo. “This one.”

Blinking, he looked down at the bag.
It was another shoulder-bag, with a pad on the strap to cushion the owner's shoulder. This one was
plain black, and the metal parts had a gunmetal finish to them. It was smaller than the one Reno
had suggested, but still had two big pockets under the flap, as well as a zipper that opened up a
third, smaller pocket. The flap fastened with a snap, and gave a satisfying click when pressed
closed or pried open. It would easily fit a sketchbook, a planner, a pencil-pouch, and a few other
small items.

Quietly, he tried it on, slipping the strap over his head and arm.

"... Yeah. I like this one."

"Boring." Reno declared, sticking his tongue out.

Mo just shook his head with a smile.

They left the store and Reno took the lead. The redhead declared himself the only one of the party
to know where a good art-store was, and eagerly bounced ahead. Mo got the feeling that Tseng's
raised eyebrow meant the man knew ten times more than Reno did, making him chuckle a little.

The store ended up being a hole-in-the-wall kind of deal, from the looks of things. Tucked away,
almost completely hidden from sight. A little worse for wear, but standing and open for business.

"Hey. Can I help you?" a bored voice asked as they entered. Peering around, Mo located a tired-
looking cashier that was nose-deep in a book.

"Nah, dude, we're good!" Reno declared cheerfully, tugging on Mo's wrist to lead him to the back.

The range of supplies the place had was... quite astounding, really. He'd have to make note of it's
location and come back here when needed. "This is the place I got the pencils from, see?"

Oh, it was.

Mo couldn't keep himself from picking up one of the little bags and looking inside. "Oh, they have
different sets! Ooh! This one has blending stumps!"

"Blending stumps?" Cissnei asked as she approached. It looked like Rude and Tseng were hanging
back by the entrance.

Mo fished one out of the bag to show her. "These. They allow you to blend your graphite together
for smoother transitions in color or darkness, things like that. Very useful, really, but I always seem
to go through them very fast..."

The three of them began picking through the little bags, examining the contents and setting
potential keepers aside. In the end, they had it narrowed down to four little bags, but then Cissnei
dug up a larger bag. It had a variety of colors, some drawing pencils of varying hardness, and a few
blending stumps. They settled on that one and moved on to look at erasers. Reno was highly
amused by the kneadable ones, and Cissnei found a small bin of ones shaped like chocobos. Mo
rejected the kneadable eraser, but got a green chocobo eraser along with the white heavy-duty
erasers and the rather nice pen one.

Next came sketchbooks.

"Why does the paper matter?" Reno asked as Mo flipped one open to run his fingers over.

"Well, a number of reasons. Certain papers will accept media better, while some still will
disintegrate if you use anything too wet. And sometimes they have textures that can show up in
your work, so you really do need to pick your paper carefully.” he explained, putting the book back and picking up another. “For example, this one here would be good for watercolor and pencil, but not much else. The one I just put back was very textured, and I really prefer smoother papers for my work.”

“Oh... didn't know that. Huh.”

Mo smiled, opening another sketchbook. Oh, this one was nice. He liked it.

“Hey, look at how small this one is!” Cissnei giggled, holding up a pocket sketchbook.

His eyes widened a bit, and he shifted how he was holding the larger sketchbook so he could grab the pocket-sized one from the woman. Flipping it open, he ran his fingers over the paper.

“That's a good one, huh?” Reno snickered as Mo added the small sketchbook to his arm.

“Yes. Now... canvases and paints.”

Reno laughed, trotting after him as he moved towards the shelf of paints.

There was some debate about what kinds of paints he should get. Oil paints were nice, but he wasn't great with them. Watercolors were also very pretty, and he was good with them, enjoyed using them, but they had the wrong feeling for most of the things he would make paintings of. His large-scale paintings tended to be darker, and watercolors tended to be softer, more delicate. Acrylic paints were flexible, could be used for a number of things, but did he really want to use them?

The redheaded pair wound up encouraging him to get all three. They got appropriate brushes for each as well, and a few palettes.

As for canvases...

“How did we leave with so many canvases? So many...” Mo murmured, shaking his head. There were several in the appropriate sizes to replace the ones in his apartment. One that was even bigger. At least ten smaller ones. Seriously, what the hell.

“You can make more and sell them, yo!” Reno laughed.

“To who?!“ he demanded, eyes wide as he adjusted his armfuls of bags.

“I dunno, but I'll advertise for ya!”

“Rude, hit him!”

Cissnei laughed and Tseng scoffed when the taciturn Turk kicked his partner's shins.
Chapter 63

Someone hammered on the door.

“Who is that?” Mo muttered, not turning away from his canvas.

“Just... just a minute...” Reno groaned, squirming on the couch. Cissnei was throwing up in the bathroom, Tseng holding her hair back. Rude was pretty much passed out. Reno was draped across Rude's lap and the arm of the couch.

Tapatio squeaked, and the door clicked open, making his head turn. The cactuar was pulling the door open. He hadn't thought the cactuar could do that.

“Thank you, Tapatio— aah, Genesis...”

The SOLDIER strode into the room, taking in the apartment. Reno waved from the couch, grunting something out.

“You're drinking.” Genesis said coldly.

“It's the last night I'll ever be able to drink. Leave me alone.” Mo sighed, turning back to the painting. He'd gotten all the big things down, and was working on the details now.

“You're supposed to be going sober.” Genesis growled, standing behind him.

“Yeah, starting tomorrow. If you're just here to be nasty then go away. Otherwise grab a drink and sit down.”

As Tseng carried an unconscious Cissnei out of the bathroom, Genesis asked, “What're you even doing?”

“Before you answer,” Tseng interjected, “I'm taking Cissnei to her apartment. Take care of those two, and don't let Reno drink any more.”

“I can... can drink more!” the redhead objected, popping up.

“Reno, you're plastered. If you drink anything else aside from water right now, I will draw all over your face with permanent marker. All over all over, too, not just dicks on your cheeks. I'm an artist, not a frat-boy, I will turn you into a Picasso painting.” Mo warned as Tapatio got the door for Tseng.

“There's a difference between calling yourself an artist and actually being an artist.” Genesis commented tartly, apparently examining the canvas.

He did a good job at not showing it, he thought, but that hurt. It really stung. He knew he wasn't the best in the business, and he rarely ever sold or showed anything, but he was still proud of what he did.

Reno seemed to take more offense to that than he did, half-climbing over the back of the couch to declare, “This guy is great! You clearly never... never saw his sketchbook!... was awesome... urgh...”

Mo shook his head. He put down the brush and palette and went to wash his hands. Once they were clean of paint, he got out two glasses of water. Genesis watched as he came back. Tapatio was
standing next to the couch, patting Rude's knee, but bounced away when Mo gave him one of the
glasses. Reno blearily accepted the other, downing it almost as fast as he had been the beer.
Grunting, Mo forcibly sat the redhead up next to his partner, then went to fetch a blanket. Reno
had passed out by the time he had.

“... You really are too nice.” Genesis commented when he finally came back to the painting.

“I get that we don't like each other, but I really don't need to put up with you. Was there something
you needed?” Mo asked as he began working on the butterfly-wings. He had the shadowy figures,
the table, the shot-glass, and the bottle. He was working on the butterflies and terrarium. Once all
that was done he'd apply shadows and highlights, then sign it. This one would go in the bedroom,
since it was vertical, and then he just needed one for this room.

Genesis didn't answer, and for a while, that was that. Mo applied a range of colors to the
butterflies. Most of them were blue, with hints of purple. But there were a few green. Some were
orange. He created delicate patterns on them, both as the natural patterns of their wings and as the
veins.

“... I remember you commented that you wanted to illustrate some of the passages from Loveless.
But I've encountered so many who claim to be artists and have no talent. It's hard to believe anyone
truly knows how to make art these days.”

Mo paused, but quickly resumed working on the current butterfly. It was the last blue one.
Afterwards he could finish up the green and orange ones. That would leave the terrarium, and then
the highlights and shadows.

“I never call myself anything I'm not,” he said, cleaning off the brush and grabbing a different one,
“I studied in a variety of artistic fields. I prefer three-d things to two-d, but I work with what I have.
If things stay peaceful, maybe I'll start getting materials. But for now... it's enough to have a couple
of sketchbooks and some canvases.”

“... It's dark. I don't understand the meaning behind it. But I can appreciate the craft and the effort
you're putting into it.”

Again, he paused, turning to look at Genesis. The SOLDIER was examining the canvas, stormy
eyes roving over the figures and shapes.

Turning back to the canvas, Mo spoke.

“Most artists will never be famous. They will never live off of selling their work. Most of the ones
that do get famous only do so after they die. It isn't a profitable field. The only ones who truly
profit are the ones we buy materials from. I knew this but still decided that was what I wanted to
do. I can't make people smile the way my brother could. So I decided that I would make things that
people smiled at, even if it was only after I died that they did. It's expensive, and studying for it is a
lot of money... but my parents paid for it all. I feel guilty if I don't do my best to exercise what I
learned as often as possible. And... and I feel better when I make things.”

He was done with the butterflies, and stepped back to examine his work so far.

“... If you do illustrate it, I want to see.”

It took a moment for him to process that.

“If they're any good, I may see about getting them published. There are a few illustrated editions
out there, but none of them are any good. But you seem to actually know what you're doing. If your
illustrations are decent enough, I'll want them alongside the poem.” Genesis declared, turning away.

Mo had to fight to keep his jaw from dropping, eyes wide.

“Where's your phone? I came to get your number and give you ours.”

“... Ours...?”

“Sephiroth, Angeal, and myself?”

Oh, that made sense...

“Oh... in the bag hanging up by the door... the little zipper pocket...” he mumbled, still processing what Genesis had said. The man thought his work was potentially good enough to be published in books? Really?

He couldn't help but stare dumbly as the man fished out his phone and flipped it open. He watched as Genesis punched numbers in, then pulled out his own phone and put something in there. Done, the SOLDIER put both phones away and started to leave.

“Genesis.”

The man looked at him in irritation over his shoulder.

Mo opened and closed his mouth a few times before saying, “Thank you. I... I've never been told anything like that. To hear it from you when we don't get along...”

“Hmph. Don't let it go to your head.”

Mo turned back to the canvas as Genesis opened the door.

Before it closed, though, a rather curt, “You're welcome,” reached him.

Squeaking made him look down. Tapatio held up his empty glass, making him smile.

“... One day, maybe... it'll take a long time, but... maybe one day he and I will get along.” Mo murmured as he took the glass.
“My head hurts.” Reno complained as Rude groaned.

“Whose fault is that?” Mo chuckled, offering them both water. Reno's vanished in an instant, while Rude sipped at his carefully. “I need to get to work now. Are you two coming with, or is Tapatio playing nurse?”

Both Turks groaned.

“Right. I'll leave some water here on the table, but I need to head up to Lazard's office now. I have my phone, so you can call me or sic someone else on me if needed. Feel free to stay here until you feel a bit better.”

He got more groans, making him chuckle as he grabbed his bag and left.

Last night, after Genesis had left, he'd finished the painting. Afterwards, he'd drunk a bit more, then taken a shower and gone to bed. The first thing he'd done upon waking up was to carefully remove the blended oompa-loompa painting, break down the canvas-frame and cut up the canvas so it all fit in the trash, and hang up his own painting. Tapatio had watched, sounding like he was cheering.

But now he needed to get up to the fifty-first floor.

He was given a few curious glances as he got onto the elevator this time. People had probably heard about him being outlawed and then pardoned. If nothing else, the secretaries from up top had spread rumors about him.

But... well, aside from that, nothing really happened on the way up.

Adjusting how his bag sat on his shoulder, Mo left the elevator at his floor and headed for Lazard's office.

Taking a deep breath, he knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

“Hello, Director. Thank you for taking me on as your employee.” Mo greeted as he entered the office.

Lazard looked up from what he was working on, blinking a bit in surprise. The mild shock faded into slight amusement. “You don't need to be that formal. Lazard is fine, and you don't need to announce yourself every time you come in.”

Deja vu back to Rufus.
Mo shook his head. “Given the nature of our relationship, it would be improper of me to address you by your first name, sir. Additionally, as your employee, it's required that you know when I am here, going on break, or leaving for the night.”

Blue eyes, not quite ice, blinked again. A kind smile tugged at the blonde's lips as he replied, “I suppose you're right, it would be rather improper, and give a few people the wrong idea. It's been a while since anyone in my department has addressed me so formally, and I hope that one day you feel comfortable doing similar.”

It was so different from Rufus, insisting he call him by first name. Given the similarities in their appearance, Mo felt... surprised, to say the least. He knew he shouldn't be, really, Lazard was not Rufus, but... still.

Before he could say anything else, Lazard spoke again.

“I'll admit, I've never had a secretary before. I tend to do all my work myself. I don't really have anywhere for a secretary to work as a result. But... we can talk your job out today, and figure out what exactly you'll do.”

Mo tipped his head to the side. “If you've no need of a secretary, why exactly did you hire me? I know you said it would make training easier for me, but that can't be the only reason.”

Lazard suddenly looked serious, resting his elbows on his desk and steepling his fingers. “… I admit. It's petty and childish, but a good portion of it was to rub salt in Rufus's wounds.”

He blinked. What now?

“It doesn't leave this room... but I'm Rufus Shinra's half-brother. Most people at this company know nothing about it, and I'd rather keep it that way than raise a ruckus.”

Mo... wasn't sure how to react.

“Half-brother... how?” he asked softly.

“Illegitimate. Out of wedlock. The president is... promiscuous.”

He shuffled his feet, still not sure how to react.

Lazard took care of that for him, saying, “I think that's enough of such bitter topics. It's your first day of work, I shouldn't burden you with my personal problems. Why don't we figure out what exactly we'll have you do?”
“Yo!”

Mo grabbed ahold of the table this time, bracing himself. Reno slid into the body-slam, still almost toppling him despite his preparations.

“Heh, almost didn't get you!” the redhead grinned, settling down.

“And I see you're recovered from your hangover. How's Rude?” Mo answered.

“He's good. How's Lazard?”

He couldn't help but sigh. “Infinitely better than Rufus. I'm less of a secretary and more of a personal assistant and errand-runner, but he's a very kind and polite man.”

Reno grinned wickedly and leaned in as if sharing a secret. “Smash or pass?”

Mo spluttered in shock, almost choking on the bite of food in his mouth. Recovering, he declared, “You best be asking everyone you know questions like that, you cheeky brat! I swear, ever since I came out to you...”

“You love me.”

“You're lucky I do. Fingers out of my food.”

Before they could take the discussion in any other direction, several trays clattered down onto the table across from them. Looking up, Mo found a scowling Heather and several of the other top-floor secretaries sitting down.

“Betcha you're gonna miss these lovely ladies, aren't ya?” Reno asked, sticking his tongue out between his fingers at the women.

“Show some respect, you're not an animal. Heather... nice to see you...”

She promptly bit out, “What's all this about Genesis personally rescuing you? You were outlawed for criminal affiliations.”

Oh, jeez...

Mo didn't look up at her, focusing on his food as he answered, “Vice president Shinra orchestrated my kidnapping by AVALANCHE to frame me as a terrorist. But that's what it was. I was kidnapped. And yes, Genesis is the one who rescued me. He's the one who exposed the vice president, as well.”

“I refuse to believe that, personally. You're gay and clearly slept your way into the company with your dramatic sob-stories, I don't think you can be trusted.”

Aah. Homophobic behavior. He knew it would pop up sooner or later. It was best to just ignore it, fighting got—

Heather and the other secretaries shrieked as water was thrown over them. Mo stared in shock at Reno, who had grabbed the glass on Mo's tray and expertly managed to wet every woman at the table. Everyone nearby was quiet, their attention drawn by the birdlike squawking.
"How dare you!" Heather screamed, glaring daggers and pitchforks at Reno.

How she had the guts to do that when Reno wore such a cold and dark expression, Mo had no clue. He felt ice-cold, like the world had stopped.

"Bitch, you listen here," the Turk growled, standing slowly up, "Mo Tesla is my friend. He ain't your punching bag, and his business is none of yours. Yeah, he's getting paid better than you, but I bet he works better than you. And yeah, he got the chance to feel up your favorite SOLDIER boy, but unlike you, Mo has a little bit of tact and discretion. He isn't some slut throwing himself at every man in the company, which you appear to be. And you can say you aren't, but women don't just talk about fucking into a position without a little experience these days. So you can fuck right off, and if you ever try tearing into him again, you'll find all your dirty laundry aired out for the world to see."

They got it now, makeup dripping and shirts stained, fear clearly showing on their faces as they stared up at Reno.

The redhead planted a hand on the table and leaned over.

"Beat it."

The women all but dematerialized, leaving behind untouched trays.

Straightening up, Reno threw a lazy look around and then drawled, "What're y'all lookin' at, yo?"

As the redhead sat down again, the chatter started up again. Mo felt his heart start again, and put a hand over his chest.

"You okay, buddy?" Reno asked.

"You... you didn't have to do that... You were scary..." he breathed in reply.

The redhead laughed, and it was like he'd never been that terrifying persona. "Part of the job, yo!"

"... I have to admit, some tiny part of me is super aroused by that display. If you were... anything other than straight, I'd have asked you out."

Reno cackled, dragging one of the abandoned trays closer. "So that's what you like, huh, is a super dominant and protective guy?"

"Not usually... but I suppose it's been long enough since anyone has behaved like that for me, it's natural to find it arousing?" Mo answered, taking a bite of... it might have been scalloped potatoes with ham. It looked like that, but tasted oddly of butter.

"Right, right, you like the stable and dependable ones."

Nodding as he swallowed, Mo added, "Kind, gentle and honest men, like the perfect fairytale princes we always read about. But if he's too perfect... if he's too perfect, I'd never be able to date him. Relationships have to be give-and-take. We have to complete each other, have something to offer. They can't be perfect."

Reno looked at him with a serious expression. "That's deep."

He shrugged, taking another bite of maybe-potatoes-and-ham.

They continued to talk as they ate, about... random things, really. Mo was set up to start receiving
treatment to go sober tonight. Reno was going to take him to medical after work. The AVALANCHE base in Cosmo Canyon had been raided by nearby stations, but nothing had been there. Mo was figuring out another painting, and he might ask Reno to model for him. No, not naked. Rude's girlfriend had apparently dumped him. Mo hadn't known Rude had a girlfriend, he was sorry, being dumped sucked.

After a while, Mo finished eating, and told Reno he needed to get back to Lazard.

He was in a pretty good mood as the elevator went up. He had a nice boss now, a sweet and friendly pet, Reno had confirmed they were friends... things were looking up, to be honest. It was nice.

“Welcome back.” Lazard greeted as he came into the office.

“Yeah... Anything come up?” Mo replied.

“Just one, really... I need Zack to come here, but he apparently doesn't have his phone on him. If you could hunt him down and drag him back here?” Lazard asked with a rueful smile. “No one really has any clue where he might be, though Angeal says he left him in the training room. But with how that boy moves, he could be in Wutai already.”
Chapter 66

Okay.

Mo had sent a message to Reno, Rude, Cissnei, and Tseng, asking that if they weren't busy and saw Zack, they duct-tape him to the ceiling until Mo could come get him. He'd given Angeal a call, confirming that the boy wasn't with the man and had not been seen for a few hours. Lazard had given him a few suggestions on where to look, primarily on the SOLDIER floor. But if that failed, he did have a very short list of other places to check out. Lazard had also given him Zack's number, so he could call periodically in case Zack found his phone.

He just hoped he didn't have to search the whole place top to bottom. A few floors could be eliminated off the bat, but that was still close to seventy floors to search.

Okay, Mo told himself, just start on the SOLDIER floor. Poke around. If Zack wasn't there... there was the canteen, the recreational floor, and the break floor. If he wasn't anywhere on any of those, and no one had offered any information on where he was, then a bottom-to-top search was required.

Mo heaved a sigh.

Hopefully this was not a regular occurrence. He prayed to whatever deities existed that it was not a regular occurrence.

Stepping off the elevator, he paused, looking back and forth. Should he just search room by room, or ask around...?

“Someone looks lost.”

Mo jumped a little, snapping around to see who had spoken. It turned out to be a SOLDIER wearing a helmet. He couldn't make anything about the man out, a sort of sly smile just visible under the odd shape of the... faceplate, he supposed.

“... No, not really, I'm just... looking for someone. You... uh, you wouldn't have happened to see Zack Fair recently, would you?”

“Oh boy, what'd he do this time?” the SOLDIER chuckled, crossing his arms over his chest.

Mo shrugged his shoulders. “I don't know. I'm just the messenger, and the message says Director Lazard needs him in his office.”

There was a split second of silence before the man grinned. “Oh, I see. You're Mo Tesla, aren't you, the director's assistant.”

He blinked. How, exactly, did the man know that? Who had told him?

“So haven't you just called him?” the SOLDIER asked, drawing Mo's thoughts back to Zack.

“He hasn't answered when called, so we're assuming he doesn't have his phone on him. I have his number so I can call every once in a while, but the last place he was seen for sure was in the training room... and that was a few hours ago. So I'm starting here, and I have a few other places to look, but if he's not in any of them, then I have to do a full search of the tower.”
He was given a sympathetic head-shake. “Stay here. I'll run around and check the floor out. I can help refine your list and swap our numbers. That way I can help you search and call if I find him.”

Mo smiled in gratitude as the man started off. He moved over to the wall, just to the side of the elevator, and rested his back against it. After a moment, he pulled out the small pocket sketchbook and a pencil. He might as well work on a thumbnail of sorts for the painting tonight while he waited.

People walked past now and then, going in and out of the elevator or just on their way elsewhere. He looked up each time, waiting for Zack or the currently unnamed SOLDIER to walk past. Since he was only making a raw thumbnail, the sketch didn't take long. He ended up hashing out another one before the SOLDIER returned. He looked up and found the man trotting over. Tucking the tiny sketchbook away, Mo pushed off from the wall expectantly.

“Didn't find him. But I got some of the guys to keep their eyes open, so they'll give me a call if they catch him. Here, let's swap numbers, and then I can take a look at your list.”

Mo dug out his phone and handed it to the SOLDIER. It only took a moment for the man to hand it back, and he looked at the contact name curiously.

“K... Kunsel? Am I saying it right?”

“Yes. Now, where's that list?”

They both settled against the wall, Mo pulling out the piece of paper Lazard had written on. Kunsel largely agreed with the man's suggestions, mostly refining them. He did, however, add a number of places to check.

“Please tell me this isn't a common occurrence. If this is something that happens often I'll jump off the wagon, and I just crawled on this morning.” Mo beseeched.

Kunsel chuckled, shaking his head. “Zack's pretty good about keeping his phone on him. Makes him nice and easy to contact. This is the first time I've heard of him not having it.”

Thank goodness.

He still sighed, regarding the new list forlornly. The science department was on there. Zack apparently had a tendency to wander, and would sometimes find himself participating in experiments up there. Mo really didn't want to go to the upper floors. There was the science department with Hojo, there was the chance the secretaries from the top floors were running errands... ugh. Zack was a great kid, but this was just making Mo want to... he didn't even know. Do something nasty.

Kunsel seemed to read his worry on his face, because the SOLDIER offered, “I'm not on duty or anything. Why don't I help you out? I can take the top floors, and you can start in the lobby and work your way up.”

“If you swing that way I'll take you out.” Mo answered, relief obvious in his voice.

The other man laughed. “Not tonight, but we can see about that some other time.”

He couldn't tell if Kunsel was serious or joking, but right now he didn't care. The two split off, heading for separate elevators. Mo took the one they were directly by, and Kunsel headed off to the next one.
When he got to the lobby, the first thing Mo did was go to the front desk and ask if any of the workers there had seen Zack. One of them knew who he was talking about, giggling about how the boy was a shameless flirt. But no, she hadn't seen him today. Mo thanked them for their time and asked that if they did see Zack, they tell him Director Lazard wanted him.

He pushed through the rest of the first floor, worked his way up through the second. He was getting done with the third when his phone buzzed. Someone was emailing him.

Leaning against a wall so he wasn't in the way, Mo opened his phone up and selected the email. It was from Rude. There was no subject and no text. Just an attachment. It looked like a picture. Confused, Mo opened the attachment up—

Was that the tree on the break floor? What was that in the branches, it looked like...

Before Mo could decide on an appropriate reaction, he got a call from Kusel. Accepting the call, he put his phone to his ear. He didn't give Kusel a chance to speak, asking, “Are you on the break floor?”

“Yep. How'd you guess?” the SOLDIER replied, sounding far too amused.

“If you see a Turk with a shaved head and sunglasses, please tell him thank you for me. I'm on my way up.”
“Let me start with why. Why were you in the tree.” Mo said, deadpan as he carefully herded Zack into the elevator.

“I wanted to see if I could! Plus I thought I saw a bird or something, and birds really shouldn't be inside. Not if they're wild.” the boy answered with a grin, waving at Kunsel. The other SOLDIER was staying on the break floor, since he was, technically, on break.

Mo conceded the point about wild birds being indoors.

“Okay, but why have you not answered when Lazard and myself call?” he asked as the doors slid closed.

Zack froze, eyes wide. “Lazard was calling me?”

“And you didn't answer a single time. He called. I called. Angeal called, once at the very beginning. Never answered once.” Mo nodded, crossing his arms over his chest.

The young SOLDIER dug into his pockets, fumbling a little. Mo blinked in confusion when he saw Zack was pulling out his phone. “I never got a single call!”

Arms still crossed, Mo leaned in to see the screen as Zack flipped his phone open.

... Nothing happened.

Zack pressed a button.

Still nothing.

“Did the battery die?” Mo asked.

“No way! I swear I charged it last night!” Zack cried in distress, eyes wide as he looked up. “Why does Lazard want me? What did I do?”

Mo shook his head, leaning against the wall. “I'm just the messenger.”

That was apparently the wrong response.

All the air was knocked out of his lungs and his feet left the ground. Zack had scooped him up, hugging his midriff and wailing in distress about how he didn't want to die, didn't want to be demoted, he was sorry for whatever it was he did, Mo could tell Lazard he was sorry, right?

The elevator dinged, doors opening.

“Help.” Mo beseeched as Sephiroth stood unmoving at the doors. He couldn't tell if the man
looked confused or amused, but he wanted down and he wanted to stop feeling his insides squish around.

Zack seemed to notice just who was watching them and hurried to put Mo down, just about standing at attention as Sephiroth finally stepped into the elevator. Mo couldn't help but gasp as he could breathe, holding a hand to his stomach.

“At ease.” Sephiroth said, standing next to Mo. “A puppy indeed.”

It took a moment to realize Sephiroth was talking to him, and a second more what he was referring to.

“... Last time I checked, dogs don't climb trees. How does Angeal do it? I mean... Zack, you're adorable and a sweetheart, but compared to you I'm old and fragile.” Mo answered, turning to Zack halfway through.

The boy blinked, pointing to himself in confusion.

To Mo's surprise, Sephiroth chuckled.

Oof, that was painful, like he'd been bulldozed by a rhino, his stomach hurt now...

Silence fell, and stayed that way for a while.

It was Sephiroth that broke the silence.

“Thirty-five is hardly old.”

“Compared to sixteen it is. I'm more than twice his age.” Mo answered, adjusting how his bag sat on his shoulder. A thought suddenly occurred him him, and he looked at the general with narrowed eyes. “Don't you dare tell me you're younger than twenty.”

Cat-eye green turned to him. If that wasn't amusement, he'd eat his sketchbook.

“Supposing I am, though?”

“If you're the same age as Zack I swear to whatever God exists—”

“I just turned twenty.”

Mo stared before shaking his head. “Shinra is run by people who aren't even legal yet. Hell, Zack isn't even old enough to legally give consent yet and I'm told he's a standard SOLDIER age! And now you, in all your Imperial March glory, tell me that you only just crossed the line between boy and man! Gaia is off it's rocker!” he declared, throwing his hands up in defeat.

The elevator dinged, doors opening. This was his and Zack's floor. Sephiroth's too, apparently. He hadn't noticed the man not hit a button. He'd been too focused on his organs resettling after Zack's desperate hug.

As they approached Lazard's office, Mo's phone rang. He gestured for Zack and Sephiroth to go on ahead as he checked who it was.

Reno.

... He hoped nothing was wrong...
Answering the call, he greeted, “What's up?”

“Yo, Tesla! Sorry to call out of the blue, but something came up!”

Reno was yelling. It sounded like there was a lot of wind, and... a helicopter?

“Don't worry. Focus on your work. Do you know who'll be watching me instead?” Mo reassured, letting himself get a tiny bit louder in case Reno couldn't hear. Blinking, he noticed that Sephiroth hadn't gone into Lazard's office, and was instead watching him.

“Not a clue! This is kinda an all hands thing, so you may possibly be on your own!” Reno yelled.

“Okay. I start treatment tonight, right?” Mo answered.

“Oh, shit, yeah! Watch out, okay?! Creepy ol' Hojo has a few fingers in medical! Maybe don't go alone, grab a cute SOLDIER hunk to keep you safe!”

“Shut your mouth and work.” he shot back, feeling his face flush when he noticed Sephiroth lift an eyebrow. Enhanced senses, plus Reno's yelling, meant that the general could likely hear both sides of the conversation.

“Sorry I won't be modeling tonight! Maybe next time!”

Mo shook his head, momentarily forgetting the Turk couldn't see him. “Your work takes priority over my painting. Stay safe and come back alive, okay?”

“I make no promises, yo! Later!”

With that, Reno hung up. Mo shook his head with a sigh, snapping his phone shut and putting it away.

“Treatment... for your alcohol dependence?” Sephiroth asked.

Mo blinked, but nodded. He was relatively done questioning how people knew shit in this company. He was just going to accept that everyone knew everything.

“... Genesis told me about his degradation. He said he never would have if you hadn't convinced him otherwise.”

That made him blink again. Sephiroth looked... uncomfortable? Maybe? It was hard to tell...

“... Thank you,” the general said at length, “Genesis is... I value him greatly, even if he does not always appreciate it. I can't imagine what it would be like if he were...”

Mo couldn't help but smile softly. “As I told Angeal. I'm a pretty useless person, but if giving my blood like this will help, I'll give all I have to give. I may not like Genesis the most, or find him the most charming individual, but everyone deserves a chance to live.”

Before anything more could be said, there was an ear-splitting whoop. The office door crashed open and Zack streaked out.

Peering into the office at Lazard, Mo asked, “What did you do?”

“He was recommended for First. He'll be evaluated on his next assignment to see if he makes the cut.”
The only thing Mo was able to say was, “That won't mean he'll be training me too, does it?”

Both Sephiroth and Lazard chuckled.
Chapter 68

When he left the office that evening, Mo found himself inches away from crashing headlong into Sephiroth.

“I walk into you far too much, are you doing that intentionally?” he asked the general, standing to the side and holding the door open.

But rather than go in and speak with Lazard, Sephiroth merely asked, “Is Mr. Tesla done for the night?”

What now?

Lazard looked up from the last pieces of paperwork. “Yes. We've just about finished everything, once I get these approved I'll be leaving as well.”

Sephiroth nodded, turning back to Mo. “Your treatment starts tonight and you don't have an escort. Your Turk warned that Hojo has influence over medical, and it's my understanding that you redacted your consent to his experiments.”

Mo looked down, rubbing at his forearms where the scars were from the shocks.

It took a moment for what the man was implying to sink in.

“Wait... so you're walking me there?” he asked, looking up.

The look in Sephiroth's eyes became dangerous. Mo felt himself shudder in fear.

“No everyone is as tolerant of his madness as I am. You're already scarred, if memory serves. Additionally, if you're curing Genesis, I don't want that walking mass of complexes to corrupt you.”

So it wasn't that he was softer than Mo thought, per se. It was self-motivated, in a way.

Nodding meekly, he followed after the younger man. They headed to the elevator, and Mo couldn't help but rub at his shoulder. Looking sidelong at Sephiroth, he found it hard to believe the guy was just one year older than Rufus. And a general. It was mind-boggling. Zack was sixteen and working his way up, how young had Sephiroth been when he first became a soldier? When he became a SOLDIER?

“What is it?”

Shit, he'd been caught staring.

“... You don't look twenty. You look much older.” he admitted as the elevator arrived.

“The silver has that effect, yes.” Sephiroth replied as he sent them towards medical.

Mo shook his head. “I didn't mean your hair. I meant you in general. I'm thirty-five and you look like you could bench-press me if you wanted. Sure, I'm underweight and a touch on the effeminate side, but you look like you could do it all the same. And you have no softness to your features. Even Rufus had a tinge of childishness to him, but with you it's like all the softness was sloughed off, leaving only hard angles behind. And your eyes are so cold. It's not that they don't look like everyone else's, I see what you're about to say. It's that when you look at me I feel like razorblades
are being dragged over my skin. You're so young and yet you're called the strongest man on Gaia. You're a military general. It's... absurd and wrong. Back... back on earth, you'd be a captain at best. I think. I was never military. I signed up for conscription in event of a draft, but being a pacifist knocks out your interest in such things quick.”

For a moment, the elevator was quiet. Mo risked looking directly at Sephiroth and found feline slits boring into him. He quickly looked down.

“... I frighten you.”

A choked laugh slipped out of his throat before he could stop it. “I think everything on Gaia scares me. You're just in the top five. I mean... how young must you have been? To be a general at only twenty years? Just looking at you makes me feel like an old pervert! How could I not be frightened of you?”

There was no answer. Mo wondered if he fucked up.

The elevator dinged.

“As long as I can remember.”

... Huh now?

Mo blinked as Sephiroth stepped off the elevator. He was lost on what they were talking about now.

The general paused, looking over his shoulder at him. “As long as I can remember, I have trained to be the ultimate SOLDIER.”

Gulping, Mo hurried after the man. Sephiroth strode through the waiting area they came out in and approached the desk in the back. The woman there seemed relatively unfazed by either of them, just pointing down the hallway and giving a room number.

As Mo walked behind Sephiroth, he found himself asking, “So is it true you were raised by Hojo, then?”

“He is my father.”

... What.

“... You must take after your mother. I see absolutely none of him in you.”

A dark chuckle. “A comforting thought.”

As they came to the room, Mo commented, “Personally, I would have run away and joined the circus.”

Sephiroth turned to look at him, one eyebrow delicately arched, as they entered the room. “The circus?”

“Gaia has circuses, right?”

“At least one, yes. But why the circus?” Sephiroth asked, sounding genuinely perplexed.

Mo couldn't help but smile a bit. “It's an old cliche,” he explained, “When kids run away from home, they join the circus. I don't know where it came from, but it's an old saying.”
The SOLDIER seemed content with that, nodding.

Mo turned his attention to the room. It was different from the one he'd been kept in at the very beginning. This one looked more like a doctor's office. It had a desk, a medical examination table, and a few chairs next to the door. The paper over the table looked a little crinkled, suggesting someone else had at least sat on it today. There was a folder with a picture of him paperclipped to the front on the desk.

“... I guess they stepped out...” he murmured.

Sephiroth didn't say anything, sitting down in one of the chairs by the door.

Okay then.

After a long, awkward moment, Mo hopped up onto the examination table.

Silence.

Mo pulled out his sketchbook, figuring if nothing else he could doodle aimlessly while they waited for... whoever was treating him.

Without really thinking about it, he began to draw Genesis. Quiet and calm, instead of the childish anger and sass he was accustomed to. Sitting, instead of pacing in predatory circles. Jacket and gloves gone, sitting cross-legged on an ambiguous ledge. Book open in his hands. On a whim, Mo added some feathers on the ground.

The door opened, prompting him to look up.

A man in a white coat was coming in. “My apologies, Mr. Tesla, but there was a bit of a mix-up,” the man said with a smile, “If you would follow—”

Sephiroth cleared his throat. The white coat spun around in surprise.

“G-General Sephiroth! I-I-I was unaware you would be here!”

“Return to the labs and send the proper attendant in.”

The white coat fled.

“... Does Hojo know I'm Turkless or is he just that bold?” Mo asked, staring at the door as it crept slowly shut.

“More likely than not, a mixture of both.”

Mo couldn't help but hang his head. “That determined, huh... dunno how I'll be able to sleep knowing that...”

It was a scary thought. Someone slinking into his apartment and taking him out of bed. Holding a chemical-doused rag over his mouth and nose so he wouldn't wake up, and carrying him up to the cold, lonely labs. Strapping him down and slipping a tube into his wrist to keep him out.

His sketchbook and pencil clattered to the floor, making Sephiroth stand up.

“I'm sorry,” he apologized, “I'm sorry, I just... I thought too much, I scared myself... Hojo wouldn't really send someone into my apartment at night, would he...?”
Sephiroth's silence was not at all comforting.

Gulping, Mo hugged himself. Say goodbye to sound sleep...

“It looks just like him.”

Blinking, he realized that Sephiroth had picked up his sketchbook. The general was staring at... the picture of Genesis.

“Oh... does it? I thought it seemed too peaceful, out of character.” Mo answered.

“He has been more agitated as of late... but when he's calm and reading, it's just that. Peaceful.” Sephiroth said, handing the sketchbook back, pencil held against the page.

Huh. Mo had yet to experience that.

Without really thinking, he asked, “What's your artistic ability like, then?”

Sephiroth blinked blankly, and Mo hurried to explain.

“Genesis is flamboyant and poetic all the time, and Angeal has all those plants and that camera and he bakes, and the three of you are all so similar... I guess I'm just curious. If there's something artistic or creative you like to do.”

After a moment, the general shook his head. “I can't say there is. Such things were deemed unimportant to my education, so I never had the time or ability to explore them.”
“Hello, Tapatio. You been good today?”

The cactuar squeaked, hugging his leg.

“Tapatio?” Sephiroth echoed.

“It was a spur-of-the-moment name... I was fighting with Genesis...” Mo admitted with a sheepish smile. “Thank you for escorting me there and back... ah, would you like to come in...?”

For a moment, Mo was confident that Sephiroth would decline.

“For a while.”

That shattered that flimsy confidence.

Mo let the young general in, taking a moment to console Tapatio when the cactuar hid behind him. Sephiroth watched, gaze burning where it landed.

“... Do you want to try drawing something?”

He didn't know what pushed him to ask that.

“... Why?”

Sephiroth clearly didn't either.

Fumbling for words, Mo explained, “You said you were never really allowed to, and, uh, it's a really vital part of growth... as well as being one of the best forms of self-expression, and... and, uh, I... I guess the idea of a kid not being allowed to indulge in arts or crafts seems... it's sad.”

Small PSA:
Depression is different for everyone. For Mo, it manifests as a lack of self-confidence and self-worth. He holds himself in low esteem and accepts anything bad anyone has to say about him as a result. When on a downward trend, his thoughts tend to spiral, and he dwells on his lack of self-worth more than is healthy. When I myself was depressed, it came across as apathy and anger, combined with low interest in anything. However, a common thing among most depressed individuals is the tendency to relapse after an upwards trend. If things have been going well and are looking up, it really only takes something small to knock them into a really bad spiral.

In this chapter, the lack of understanding between himself and Sephiroth—confusion as to how to behave and how to react, as well as not knowing if he just screwed up or not—tips over the fragile happiness Mo had been building up.

You will not always be able to tell a person is depressed. You may just read them as quiet, shy, sensitive, an asshole, etc, or they may be so cheerful you think there's no way they could be depressed. And just because one is quiet, shy, sensitive, an asshole, etc, does not automatically make them depressed. It's a tricky subject to deal with.
Tapatio squeaked. Mo scooped the cactuar up, patting the succulent's back comfortingly.

“Is that what you see me as?”

Blinking, he looked at Sephiroth in confusion. The man was... unreadable. But at the same time, Mo couldn't help but feel like he was under a microscope.

“A kid?”

Blinking again, Mo realized what Sephiroth was getting at.

Putting Tapatio down, he cautiously approached the other man. Slowly, he reached out to touch Sephiroth's arm.

“... You're fifteen years younger than me. You're not a teenager by the skin of your teeth. I've never seen you in action and I hope I never do. Yet you were raised by someone deplorable and forcibly molded into a warrior. I think you were denied a childhood, and that truly is sad. You're a man, but young, and from the sound of things... deprived of a proper childhood. I know sitting around doodling with an old drunk isn't exactly... well... I guess... knowing the scant little about you that I do, I want to comfort you, but I don't even know if you need or want it. And the last thing we talked about before the nurse came in was artistic ability...”

Sephiroth was still unreadable.

He let his hand drop and backed away, shaking his head. “I'm sorry. I don't know what I'm saying.”

There was a beat of silence, and then Sephiroth left wordlessly. The door clacked shut, and Mo couldn't help but feel like he just majorly fucked up.

Everything felt like it was sinking as he sank down onto the couch.

Could he not do anything right?

To be fair, he supposed, he had no clue whether he'd done well or poorly there. But then again, adults took poorly to being treated like children. Mo hadn't thought he was treating Sephiroth like that, but he very easily could have been.

Mo nudged off his shoes and shrugged off his bag.

Tapatio appeared next to him, patting his knee and squeaking.

“I'm sorry... do you need water?”

Without waiting to see how the cactuar would respond, he stood up and moved to the kitchen. His movements were stiff, jerky. He felt like he was shutting down.

Stupid miserable fuckup.

He got out a glass and filled it up at the sink, Tapatio tugging at his leg. When he offered the glass of water, though, the cactuar bounced back.

Angeal had commented on cactuars needing space to run around in.

“I'm sorry,” Mo sighed, “We can't walk now. I need an escort when I go out, and all the Turks are away. But as soon as they get back, we'll take a long walk somewhere, okay?”
Tapatio didn't respond, bouncing back and forth, squeaking frantically.

Was there something wrong? Was he supposed to do something?

He didn't know.

In case Tapatio changed his mind about wanting water, Mo left the glass on the table. His shoes were left in front of the couch. His bag was left on it. Mo ignored these things and moved into the bedroom. Mechanically, without undressing, he crawled into bed and burrowed his head under the pillow.

Stupid. Useless. Waste of space.

His inner demons had crawled out of his mind and were sitting on his shoulders, he realized. But he couldn't bring himself to really care, folding his arms over the pillow to keep it in place.

He was tired.

Tapatio was at the edge of the bed, beating on the mattress and crying in distress. Mo felt awful. He was making Tapatio cry.

But he couldn't bring himself to move. He was firmly pinned to the bed.

It only took a little longer for him to start drifting in and out of sleep. It was fitful. Dreamless. The only difference between being awake and being asleep was that when he was dreaming his body felt weightless. When he was awake, he felt the monster on his shoulders pressing down, trying to break him.

Break him? He was already broken.

A door opened and shut. Tapatio wasn't at the edge of the bed. He didn't know how much time had passed. Drifting in and out again, he realized he could hear his phone ringing. But he couldn't muster the motivation to go answer. He was pinned, anyway, a weakling trapped in the darkness of his room and his mind.

Drifting in. Weightless. Dreamless.

Drifting out. Pinned down, stiff and aching. Couldn't bring himself to change his position.


Drifting in.

Jolted out, a loud voice ringing across his mind.

“Tesla!”

He knew the voice, but he wasn't thinking. Didn't want to. Couldn't connect the dots, as a result.

Something catapulted onto the bed, crashing down on top of him and knocking the breath from his lungs. He shifted just enough to see Tapatio, keening in distress.

Bootsteps.

Someone was coming in.
Mo couldn't bring himself to care, hiding away under the pillow again.

“Hey... what's wrong?”

A different voice.

Wasn't thinking. Didn't want to. Didn't care.

He was tired.

Tapatio was pried away, and the bed dipped. The pillow was yanked on, exposing him and making him jerk in surprise. Rough hands forcefully rolled him over, and the first voice clicked in his head as Genesis. The redhead was scowling down at him, stormy blue eyes searching for something.

Mo rolled over, curling up on his side and hiding his head.

“Hey! Don't just ignore us! For the— Angeal, you deal with him!”

Genesis left. The bed dipped again, in a different area. Gentler hands pulled on his arms, exposing his face. Angeal sat over him, face concerned. Mo felt sick. They shouldn't be bothering with a waste of oxygen like him.

“Mo, what's wrong? Talk to us, let us help.” Angeal implored.

Rolling over again, Mo sought out his pillow. Finding it, he dragged it over his head and held it there.
“So there's nothing wrong with him?” Angeal asked with a concerned frown.

“Not in the sense you two were worried about, no. But I think there is something... wrong, as you put it, and it isn't something I can just fix up.” the doctor replied.

Mo curled up tighter.

Angeal and Genesis had both tried to make him respond to them for... who even knew how long. In the end, though, they had both come to the conclusion that he was sick or hurt or something, and he'd been carried back to medical. The doctor that had taken him had done a little poking and prodding, then asked a few questions... and looked at him.

“Don't talk in riddles, is something wrong or not?” Genesis snapped.

“It's not something that can be told outright. A better-suited professional might be able to tell on a better day. But if I had to wager a guess, I would say that Mr. Tesla is depressed, and rather severely at that.”

There was a moment of silence, and all Mo could think was that he wanted to melt away into a puddle and die.

“Depressed?” Angeal echoed.

“There are many small signs that can add up to depression. But, as stated, it would take a more qualified individual to tell. It's more a mental thing than physical. I can catch some of the signs and symptoms, but not give an official diagnosis. I would recommend that be done as soon as he's in a more cooperative mood. As he is right now, all I can suggest is rest and being watched by a good friend. Maybe keep him here for the rest of the night, just to be sure nothing's wrong.” the doctor said, leaving the room.

After a moment, Angeal moved closer. Mo watched blearily, vision half-filled with his bangs. He blinked when Angeal's hand pushed his hair away from his face, but didn't move otherwise.

“You can talk to people. You know that, right?”

He opened his mouth to answer, but couldn't find any words to use. His teeth clicked as he closed his mouth again, pulling away from Angeal's touch.

If he talked to people then they would be burdened with his problems, just like now. If he had slept it off, no one would have known and everything would have been fine. But somehow these two found out. They came to his apartment for some unknown reason in the dead of the night and found him in the middle of an episode. There was a reason he didn't socialize much. There was a reason he had so few friends. He was a burden and dragged others down. These two could have been in bed, but were here worrying over him.

“You know, you should count yourself lucky. If anyone had come across that cactuar of yours before it got to Angeal's apartment they would have killed it. I considered it.” Genesis said darkly.

“Gen!” Angeal hissed, shooting a glare towards the redhead.

“He's not made of glass, 'Geal.”
Mo blinked, swallowing a lump forming in his throat.

Tapatio had gone to get them? How? A card was needed to use the elevator. And how did the cactuar even remember how to get to Angeal's apartment.

Wow.

Just... wow.

Tapatio deserved better.

As Genesis came closer, Angeal reached out to touch Mo's shoulder.

“You're helping us. Let us help you. You can talk to us, depend on us.” the dark SOLDIER said gently, squeezing a little.

Mo had to swallow again, his eyes blurring with tears. He didn't just pull away from Angeal this time, rolling over. He sat up as he did, resting his elbows on his knees and hiding his face in his hands.

“Mo—”

“Don't,” he begged, voice weak, “Please just don't... Go to bed and forget it happened, I'll sleep it off and be better tomorrow, but if you... if you touch me, if you keep pushing, I'm going to break, and there won't be any fixing me... I know I'm broken, but I've been broken for so long that I don't even remember what it's like to not be broken...”

There was a sharp clack, a footstep that lasted just long enough to make the sound. Next thing he knew, his shoulder was being shoved at, and he was looking up at Genesis—

The redhead backhanded him.

“Genesis!” Angeal barked.

Mo said nothing, just touched his fingertips to his cheek. He tasted blood. The inside must've been cut on his teeth when Genesis hit him. It felt like he would bruise. The tears had started leaking out by this point.

Angeal was dragging Genesis out of the room. Mo watched over his shoulder, wiping at the tears before they could run down. Blinking, he noticed his wallet was sitting on one of the chairs by the wall.

It only took a moment for him to decide to leave.

Grabbing his wallet, Mo peered out of the room. Angeal and Genesis were down the hall. It looked like the former was lecturing the latter. He watched for a moment, then crept out and left.

From there, it only took him a couple minutes to get back to his apartment. Tapatio ran to greet him, jumping up and tackling his chest with a squeal that bordered a shriek. Mo wrapped his arms around the cactuar, sliding down the door. Tapatio patted his face and shoulders, then hugged his neck.

How worthless was he, that he was making a plant cry?
He had five missed calls from Reno. And an email. The email informed him that if he'd gotten kidnapped again the Turk would drag him back and keep him in a cell that only Turks could get at. The redhead planned to feed him through a slot in the door, and slip art supplies in while he slept.

It brought a small smile to his face. He emailed back, telling Reno he was okay, he'd just gotten busy last night and hadn't been able to answer the phone. As he was getting everything ready to go to work, his phone buzzed with a new email. It was Reno again, sending a picture of a crude doodle. After staring for a moment, Mo figured out it was supposed to be him and Tapatio surrounded by what looked like carrots.

He informed Reno that if the picture survived he expected it to be handed over when the Turk returned.

Before leaving, Mo called to Tapatio. The cactuar came running over, looking up at him expectantly. Kneeling down, he wrapped his arms around the sentient succulent.

“I'm sorry I made you cry, buddy... it wasn't fair of me to shut you out like that. I'll try not to do it again... I can't make any promises, but I'll try...”

After a moment, Tapatio squeaked, hugging him back.

Mo stayed still for a moment, eyes closed.

He was getting worse. He had known it would happen, really. Drinking had been his medicine, which had been part of why it was so hard to stop. Even now, he wanted nothing more than to leave the building and go to one of the bars Reno had taken him to. But he had work. Lazard was likely waiting for him. And he'd promised to go and stay sober, to help the SOLDIERs.

He had to get better. But he couldn't burden anyone while doing it. That would only drag them down.

He had to get better on his own.

Slowly, he pulled away from Tapatio and stood up. “Okay, you be good now. I'll be back tonight... maybe I'll stop by during my break, so maybe I'll see you sooner.”

The cactuar squeaked, waving.

Smiling, Mo waved back as he left.

Okay. To work, now.

The elevator ride up was uneventful. The usual people got on and got off.

Taking a deep breath as he approached the office, Mo raised his hand up to knock.

“Good morning, Mr. Tesla.” Lazard greeted.

“Likewise, Director.”

He was on his way to join Lazard behind the desk when the man looked up in an expectant manner.
Aw, shit. Please please please no.

“Angeal told me what happened last night. Do you want to talk about it?”

Fuck. Why did Angeal have to be so kind and nice and perfect?

Sighing, Mo shook his head. “I’d rather not. It's something that happens, and I've overcome it before. Since I'm going sober, it may happen more often, but I have yet to let it interfere with my work or daily life.”

Lazard leaned back in his chair, examining Mo with a thoughtful expression. “Maybe not work or daily activities, but what about your mental health? It can't be good to deal with things like that on your own.”

“Please,” he answered, trying to keep from begging, “Just treat me as you have. The last thing I want to do is burden anyone, so let me deal with this. I'll survive, I'll go on, same as I always have. It'll be fine.”

After a moment, Lazard nodded. “If that's what you want. I imagine it won't be too hard to keep treating you the same, given how limited our interactions have been.”

Mo couldn't help but smile, bobbing his head.

Turning back to the desk, Lazard informed him, “We just got a new batch of SOLDIER applicants. I wrote down what you need to know, but if you could help me sort them out?”

“Of course.”

Mo pulled out the chair Lazard had gotten for him and sat down, taking a few envelopes from the stack the blonde indicated. Each envelope had a name and picture on the front, and a few papers inside. Lazard had written up a page with qualifications he should look for. A pair of stamps sat between them, and every few moments Lazard would slide papers back into their envelopes and stamp them. The stamped papers were then sorted into two neat stacks of their own.

Okay. First applicant.

Proper age range. Authentic papers. Good height. Good weight. Poor medical history, but not bad enough to disqualify the guy. Next page... mako resistance and acceptance... good... Physical tests... Right, that looked like an accept, then.

Looking up, he noted that Lazard had done four more in the time it took him to do one.

Lazard seemed to notice his gaze, because the blonde smiled. “I have experience. This is your first time sorting these out. You'll get the hang of it eventually, but it's best we get you whatever experience we can since you'll be here long-term.”

Nodding, Mo sighed and turned back to the few envelopes he had claimed.

For a while, everything was quiet. The only sound was the shuffling of papers and the gentle thumps of stamps.

Before he realized it, Mo was humming. A Doris Day song. ‘Que Sera Sera.’

Lazard chuckled, making him stop and look up.

“No, don't worry. I was just thinking how nice it was. My mother used to hum when she worked
too. What song was that?” the director told him with a smile.

“Oh... uh, ‘Que Sera Sera.’ It means what will be will be. My parents used to play this album by
the singer all the time, but I only remember that one because it was the opening for this weird
movie... I never got what everyone found so romantic about the guy, he was psychotic and
borderline abusive, even if his actor was cute.” Mo answered, sliding another envelope into the
reject pile.

“Sometimes all a man needs is to be attractive. Humans can be incredibly fickle some— Aah...”

“What's wrong?” Mo asked as he opened the next envelope.

“Cloud Strife. He's applied for SOLDIER three times and been rejected all of them. He just doesn't
meet the requirements, and has no patience. He needs time, to let his body finish maturing, but
insists on applying every time we open applications up. Unless he hit some miraculous growth
spurt, I have no choice but to reject him again.”

Leaning over, he took a peek at the picture on the envelope. A moody blue gaze stared out at him
from behind unruly blonde bangs.

“He looks so young!”

“You do know you're the oldest person to receive the SOLDIER treatment, right?” Lazard
chuckled.

“Yes, I noted the fifteen to twenty-five. But why? Is there some incompatibility I'm not aware of?”
Mo replied tartly.

“You'd have to ask Hojo for the specifics, but that is more or less the case.” Lazard answered,
stamping Cloud's envelope for rejection.

Mo didn't say anything, looking down at the envelope in front of him. If that was true, and people
younger or older than the designated range had such incompatibilities with mako, then when did he
take to it? What was so special about him?

Some small memory of his death-dreams surged forth, telling him he was objective, creative, and
kind.

Shaking his head, Mo turned his attention back to the applications.

After a moment, he began to hum again.
Chapter 72

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who has stuck with this long-ass story. I know it's taking forever, but there is a planned end, and we are actually coming up on it! It starts to be properly set in motion next chapter!

“Yo!”

Mo pressed himself to the wall. Not a moment too soon, either, a familiar head of crimson hair tumbling past.

“I'm gone four days and the first thing you do is reject my hugs?” Reno pouted as he got up from the floor.

“Hello to you too.” Mo smiled.

The Turk stuck his tongue out, then pulled something out of his jacket. It looked like a piece of paper, rumpled, torn, and stained by coffee. As Reno held it out, Mo saw it was the drawing of him and Tapatio. He snorted, shaking with barely restrained laughter as he took the sheet.

“My finest work, I estimate that you could sell it for several million if you truly desired.” Reno declared in mock hoity-toitiness, pushing Mo to burst out laughing, doubled over and clutching his stomach. “Yeah, I thought you'd like that. So, how'd shit go while I was gone, yo?”

“Well... okay, I suppose. I like working for Lazard. And because of my metabolism, I'm told they'll have to stop treating me with drugs soon, otherwise I'll end up addicted to those. So afterwards it'll be up to me to stay sober. Aah... and Tapatio's getting antsy, so I'll probably need to walk him soon.” Mo answered as he recovered from his laughing fit. Tucking the doodle into his bag, he continued, “I'm going to eat now, and afterwards I'm supposed to go train. Nothing exciting.”

Reno walked alongside him, saying, “I know Tseng is often in the Sector Five slums, and those have some pretty open areas. I'll talk to him and see if he can't take you with him, maybe tomorrow.”

“Thanks. So, am I allowed to ask what you were doing for four days, or would you have to kill me afterwards?” Mo asked as they came into the canteen. “By the way, did you just lurk in the hall here waiting for me?”

“I tried just sitting in the elevator, but Sephiroth said I was in the way while he was on his way somewhere, and I'm insane, not suicidal. And I wouldn't kill you, just set up that cell I told you about.”

Mo laughed.

They both got their trays, and Reno bounded across the room to sit next to Rude, Mo trailing after. Sitting down, he greeted the taciturn Turk and settled in for more Reno chatter.

The first thing the redhead asked was, “So what'm I modeling for, yo? How naked will I be?”
Mo was very glad he hadn't put anything in his mouth yet. He would've spat it out.

"Reno, I value you as a friend. My first and my best. But I'm not hanging a painting of you au naturel in my apartment. I just need your face and hands, really." he informed the cackling Turk.

That made both of them look at him expectantly.

Pulling out the pocket sketchbook, Mo showed them the thumbnail. He explained, “There was this one play back on earth, a comedy called A Midsummer's Dream. In it, part of the plot revolves around a flower that a character named Puck uses to create a sort of love potion. Puck isn't human, but... well, I think he was called a fairy? If nothing else, he was a member of the fairy king's court. I wanted to get you modeling with a tealight because you have a sort of fae quality to your face, and I think it would work well as Puck.”

“So you're going to paint my magical half-cousin with a love-flower?” Reno asked, looking up at him.

“That's the idea. I want to use your face especially as a base, and I want very natural shadows, plus I need to pick out the best angle. The best way to do that is to have you sitting in a dark room, holding a small candle in your hands. So... in answer to how naked you'll be, I may make you take off your shirt, but not much else.”

“Aww, that's not sexy...”

Rolling his eyes, Mo asked, “Were you expecting me to draw you like one of my French girls?”

“Don't speak the language but I know what you're saying!” the redhead grinned, earning a headshake from Rude.

“If you want me to paint your naked ass that bad, you'll have to pay m— Put that wallet away you little shit!”

Reno pouted, and Rude snorted. Even with the shades, Mo could tell the quieter Turk was rolling his eyes, but the quirk of his lips suggested it was fond.

“Hey, Mo!”

Reflex more than anything had him grabbing onto the table and bracing for impact when Zack's voice called out. But the SOLDIER was, for all his energy, more mature than Reno, and just plonked down next to him. After a moment, another SOLDIER sat on the other side of Zack, wearing a helmet. Kusel, he recognized. It was hard to tell, but that was Kusel.

... Zack's sweater was different. It looked like the ones Angeal and Genesis wore. It had been purplish before, like Kusel's.

“I made it to First Class! Isn't that awesome?!” the boy grinned, vibrating with energy.

“Oh... congrats.”

Was that why the sweater changed? He'd seen the purple of Seconds and the blue of Thirds. He was told there were other Firsts, but he only really encountered Sephiroth, Angeal and Genesis. Was black the First color? So it got darker as ranks went up?

“Yep! And I get to help train you now!” Zack grinned.
Someone did that to spite him. He was going to die, this Energizer bunny on ten cups of coffee was going to train him?

“Best of luck.” Kunsel said with an impish smile visible under his visor as Reno snickered.

“... I'll need it...”

“What's that?” Zack asked. Blinking, Mo saw that the boy was craning his neck to look at the small sketchbook on the table between him and the Turks.

“The rough outline for a painting I want to make. I try to always have a sketch done before I start painting, so I know what I'm doing.” he answered.

“And I'm going to be the model!” Reno declared cheekily, gesturing to himself.

Zack blinked, looking at Mo. “But it looks like you know what you're doing already, so why do you need a model?”

“So he can get the shadows and angles right, plus he wants my gorgeous face in the painting.” the redhead interjected, sticking his tongue out with a wink.

Zack stuck his tongue out back, and all Mo could think was that it was like introducing a pair of dogs to each other.
“Oh, you’re all here...” Mo murmured, faltering a bit as he entered the training room. Sephiroth, Angeal and Genesis all stood in the center of the room, looking like they’d just wrapped up a discussion about something.

Reno had tagged along to watch, Rude going off to do... something. Kunsel had said something about having a mission he agreed to and gone off on his own. Zack was bouncing over to Angeal, grinning like a million-watt bulb.

“I'm gonna hide out in the control room, outta the way.” Reno waved, sauntering over to something sectioned off behind glass.

“Set up an empty field while you're at it. Something environmental.” Sephiroth said, getting a salute out of the Turk.

“What...?” Mo asked.

“You haven't seen it yet, huh?” Angeal smiled.

Before anything else could be said, a blue light slid over the room.

Mo gasped, head snapping back and forth with his eyes wide.

The room had morphed into a desert landscape. But it was more than visual, he could feel the sun beating down, a hot breeze ruffling his hair, sand crunching under his feet.

“What the hell?!?” he demanded.

“Did your world not have VR?” Genesis scoffed.

“His world?” Zack asked, head tipping to the side. Angeal grabbed the boy's shoulder and tugged him away.

“I mean, we had VR, but not like this! This... this feels more like augmented reality than virtual! This is... it has to be decades ahead of what earth has! What we have is... If this is your VR then I'm ashamed of what we have!” Mo answered, struggling to find words.

Zack tackled him before he could continue. “Are you really an alien?! That's so cool!”

“Calm down, Zack, you'll strangle him like that.” Angeal said humorously, patting the boy's shoulder.

Zack pouted, but let Mo go and backed off.

“Now what that's sorted out,” Sephiroth said, drawing all attention onto him, “Shall we start?”

Mo and Zack both nodded, though Zack was at least ten times as enthusiastic.

“We're doing a scenario today. Mo, you'll be given a mastered barrier materia. We'll also be giving you a chest of materia. Your job is to defend it from Zack. Zack, you'll be working to break Mo's barriers and get the materia. If Zack does get the chest, Mo can try to reclaim it. We'll watch in case intervention is required, but otherwise we'll be in the control room with Reno.” Sephiroth explained.
Could he forfeit? Was that an option?

Genesis and Angeal came close. Angeal set a silver chest by his feet, and Genesis handed him a bangle with a single green stone set into it. Slipping the bangle on, a familiar murmuring slipped into his mind. Louder than the other two, but not like the one Elfé had. Comforting, in a way.

The three SOLDIERS vanished, and Mo was left with Zack.

“Shit!”

Zack grinned, leaping away. The boy had gotten so close so fast. Mo almost hadn't gotten the spell up in time. And he was supposed to defend against this? At least the Wall spell went all around him... so he just had to keep it up, right? Outlast Zack?

“Come on little guy,” Mo murmured, “Let's see what you've got.”

“Come on, I'm pretty sure I outweigh you!” Zack laughed, lunging forward again.

Gritting his teeth, Mo focused on the sound of the materia. He pushed himself deeper and deeper into the song it sang, trying to coax it into accepting more energy as Zack's sword hit the Wall again and again. The iridescence of the spell rippled and shimmered with each blow, sparks of light spraying outward as the blade screamed against the protective dome.

“Wow, it really is strong!” Zack admired, grinning as he stepped back. “Guess I'll have to try a different tactic!”

Mo blinked in confusion as the boy lifted his hand up.

There was a glint, and he realized Zack had a bangle of his own, with a trio of green stones. One was sparking brightly.

A loud crackle sounded, and Mo gasped as lightning struck at his Wall. The spell shimmered, and his ears were left ringing. The song in his head had started to die, and he hurried to grab onto it. Physically, he clapped his other hand over the bangle.

“Looks like that worked!” Zack grinned, eyes bright.

Fuck.

Mo closed his eyes and grit his teeth. He just had to hold on, just had to outlast Zack. Genesis said he had a natural affinity for magic. Both he and Sephiroth had commented that summoning a wall on the first try was unheard of. Zack was energetic, but materia drew on energy directly, it felt different from physical exhaustion. If Zack was resorting to materia then surely it was in his favor?

More lightning. The materia was howling. Mo howled back in his head, trying to coax the spell into lasting.

“Come on, you can't hold out forever!” Zack called, cheerfully taunting him again.

Mo couldn't help but smile for a brief moment, eyes still closed. He might've been a pushover, easy to walk all over, but how long ago had he hit rock bottom? There was nowhere else for him to go. He could hold out for quite a while.

He just hoped quite a while was longer than the living battery beating on his Wall would last.

A larger bolt. It shook him, the materia crying out. Mo went down to one knee, eyes opening in
shock. The spell flickered, and he gripped his wrist so hard he was sure he'd leave a bangle-shaped bruise. Zack's sword was stopped in a nick of time.

“Aw, I thought I had you there!” the boy pouted. It looked like he was leaning on his sword, trying to force his way through.

Swallowing anxiously, Mo closed his eyes again, coaxing the materia to accept more of its energy. The song in his head felt like it was starting to change. Like other strains of song were... trying to infect the one the barrier sang.

But he couldn't focus on that right now. He had to focus on feeding the Wall spell every scrap of energy he could, on keeping Zack out. If he lost it, he doubted there was any real stopping the young SOLDIER. He'd need a bit more than a trip to medical if that sword made contact, let alone the lightning. He'd been shocked enough by Hojo, thank you very much, and Genesis already turned his stomach into a massive scar.

Zack had taken to beating on the Wall and summoning lightning in random turns. Mo hoped the other two materia the boy had were something like a restore and a barrier, because if he was given more elemental damage to repel, he might not make it.

The song was definitely changing. He could feel himself shaking.

Focus, dammit!

Zack was relentless, pounding at his defenses like some kind of monster. Mo could feel himself gasping. He wondered if Zack really did have deeper energy wells to draw from. Really it wouldn't be too surprising. The boy was fit in addition to energetic. He wasn't a recovering alcoholic or a twig that never worked out, like Mo was.

“Come on,” he whispered, pleading, “Come on, we can do this, together...”

He was so tired. His head was pounding, his hand going numb. His leg was shaking, and he wanted nothing more than to pitch forward into the virtual sand.

... There was nothing saying he couldn't use the materia in the chest.

Opening his eyes, Mo found the very edges of his vision tinged with green. Looking back at the chest, he weighed his options. If he dug through it looking for something to stop Zack with, his focus would drop. The boy would break through and get him. But if he didn't find some way to end this now, then Zack would still break through and get him.

He had to risk it. He had to try finding something while maintaining the Wall, or he was ending up with even more new scars.

Forcing himself to his feet, Mo backed up until his legs hit the chest. Turning to the side, he went down on one knee again, his hand resting on the metal box.

“No fair! Is that legal??” Zack yelled, throwing himself at the Wall with what had to be all his strength. Mo felt the spell buckle a little, and closed his eyes while hissing.

The song hardly sounded like the barrier at all anymore. More untamed. Louder. Harder to hold onto.

He needed a seal. If he could find a seal, then he could cast Sleep and be done. That was it.
Oh for crying out loud, how many materia was that?! And there didn't look like there was any order to them, either. They must've anticipated his train of thought and designed the exercise to be harder than that. If he wanted a seal he was going to have to search.

The spell buckled again, causing him to cry out. The green creeping around the edges of his vision grew more intense, and the materia-song warped more.

He didn't have time for this.

Mo closed his eyes, thrusting his arm into the chest and forcing the materia to move. He didn't even know if there was a seal in there, but if there was his only chance of finding it was by recognizing it's song.

... What?

Mo opened his eyes again, looking to the shining stone on his wrist in horror.

The distorted song was too loud. He couldn't hear any of the materia in the chest. If he wanted to find a seal, he'd have to take off the barrier and expose himself to Zack's onslaught.

“What're you looking for? Come on, that's hardly fair!” the boy yelled.

The SOLDIER slammed himself against the Wall again. Mo gasped, collapsing against the chest.

The song grew louder still.

“Shut up,” he begged, breathless and in pain, “Just shut up...”

The materia was sucking everything up. He couldn't feel anything. But if it was taking so much energy, why was the shield threatening to give so much?

Zack struck again, another lightning bolt crashing down at the same time.

Mo felt himself howl as green engulfed his vision.

He couldn't hear anything over the primal song in his head.

He was numb. He couldn't hear anything, couldn't see past the green haze.

Just as suddenly as it all happened, though, it ended. The opaque green became a faint tint. He could feel again, but wished he couldn't, his whole body screaming in agony.

Blinking, Mo realized Sephiroth was standing over him. The green tint seemed weaker when he looked at the general, darkened by a black miasma. Hadn't the same thing happened with Genesis after he grabbed Rufus?

Blinking again, he realized that the training room was in smouldering shambles.
“A Limit Break? But... was I really pushed that far?” Mo asked, blinking in confusion.

“Dude, materia can eat your energy up and push you to the brink fast. I bet you kept feeding it even when it didn't really need more. Just pushed yourself too hard, yo.” Reno answered, handing him a cup of water. He hoped he wasn't shaking too much to hold it properly.

“You should have said something! I would have stopped!” Zack declared, eyes wide like a kicked puppy.

The training room was destroyed. Zack had been healed by now, but had been burnt and bleeding from a nasty injury not that long ago. His sword was broken and his uniform torn. Reno had a few small cuts and a bruise, but explained that with Shinra's finest, he'd been well-protected. Sephiroth had intervened to keep Zack from being hurt any more. The general and two commanders were upstairs explaining what had happened to Lazard now. Mo, Zack, and Reno were in the little lounge near the training room, waiting for... a number of people, apparently. Mo had only just regained the energy to talk, worn completely out.

“... So... what exactly did I do? I... really can't remember. I remember Zack breaking the Wall... and then Sephiroth was standing over me...” Mo asked, staring at the ripples in his water. He was still shaking, but not enough to slop everything everywhere.

“You took all the materia and fused it together into a huge summon. Dunno what exactly it was you summoned, though. It looked like a woman, wearing armor and using a bow. Really tall. Lots of white. She shot once, and then everything exploded.” Reno declared.

Mo dropped the cup.

Zack and Reno were yelling as he doubled over holding his head, but he wasn't listening. His mind had connected the description to one thing, and that was the dreams he had when he'd died.

But that was it, right? They were just dreams, that was all they had been. Nothing more, just dreams conjured up by his brain in it's seven minutes it survived after death. A strange woman in armor dragging out the dirty laundry of his mind and talking in his mother's voice. Guilt personified. That was it, right? Nothing more, right?

Someone grabbed his shoulders, forcing him to look up. He recoiled away on instinct, unable to hide or disguise his wide eyes.

Genesis had him by the shoulders, snarling something.

“Wh-what...?” Mo gasped, hands coming to rest on the redhead's wrists.

“Were you even listening?!” Genesis snapped back.

Before Mo could answer, Angeal appeared, pulling Genesis away. Reno and Zack hovered nearby, eyes wide with concern. Sephiroth and Lazard stood off to the side, and behind them Mo could see Tseng, Hojo, and Scarlet.

“Mo, buddy, what happened?” Reno asked, hands out as if he were a frightened animal.

In a way, Mo supposed he was.
Dropping his gaze down to the water spilled across his lap and the floor, he choked out, “I dreamed about her. That woman... but... there's no way it means anything. I was dead. I was hung up on everything that had just happened. I... there's no way it means anything, right?!"

Sephiroth stepped closer, head tilted ever so slightly. “Dreamed about her? You mean the entity you summoned?”

“I-I can't say for sure, I don't remember anything after the Wall breaking, and Reno's description was vague, but it sounds like they line up...” he answered shakily.

“What exactly happened in these dreams?” the general pressed.

“Well... nothing, in the first... I was in a dark place with green streams, and she pushed me... The second time... It's just my guilt, right? That gave her my mother's voice when she went through my memories like that? And talk of chosen ones and things like that, they're stories for children!”

But the looks everyone was giving were far from reassuring.

Mo felt tears welling up in his eyes as he begged, “I didn't ask for this...”

He was scared. He was confused. He didn't know who the woman was supposed to be or what the half-forgotten dreams meant. But they clearly meant something to everyone gathered around him. That worried him, especially the hungry expression on Hojo's face, the cold calculation on Scarlet's, and the calculating appraisal on Tseng's. It looked like envy on Genesis, awe on Angeal and Zack, and he couldn't make out Reno, Sephiroth, or Lazard. Then again, he could hardly define his own emotions on a good day, why did he think he could read people?

A choked noise of distress wrenched it's way free from his throat, and Mo buried his face in his hands.

He didn't want to cry. He didn't want to cry. He was a grown man, he shouldn't be crying this easily.

A hand clapped to his shoulder, startling him into looking up. Reno stood above him, smiling. “Why don't we head back to your place, yo? We can get started on that painting and shit.”

After a moment, he gulped, nodding.

Reno pulled him up, smiling still, and guided him towards the elevator. Mo heard more than saw Zack trotting after them.

He wanted a drink.
“He really does look eerie like this.” Cissnei commented from the couch. They'd encountered her on their way to Mo's apartment and essentially kidnapped her.

“Reno if you laugh I'll hit you. Don't move.” Mo ordered, gaze flicked up and down, up and down, pencil moving rapidly across the page. He could see the redhead vibrating with the urge to talk and move. “Just a few more minutes, I promise.”

Honestly, it would probably be less. But he was working, he was busy, he had to assume it would take longer.

“Do you really draw like this, though? Like before you got the enhancements?” Zack asked.

“Yes. The enhancements do make it easier, but if I wanted a model with specific lighting I had to draw with that lighting. I'm almost done, Reno, I promise.”

There was silence. Mo took advantage of that to draw more furiously, trying to get the shading down. He needed to know how he was shading this with pencil before he did anything with paint. That's why he was doing a drawing in his sketchbook now. He was sitting so he eye-level with Reno, looking at him from a three-quarters view. The redhead had his lips slightly parted and pursed, like he was blowing on the tealight cupped in his hands. His shirt and jacket were off, and his hair had been attacked with a wet comb to get it to sit the way Mo wanted. Lit this way, by nothing other than a tiny candle held in his hands, Reno probably could have passed as Puck.

“So,” Cissnei hummed, “What made you want to do this painting? It seems so dark and cryptic.”

“I like illustrating Shakespearean plays. He paint very vivid images with his words, the monologues are always gorgeous. And I have actually done something like this one before, but not with a model, and I wanted to revisit it for a while... Done! Thank you, Reno!”

The redhead took a deep, dramatic breath, and blew the candle out. The apartment was plunged into darkness for a brief moment. But the lights quickly came on. Tapatio had hit the switch, it looked like.

“Thank you, Tapatio.” Mo smiled.

He was given a squeak, and the cactuar bounced over to hug his leg.

“Man, you two seem so close! How'd you do it? Most cactuars run away!” Zack declared. “I mean, they're really smart, I had a mission once that was tracking one down after it got at an executive's papers and ran off with them!”

“I don't know, honestly. I saved his life, then he saved mine, and then... I guess we just adopted each other.” Mo smiled as Reno put his shirt back on.

“I think it's super sweet. Hey, if I made hot chocolate, who would like some?” Cissnei smiled, standing up.

All three of them promptly raised their hands, earning a giggle.

Cissnei moved into the kitchen area as Mo started to set up to begin painting. Zack, Reno, and Tapatio clustered around, the Turk and the SOLDIER holding his sketchbook between them. It
was peaceful. Domestic. The atmosphere was calm and warm, almost enough to make him forget everything that had happened earlier.

Almost, but not quite enough. Zack still wore a torn and singed uniform. Even if the exposed skin underneath was flawless and healthy thanks to healing spells from materia, his uniform showed that he must have been in pain. Reno had a bruise on his cheek and a number of cuts from broken glass flying everywhere. There was a room left in shambles because of Mo.

He thought he'd been upset back when he's almost blinded an older boy. He thought he'd been sickened with himself when Tseng and Veld showed him the video of his kicking a down man. But this...

Mo paused, swallowing thickly. He'd gotten his outline down on the canvas by this point. He could mix his paints and get started.

“... How can you guys... not hate me? How can you not be scared?” he asked aloud.

There was a collective pause.

“What do you mean?” Zack asked.

Mo gave a strangled laugh, putting down his palette and brush before he could drop them. “Zack, if it hadn't been for Sephiroth and Angeal, you'd be dead. I would have killed you. How can you not hate me? I... I demolished a room designed for super-soldiers to train in, and I wasn't even conscious for it! I... I would be scared. I am scared.”

He was blindsided, something big barreling into him and picking him up off the ground.

“Zack, my ribs...” he wheezed, kicking a little.

“It's not your fault! You didn't know! If anything, it's my fault for pushing you like that! I should have noticed you were under too much pressure and backed off! And I don't think it's scary, Angeal and the other two mess the room up all the time! I thought it was a really cool Limit Break, even if you're a pacifist and probably won't use it much!” the young SOLDIER declared, nuzzling his back.

“Kid has a point, yo. We all thought we had you all figured out, it's not your fault no one warned you that you could potentially evolve like that!” Reno added.

Mo swallowed, wondering when he'd started to tear up.

Zack gave him another squeeze, then set him down. The boy was smiling brightly, eyes shining. Reno flashed him a thumbs up, grinning cheekily. Looking over at the kitchen area, Mo found Cissnei giving a warm smile as well.

A squeak sounded, and he stumbled back a few steps as Tapatio launched up to hug him. The cactuar thudded against his chest, clinging where he landed.

Swallowing again, Mo blinked away the tears in his eyes, hugging Tapatio back.

He was still scared. He still hated that he couldn't trust himself fully, worried he'd be violent and hurt someone without knowing about it. But having people like this, who trusted him and believed in him, was comforting. He questioned how he had survived so long without such a group. He didn't know if he could, now. Losing them... might just be too much.
After a moment, he put Tapatio down and gave everyone a soft smile. They seemed reassured, nodding, and he turned back to the easel with his canvas.

Cissnei brought the hot chocolate around, and the trio settled down to watch him paint.

“He has horns!” Zack exclaimed as Mo blocked out his base colors.

“That he does. It adds to the inhuman element. And Puck was a shapeshifter, if memory serves, so he could change his appearance at will.” Mo explained.

“I thought it was going to be dark?” Cissnei asked.

“It will, but I'm working with a base color and then getting darker. Not to mention my light-source is going to be colored, so everything will be tinted. It's hard to make a tint if you don't apply everything else first.”

Before any more questions could be asked, a knock sounded at the door. Tapatio bounced over and pulled it open, squeaking.

“Yo, Tseng!” Reno greeted with a wave as Zack sprang up. Mo noticed that Genesis had come in as well. “Just missed the hot chocolate!”

The other Turk didn't reply.

Mo realized that Genesis was glaring at him. He had no clue why. Gulping, he turned his attention back to the painting. He was just about done blocking everything out, then he could get to work on the details.

“Are you aware of what those dreams of yours were, Mr. Tesla?” Tseng asked.

Mo sighed, putting down his brush and palette again. Moving to the sink, he washed his hands. Clean and paint-free, he grabbed his hot chocolate and moved to the couch. Putting his mug on the table, he rested his elbows on his knees and put his face in his hands.

“I don't know. I don't think I want to know. But I get the feeling you're going to tell me anyway.” he said miserably. Tapatio appeared at his knee, patting and squeaking.

There was a beat of silence before Tseng spoke up again.

“Those were less of dreams and more of out-of-body experiences. When an individual dies, they return to the Lifestream. The Lifestream is the lifeblood of the planet, and the will of the planet is said to manifest as the Goddess, Minerva. Those dreams of yours, from your descriptions... took place in the Lifestream.”

... They were real, in essence.

Mo kept his eyes closed, taking deep breaths.

He didn't want to be a divinely chosen hero. He didn't want... he couldn't even remember everything that had been said! He just wanted to live as normally as possible!

He wanted a drink.

“You spoke with the Goddess. What did she say?” Genesis pressed, sounding close.

“I don't remember, okay?” Mo yelled, jumping up. He couldn't hold the tears back anymore.
Glaring weakly at Genesis, he continued, “It's not like I was taking notes, I didn't think they meant anything! I... I don't remember! She talked about... jeez, she talked about how I had nothing left, and that made me the ideal candidate, and ending something or other! For crying out loud, she talked about what sounded like time-travel! Turning time back on some other woman, and sending a Genesis lookalike to find me, it was nonsense!”

Tapatio was crying in distress, hugging his leg. Letting out a choked sob, Mo picked up the cactuar and turned away.

“I... I didn't ask for any of this... I just... I want to...”

He trailed off, not sure what to say as Tapatio patted his cheek.

The apartment was silent for what felt like a long time.

“... Infinite in mystery is the gift of the Goddess. We seek it thus, and take to the sky.” Genesis murmured, and Mo could hear him stepping closer before a hand grabbed his shoulder. “You kept me from making decisions I now see were foolish. You saved the life of a man you hate. You're offering to cure not just me, but others as well. And yet you act like there could be better choices. Have you no clue how much I envy you, Tesla, how much I wish the Goddess had chosen me?”

He could hear it, jealousy dripping from the SOLDIER's voice.

Turning his head, Mo let his electric blue eyes meet Genesis's stormy ones. It looked like the man was searching for something. He couldn't hold the gaze for long, turning away and nuzzling into Tapatio.

“... And you... do you have any idea how long I've just looked for some way to feel like a normal person... to just be happy and not need to depend on alcohol to dull what emotions I do feel? But now... now I'm being asked to save the world when I can't even save myself. I'm a jaded old man who wants nothing more than to drink my days away in a basement studio, and see if I can't find a smile in the bottom of a bottle! I'm just a second-rate artist, a shitty desk-jockey, and a second-favorite son! And your Goddess wants this to save her world?! What a choice!”

His voice had grown bitter. He was shaking, and it took everything he had not to run into the bedroom and slam the door shut. Tapatio was squeaking gently, hugging him back.

“That's part of why I'm here, Mr. Tesla.” Tseng said suddenly, making him turn. “There is someone in the slums who may be able to help you.”
Chapter 76

Watching Tapatio race around in excited circles almost made it easy to forget what was going on. The cactuar was so happy to be outside, even if there was no sun or sky, the air stinking of trash and rot. Just the fact that there was room to run around seemed to be plenty for the sentient succulent. Mo couldn't help but smile, turning his head as they walked so he could keep Tapatio in sight.

It was him, Tseng, and Reno. They were in the Sector Five slums, on their way to meet the person Tseng claimed could help him. It was the day after the whole thing in the training room.

Apparently, when he'd broken his limit, the barrier on his wrist had begun to glow brightly, and had come free from the bangle to hover between his hands. The materia from the chest and the ones Zack had all had been pulled into the brightly glowing orb, making it grow in size and the light become brighter. Then he'd begun to compress it, apparently, turning it red in the process. And after that...

He was told that the materia he had somehow created had become a useless lump of rock after everything was said and done. A gemstone without any magic in it, just a large, polished jewel. The current theory, according to Reno, was that summoning the Goddess had not only drained him, but also the materia.

As he watched Tapatio race around, Mo couldn't help but wonder who exactly they were going to see. Tseng had said last night that their existence was largely kept a secret, but that it was his job to keep an eye on them. They were only taking Reno because the redhead was... well, Tseng had phrased it as Reno being good at handling Mo.

But he wondered... an old hermit, perhaps? A wise sage with over a century of experience?

Tapatio came racing up to him, squeaking and bouncing in excitement. Smiling softly, Mo picked the cactuar up.

“I hope you've worn yourself out by the time we get back. I don't think the apartment's big enough for this energy of yours.” he informed Tapatio with a smile. The cactuar squeaked, wiggling in his arms.

“We're here.” Tseng said suddenly, drawing his attention.

“An old church, huh?” Reno asked, examining the place before looking around. Mo noticed a sort of sharpness to the redhead's gaze that wasn't usually there. This was Reno on the job, then, Reno the Turk. It sent a chill down Mo's spine.

Tapatio grew quiet and still as they approached the church. Mo couldn't tell why. He hoped nothing was wrong.

Tseng pushed the old door open and peered inside. After a moment, he nodded to them and went inside. Mo exchanged a glance with Reno before they followed the stern Turk.

“Oh! Hello!”

Not an old hermit. A young woman... no, a girl, probably Zack's age, with brown hair and bright green eyes. Upon seeing them, she stood, but had been tending to a rather large bed of flowers. White and yellow lilies, it looked like.
“You brought friends this time!” she remarked, waving to them as Tseng approached her.

“Yes. Mr. Tesla is... experiencing issues that I believe you may be able to help him resolve.”

“Hold up, Tseng. How's your girlfriend supposed to help Mo out now?” Reno asked, hand raised like a child.

The girl giggled, and Tseng coughed, looking away for a moment. Mo saw the faint pink on the man's cheeks as he did so, but it was gone when he looked back.

“Aerith Gainsborough is the last living Cetra. Given what Mr. Tesla did yesterday... and what he told us...”

Cetra? As in that extinct race Reno and Cissnei had told him about?

Tapatio suddenly wriggled free of his arms, bounding over to stand before the girl.

“Hey! Tapatio, what are you doing?” Mo demanded. The cactuar promptly came bolting back, but then ran to stand before Aerith again. “Oh, you...”

She just giggled, kneeling down and holding her hand out. “Hello to you too! Tapatio, was it?”

Mo watched as Tapatio touched her hand. The cactuar stayed like that for a moment, looking at her, and then ran back to Mo. He grunted when Tapatio sprang up to hang from his shoulder, reaching up to pat the succulent's head.

“He's cute! It's nice to meet you!” Aerith smiled, coming closer. “So, what can I help you with?”

“Well... it's... kind of complicated.” he mumbled, looking down.

“A long story, then?”

Reno snorted at her words. If Tapatio hadn't been hanging from his arm, Mo would have elbowed him in the ribs.

“So why don't we sit down and you can tell me?” Aerith suggested.

He looked up, at Tseng. He had been hoping the man would take the wheel, but no such luck. The Turk just chose a pew and sat down. After a moment, Reno trotted over to join him.

Sighing, Mo nodded.

Aerith guided him over to the flowerbed that filled about a quarter of the church. It smelled sweet, in comparison to the stink outside. All of Midgar stank, and here it almost seemed pure.

Kneeling next to the girl at the edge of the flowers, Mo took a deep breath.

Rip it off, like a bandaid.

“I'm not from this world.”

Aerith blinked at him in confusion. Her eyes were the same color as Sephiroth's, he noticed. Her pupils were normal, human, but they were the same color. Like mako, or materia.

Tapatio patted his face. He sighed, feeling somewhat reassured. Adjusting how he sat, Mo moved the cactuar into his lap.
Another deep breath, and he explained, “I'm from a very similar world. But at the same time, a very different one. There's no Lifestream, no mako, no materia, no magic. We didn't have Cetra, and our electric companies don't have private militaries. And... for my whole life, until recently, I lived there. On earth. But then an establishment I was at was attacked by a strange man covered in black slime and waving around a gun and some kind of gemstone. I tried to subdue him, pin him down, but I'm not very strong. I was thrown off, and the gem was broken over my head. Next thing I knew, I was... I was waking up, strapped to a bed, with Tseng standing over me.”

As Mo paused to catch his breath, Aerith reached out and rested a gentle hand on his knee.

“Take your time,” she told him with a kind smile, “We aren't going anywhere.”

He looked to the Turks. Reno was fiddling with his phone, slouching down and sprawled everywhere. In comparison, Tseng was sitting upright, legs crossed and hands in his lap. His expression was distant and blank at the same time.

Apparently they really weren't.

Tapatio hugged around his neck again, and he hugged back.

“I'm sorry,” he choked out, “It must sound so unbelievable, like a story for kids...”

“No.” Aerith said, making him look up. Her face had become distant, as if she was listening to something only she could hear. “I believe you. You've come a long way, and been through a lot. And there's more ahead of you.”

After saying that, she blinked, reaching up to touch her head. She looked confused.

“... The Cetra... I was told they could talk to the planet. That means... you can hear the Goddess, right?” Mo asked quietly.

Aerith tensed up a bit, but nodded.

He took another deep breath, giving Tapatio a small squeeze for comfort.

“When... I first got here... I died. Twice. And... both times, I saw her. Spoke with her, the second. But I thought they were just dreams. I... I remember her talking about choosing me... wanting me to do something... but I don't remember everything. I didn't try to, because I didn't think it was important.”

Before the girl could say anything, Mo continued, “And I don't know if I want to know what she wanted, because... I don't want to be a hero. I don't want to fill out some divine task. I just want to make things that make people happy.”

He jumped a bit when Aerith reached out to take his hand. She was smiling gently at him, rubbing circles into the back of his hand with her thumbs.

“I don't know if it will work... but would you like me to try talking to her?” she asked.

From the corner of his eye, Mo noticed Reno and Tseng watching them both now.

After a moment, he nodded.

Aerith nodded back, letting go of his hand and standing up. Mo watched, holding Tapatio close, as she moved around the flowers to stand before the crumbling altar. She knelt down, back to them,
and Mo could guess that her hands were clasped as she bowed her head.

Tapatio squeaked softly, gaining his attention. The cactuar was staring at the door.

Before he could question anything, Reno was pretty much on top of him, holding a hand over his mouth. Tseng was pulling a gun from his jacket, gaze sharp and cold on the door. Tapatio clung to Mo, and he patted the quivering creature, trying to be reassuring.

There was a moment of silence. He wondered if Aerith could feel how tense the air had gotten or if it was just him, looking at Reno and Tseng with their killer eyes.

The door slammed open.
“Don't shoot!” a familiar voice barked out.

“Shears?!” Mo exclaimed behind Reno's hand, eyes wide. The man had Elfé draped over his shoulder, and looked... worse for wear. Bleeding from a cut on his temple, lip split. Covered in dirt and bruises.

“Why shouldn't I?” Tseng asked. It wasn't challenging. It was matter-of-fact and cold.

Mo let go of Tapatio, cactuar clinging to his front, and shoved Reno away. “Tseng, wait!” he begged, scrabbling to his feet. Ow, shit, Tapatio's needles were out again, the poor thing must've really been scared...

Thankfully, it looked like Tseng had listened, at least partially. He hadn't shot them yet, gaze flicking to Mo every few seconds.

“So you're here too,” Shears noted, voice sounding slightly dark as Mo took a few cautious steps towards the two eco-terrorists.

“Yeah... but why are you here? And... what happened?”

“Mo.” Reno said, voice steeped in warning.

“Just a moment,” he pleaded, turning to look at the two Turks, “Just a moment, please. Shears was the only reason I didn't go insane when I was with AVALANCHE, so please, just a moment!”

Neither said anything. He noticed that Aerith was standing beyond the flowers, eyes wide.

Gulping, Mo turned back towards Shears and Elfé.

“So why—”

Shears cut him off, saying, “Fuhito's going to attack Shinra. He wants to blow up all the reactors, destroy the city completely.”

Mo didn't know what to say in response to that, and only choked out a confused, “What?”

Shears looked past him, probably at the Turks, before moving to the closest pew and laying Elfé out on it. “After that crazy SOLDIER grabbed you and flew off, we started talking about what you said. About alternate energy sources, creating our own company, those things. But that son of a half-mutated guard hound wasn't having it, kept insisting we had to tear Shinra down the way we were. And Elfé's condition started getting worse fast— you were right, she does have a materia. It's only a shard, embedded in her arm, and it allows her to fight on the level of SOLDIER, but it drains her. It got worse after you left. Then... then that fucking crazy fucker completely took over! I don't know what his game is, but he's after three things. Elfé, Professor Hojo, and you. After that, he's going to turn this whole city to rubble.”

Mo felt his blood run cold.

Not sure what else to do, he looked to Tseng and Reno. Reno trotted over to him, face stony, and Tseng was pulling out his phone.

“Do you have any way to back that claim up?” Tseng asked, gun still out and unwavering.
Mo looked back just in time to see Shears shaking his head. “I know it's all real fucking convenient and shit, and I really oughta, but I don't. But I'm not going to sit by and let that bastard have his way. I joined AVALANCHE to take down Shinra by stopping the bad people, not hurting the innocent ones. I could turn a blind eye to a lot of the shit he pulled, but this...”

Mo wondered if the words they had exchanged before Genesis flying off with him had anything to do with things. If they had truly begun looking at the options he suggested, maybe they had.

“... So what do you want us to do, yo?” Reno asked, voice somewhat clipped.

“As long as you don't just stand by and let it happen, I don't fucking care.”

After a moment, Mo started moving closer again. Shears didn't seem to care, checking Elfé over. Swallowing, Mo took that as a sign it was okay to approach—

Aerith breezed past, a look of both concern and confusion on her face.

When had she started moving?!

Tapatio squeaked, reminding Mo that the cactuar was still clinging to his chest. It felt like the needles had been retracted again, but the poor thing was still quivering. Mo ran his hand over tough green flesh, gently shushing.

“What is it?” Aerith asked, making him look up. She stood over the pew Elfé and Shears were on, looking down at the former. Her expression was... hard to decipher. “The voice in her, it's so old...”

He knew the answer to this one, drawing close as well.

“The materia,” he answered, still comforting Tapatio, “I have no clue what it is.”

“Killing her, that's what.” Shears growled, checking for the woman's pulse.

Shears was worse for wear. Roughed up and banged up. But Elfé looked like she was on the verge of death.

Mo swallowed.

Maybe... maybe...

Looking back, he found Reno watching him and Tseng in the corner on his phone. After a moment, Mo carefully pried Tapatio from his chest and set the cactuar down. The sentient succulent squeaked, as if asking what he was doing.

“I... I can try something. To help. I don't know if it'll work or not.”

Shears looked up at him, eyes sharp.

Swallowing, Mo explained, “I have an affinity for materia. I can hear them, and unintentionally feed my spells. Maybe... it's in her, right? Maybe I can coax it out.”

“You— so that's what happened?”

Before Mo could answer Shears's question, Reno grabbed his shoulder. “Dude, I don't know what you're thinking, but it sounds like a gamble. We have no clue what's going on or what could happen.”
After a moment, he nodded. “I know. But... I can't just stand by and not offer. If it works... it works. If it doesn't... well... hopefully we don't need to cross that bridge.”

That seemed like enough for the redhead, stepping away with a nod and a look in his eyes Mo didn't have the time to decipher.

Well, he made his bed...

He slipped between the pews, kneeling down so he was closer. Taking a deep breath and steeling himself, Mo closed his eyes and pressed his palms to Elfé's arm.

The primal song hit him like a fist to the gut. It was angry, hungry, loud, present. It tried to consume him, pulling on him. But when he focused on it, it felt like there was distance between them. Like he wasn't actually as close to the materia as he could get.

Gritting his teeth, Mo tucked his chin against his chest and tried to feel out where it was. As if in retaliation, challenging him, the song beat down harder. It was loud, overwhelmingly so, and he could feel it chewing through him. He wasn't even offering any energy and it was draining him.

A twinge of doubt snaked through him.

He was told that if he wasn't careful with materia, he could kill himself. That it was easy to push himself too far without ever realizing it. And it felt like this one was going to pull him over the brink long before he pushed.

Right before he could pull away or back out, though, gentle hands pressed over his, cool and delicate. Even without opening his eyes, he knew it was Aerith. The girl's touch calm with a calming presence, quieting the storm-like song of Elfé's materia. It was soft and reassuring, grounding him and guiding him away from that edge.

Mo couldn't help but exhale in relief. He hadn't been aware that he was holding his breath. Either way, it felt good having someone on his side in this battle.

Resolve strengthened, he turned his attention back to the materia. It was still gnawing on him, but not like before. Before, it had been devouring him, eating him alive. Now it was just teething, as if Aerith on her own was enough to hold it at bay. Of course, that implied she was now taking the brunt of the song's anger. And if she was going to put herself on the line like that, he best work fast.

Reaching out again, Mo tried to tune into the song. Not immerse himself in it, the way he would with barriers and other materia, but listen the way he would to Reno's one-sided banter. Follow the flow without getting caught up in it.

Down.

He slid his hands towards Elfé's, and the song grew louder. More intense. Something was roaring, seething just under the feral melody, and if it weren't for Aerith Mo was sure he would have given up and run away. But her kind, quiet presence was still there, so it was only right that he push on.

His hands came to clasp Elfé's. The song of the materia was overwhelmingly loud, beating and biting. He felt exhausted. It was draining him, sucking everything out and leaving him to die. Only Aerith and her encouraging aura kept him where he was. But that was no good, he needed to advance forward, get the materia out. If he was rooted in place, then it defeated the purpose.

The warm hand on his shoulder almost jolted him out and away. He couldn't identify it right off the
bat, like he had with Aerith. But after a moment, he realized that the presence at his back was Reno.

A second later, something pushed against his side, and he realized it was Tapatio.

They had come to back him up.

Steeling himself, Mo pushed back against the song of the materia.

Aerith was cool and sweet, like a spring breeze. Reno crackled with energy, like a live wire or an electric fence. Tapatio was fresh and earthy, like the gyshal greens. It was an overall feeling of—

Something dropped into his palm, making him open his eyes in shock. Blinking, he opened his hands up, pulling away from Elfé and Aerith.

A red marble glinted in his hand, somehow managing to look menacing.

“I... I have it.” he said, not entirely believing it.

“I hope it wasn't too late...” Shears said grimly as Reno clapped Mo's shoulder in triumph.
Chapter 77

“Go straight home. Be prepared for an evacuation order.” Tseng told Aerith as they left the church. She nodded, and took off. “I reported everything you said. If you're telling the truth, then we won't be caught completely unaware. For now, we need to get back to headquarters.”

Oh. Mo blinked, looking to Shears. Tseng had been talking to him.

He was exhausted. Pulling the small red materia out of Elfé had taken a lot out of him. He couldn't stand if he wanted, let alone walk. He was on Reno's back right now, Elfé in Shears's arms and Tseng leading the way. Tapatio bounced along next to Reno. The materia was still in his hand, song chanting angrily in the back of his head.

Ugh. He was tired. He wanted a drink.

They were moving fast, he could see it, but everything felt like it was moving slow. The edges of his vision were tinged green. His head hurt. He wished the materia would shut up.

It was scary. The idea of a whole city being reduced to rubble. There were so many people that would die. What did Fuhito want? Shears had said the man was after Professor Hojo, which was... batshit insane on it's own. Why anyone would want to be around the guy willingly was beyond Mo. And then there was him. But everyone seemed to want him, or at least his blood. So that wasn't surprising, and he supposed it wasn't surprising that Fuhito wanted Elfé either—

The materia was red.

That meant it was a summon. But if it made her stronger, then shouldn't it have been an independent? Purple? That would have made more sense, wouldn't it?

Why did Elfé have a summon in her?

Was it really Elfé that Fuhito wanted?

Mo let go of Reno. The Turk yelped, stumbling as he tried to fight his way free.

“Dude! What the hell!” the redhead demanded as Mo dropped to the ground. “Now isn't the time! We gotta move!”

He swatted Reno's hands away, shaking his head. “No... no, he doesn't want...”

“What now?” Shears growled as Tseng came back.

Mo climbed to his feet, shaking so hard he was confident he would fall back down. Tapatio stood next to him, as if trying to steady him by hugging his knee. He held out his hand, letting them see the materia. “Why is it red? Shears... you said... it made her stronger. But... th-that sounds like an independent... purple... So why is it red?”

“So it's a summon. What of it?” Shears demanded impatiently.

“No, hold on. That Aerith chick said she heard an old voice. And you said it's only a shard. If it's some kind of special summon...” Reno trailed off, running out of steam.

Mo picked the train of thought up, saying, “It's angry... and strong... And... you said Fuhito was insistent on being destructive... So if it's something powerful, something special, he may want to
use it destructively. And... if we're going to headquarters, aren't we as good as handing everything to him? If he's targeting the reactors around the city, forces will be spread thin. Hojo's there. I'm not. The materia isn't. So... shouldn't I hide somewhere, and delay him blowing everything up? He can't get me or the materia if we're buried under tons of rubble. He'll be forced to search for me instead..."

He began to sway, utterly exhausted. The others exchanged looks.

After a moment, Shears said, “With that logic, Elfé needs to hide too. He doesn't know she doesn't have the materia any longer.”

That left it up to Reno and Tseng. It was now their decision to make.

Mo swallowed, sinking slowly to his knees and panting. He was exhausted. The green tinging his vision was pulsing. Tapatio squeaked at him, patting and rubbing. He was so tired, worn out like an eraser run over sandpaper for an hour...

“Alright.”

Blinking, Mo looked up.

“I'll take these two into a different sector. Reno, you stay with Mr. Tesla and hide somewhere nearby. Try to move around enough to stay off the radar, but not so much that you make a scene.” Tseng ordered.

“Got it. C'mon, Mo, back this way.” Reno nodded, crouching down to help him up.

Taking a deep breath, Mo took Reno's hand and stood. Tapatio sprang up to ride on his shoulders, making him wobble a bit before regaining his footing. Reno waited for a split second as Tseng and Shears ran off, then began to lead him back the way they came.

His head hurt. The green at the edges of his vision hadn't faded. The goddamn summon was noisy. If he stopped moving again, he would collapse and not get up again. Reno seemed to notice how out of it he was, taking him by the wrist.

How long did they have? When would Fuhito's attack start? And after that, how long would it take for them to be found? Who would he find first?

Was Shears's warning enough?

Reno suddenly pulled on him, leading him between a couple of buildings and into the shadows. “Sit down. We'll rest for a bit here, let you catch your breath before we move again.

It was narrow, with barely enough room for such a thing, but Mo did so anyway. His knees were practically touching his chest as Tapatio slipped off his shoulders. He let his head thump back against the wall, closing his eyes and trying to focus on breathing. He was vaguely aware of Reno jumping over him, which prompted him to open his eyes again. The redhead now stood in the mouth of the narrow alley. It looked like he'd produced a nightstick from somewhere, and was keeping watch.

Tapatio squeaked, drawing his attention. The poor thing was shaking, looking to him as if for reassurance. Mo smiled weakly, pushing his legs out as far as he could so he could pull the cactuar onto his lap. “It's okay... it's okay... we'll be fine...”

Before he could even finish the last word, there was an ominous rumble. Everything seemed to
“Shit... at least it wasn't close...” Reno hissed, looking more on-edge than Mo had ever seen him.

He swallowed, closing his eyes and touching his forehead to Tapatio's. The entire time, his fist had been clenched around the red marble. It felt warm, not just from his body-heat. Like it was alive.

Something swept overhead and landed at the mouth of the alley with a thump. Reno cursed, and there was a loud crackle followed by a snarl. The smell of electricity and burnt leather lanced through the air, and Mo was on his feet with eyes open wide.

“Jeez, Commander! Give a fella some warning!” Reno snapped, jerking his nightstick away from Genesis. Mo could just see the root of the SOLDIER's wing from around Reno, and he could hear murmuring beyond. Shock and fear, mixed with confusion. “Shouldn't you be defending something somewhere, yo?”

“Tesla,” Genesis said curtly, yanking Reno out of the way, “It isn't safe here.”

“A-actually... I'm about as safe as can be... the guy behind this shouldn't do anything too drastic as long as he doesn't have me...” he rasped in reply.

Genesis growled, reaching into the alley to yank him out. “You're too valuable, to me in particular, to be used as a meat-shield!”

“Exactly! Fuhito wants me, probably for the same reasons you do, so if he can't find me then he can't do anything crazy! And what's the point of being valuable at all if you can't flex it every once in a while?!” he replied, aware of everyone in the area staring at them. Genesis was quite a sight, with his wing out. Mo would stare too.

The SOLDIER growled at him, hand moving towards his midriff. Knowing that meant Genesis wanted to pick him up and fly off, Mo hurried to back into the alley once again, hugging Tapatio to his chest.

“Get the hell back here!”

“Listen, Rhapsodos, go back to headquarters or wherever you're supposed to be. I've got Mo covered.” Reno declared, grabbing Genesis's shoulder.

“Don't touch me!”

Tapatio shrieked in distress, burying his face in Mo's chest.

The song of the materia roared louder.

... That gave him an idea.

“Genesis,” Mo said, his voice halting the building fight between the two redheads, “I'll go with you on one condition. You told me that you fly fast, right?”

The SOLDIER seemed to puff his chest out, feathers ruffling as he declared, “Naturally.”

Mo held out his hand, fingers shaking as he opened his fist to reveal the materia. “Take this and drop it in the ocean. Not near the shore. Far enough out that no one will be able to casually find it while scuba-diving. If you can do that and return, I'll go with you.”

Genesis looked at him skeptically before taking the materia, holding it up to the light. Mo had to
struggle to withhold a gasp, feeling as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

“What is it? I don't recognize it.” Genesis frowned.

“We don't know. All we know is that guy Fuhito, the one behind this bullshit, probably wants it. As of right now, he likely doesn't know we have it. Keeping it would likely be preferable, but right now I agree with Mo. It's probably no good and should just be gotten rid of.” Reno answered.

After a moment, Genesis closed his hand around the small materia. Frowning, the commander looked at Mo.

He was holding Tapatio close with one hand, but he reached out with the free one to take Genesis’s hand. “According to the doctors, I'm sober. It's too dangerous to keep treating me with my metabolism. So it's up to me to stay dry now. Once... once all this has blown over... we can start.”

Stormy blue eyes grew wide for a second, and then a sort of steely determination seemed to settle over Genesis like a veil. The man backed up, away from the alley, and into the open. His wing snapped open, and then he was taking off, earning gasps and shrieks of shock.

“Jeez. What is that guy's deal, yo?” Reno grumbled, moving closer. “You good? Or should we rest a little longer?”

Before Mo could answer, there was another rumble. It sounded closer, shook everything more violently. People began to scream.

“Never mind. Hold on a sec.”

Reno turned away, tucking the nightstick under his arm and cupping his hands around his mouth. “Yo! Listen up! Right now, Midgar is under attack by a terrorist! Shinra is working to stop him as we speak, but if I was you I would start evacuating!”

The effect was instant.

“Pandemonium.” Mo observed, leaning heavily against the wall. The green was finally fading from his vision, thankfully. “Most people try to go for calm when issuing an evacuation order, y'know?”

The redhead shrugged, grabbing his wrist again. “I've neither the time or the man-power for a calm and orderly evacuation. I'm moving you around and keeping you safe from a megalomaniac. Plus we can take advantage of the chaos to blend in and get lost.”

Mo couldn't help but balk for a moment. Clutching Tapatio, he gulped and nodded.

Reno gave a reassuring smile, and they plunged into the streets.
Chapter 79

Fuck.

It was fine, Mo tried to tell himself. Reno would find him before anyone or thing else could. It was perfectly fine.

He'd gotten separated from the Turk a while ago. A few more rumbles had sounded since then, but he hadn't noticed any plate-dropping explosions. The place had started to really clear out, with just about no trace of life at all.

Just Mo and Tapatio hidden away in the shadows of a narrow alley.

It wasn't the same one that Reno had hidden them in earlier. It was a little wider, but also darker.

Mo sighed, hugging Tapatio. The cactuar was shaking. Or his own trembling was shaking the cactuar.

And to think that just under three months ago, he believed life couldn't get worse after being dumped and ditched.

There was movement at the mouth of the alley.

Mo looked up.

For a moment, he thought it was a SOLDIER. But the uniform and helmet were wrong. He felt a chill go down his back as the man passed.

“Reno... Genesis... hurry...” he whispered.

“Psst. Will I do?”

The voice above had his head jerking back, hitting against the wall. He winced, praying the not-SOLDIER hadn't heard, and looked up.

“... Kusel?”

The SOLDIER above nodded, looking around. “There's an EPA out on finding you and playing keep-away. Unfortunately, I am every person available. C'mon, let's get you up here. They aren't searching rooftops yet.”

Mo nodded, checking the mouth of the alley before standing up. Tapatio clung to his shoulders, on his back once again, as he reached up to take Kusel's extended hand. It took a little grunting and heaving, but before long he was on the roof with Kusel.

“Your Turk friends sent out an email warning everyone that there was an attack imminent. I don't think any of us thought it was this imminent. Come on, if we can get to the next sector we should be in the clear.” the SOLDIER murmured, sliding carefully across the rooftop.

“Who was that I saw before? The SOLDIER wannabe in black?” Mo asked, keeping his voice low.

“They're the ones attacking. They're strong, but don't seem too intelligent. Some seem smarter, sure, but not all of them. They're a lot of trouble regardless. I might be able to handle a few, but not in waves of rapid succession.”
He gulped. He hadn't known AVALANCHE had that kind of manpower. From what little he knew about Shears and Elfé, he would have thought they'd reject the idea of it.

Of course, if Fuhi to was the one pulling the strings now...

Kunsel guided him across the roofs, crawling and sliding so they wouldn't be seen. They moved as quietly as possible, not talking much. Despite that, they had a few close calls, almost being seen at least three times.

They were getting close to the next sector when Kunsel froze, hissing a curse.

Peering around the SOLDIER, Mo felt his eyes widen and his gut drop.

There was a cluster of the enemy right were they wanted to go. They couldn't take the rooftops into the next sector, not with a lack of roofs and a wall between them. But with that many of the fake SOLDIERs just there, they had no way to get there.

“Dammit...” Kunsel hissed, pressed flat against the roof.

“Do we go back and try the other way?” Mo suggested, sliding into place next to the man.

“I don’t think we can.”

“Then what?” he asked plaintively.

Before Kunsel could answer, Tapatio screamed.

It was that and that alone that kept their heads on their shoulders, Kunsel throwing them both to the side as a sword came down.

One of the not-SOLDIERs had gotten up on the roof. They were at a disadvantage and the swarm of enemies had heard.

“Get down and go!” Kunsel barked, getting to his knees and yanking his sword from his back.

“But—”

“Go!”

Mo tried not to hesitate, moving to the edge of the roof and leaping off. He landed awkwardly, but not enough to hurt himself. He stumbled, but recovered as the first shriek of swords clashing rent the air.

He took a moment to figure out the best direction to go, and ran.

He was scared.

He couldn't bring himself to look back, scared that he'd see Kunsel dying on a stranger's weapon. But despite that, he knew he was being followed, could hear the heavy tromp of boots on the ground.

It didn't take a genius to figure out that he would never outrun them. He wasn't in the best shape on a good day. And just because he'd stopped drinking didn't mean he was better automatically.

He was fucked.
Mo wasn't even thinking, and ended up smacking into a wall.

Shit.

There was another thing. He didn't know his way around. He had run into a dead end. He staggered back, turning around. The not-SOLDIERs had gotten him cornered, pushed into an alley he hadn't realized he was plunging into.

“Fuck...” Mo rasped, throat dry with terror. He was shaking. There was nowhere to go.

Tapatio sprang off his shoulders, landing a few feet before him. The not-SOLDIERs seemed as confused as Mo was. The cactuar squeaked, like a shrill battlecry.

A hail of needles rained down on the not-SOLDIERs, making them stumble back and throw their hands up.

Mo was shocked. His surprise cost him a second, but then he jolted back into the situation. He stumbled a little over his feet, but scooped Tapatio up and started pushing through the dazed men. While they were taken aback by Tapatio's surprise attack, he had to get away.

They were almost out, almost on their way, when the very last one, in the back, grabbed him and threw him to the ground. Instinct more than anything had him curling around the cactuar. Poor Tapatio was crying. Mo could feel needles digging into him. Not as many as usual. Had Tapatio used them all up in that crazy move?

Rough hands pulled him up.

He was fucked.

He tried to struggle, tried to get away, but a fist like steel crashed into the side of his head.
Chapter 80

... Ugh.

He turned his head, nose scrunched up.

The sharp, bitter smell followed him, and he swatted at it irritably. But it persisted still, making him cough and splutter, eyes opening.

“There you are. Sleep well, Mr. Tesla?”

“F... Fuhito...” Mo rasped, instinctively trying to pull away. But there was a wall behind him, so it wasn't like he could go much of anywhere.

The man smiled, tucking a small vial into his pocket. Smelling salts, probably.

Blinking, Mo realized they were at Aerith's church, with a small cluster of the not-SOLDIERs standing behind Fuhito. Hojo stood nearby as well. From the look on the man's face, he was there willingly. Mo felt his blood run cold, but tried to reassure himself that everything would work out.

“You advance so quickly, Mr. Tesla,” Fuhito said, drawing his attention, “You left AVALANCHE not that long ago, and yet yesterday you were summoning the Goddess. And today... you drew a powerful materia out of Elfé on your own. I can't help but wonder where you'll be with the right hands guiding you.”

Mo didn't say anything, hunching his shoulders and looking away.

He didn't see Tapatio anywhere. He hoped the cactuar was okay. Hoped Kunesl was okay. Hoped Reno was okay. Tseng. Shears. Elfé. Everyone. He wanted everyone to be okay.

“Of course, I do need Zirconiade. And since you seem to have removed it from Elfé...”

Zirconiade? Was that the name of the summon?

Licking his lips, Mo asked, “What makes you so sure I have it?” in a thin, shaky voice.

Fuhito crouched down in front of him, smiling still. “Mr. Tesla, I would like to consider us friends. Your hands aren't even bound, see? I know you have the materia. Shears thought selling you out would save Elfé and that Turk. And given your other abilities, I'm inclined to believe him.”

It was like facing down Rufus all over again. Staring into the jaws of death as death smiled.

But Rufus hadn't killed anyone, not that Mo knew of.

Fuhito had just told him that Tseng and the pair from AVALANCHE were dead.

“You... kill the people I care about... and call yourself my friend...? You... you're fucked in the head... even Lucius put up a better front than that, and Lucius broke me almost more than Vicky did...!”

“It's all for a good cause, I promise.”

His head snapped up, tears already carving paths down his face. “A good cause?! A good cause?! The ASPCA is a good cause, what cause is so good it justifies murdering people?! Destroying a
city?! You're sick!”

Fuhito chuckled, standing up again. Turning to look over the not-SOLDIERs, the younger man said, “This planet is dying. You said so yourself. Anything will kill a planet. It needs time to heal, time to recover. But it can't do that unless there's nothing preying on it.”

Mo felt his eyes grow wide.

“The only way that can happen is if everything returns to the Lifestream. There, nothing can harm the planet, and it can decide for itself if it wants to try creating life again.” Fuhito continued.

“You're insane!” Mo yelled, struggling up to his feet. His limbs felt like jello. He almost fell over, and had to cling to the wall. “Who hurt you, for you to be like this?! What went wrong in your head?! There isn't a world in all of the universe where that would be considered sane!”

Hojo was chuckling. He could see it, hear it. But his focus was largely on Fuhito.

Said man was turning again, still smiling. “That's right. I had almost forgotten. You don't blame snakes for biting, wasn't that what you said?”

The words felt like a punch to the gut, and for a brief moment he wondered if Rufus was okay.

He hadn't been planning on saying anything, but the insane nonsense Fuhito was spewing had him talking, declaring, “You're wasting your time! I gave it away, I no longer have it!”

That had the man's smile faltering. “Don't bluff, Mr. Tesla, it doesn't suit you.”

He shook his head, snapping, “You killed my friends, attacked the place I call home, and now you're telling me you're looking to commit worldwide genocide! I'm past bluffing, I was never a good liar anyway! Strip me down and cut me open, but I don't have it and you're wasting your time!”

A hand slammed into his throat, making him gag in pain. He was shoved against the wall, left to gasp for breath as he was strangled.

“Where is it?” Fuhito hissed. There was a dangerous glint in his eye, and his smile was gone.

Mo didn't answer, gritting his teeth and trying to swallow the pain in his throat.

Hojo was laughing. Full-blown laughing. “To think,” he cackled, “That just three months ago, this man broke down crying at the idea of his own death, but he's now trying to risk his life without fighting! What a progression!”

“Fighting without fighting, hm?” Fuhito growled.

Mo coughed, one hand reaching up to grab Fuhito's wrist. “I... was taught that... for... for evil to win, all good has to do... is stand aside... So all I have to do... all I have to do is keep your hands off that materia... and... if Genesis is as fast as he... he was boasting... then you'll never get it...”

It hurt to speak. After he finished talking, he was sure he would never speak again. It felt like there was some kind of buildup in his throat, and combined with the pain he wondered how much of it was blood.

“You... No matter. If you can summon the Goddess herself, then it doesn't matter.”

Mo grit his teeth, closing his eyes. He was still crying, but part of it was pain now. The other part
was frustration. They'd worked so hard to make sure Fuhito failed. But none of it mattered. Fuhito had changed his plans to accommodate. Everything Mo had suggested to slow him down had been taken in stride.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

“Of course, his summoning ability will mean nothing without materia, and he has to perform willingly on that count.” he heard Hojo commenting.

“Neither of those is a concern to us. I have my ways of earning cooperation. Even the most stubborn of SOLDIERs cave to my will, I imagine a mako-filled alcoholic will be no challenge.”

Fuck.

Mo's grip tightened on Fuhito's wrist. This seemed to prompt the man to release him, and he slid down the wall.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Was it really so hopeless?

He swallowed again, ignoring the pain as he buried his face in his hands.

Fuck.

Something crashed loudly.

“SOLDIER First Class, Zack Fair, is on the job!”

Mo's head snapped up, eyes wide.

Zack stood in the doorway. The boy was out of breath. His hair was a mess. His uniform was rumpled, torn and dirty. He was covered in cuts and bruises and what looked like a nasty burn on his forearm. His sword was nicked and chipped. But there was a fire in his eyes that made Mo not care, made him gasp in relief.

A squeak sounded, and a familiar green head poked up over Zack's shoulder.

“T... Tapatio!” Mo cried out in relief, voice rasping. The cactuar jumped down from Zack's shoulder and raced over, leaping into his arms. “Oh, thank goodness you're safe...”

“You think you can win this?” Fuhito asked, making him look up. “One SOLDIER against all the Ravens here? You've seen how strong they are, haven't you?”

“I don't have to win! I just have to hold on long enough for Mo to get away! That's all!”

Mo felt his gut drop, and scrabbled to his feet again. Throat protesting, he yelled, “I'm not worth your life! Don't throw everything away on me!”

Zack just grinned, taking up a ready stance that Mo recognized from training. “Isn't it fine? These
guys want you for some reason, and it can't be good, so it doesn't matter! As long as you get away safely, then it'll all be fine!"

The boy didn't give anyone else a chance to say anything, lunging forward. The not-SOLDIERs leapt to meet him, and swords clashed with a scream.

Mo wanted to be sick.

There was no way Zack could win. The young warrior was throwing his life away and knew it.

Bile rising in his throat, Mo hugged Tapatio to his chest.

Fuhito yelled as he ran past. He ignored that, ducking around the fight and past Zack. He began to cry all over again as he left the church.

He ran as hard as he was able, pushing himself farther than he thought he could, taking long strides and resolutely not looking back. He refused to look back. Doing so would cost him.

But he was also scared that if he looked back, he would see Zack dying.

So he ran, eyes forward as he followed the path that would take him back to Shinra. He didn't know where he was going. He just hoped he found someone. Hoped Zack survived.

His breath came in ragged gasps that tore at his throat. Fuhito had hit him hard. He'd probably be rendered mute a few days after this. Provided he got out of this, that was—

“Tesla!”

A ball of flame and feathers hit the ground before him, just about making him trip over his own feet. Genesis didn't give him a chance to recover, grabbing him and yanking him close.

The redhead was a mess. His hair was even messier than Zack's had been. He was heaving, just about snarling with how out of breath he was. Mo could feel him shaking where they touched. He smelled of smoke, and his coat had burnt streaks. Part of Mo wondered if that meant Genesis had tried to use flames to increase his speed. His face was pale, forehead coated in a sheen of sweat.

This was the first time he had seen one of the Big Three so uncomposed, he realized as Genesis held onto him and took off.

Leaving the ground shocked him back to the present, making him yell, “Wait, Zack! He's fighting them all alone, there's no way he'll win! Please, you have to help him!”

He definitely tasted blood. Was it that bad?

Genesis snarled, declaring, “We had a deal!” as they flew out from under the plate.

Mo tried to object, but couldn't, coughing. His throat had decided it had enough, apparently. He wasn't going to be talking any more any time soon.

Zack was going to be left on his own.

And Mo couldn't even scream properly.
Mo felt he was getting used to Genesis dropping him unceremoniously when they flew. He hit the ground hard, but scrabbled to his feet quickly. Tapatio was clinging to his chest, crying pathetically. Every breath he took hurt, and he knew he wouldn't be able to speak if he tried.

"Now, for once in your life, stay put and out of trouble! Evacuation efforts are still going on, but if I come back and you're gone, you'll regret it!" the SOLDIER yelled at him, already flying back towards Midgar.

He'd just gotten to his feet, but collapsed to his knees, tears streaming down his face.

Genesis had flown him out of the city and dropped him on a ledge that looked over the area. He could see Midgar from here, a tiered mass of metal and concrete. Pillars of smoke rose up from the city, and he could see crowds of people being filed into trucks. These trucks then moved away, to some destination he didn't know. Even from this distance, he could make out so much detail, and he had no clue if it was the stress or his SOLDIER-grade enhancements.

But right now, he couldn't say he cared.

He was looking at Midgar, but his mind was still in the church, with a worse-for-wear boy less than half his age taking on far too many enemies at once.

Zack had been hurt. Had been tired. Had known he was taking on more than was sane.

Had known he was throwing his life away.

The sob Mo let out as he hugged Tapatio was soundless, and tasted like blood. He was pushing his throat too much too far after Fuhito hit him like that. But he didn't care.

Zack was so young. He shouldn't have been in the military. He should have been worrying over crushes and moving out of his parents' house and other childish things like that. Not over dying for someone like Mo.

That would be four, maybe five people, who had died today because of him. Tseng, Shears, Elfé, Zack, and Kunesel.

His mouth tasted like copper. His face was covered in tears, he could feel it. Tapatio was patting his shoulder, and Mo couldn't tell if the cactuar was crying over his own ragged sounds and trembling.

Save the world? When he couldn't save himself? Couldn't save a single kid?

The Goddess had made quite the pick, hadn't she?

He didn't know how long it was before something hit the dirt behind him, making him jump and twist to look.

Zack, battered, bruised and bloodied, and a dark-haired Second he didn't recognize were picking themselves up off the ground, looking bewildered.

"There, are you happy? Will you sit still now?" Genesis snapped, touching down with an irritable look on his face. More than irritable. Livid.
Inadvertently dumping Tapatio off his lap, Mo jumped up and lunged towards the redhead. He felt the SOLDIER tense under his hands as he grabbed him and pulled him close. It was weak and feeble, but he gave Genesis a squeeze, trying to convey his gratitude. It didn't feel like enough, and he planted a small kiss on the younger man's cheek without thinking about it.

That seemed to be where Genesis drew the line, because he was pushed off. “Now just stay! I'll be back when all this nonsense is done!”

With that, the redhead took off, leaving only a few black feathers drifting down.

Even though Genesis was gone, Mo nodded, and moved over to Zack. He pulled the boy close too, holding on tight. Letting himself know it was real.

“Woah— Hey, I'm okay! Just a little beat-up, but I'll be right as rain with a restore and a day off!” the boy told him, patting his back.

“So Zack gets a hug and I don't?”

He knew that voice.

Mo's head snapped up, looking at the strange Second in confusion.

Was that...?

Zack chuckled, clapping him on the shoulder and saying, “I know, right? Kunsel is totally different without his helmet!”

He reached out, grabbing Kunsel and pulling him into the hug as well.

He owed Genesis. More than a blood transfusion. He owed Genesis a lot. The man was a brat, but he had saved both Zack and Kunsel, brought them both out of whatever chaos was still going on. He owed the redhead a lot.

“Good to see you're safe too. Was worried they would catch you again.” Zack said, voice quieter than Mo was used to. He hated it. The boy was always so sunny, and anything else felt wrong.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath that clawed at his throat, Mo gave the two SOLDIERs one last squeeze and stepped away. His chest clenched painfully as he took in the ugly burn on Zack's forearm. At the cuts and gashes and bruises both of them sported. It looked like Kunsel was favoring a leg.

And yet there were people worse off. Like Tseng and the two from AVALANCHE. And he had no clue what had happened to Reno on top of that.

He swallowed against the lump in his throat, but ended up doubling over, coughing and hacking.

“Woah! Hey, what's wrong?!” Kunsel demanded, two pairs of hands grabbing his shoulders.

Tears streaming down his face, Mo instinctively tried to answer. That just made him cough and hack more, on the verge of retching as blood coated his tongue and dribbled from his lips.

“Shiva, what the hell happened?! No, don't talk! Kunseeeeeel, what do we do?!” Zack panicked, fluttering hands patting at Mo's shoulders and upper torso.

“That bruise on his throat looks pretty nasty, he must've gotten hit or something... do you have a restore on you? I have one, but it's a pretty low level and I don't know how much good it'll do...”
Kunsel answered, eyes wide and frantic.

“No, mine’s pretty much brand spanking new and can barely do anything! Hey, what if we cast together, wouldn’t that amount to something?”

Mo wanted to say something. But as it was, he couldn't speak, and he didn't know if he could get their attention at this point anyway.

Something tugged at his hand, and he looked down as Zack and Kunsel panicked together. Tapatio was looking up at him, holding his fingers between his own... hands, Mo supposed. He managed a tiny, wavering smile, kneeling down and away from the hands about his shoulders. The cactuar squeaked softly, reaching up to hug about his neck, and Mo hugged back.

A soft, warm feeling brushed over him. It was much fainter than other times he'd felt it, but he recognized it as the healing magic of a restore materia. Looking up as his small scrapes closed up, Mo found both SOLDIERs casting, worried expressions on their faces. He offered them the same smile he had Tapatio, feeling the stinging of his throat lessen. Chances were there was going to be permanent damage no matter how much magic healing went into the injury.

He came to Gaia virtually unblemished. A small handful of tattoos, a few blisters that became small scars between his fingers, but nothing else. Now there was a scar on his stomach connecting to the one on his back like some kind of WWE championship belt. He had one on each forearm, a matching set. There was a small one on his forehead from his time in the desert. And now there was a chance he could lose his voice for all he knew.

So much had changed. So much was different.

His throat hurt. It felt like there was buildup starting to block his airway or something, but he didn't know if he should swallow, clear his throat, or spit. It might make it worse.

He wanted a drink. A long and hard one, undiluted and straight from the bottle.

A flap of wings made them all look up. Genesis circled once, then landed, lacking his usual grace and poise. He was visibly exhausted, and his coat was missing. The redhead wore a foul expression, but seemed to nod once, probably in approval that Mo hadn't moved.

“Is... Is it done, then?” Zack asked timidly.

“Yes. We killed the leader of the little band and wiped out those brain-dead lackeys of his.” Genesis said savagely.

“Do we know how bad the damage is?” Kunsel asked, sounding infinitely bolder than Zack.

“Do I look like a fucking Turk?!”

Without thinking, Mo opened his mouth to say something in reply to Genesis. A hand clamped down over his mouth, another one cupping the back of his head to keep it in place.

“No! Shush! Your throat is hurt!” Zack scolded without any bite, blue eyes wide.

“What do you mean, his throat is hurt?”

Kunsel answered, “We don't know. He has a nasty bruise on his throat and when he tries talking, he coughs and spits blood.”
Tapatio squeaked in what sounded like fear, his only warning before he was pulled away from Zack by rough hands. Genesis turned and pushed at him, making him lean and tip his head back to expose his throat. The redhead frowned, brow furrowed, and muttered, “The one time I don't have anything on me...”

“Both of us have restores, but they're low-level. We did our best, but I don't think we really did anything other than ease the pain.” Zack piped up.

Genesis grunted, not looking at either of the other SOLDIERs. He held onto Mo for a moment longer, then let go and moved to the edge of the little ledge they all stood on. “We'll wait here for pickup. Try to behave until someone else has to deal with you.”

Kunsel and Zack both gave affirmatives. Mo bobbed his head, settling down with Tapatio in his lap.

He was tired.

He wanted to know what had happened to Reno. To know if Tseng, Shears, and Elfé really were dead or if that had been a lie. He hoped everyone was safe.

Tapatio patted his face, and he closed his eyes to hug the cactuar close.

He wanted a drink.
Chapter 82

Mo was silent, stroking over Tapatio's tough skin.

It was chaos around him.

A helicopter had picked them up and flown them back to Shinra headquarters. They'd all been promptly whisked off to medical. There were so many people being treated. Mo had seen all kinds of injuries go past. Sadly, he'd seen several white sheets covering still forms, too. Since his injury wasn't as bad as others, he was sitting by a wall, holding Tapatio.

He was tired. But he didn't think he was sleeping tonight. Everything felt heavy. His throat was raw. He wanted to lie down and curl up.

“Yo!”

It took a moment for the voice to sink in. Mo almost thought he'd imagined it.

His head snapped up, eyes wide.

Reno limped over, grinning somehow. Mo didn't know how the redhead was able to smile like that. But seeing it lifted something from his chest, and he patted the seat next to him.

With all his usual drama, the Turk flopped over into the chair. “Aah, off my feet at last! So, you made it out okay?”

Tapatio's hand bapped against his lips before he could attempt speaking. The cactuar squeaked, as if reprimanding him for the thought of making his injury worse.

“Woah, censorship! Dude, what?” Reno laughed.

Mo gave a rueful smile, tilting his head back and poking at his throat.

“Oh, fuck! Someone messed you up!” Reno gasped, eyes wide.

Mo nodded, leaning towards the redhead a bit. He hoped that the worry he'd felt was conveyed properly.

It seemed to be, because Reno gently bumped him back. “We got lucky,” the Turk said softly, “Only lost a handful of people. Lots of nasty injuries... I mean, Tseng lost an eye...”

That had him grabbing Reno's arm, eyes wide.

Tseng... was alive?

“What's wrong? You okay, man?” the redhead asked, looking at him in concern.
Tapatio smacked his cheek lightly, not letting him talk, and he ground his teeth in frustration. He wished he had a way to communicate. He had things he wanted to ask. Things he wanted to say. And he couldn't, all of them trapped behind the apparent bruise on his throat.

Feeling far too cattish, Mo leaned heavily on Reno.

“Can't understand you, yo! Hang on, lemme go find a paper and something to write with!”

Before the Turk could leave, Mo yanked him down and placed a kiss on his nose.

“And here I thought I wasn't your type!” Reno cackled, managing to bounce despite his limp.

He rolled his eyes, going back to petting Tapatio. The small kisses like that were something he picked up from his mother. Whenever she had been immensely grateful, she would kiss the person. Small, chaste pecks on the cheek, temple or nose, whatever was easiest to reach. If he thought about it, Mo realized he hadn't done it in... years, really. But he'd started again here, with Cissnei in his apartment. Now Genesis and Reno.

He couldn't help but wonder if he would have to reign himself in. It wasn't like that was something he did incredibly often, but it could definitely be taken the wrong way.

Reno's reappearance drew him out of those thoughts, the redhead grinning and presenting him with a clipboard full of paper and a pen. Mo smiled, accepting the items gratefully, and carefully wrote down the first thing he wanted to address.

“Yeah, they're alive. Like I said, Tseng lost an eye, and all of them are pretty beat up, but they're alive. That Fuhito guy apparently didn't count on Veld swooping in to save the day after leaving them to fend for themselves.” Reno nodded, giving a crooked grin.

The sigh of relief hurt, but Zack and Kunsel's healing had done enough that he didn't spit up blood. And hadn't Genesis said Fuhito was dead?

He wrote that down, and Reno nodded again. “Sephiroth did the deed, or so I hear. Him, Genesis, and a handful of SOLDIERs and infantry both cornered the guy and his entourage in the slums and fought to the last man. Hojo vanished off somewhere, but since we have security footage showing he went willingly with Fuhito, I imagine he's as good as dead. Us Turks'll probably be made to hunt him down later.”

For some reason, that made him nervous. The idea of Hojo running free, without any restraints, without anyone to watch him... like Fuhito two-point-oh. A scary thought.

“So,” the redhead prodded, drawing him away from that thought, “What happened to your throat?”

Mo blinked, then smiled and shook his head. He carefully shuffled Tapatio into Reno's lap, then crossed his legs and began writing up what had happened in the church. Reno rested his cheek on his shoulder as he wrote, bright eyes undoubtedly riveted on his words. He could feel the Turk's gaze on his hand, so he certainly hoped the man was paying attention.

After regaling Reno with the events from earlier, Mo wrote down what he'd wanted to say when he first saw Reno again. He penned in his worry, his elation upon seeing the redhead and how scared he had been that something had happened.

“Aw, you don't gotta worry about me, yo! We Turks are kinda hard to kill!”
“Like cockroaches.”

Mo jumped at the sudden harsh voice, accompanied by Genesis sitting down on the other side of him. The redhead was shirtless, with a mass of what looked like fresh bandages on his shoulder. Aside from the ugly injury there, Mo couldn't see any other wounds to speak of.

He could, however, see a few strands of silver in the man's fox-ginger hair. For some reason, that made his stomach churn.

“You're so rude, Commander! What would your fans say?” Reno gasped in mock hurt.

Genesis said nothing. Mo noted that the man seemed to be tracking the chaos, eyes narrowed.

“Never thought war would come to us like this, huh?” Reno hummed quietly.

“No,” Genesis replied, “We always knew it would happen. We just thought we had more time.”

Mo allowed himself to shiver. Tapatio clambered back into his lap, and he hugged the cactuar to his chest.

He wanted all the fighting to be over, but something in his gut was saying there was a battle yet to come.
Chapter 83

Chapter Notes

I feel the need to note that while I'm doing my research I'm far from an expert on anything medical. Don't trust my bullshit medical stuff, I'm no doctor. I'm a silversmith. Very different fields.

“Now try saying something.” the nurse coaxed. “It doesn't have to be anything complex, but it'll let us gauge how you're doing.”

“... A... aaaaah...?” Mo offered. It sounded like he'd been gargling gravel.

“It can be a bit more complex than that, sweetie.”

“... I'm hungry...?”

That earned a bit of laughter. “I imagine you are. Why don't you stay here and I'll go find you something? We've done just about all we can for your throat, the doctor can fill you in on the details.”

He bobbed his head, twisting around to find Tapatio. The cactuar waved at him from the chair in the corner of the room. He smiled, waving back as the nurse left the room.

“So, as she said,” the doctor declared, drawing Mo's attention back to him, “We've done all we reasonably can for your throat. There will be some permanent damage, affecting your voice, but nothing major. As it is right now, it will hurt, but hurt more like a sore throat during a bad cold. Unfortunately, cough-drops won't help you. Try not too talk too much. If you have to talk, try to avoid raising your voice too much. Do your best to stick to softer foods, and I would avoid anything overly sugary. There's nothing we can really prescribe aside from that, and using any more healing materia at this point would do more harm than good.”

Mo nodded in understanding. That tended to be how most medical things were, too much of a good thing made it bad.

“Excuse me!” came the nurse's voice in the hall. “Commander Rhapsodos!”

Oh dear.

Mo allowed himself to close his eyes with a heavy sigh as the door to the room banged open. He heard Tapatio squeal, and it only took a second for the cactuar to latch onto him.

“There there...” he croaked, patting the sentient succulent's back.

“Commander, please, we aren't done here yet.” the doctor said, probably trying to mollify the man.

“He looks fine to me!”

Mo opened his eyes and reached out, grabbing the doctor's sleeve. Once he had the man's attention, he gave his head a bob.
The doctor sighed, stepping to the side. Genesis huffed, all but stomping closer. He was looking considerably better. Still shirtless, still bandaged like no one's business on his shoulder, but his hair was no longer a disaster. He didn't look too pale. His chest wasn't heaving any more. Still a grouchy brat, though.

“We're starting the transfusions now.” Genesis declared.

“Shiva's tits you are!” the nurse snapped, apparently having followed the redhead in. “He needs to rest after everything that happened today!”

“Agreed. In addition to the damage to his throat, Mr. Tesla isn't—”

“I don't care!” Genesis roared, making Tapatio quiver in fright as he cut the doctor off.

Mo stood up, drawing all eyes in the room onto him.

“It's fine,” he rasped, “I made a promise, and I've kept him waiting for a while now.”

Genesis seemed to smirk triumphantly, the nurse stomping out. The doctor just sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “It isn't like you can even give him all that would be needed in one sitting, Mr. Tesla. It takes four to six weeks for the red blood cell count to go back up to healthy levels after drawing a pint of blood.”

... But if that was the case, then any work his blood did would be undone, wouldn't it? Genesis had said that after a brief time of recovery, the degradation began to progress again...

The redhead seemed to realize this as well, snarling and pacing back and forth.

... Well... humans could lose more than a pint before passing out, let alone dying.

This was a stupid idea.

“H... How much could you take before running risk of killing me?” Mo asked.

Both Genesis and the doctor stared at him incredulously.

Carefully adjusting how he held Tapatio, he explained, “If I give up as much as possible, then there's some in reserve. It can be given in... doses, I guess, until I've recovered enough to give more.”

“For one thing,” the doctor said sharply, “You need to stop talking or you'll undo all the work on your throat. For another, you would be living here, unable to go out, until your red blood cell count returned to normal, only to start the cycle over again. SOLDIER benefits or not, I simply cannot allow that.”

“So you would have me die instead?” Genesis hissed, eyes narrowed. “Waste away in a slurry made of my own decaying body? He would live, recover. I won't.”

Mo huffed, looking down at Tapatio. The cactuar looked innocently back up at him.

If there were no doctors willing to help, it threw a wrench into everything. But Genesis needed his blood, and he had promised. But they needed to be consistent in it, or it wouldn't matter anyway. The only way Mo could see was to push his own limits, give as much blood as he could give without dying, and maybe then receive a transfusion himself. He was type O, right? So he could give to anyone, but could only receive from other type O donors? He thought that was right. He
couldn't remember everything about blood types. He knew they existed, and that there were compatibilities and incompatibilities, and there was some divide between negative and positive. He was an artist and a desk-jockey, not a doctor.

There was a loud sound, like a muffled explosion, and suddenly the room was a little too cramped. It was filled with Genesis's wing, feathers falling to the floor all over.

The doctor was recoiling away from Genesis, looking shocked and terrified. The redhead himself looked to be on the verge of killing the man.

Without thinking, Mo swung Tapatio onto his back and threw himself between the two. Genesis didn't seem to relent, bristling like an angry cat and growling twice as much. It took everything he had not to back up more than a step, admittedly afraid. He knew that Genesis was... the angry sort, short of temper and probably not spanked enough as a child, but this... this was more than that. This was closer to the frantic jabbering of the sludge-covered maniac at the bank.

Genesis needed help. As far as he knew, Mo was the only one able to give it.

He gulped, trying to think of how to defuse the situation, stop the ticking time bomb of fury before him from going off.

The door opened.

The nurse screamed, dropping something that clattered across the floor.

A harsh voice barked out, “Genesis!”

And that did the trick. The redhead recoiled as if he'd been struck, blinking rapidly before looking to the door. Mo followed his gaze and found Angeal standing in front of the nurse, a bowl spilled across the clean tile floor.

“I...”

If Genesis said anything after that, Mo didn't hear it over the rustling of feathers. The redhead was suddenly fleeing the room, wing gone as he pushed past Angeal and the nurse. The other SOLDIER swept a questioning gaze over the room before following, footsteps thumping after the redhead.

Tapatio was shaking, soft whimpers making their way to Mo's ears. His stomach was starting to protest, reminding him he was in need of a meal.

But he couldn't think of that just yet.

Turning to the doctor, Mo reached slowly out and took the pale man's trembling hand.

“... Please...” he whispered, not sure how much of the noise actually reached anyone.

Thankfully, the man nodded, slow and shaky.
Mo's favorite movie is probably The Adventures Of Baron Munchausen. A weird and crazy one, for sure, but a good one. Plus it has Robin Williams in it.

When Mo heard someone sit next to him, he fully expected it to be Genesis. But upon opening his eyes, he found Veld.

“H'lo.” he croaked.

“I'm told you're not supposed to be talking.” the gruff man replied.

Mo shrugged, casting about for Tapatio. He was tired, extremely so. He was dizzy and felt like he was full of air. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.

“... It's also my understanding that I should thank you.”

He paused, blinking. Groggily, he turned his head to look at Veld.

The man was quiet, head bowed and hands knit tightly together in his lap. As if he was repenting for something.

Before Mo could say anything, Veld spoke up again.

“You called her Elfé. Everyone did. I guess... I guess she forgot. But her name is Felicia. She's my daughter... my little girl.”

Huh, so they were related? It explained why they looked so similar, especially when they scowled... oh, shoot, Veld was still talking...

Mo tried to pay attention. He really did. But he was tired. He couldn't stop... tuning out... drifting off... not asleep... not awake...

He was pulled back to the world by a hand on his chest. Blinking rapidly, Mo grabbed blearily at the hand. But everything was sluggish, and it took him longer than expected to actually reach and grab the stranger's wrist.


“Can... can you stand?”

The redhead sounded so sluggish. But maybe it was just that Mo was having trouble hearing. He blinked up at the SOLDIER, opening his mouth to answer, but his mouth was so dry all that came out was a pathetic wheeze.

“Good enough.”

Genesis didn't let him attempt anything else, dragging him up. He stumbled, legs nearly giving out from under him.
“Good. Enough.” Genesis ground out, voice sounding strained, heaving him up, dragging an arm across his shoulders. “Where's your blasted pet?”

A shrill squeak. Rubber on rubber. It stabbed his ears.

“Then come the hell on!”

Genesis was swaying, Mo realized. That wasn't just his own instability.

Suddenly they were moving, Mo almost dropping to the floor. Genesis yanked on him, growling, and something attached itself to his leg. Tapatio. He tried to look down at the cactuar, but almost stumbled over his own feet. Genesis cursed, staggering, and Mo slurred out an apology.

After that, he must've blacked out or something, because he came to in the elevator. It felt like they were moving. The jolt of the thing starting must've been what snapped him back into consciousness. It felt like the fact that he and Genesis were leaning on each other was the only reason either of them was standing.

“Are you... okay...?” Mo managed to get out.

“I am just fine. I heard you had blood drawn and received some. Now we're going to Angeal's apartment to spend the night because that was the only way the damn nurse would release us.” the redhead growled back.

Tapatio squeaked. The noise hurt less. Was he recovering?

The elevator stopped. Genesis gave a noise that could only be described as a gurgle. Mo felt himself nearly pitch over, scrabbling at Genesis's shoulder in effort to stay up. Tapatio patted his thigh reassuringly as the doors slid open. Working together, with Tapatio serving as a cheerleader, they got out of the elevator and began staggering down the hall.

At one point they had to stop, Genesis leaning more heavily on him and shuddering. The redhead made a number of unattractive noises, pale and slightly green, before squeezing his eyes shut and gulping. After that, they had started off again. But before too long, they were standing in front of Angeal's door, redhead hammering angrily on the wood.

"'Geal! Angeal, open up, I know you're in there!” Genesis howled.

Mo picked up on a frantic scuffling inside the apartment seconds before the door opened.

“What are you doing here?!” Genesis snapped.

“Uh— The barracks got hit pretty hard, so Angeal said I could stay with him until I'm set up with an apartment or they fix the barracks. Did you guys need something?” Zack asked, eyes wide.

“Yeah, that was, uh, Genesis. He threw Mo on the couch and went to barf. What should I do?” Zack asked, appearing over the back of the couch. Mo blinked, hearing Angeal... somewhere. “Stay with... Okay, I can do that.”
The boy vaulted over the back of the couch, making Mo flinch. Zack then picked him up and rearranged him, sitting down so Mo could lean against his shoulder. Tapatio sprang up into his lap, getting comfortable almost instantly.

Mo sighed, allowing himself to sag against the energetic younger male. He was feeling better than when Veld had come to see him... right. Veld had come to see him, hadn't he? Or had that been a hallucination induced by blood-loss? He was three pints down, after all.

His eyes landed on Zack's arm. From his wrist to his elbow, the boy now had an impressive burn scar. It was easy enough to see that materia had been used to help heal it, but it was still a scar. It was still big and visible and a scar. It must've hurt like hell when he first got it.

“So...” Zack said, sounding thoughtful.

Mo grunted for him to go on.

“I know you aren't supposed to talk too much, since your throat is healing. But can you tell me about your world? Like... you aren't going back, right? Is there anything you're really going to miss?” the boy asked.

He hummed, looking to Tapatio as he mulled the question over. The cactuar looked back, head tipped slightly to the side.

Angeal's apartment smelled like flowers and potting soil. There was the smell of something cooking again. It was cozy and homelike. If he was being honest, Mo liked it better than his own apartment.

It was the same for worlds, when he thought about it. This world had people who were genuinely his friends. He had a good boss here. People were more inclined to push him to be better here. He had none of that back on earth.

But... something he would miss, huh...?

“... It's silly.” he croaked, shaking his head.

“So's Reno! Tell me!” Zack argued.

Mo hesitated a moment longer, then admitted, “The movies and TV shows. I mean... I'm not yet caught up on Voltron. And I'll never get to see a Disney movie again. Or Heathers, or Highlander, or Van Helsing, or Italian Job, or Plan Nine From Outer Space, or...”

He stopped, realizing he was rambling.

“No, go on! Those sound interesting! Tell me about them!”

With how big and powerful he was, it was sometimes hard to forget that Zack was a kid. An honest to goodness kid. A minor.

Smiling a little, Mo closed his eyes and began to explain.

“Voltron is this show that's been redone... at least five times by now. I've only seen the most recent version. But the basic premise is that these five teenagers end up becoming legendary warriors who fight in outer space. They free enslaved planets from the evil Emperor Zarkon using these big robotic space cats given to them by an alien princess. These five lions come together to make the most powerful weapon in the universe, a warrior known as Voltron. It's... silly, and fantastic, and
Lance and Keith are so obviously gay for each other, though the internet is so full of spoilers that I already know Shiro is the canon gay character... but so far it's a good show. I really want Prince Lotor to stay good. He makes a good hero, far better than a villain.”

“Wow. And the others?” Zack asked eagerly, bouncing a little and making Mo open his eyes.

Before he could answer, Genesis came into the room, all but throwing himself onto the couch next to Mo. Tapatio squeaked, scooting onto Zack's lap. Mo understood, the redhead looked ready to light anything that dared cross him on fire.

“And and and?” Zack prompted, oblivious to hellfire incarnate on the other end of the couch.

“Shut up, puppy. Some of us are under the weather.” Genesis grumbled.

Mo smiled wanly, but continued to explain.

He was midway through explaining Rockula when Angeal finally appeared.

“By Odin's beard, Gen! You look like the cat dragged you in!”

“I'll be fine! The only way the damn nurse would let us go was if we spent the night here!” the redhead snapped back, drawing his knees up and curling up. Like an overly spoiled cat, Mo thought.

“She shouldn't have let you go at all!” Angeal scolded, looking them both over. “Goddess almighty, you both look half-dead! The two of you should be resting!”

“We are, 'Geal. I refuse to spend the night in that half-assed hospital, and if I take my eyes off this man he'll end up kidnapped by Wutaian insurgents or frozen on the northern continent.”

Mo wanted to object, but with his luck that was probably true. He huffed a sigh instead, pouting a little as Zack snickered.
Chapter 85

Twelve pints of blood.

That was how much it was estimated was needed to fully cure Genesis. The man had been taking Mo's blood in doses for a few weeks now, and there was, so far, pretty good improvement in his condition.

And it being a few weeks, that meant it had been a few weeks since Fuhito's attack. For the most part, things had returned to normal. Mo was still working with Lazard on the executive side of SOLDIER. He still itched for a drink every now and then. His voice had gained a small rasp from the injury Fuhito dealt, but not much else. And it turned out Veld's visit had been real. Elfé— that was, Felicia and Shears were currently under investigation by the Turks, but Mo thought it rather plain the two would be let off the hook. Tseng now wore an eyepatch, traces of a scar peeking out on the bridge of his nose and his temple. According to Reno, orders had yet to go out to hunt for the missing Hojo. Rufus would soon be returning from his house arrest in Junon.

But still, Mo thought with a slight sigh.

Twelve pints was a lot. Three more visits to medical that would leave him... considerably drained and loopy. And then he'd promised Angeal blood too, and any SOLDIER who needed it. The next visit was next week.

Right now, though, he was heading to the break floor. Shears and Elfé— Felicia had asked if he would meet them there. Something about discussing plans for the future, which was... ominous in a good way? He supposed?

Mo leaned against the elevator wall.

Twelve pints.

It was good that Genesis was making progress. That the degradation was being pushed back. But twelve pints... that was more than was in the human body. The average adult human had nine pints of blood or something like that. Twelve was... a lot.

How much would Angeal need? The man wasn't degrading, but apparently had a similar origin story to Genesis. Less, probably. Maybe three pints would be enough for him.

The elevator dinged.

Straightening up, he got off. A few other people got on, and he excused himself as he wove around them. As the doors slid shut behind him, Mo looked around for the two... former terrorists, he supposed. This floor was pretty open, aside from the large tree in the middle of everything, so...

Aah, there. At one of the tables by the cafe.

He headed over to join them. It looked like Veld was with them, sipping at some drink or other as they talked. It was... different, seeing them side-by-side. Veld and... and Felicia. Like this, it was obvious they were related. Felicia was softer, less angular than Veld, and only part of that was how young she was, but Mo felt like an idiot for not noticing sooner.

Shears noticed him, and waved. Mo waved back as the Verdots looked up.
Sliding into the chair across from the trio, he asked, “So, ah, what was it you wanted to talk about...?”

“First of all, to thank you. We haven't gotten the chance to actually talk at all... but I'm told you're the one who saved me. Who got the materia out before it could kill me.” Felicia said with a bob of her head.

“Oh... it was nothing...” he mumbled, dropping his gaze to the table.

“Mo, you saved my life and kept Fuhito from slaughtering countless innocents. That's far from nothing.” the young woman persisted.

“I wasn't trying to be a hero. I just... I don't like seeing people get hurt.” he told her, shaking his head. Leave heroics to Zack and Genesis, to the SOLDIERs who tried and worked for it.

“Well, whether or not you were trying, Fuhito is gone. AVALANCHE is more or less disbanded. Shears and I want to attempt what you talked about, building our own company.”

Mo lifted his head at that. People didn't usually listen to things he said that seriously. That was...

“Good luck?” he offered meekly.

“They're going to need it. Shinra has a tendency to buy out or stomp out all competitors, and neither of them has any experience in the business.” Veld said, voice just a touch on the dark side.

“And no one on Gaia has the experience you do, from a completely different world.” Felicia nodded.

Wait. Hold on a second.

“Am I being scouted?” he asked, looking between the trio with wide eyes.

“We thought about that, but fucking Shinra likes having a death-grip on SOLDIERs, thanks to the secrets of the freakin’ treatment. Have better chances convincing a zolom to give people rides for gil than getting you away from Shinra.” Shears sneered.

“Well?” Mo said in confusion, trying to figure out what was going on.

“Do you have any ideas where we could start? What did your world do, without mako?” Felicia said, leaning forward.

“Well... I... I mean, a lot of what we used were fossil fuels, but that was pretty bad for the environment too... Look at renewable resources. I have... very little clue how any of it works, but there's solar energy, hydroelectric energy, wind energy... uhh, thermal energy? I think? That might have still been in hypothetical stages, but it's something to look into?” he offered.

“What do you mean, bad for the environment? They would be the easiest to get our hands on, could we start out using them until we got to the point of these renewable resources?”

Mo blinked at the question, then dug into his bag. He could spare a page from his sketchbook for this.

Finding a blank page, he made a quick chart, with energy types down the side, and pros and cons splitting the rest of the page.

“Fossil fuels are easy to get, and doing things like mining for them does generate jobs. But the
pollution they put out is pretty steep, and they're a no renewable resource. Once they're gone, they're gone. Thermal energy... aah, has something to do with geothermal vents and things? In theory, it would be a steady and reliable energy source. But the research and implementation would be insanely expensive. So maybe avoid thermal for now.”

Even Veld was leaning forward, examining the page as he wrote. Jeez, that was... pressure.

“Solar energy is another pretty reliable source. The panels can be converted into roofs and siding for buildings, and can be pretty attractive. However, they have to be big, for optimal surface area to be hit by the sun, and can be expensive to make, plus you'd have to do research. Hydroelectric is another that would have to be researched and expensive to implement, but steadily reliable. It would also generate jobs, since hydroelectric plants do need to be maintained more. Wind... it's probably the easiest way to go, really, but big mills aren't always able to run without relatively strong wind, plus they take up a lot of space and are a threat to aerial wildlife. I saw news-articles about smaller ones that were called wind-trees, that looked attractive, took up little space, and didn't need very much wind to generate a lot of power. Um... then there's things like nuclear energy. It's another one that would generate jobs and be more or less just as good as all the renewable energies. But then there's things like disposing of radioactive waste, making sure workers are healthy, things like that.”

Done writing, he turned the sketchbook for them to see.

“The people at Cosmo Canyon already use windmills for energy. We can start there, using fossil fuels alongside it until we can get set up with the others.” Felicia nodded.

“What about the government issue? And military?” Shears frowned, looking up at him.

Mo shook his head. “I wouldn't worry about those things just yet. Focus on actually getting your own company started.”

“He's right,” Veld said grimly, drawing all their attention to him, “You have good intentions and a fistful of ideas, but that's not nearly enough to get set up these days. You need funding, a base location to start at, and people to help you research just to start. It would be a good idea to have someone with corporate experience on your side, maybe even from Shinra.”

“And who in the hell is going to quit Shinra to join us?” Shears grumbled, turning away with a scowl.

Silence fell over the table, grim and oppressive.

... Well... Mo could think of one...

“Uh... Rufus might.” he proposed awkwardly.

All three zeroed in on him instantly. He flinched a little, blushing as he looked at his lap. Stammering, he explained, “H-he funded you before... that implies he has some issue with the company, ri-right? Plus he has the corporate experience you don't... so... Never mind. It was a stupid suggestion.”

“Maybe not.”

Veld's words had his head snapping up again, eyes wide.

“Getting him properly away from the rest of Shinra might be a challenge, but Rufus has never really gotten along with his father. Chances are, he'll agree. I can't say for certain, but he would, in
a way, be the ideal. Despite his age, he has experience, influence, and funds.” the gruff man said, sipping from his cup with a thoughtful expression.

“And I may know a place in Cosmo Canyon where we can start. I'll have to make a few calls to be sure, but if nothing else, we have things to go off of. Can I keep this?”

Blinking, Mo realized Felicia was pointing to the sketchbook page. “Uh, sure...”

She nodded, carefully pulling the page from the book.

Uncertain of where to go from that point, Mo opened his mouth—

A cannonball of condensed energy slammed into him with a happy yell. All the wind went out of him as his chair clattered to the floor. But instead of falling with it, he found himself swung up into the air, arms pinned to his sides thanks to a rib-crushing hug.

“I was looking for you! Why weren't you answering your phone?!”

“H-hi, Zack... down, please...”

“No way! You'll vanish again! Genesis was right, you vanish far too easy!” the boy declared, squeezing him tighter.

“Okay... but I can feel my gallbladder... you aren't supposed to feel that...” he gasped, trying to wriggle and get some breathing room. It didn't feel like it worked.

“I think we were done anyway.” Veld commented, sounding vaguely amused. Felicia had a hand clapped over her mouth and Shears was staring incredulously. “Don't forget your sketchbook.”

Zack's grin was way too big.

Mo began composing a last will in his mind.
Mo's fear is inspired by my little sister panicking when she sees horses—she adores horses and ponies, but they're so much bigger than her she finds it scary.

“What is that?!” Mo yelped in fright, digging his heels in and pulling uselessly against Zack.

“They're chocobos!” the boy replied with a grin. “Come on, you'll love them, I promise!”

After abducting him from the break floor, Zack had released him in the elevator. The young SOLDIER had told him with bright eyes and a dazzling smile that there was something he wanted Mo to see. If he had known that something would be a stable full of hulking feathery monsters, maybe he wouldn't have given in so fast.

“Come on, they're the best thing ever! Here, I'll show you the one I get to ride!” Zack declared, dragging him along as dozens of sharp beaks and beady eyes swiveled to watch them go past. Mo struggled to hold onto a whimper, staying steadfastly in the center of the aisle.

They were huge. Enormous. He had guessed, back when Reno told him what they were. If they were this world's replacement for horses, naturally they would be big. But there was a stark difference between a thumb-sized green eraser and a tower of feathered yellow muscle.

“Hi there, boy! How you doing?” Zack greeted, stopping in front of one boxes in particular. The chocobo made a noise that Mo supposed could have been a greeting, but he was more worried about not being able to tell if that was a happy or angry crest-flare. Was there a difference? How would one be able to tell? He was drawn out of those thoughts by Zack declaring, “Mo, come here and say hello!”

Before he could object, the boy had grabbed his wrist and tugged him close.

“W-wait—No—”

But it was too late, Zack offering his hand to the feathery monster. Mo froze, holding his breath and trying not to whimper in fear as the tip of the huge beak brushed over his fingers. He could feel how sharp it was, smooth and somewhere between warm and cool, and shit the tip was scratching over his palm—

Mo yanked his hand away, stumbling back into the hypothetical safety of the center of the aisle.

“Mo?” Zack asked, eyes wide with concern as he tucked his fingers into his armpits.

The safety was entirely hypothetical. If these things were the equivalent of horses, would those flimsy stable doors hold them? If they wanted to get out, what exactly was stopping them? They were so big and he could hear their claws on the floor and what was the difference between a friendly and unfriendly crest flutter—

Warm hands rested on his shoulders.
Blinking, he realized that he wasn't breathing, shuddering as he hugged himself. Zack stood in front of him, wearing a concerned expression.

“I'm sorry, Mo. I didn't think it would scare you. Do you wanna leave?” the boy apologized.

“I— Yes, please!” he squeaked, giddy with fear.

“Okay. Just let me feed mine and we can go get lunch or something, okay?”

Mo nodded, teeth clacking a little with how hard he did.

“Alright, go wait by the door, I'll be over in just a sec!”

It took everything he had not to bolt. He didn't know if running would upset the chocobos. And if it did, what would happen? Would they panic? Try to stampede? Would they even notice?

True to his word, Zack didn't take very long, lightly jogging over and putting an arm around his shoulders. Mo couldn't help but lean into the boy, using him as a shield until they left the stables.

“Sorry, Mo. I... I've never seen anyone react like that before.” Zack said apologetically, looking truly miserable.

Taking a deep breath, Mo replied, “It's okay... and, y'know, I imagine... with time I won't be as scared... But they're so big! Like prehistoric ostriches, the ones that could crush a full-grown man's skull in their beaks with minimal effort! I...! Seeing them as soup mascots or erasers is one thing, but they're...!”

“Great big feathery cuddle monsters!”

Well, it looked like Zack was perking up again. That was either really good or really bad.

“I know! There's a chocobo ranch not too far away from Midgar! I can take you there sometime, and we can start with introducing you to chicks! And then we can work you up to riding them!”

“Now hold on a minute—”

“Oh, yeah, where do you want to eat? My treat, since I made you all upset with the chocobos! I know this great place with an all-you-can-eat buffet that we can probably make in time for the lunch-time deals! Wanna eat there?” Zack asked with his usual high-beam grin, stars in his eyes.

Sunshine smile, starry eyes, jet-black hair, anything else and this kid would be made out of the sky.

“Uh... sure?”

“Awesome! Come on, let's go!”

And there was the special brand of whiplash only Zack could give him, staggering over his own feet as the kid yanked on him.

Hm, that would make a good picture, though. Zack, but made of cosmic bodies and colors. Done in pencil, he felt, that would be softer and more Zack-like. There was a certain feel to the boy that paints or inks wouldn't quite capture, and Mo would be the first to admit that his starry skies looked best in colored pencil.

It didn't take long at all for Zack to run him out of breath, the two pausing on a street-corner while
Mo caught his breath.

“Sorry. It's easy to forget you aren't in SOLDIER with your eyes. And I see you so often, too!” the boy declared with a sheepish grin. Lordy Lou was the boy doing squats?

“Where... do you get all... that energy from?” Mo replied, panting.

“... I dunno?”

Of course. Naturally. What was he expecting?

Taking a deep breath, Mo took stock. He was still a little winded, but he wasn't huffing and chuffing like he was dying now. He was sweating and a little dizzy, and if Zack yanked on him anymore his shoulder would dislocate. But he could breathe now, if nothing else.

“Okay... so... where is this place at...?”

He followed the bouncing boy, admittedly dragging his feet a little, as Zack led him down the street. He smelled the place before seeing it. A fast food buffet, then. Mo could say with some certainty that he'd recognize the smell of a deep-fryer anywhere.

It ended up being... not packed, but having quite a number of people inside. They paid to get access to the buffet and laid claim to a small table in the back. The chatter of people was surprisingly overwhelming. It seemed somehow louder than the canteen. Smaller spaces having different acoustics, he supposed? Maybe? There was more bodily contact, too. Mo was confident that his cheeks were pink by the time he'd let Zack pick out his food, and he could see his nose turning red when they returned to their table. Had he really had so little casual contact that he was getting flustered over this? Didn't Reno and Zack touching him all the time count for anything?

They settled down to eat, and Mo took out his sketchbook to start drawing Zack. Said boy started chattering happily. Mo got the feeling one could lock Zack in a room with nothing but a potted plant and the SOLDIER would happily name, befriend, and tell his life-story to the plant. It was just the kind of person Zack was.

On a whim, Mo laid out the base for a flower crown on his picture of the boy.

Eventually, Zack fell silent. Mo looked up to see if there was a question he had missed, but from the stormy expression the younger man wore, that wasn't it. It looked like he was glaring at a nearby table, too. One that had a trio of women, little more than teenagers, sat there, all wearing way too much makeup and way too little clothing.

Curious and confused, Mo turned his attention towards the conversation.

“— freaky, isn't it? I mean, people don't have wings!”

“Yeah, right. I mean, he's hot and all, but I don't think he's human. Plus I heard he tends to bully people. How do we know he won't just turn on us?”

Genesis. They were talking about Genesis.

“Exactly. I don't know why Shinra's bothering with him, to be honest. Everyone knows that if you piss them off, you vanish, so why are they keeping him around if he's some kind of weirdo?”

Zack seemed unable to take any more, jumping up so his chair fell over and the table rattled. Chatter in the immediate area died instantly, all eyes on them.
“Zack, easy...” Mo murmured, standing up as well, hands out in a calming gesture. Electric eyes darted to him. “If it's upsetting, we can leave.”

“You heard— They can't just say that!”

More people were staring. It would be bad for Zack if a scene started.

Stepping closer, Mo reached out to touch the boy's wrist. “I know it's horrible. But there's nothing we can do. People will always be nasty just to be nasty.”

“But—”

“Let's go back,” he said over Zack's objection, “We can go back and find him and if it's still bothering you we can talk it out with him. Okay?”

After a minute, Zack nodded.
“Zack,” Mo sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose, “You're the one who wanted to talk to him.”

“That was before I remembered that he kinda does set things on fire at random!” the boy objected.

The two of them were standing in front of Genesis's apartment. Being the assistant to the SOLDIER department director meant finding out the addresses of every SOLDIER was easy. Getting ahold of Genesis's schedule was less easy. And the redhead wasn't answering his phone. But, thankfully, Kunsel was. Mo still wanted to know what Turk the man was sleeping with, but they found out Genesis had yet to leave his apartment today through him. Apparently the commander hadn't left for several days.

“Zack...” Mo sighed.

“I wanna make sure he's okay and all, but he's kinda intimidating—”

Zack was never going to do it on his own.

Mo reached out and banged on the door, calling out, “Genesis, are you there?”

Silence.

The young SOLDIER at his side gave a concerned whimper.

Banging on the door again, Mo called, “Genesis, please, if you're there let us in!”

“Did he run away or something? Like... jump out the window and fly away in the night?” Zack asked, voice low and eyes wide.

Honestly, he wasn't putting that past the redhead. But he got the feeling Genesis was sulking alone in the dark. Maybe he was projecting a little, since that was what he would do, but... really, it seemed like a very human thing to do.

Time for drastic measures, though.

Knocking one last time, Mo called out, “Genesis, if you don't answer by the time I've counted to five I'm calling my Turk and bribing him to pick the lock on this door! And Reno's probably easy to bribe, take him out for drinks—”

The door slammed open.

“You,” Genesis hissed darkly, making them both take a step back, “Are staying sober!”

“... I said I'd get Reno drinks, not drink myself...” Mo replied, voice soft.

Genesis was either sick or not taking care of himself. It didn't look like he'd combed his hair at all. His lips were visibly chapped, and badly at that. The clothes he was wearing were rumpled and a touch on the stained side.

“What do you want?” the redhead snapped. His voice was... hoarse.

Zack seemed to be shocked dumb, so Mo took the lead. “We heard people saying things. We wanted to make sure you're okay.”
“Oh, so you know what they're calling me, then? What people think I am?”

Genesis’s sneer was all that was needed to push Zack into talking again. “They have no right to say any of it! You work hard and give everything your all, you save people's lives and fight their wars! You're a hero, sir! And no one has any right to call you anything else!”

The redhead barked out a harsh, short laugh, turning away in a way that suggested he was going to shut the door in their faces.

Mo didn't let him, throwing all his weight into the door. Granted, he was still a string-bean, but Genesis wasn't expecting it. The door was yanked from the redhead's hand, and Mo had to flail a little bit to make sure he didn't fall to the floor. Looked like he was right about Genesis sulking in the dark.

Staggering a bit, Mo spun towards Genesis. The man's eyes were wide in shock, mouth opening to say something.

He didn't give the redhead a chance to talk, though, lunging forward. He wrapped his arms around Genesis, burying his face in the SOLDIER's uninjured shoulder.

“H-Hey...”

“If they can't love you like this,” Mo said forcefully, “If they can't appreciate you for who you are, can't be thankful for you and your service, then they don't deserve you as a so-called normal person! They don't deserve you as anything! If they've seen your best and your worst and can't accept you as both, then they can't get either! People are never one or the other, and if no one else can see that... then they clearly aren't worth your time!”

“Wh-what he said!” Zack agreed, the only warning either of them got before the younger man was grabbing them in a powerful hug. “We're here for you! Forget about them!”

Genesis was silent. Thanks to how they were pressed together by Zack, Mo couldn't lift his head to take stock of how the redhead was doing. They'd clonk heads and that would be painful all around. Instead, they all stood in the open doorway, pressed together in effort to comfort Genesis.

“... Thank you...”

It was quiet. Mo was confident that if his hearing wasn't enhanced, he wouldn't have caught it.

“No problem, sir.” Zack replied, and Mo could hear the friendly expression the kid was making.

“... Genesis is fine... I suppose. Now let me go.”

“He's not very good at that. Very clingy.” Mo commented, trying to push back against Zack.

“Let go, puppy.” Genesis ordered, doing his best to pull away as well.

Zack stepped away, smiling brightly.

“How do you three control him? Everything I say goes so far over his head it might as well be a shooting star.” Mo grumbled as Genesis shut the door and turned the light on.

“We outrank him.” the redhead replied with a sigh.

“All the feathers! Are you molting?” Zack exclaimed, drawing both their attention.
Genesis had a very nice apartment. A different kind of nice from Angeal’s. Angeal had a sort of homey feel to his apartment. Genesis had given his a sort of high-brown mansion feel. There were several shelves packed full of books. The couches looked like leather. Mo could appreciate the fact that Genesis had several gorgeous oil paintings, impressionist-style landscapes, hanging on his walls.

But Zack was right. There were feathers everywhere.

“Purging, more like.” Genesis said, voice dark.

Mo turned to the redhead, tilting his head in question.

“Your blood is working. I’ve been feverish, and every few days I need to throw up sludge. The wing itches and feathers are falling out... but new ones are growing in. A different color.”

Mo opened his mouth to say something, but Zack burst out, “Let us see! Please please please!”

Genesis crossed his arms over his chest. “And why should I?”

Zack spoke up again, declaring, “We can help you preen!”

“He's not a bird, Zack.” Mo scolded.

“That's what it's called! When you take out loose feathers and things, it's preening!” the boy replied, eyes bright.

After a moment, Genesis shrugged. “If you put it that way...”

Mo squeaked in surprise when the redhead tugged his shirt off. Zack grinned, bouncing over to the door so he could kick his boots off. Genesis moved to drop onto one of the couches, and this time Mo was watching as the huge wing forced it's way out. He jumped, gasping a little in surprise as it sprang out of his shoulder.

“So cool!” Zack squealed, darting past and running his fingers through the feathers. “Aww, they feel so unhealthy! I hope the new ones grow in better!”

Mo awkwardly toed off his shoes and shrugged his bag off, then turned to look at Genesis.

This was... weird. The idea of grooming was always seen as incredibly intimate... it didn't help that Genesis had taken his shirt off... Ugh. Ugh ugh ugh, awkward.

At least on the plus side, the wound on his shoulder no longer looked as bad.

Huffing a bit, he came to join Zack, carefully running his fingers through the feathers. Several came loose and fell away at his touch. As they fell away, he saw one of the newer feathers.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, breathless as his eyes widened. “All of them? Like this?”

“If they keep growing in like that.” Genesis hummed.

“You'll be so stunning!”

It was white. Like snow, pure and soft. The very tip was golden, with a sort of iridescent quality. He could picture the entire wing coated in them, and with the sunlight shining though, making the gold sparkle— Genesis was going to look like a phoenix!
“That's what you do to him!” Zack laughed.

Okay, no.

Mo stood up, face red. “I can't do this if you're going to talk like that.”


“Given your oh-so-classy tattoo, I would have thought that right up your alley.” Genesis added imperiously.

“For starters, I got that when I was black-out drunk. For another thing, you two know I'm gay, right?!” Mo demanded, voice breaking a little bit. “Especially you, Zack, didn't Reno just about flat-out say it in front of you?!”

For a moment, the two were silent, staring at him.

“... I thought that was just Reno being... Reno.” Zack admitted sheepishly.

“And what, pray tell, does your sexuality have to do with anything?” Genesis asked.

“For one thing, have you looked in the mirror? You aren't my type but you're a very pretty man. Then we've got you stripping as though you're putting on a show. Then there's... acts of preening and grooming being incredibly intimate things and you kept it a secret for so long, now you're just letting Zack and I feel your wing up. Top it all off with I'm already giving you my weight in blood and my sexuality just makes everything awkward!” Mo ranted, waving his hands uselessly.

“If I'm not your type, then I don't see the issue.”

Okay, he was glad they were both taking it so well. But this man was goddamn impossible!

“Let me be even more plain about it— You're a very hot, single man. I'm a lonely gay man. I'm giving you blood and sitting here preening your wing. Combine that with the fact that I'm at least ten years older than you. I not only feel like a creepy old pervert but there's a bit of imagery in there that subjugates me in a way I'm not comfortable with. Do you get it now? Please say you do. Please.”

Genesis gave a nod. Mo couldn't help but give a sigh of relief. After a moment, he turned back to the wing and continued to brush his fingers through the dark feathers, gently coaxing the loose ones out.

“... So are you dating Reno?” Zack asked, making him splutter.

“A good question, actually. You're always with the obnoxious loudmouth.”

“No!” Mo burst out before Genesis had even finished talking. “No no no no! Reno's straight!”

“Anyone you have your eye on, then?”

If he hadn't been knuckle-deep in feathers and worried about hurting the redhead, Mo would have thrown his hands up at Genesis's question. “What is it with straight people and hooking me up?! Worry about getting your own SOs, let me worry about finding another gay man!”

“I don't want to hook you up. You're probably one of those people that've absolutely disgusting when they're in love. I want to know your type.” Genesis declared.
“Aww, those relationships are adorable!” Zack cooed, grinning dopily at him.

“I— No, fuck off, I'm not telling you!”

Zack laughed, and Mo stuck his tongue out at the boy. Genesis scoffed, and the huge wing flexed under their hands. An impressive pile of feathers was starting to build up at their feet. Mo almost wanted to collect them all and make something with them, but the second the thought crossed his mind a shudder ran down his spine.

He didn't know if he'd actually shuddered or something, but Genesis suddenly said, “You're giving Angeal blood too, right?”

“Uhh... yes? Why?”

The redhead looked grim when Mo turned to look at him. “You may need to give Sephiroth some too.”

“Wait, why is Angeal getting blood? I thought it was just for your degradack!”

“Hush, puppy, I'm talking,” Genesis said sharply, as if he hadn't just smacked the boy in the face with his wing. “The origin of the cells causing my degradation is a creature called Jenova. The notes Hollander had said that Jenova was excavated from up north. Ancient, but somehow still alive. Inactive. Angeal is part of the same project that I was. And... whenever we can get Seph to open up that much, he tells us that the only thing he knows about his mother is that her name was Jenova.”

Something in Mo twisted in horror at that name.
The end goal is to kill Jenova and hook Mo up. One of those things is progressing better than the other. I'll let you guess which.

“Mo? Are you alright?”

He blinked, looking up at Lazard. “I... uh, yeah. Fine.”

“Are you sure? You've been staring at that same requisition form for the past few minutes. If there's something you aren't sure about, please don't hesitate to ask me.”

Mo shook his head, grabbing his pen from the desk. “I've got it. No problem.”

There was a pause as he began filling out the form again. There was a problem with several SOLDIERs regularly misplacing their loaned materia. Fining them wasn't helping the issue, and the department needed to request more. Mo had suggested the idea that the individuals in question might be selling the materia illicitly, which had led to a watch being put in place on them. But even with that, there was still paperwork.

“... Is it because Rufus is coming back tomorrow?”

His hand stuttered, smudging a few of his letters. “I... I hadn't known. Uh... but Shears and Felicia were debating setting a business up with his help, so I guess that's good...”

A warm, gentle hand came to rest on his elbow. Mo looked up at Lazard in confusion.

“What's on your mind? You can tell me, and I won't tell anyone. Promise.” the man said gently, giving a kind smile.

Mo felt his heart clench. But chances were Lazard wasn't on the table either. Hell, the man was his boss and nearly fifteen years younger than him! It would be inappropriate.

Looking down again, he admitted, “Genesis said something yesterday... that got me thinking.”

“Do tell?”

Putting his pen down, Mo turned his chair so he was looking at Lazard. “Do you know anything about Sephiroth's parents?”

The blonde blinked in what looked like surprise. “I can't say I do. What exactly did Genesis say to bring this on?”

Sighing, Mo explained, “Genesis apparently found files or something that Hollander had. Ones on him and Angeal. There was stuff called Jenova cells that went into making them what they are now. The notes also talked about what Jenova was... or... is? Something Shinra dug out of a hole in the ground up north? And then he said that Sephiroth claims his mother's name was Jenova. So Genesis thinks that the Jenova cells were what was causing his degradation, and he wants me to
make sure it doesn't happen to Angeal or Sephiroth either. And... when I think about it... in a way it makes sense. When my Limit Breaks happen, my vision washes green. But when I look at those three like that, they're dark, murky. And if it is the Jenova cells... well, it's a pretty big coincidence that Sephiroth's mother shares a name with the thing, especially given that Hojo is apparently his father."

Lazard crossed his arms over his chest. “That does give rise to a few questions, doesn't it? Have you asked Sephiroth yet?”

Mo shook his head frantically.

It was... definitely childish, but after their last encounter Mo had been doing his best to avoid Sephiroth. If he had truly offended the man, he didn't want to end up with the general retaliating somehow. Yes, there had been the whole thing in the training room, but there were other people there then. A one-on-one confrontation? Mo wasn't certain he'd survive. He had insinuated that Sephiroth was a child and treated him like one. The thought that the man might hold a grudge... it was intimidating, to say the least.

“Well, aside from Hojo himself, Sephiroth would be the best person to ask.” Lazard said with a sort of half-smirk that made him look way too much like Rufus.

“I'd rather not, maybe, if possible. I have Reno and the other Turks, I'm sure they could dig stuff up if I asked.” Mo replied, scanning the rest of the form. It looked like it only needed his signature, Lazard's, a commanding SOLDIER's, and it could be sent off.

“Perhaps. But would it not be rude to dig through his history without his knowledge or permission?”

Mo bit his lip at that. Lazard had a point, but... well... frankly, Mo was terrified. He... strongly disliked the idea of being alone with Sephiroth after the fiasco that happened last time. Hell, last time seemed to have led directly to his depression issues being ousted! What next, strapped to a couch while some Freud-wannabe informed him that all his insecurities stemmed from a sexual brother-complex of some sort? No thanks!

He had handed the requisition form to Lazard somewhere during his internal rant, and was pulled out of it by the blonde saying, “Well, what do you know.”

Blinking, Mo turned to look at his boss.

“We have several forms here requiring a commanding SOLDIER to sign them, among them one that specifically requires Sephiroth's signature.” Lazard said pleasantly, smiling as if discussing whether or not to have a picnic.

Mo felt his gut drop and his heart stop. “Please no.”

“And he shouldn't be terribly busy today,” Lazard continued, “And it's almost your break-time as well. It's such a coincidence, isn't it?”

He slid out of his chair, turning Lazard's enough so that he could rest his forehead on the man's knee. “Please don't be like this,” he warbled in distress.

There was a good-natured chuckle above him, and a gentle hand combed through his hair. But Mo still heard Lazard pick the receiver of the desk-phone up and start dialing. He gave a pathetic groan and thumped his head against the blonde's thigh a few times.
“Hello, Sephiroth. No, nothing urgent. I have a few things that require your signature, and I believe Mr. Tesla has a few questions for you. Regarding his treatment of Genesis and Angeal, I believe. Yes, of course. Thank you for your time.”

As Lazard hung up, Mo informed him, “You're evil. As bad as Rufus.”

“Oh come now, no need for name-calling.”

Lazard was still petting his hair. Mo huffed, debating the merits of getting up or hiding under the desk. He really shouldn't stay on the floor like this, much less draped over his employer's lap. Anyone else would have fired him for this, he knew that much. But he really didn't want to face Sephiroth. So if he hid under the desk maybe Lazard would fire him and he could flee back to his apartment.

Yeah. Right.

“Your ends are splitting badly. You should take better care of yourself.” Lazard commented suddenly, making him lift his head. The blonde was examining him carefully, it looked like.

“It's just how my hair is. I don't use an absurd amount of product or anything, so that's just how it is.” he replied, pulling himself up and sinking back down into his chair.

“Don't they itch? Or bother you?” Lazard asked, head tipped to the side.

“How did we go from you being mean to my hygiene?” Mo wondered, turning back to the desk.

“I suppose I've just been noticing all the small things. You're very different from almost every other employee at Shinra. Your hair. The ends are split and you never style it. Your lips are chapped and split. Your nails are uneven. Every other employee, especially in the offices, is carefully styled and maintained, and you just... well, in a way, don't seem to care. But then there's how thin you are, and how tired your eyes are, and it's less of not caring and more... more of not caring, if you understand?” the younger man explained, frowning slightly.

“I'm not underweight anymore... I'm just lanky is all...” he objected weakly. It was true, too, he'd managed to put on enough weight that he was just within the healthy range.

Lazard gave him a look. Not just any look, a capital-L look, the kind that mothers gave. The kind that let children know they weren't fooled at all by whatever the kid was up to.

“Careful,” Mo said with a wan, weak grin, “I'll start thinking you care about me.”

“Of course I care about you.”

Mo felt his eyes widen and his heart stutter, not sure how to respond.

“I care about everyone in my department.”

... Ah. Well. There were worse ways to get friendzoned. And Mo reminded himself that Lazard hadn't been up for grabs anyway. The blonde was his boss and the age-gap between them was on the very border of obscene.

Shaking his head a little, Mo turned his attention back to the papers Lazard had given him.

“Regardless, though, one would think that with everything you do, you would take better care of yourself.”
“I sleep. I eat three meals a day. I shower regularly.” he replied, dropping one of the papers into the shredder. They already had that notice, they didn't need three copies of it.

“You also have an unprecedented connection with materia, which you train with, and you're giving pints of blood at a time. Not to mention your mental health.” Lazard countered.

Mo felt his hand twitch, ducking his head a little. Yes, he knew he was broken. But he was very good about not letting that interfere with his professional life. Never once at Villers Accounting and Insurance had anyone ever known. Or if they had, they hadn't called him out on it.

“... I'll get by, sir. I always have, I imagine I always will.” he murmured, voice quiet.

“You don't have to, though. You have people you can depend on.” the blonde pressed.

Mo took a deep breath, willing himself not to cry. The paper he was looking at wrinkled in his grip. One of his nails was on the verge of tearing through, he needed to relax or he'd ruin it.

He didn't want to lean on anyone, didn't want to be a burden or inconvenience anyone. Everyone had their own issues, he could cope with his own. Simple as that.

Before either of them could say anything else, a sharp knock came at the door.

“Come in.” Lazard called.

Sefiroth swept in, as regal as ever. Mo sank down in his seat, hiding his face behind his work.
Mo was quiet, keeping his shoulders hunched as Sephiroth directed the elevator towards the break floor.

“... Did you really wish to speak with me?”

He jerked a little at the general's voice. Looking up, he found Sephiroth was thankfully not looking at him.

“I... well... I do have a few questions, but... I don't want to be a bother...” Mo mumbled.

“If it's regarding Genesis and Angeal and your keeping them healthy, then you are far from bothering me.”

Well. Good to know. He supposed.

Sephiroth let out a sigh. Almost a huff, really. The man turned to Mo with his arms crossed over his chest. “If there's something bothering you about me, I would rather you say it than skirt around the issue.”

Crap. Well. Okay.

“I'm sorry,” Mo said, keeping his gaze down, “Last time, when I was getting treated, I was... I overstepped my boundaries with you. It was rude to say such things. Or. To call you childish. I'm sorry.”

The elevator was silent. Mo could feel Sephiroth's gaze boring into him, carving holes on the top of his head.

“... I was not insulted. I was...”

Mo blinked in confusion and surprise. Looking up, he found Sephiroth looking... confused? Distant? Something like that?

After a moment, the younger man started again, saying, “It has been a very long time since anyone has regarded me with concern like that. Even Angeal and Genesis... they are very confident in me, and their concern is brief and shallow. Never too worried. Yet... you and I are all but strangers. And you were so upset over something so... so trivial. Not just frowning and shaking your head at Hojo's methods. And it was... overwhelming.”

Mo opened his mouth to say something, but Sephiroth then said, “I'm not entirely used to being treated like a person.”

Oh.

Oh dear.

He might actually be overstepping his bounds here, but he couldn't hear something like that and not react.

Mo stepped across the elevator and wrapped his arms around Sephiroth. Just like Genesis had, the general grew tense under his hands.
“I’m sorry.” he told the younger man, resting his head on a strong shoulder. He tightened his grip as much as possible. “No one deserves that. No one. And... it sounds like you went through a lot of it alone... even I had Ted. Had my parents. They weren't much, but they were there. I'm sorry you didn't have that.”

A cautious hand came to rest between his shoulders. “It was... hardly your fault. You don't need to apologize for it.”

Mo pulled away a little. His hands were still on Sephiroth's arms as he offered a small smile. “I know. But hearing it can help.”

The silver-haired man didn't seem to know how to respond, blinking several times. Mo pressed close again, giving the hug all he had. Sephiroth's hand falling away became his cue to end the embrace, stepping away once more.

The elevator came to a stop.

“... Thank you.”

Mo offered a smile as the doors opened. “It's nothing. Don't worry about it.”

Sephiroth hummed quietly, stepping off the elevator. A few people stopped to gawk as they passed, but never for long. Mo imagined people within Shinra were more or less used to Sephiroth and his presence. Back on earth, Mo could say with almost complete certainty that everyone would stop and stare. Heads would turn and jaws would drop. The man was... eye-candy, to say the least. An exotic treat if nothing else.

Mo ended up sitting next to Sephiroth under the tree. For a moment, neither of them spoke. But Lazard had set them up like this. They couldn't stay silent.

“So... when I end up pushed to a Limit Break, my vision washes green. Everything glows brightly, and it's blinding. Part of why my head hurts so much afterwards, I think.” Mo started.

“Interesting. I've never heard anyone have such a thing happen during a Limit before.” Sephiroth hummed.

“... But not everything is green. Or glowing. Some things are dark.” he murmured. Even the thought of it was putting him on edge. “Murky. Like pollution in water. Black. Ugly.”

“What things?” Sephiroth asked, looking at him carefully.

“Genesis. Angeal.” Mo looked up, meeting Sephiroth's gaze just as carefully. "You."

The general arched an eyebrow at him.

“To be honest, I didn't think much about it. But... yesterday. Zack and I went to see Genesis. We got to talking, and he brought up... He said I may need to give you blood too.”

“Pray tell.” the man hummed.

"He said the origin of his degradation was a certain kind of cell,” Mo began carefully. “These cells came from a creature that was excavated someplace up north years ago. If there's more about it, he didn't tell me. But... apparently, in the notes he got from Hollander... Genesis said the creature was called Jenova.”
It seemed to take a moment to sink in. Sephiroth tipped his head to the side, frowning. “... My mother's name?”

“Apparently. And... well, given your father... that's a pretty big coincidence.” Mo nodded. “So... I was wondering what you know about your mother. If... if there's some connection between this Jenova and your mother, maybe there's a more efficient cure than slowly dosing on my blood, or an explanation for the darkness I see, or something.”

Slowly, slowly, Sephiroth shook his head. “Hojo never told me much. She died in childbirth, he said. Asking further... usually resulted in scolding. It wasn't important, he said.”

“You're sorry I'm not more help.” Sephiroth said, still frowning.

He shook his head, opening up his bag and pulling out his phone. “I may... may be able to pull a favor and find some answers. I mean... I did save Felicia, that's got to count for something.”

He could feel the general watching him as he scrolled through his contacts. It didn't take long to find the one he wanted, praying the man wasn't busy as he pressed call. Holding the phone to his ear, Mo closed his eyes and counted the tone.

On the verge of going to voicemail, a gruff voice demanded, “What?”

“Hi Veld.” Mo greeted meekly, eyes opening as he withheld a sigh of relief.

“Tesla. What is it?”

“Uh, I was wondering if I could request files from the Turks? Or... information or backstory or things like that?” he asked, noticing Sephiroth tip his head again.

“Possibly. Depending on what you request, of course.” Veld answered.

“Do you have anything on Jenova?”

Silence. Mo found himself looking to Sephiroth in alarm at how completely silent the other end went.

“And why would you be asking after that?” Veld asked right before Mo could ask if he was still there.

“It... it may have to do with my curing SOLDIER degradation...?” he replied, admittedly a little intimidated by how sharp Veld's voice was.

A heavy sigh sounded, crackling over the line. “Sorry, Tesla. You need to be a department director to request anything to do with Jenova. To be honest, if anyone else had asked, we would have been on our way to ‘collect’ you.”

“Oh. Wow. That classified, huh.” Mo said, allowing himself to feel a little defeated.

Before anything else could be said, he found Sephiroth plucking the phone from his hand. “Director Verdot. A word, if I may?”

The general gestured for Mo to stay put, even as he himself stood up and moved away.

... Well okay then.
Mo put his chin in his hands, watching Sephiroth seemingly wander away. Wandering with intent. But to a simple, casual glance, wandering.

He wondered what Sephiroth was saying to Veld. Blackmail, perhaps? Was that possible? To blackmail a man like Veld? Maybe. If anyone could pull it off, Mo bet it was Sephiroth. Maybe Rufus. Mostly Sephiroth.

He sighed softly, tugging his sketchbook out of his bag. Might as well take advantage of the lull in activity to try figuring out the canvas.

He hadn't quite finished the Reno-as-Puck painting yet. Things had been busy lately. Most of what he had left were small details. But he had the one canvas, the big one, that he wanted to do something with. He wasn't sure what quite yet, or where he would even put it, but he'd been wanting for a while now.

Staring at the blank page before him, Mo chewed on his lip a little.

There was that idea of a cosmic Zack.

He flipped back to the bare-bones sketch for that and considered it.

... Nah. He'd already decided he was doing that in pencil. And the grand scale of that canvas wasn't very Zack-ish. The boy certainly had a big and bold personality, but he wasn't the type for an enormous, glorious portrait. He was more personal and intimate, Mo felt. A small page like this was more suited to Zack.

So. Big canvas.

Flipping back to the blank page, Mo tapped his pencil against his lips.

Maybe something with a Celtic trinity knot? And he was still feeling the space theme.

Humming to himself, Mo jotted those down as notes in the corner.

Or he could make an abstract painting of Tapatio.

His mind conjured up a blocky, almost Picasso-esque image done in drippy neon colors with bulky black lines.

Oh no. Not in that big a scale. He was definitely going to do that, just on one of the smaller canvases instead. Small and cute, just like Tapatio.

Hm. He probably owed the cactuar another run, and maybe Aerith would have some answers? So maybe that was the agenda for the weekend, going down to the slums to see her and give his pet sentient cactus a run...

Smiling a little as he hummed— ‘Uptown Girl,’ it seemed— Mo turned the page so he could quickly lay out a base for the abstract Tapatio portrait.

As he sketched a few thumbnails, he became aware of Sephiroth coming back towards him. He stopped humming and put away the sketchbook.

“So... do we now have clearance or something?” he asked as the general handed him his phone back.

“Or something. Come on.”
Well. Okay.

Phone in hand, he scrabbled to follow after the younger man. It looked like they were heading back to the elevator, he noted. And his break was starting to slip away. He best email Lazard while they were in there, let the man know this might take a while...

As he began composing the email, he noticed Sephiroth was taking them to the Turk floor. Were they going to see Veld directly?

They reached the floor and Mo turned his phone off. The general took the lead, striding back towards Veld's office. Mo took a moment to wave to Cissnei and Reno when he spotted them, but was quick to follow.

Sephiroth knocked on the door of Veld's office as Mo caught up to him.

Instead of calling them in, the head Turk opened the door.

“This isn't information I can tell to just anyone.” the older man said in a low, dark tone.

“We are hardly just anyone, Director.” Sephiroth said in a matching voice.

“No, can we not try to out-edge each other right now? It's been a very long day already, if we need to be sworn into secrecy we can sign blood contracts or whatever, but can we punch in, punch out, and go home?” Mo interjected, feeling only a little ashamed of the whine creeping into his voice.

Sephiroth turned to raise an eyebrow at him. “Oh has it?”

He allowed himself to glare balefully. “You're his superior, you've met Zack, haven't you? And you're friends with Genesis? And have you ever worked a desk-job ever in your life? Honestly by this point I'm ready to dive off the wagon head-first.”

The younger man just looked mildly confused. Veld, on the other hand, gave an amused scoff. “And tomorrow you have Rufus coming back. It has been a day for you, hasn't it? Come on in and we can talk.”
Chapter 90

Chapter Notes

I mentioned trying to get Mo hooked up— NOT with Seph. Nope. Not Mo's type, and I don't think Mo is his, either. Mo just feels sorry for Sephiroth and wants to make things right.

As he and Sephiroth sat across from Veld, Mo noticed a familiar sheet of paper on the man's desk. The notes on Subject V that he had unintentionally stolen from Hojo. Was that... relevant to the conversation they were about to have?

“So,” Veld said, drawing his attention, “What exactly did you want to know?”

After a moment, Mo gave a small shrug. “I don't know, really... I... I've heard two accounts of who or what Jenova is, and... I guess I want some clarity. If it's Jenova-cells that're causing Genesis's degradation, I want to know what I'm up against. And... from the sound of things, I think whatever I learn, Sephiroth deserves to know too.”

The head Turk tipped his head slightly. “Sephiroth, not Genesis?”

Before Mo could answer, the SOLDIER said, “Jenova was my mother's name.”

That made Veld blink, looking... bewildered?

“And who, exactly, told you that?” Veld asked, knitting his fingers together and leaning forward.

“Hojo.” came the simple reply.

Mo blinked now as the Turk shook his head with a scoff.

Oh boy.

“Your mother was a brilliant young woman by the name of Lucrecia Crescent. She was Hojo's wife, and a former flame of my old friend.”

There was a beat of silence.

“... Logic dictates that they didn't have to be married to have a kid, but all I can think is that she must've been some woman to marry Hojo of all people. What happened to her?” Mo asked. He noticed Sephiroth's hands had curled into fists from the corner of his eye.

“Hojo recorded her as dead in childbirth. However, if he's willing to lie about Jenova, Vincent, and an array of other things, nothing much is keeping that from being a lie as well.” Veld declared.

... Who was Vincent?

Sephiroth seemed to catch that as well, asking in a tight voice, “Vincent?”

“The friend I mentioned. My partner, back then. He was assigned as Hojo and Lucrecia's bodyguard when they were sent to Nibelheim to work on part of the Jenova project. Tesla here
already knows something about him.” the Turk nodded.

Mo blinked as Sephiroth's gaze turned onto him. “Do I?”

Veld nodded again, picking up a paper and handing it over. One of the Subject V ones. “Hojo reported him killed in action. Shot while protecting them from a thief. I can't say that ever sat right with me, but I'd been assigned to Hollander and Hewley in Banora. I couldn't exactly investigate. And now with all this nonsense it looks like I should've tried.”

Sephiroth took the paper, reading over it with a look of disgust. Mo reached out a timid hand, placing it on the general's knee. When green cat-eyes landed on him, he offered a wan smile, gently squeezing in an offer of reassurance. It seemed to do something, because the younger man let out a deep sigh, shaking his head as he handed the paper back.

“So... What is Jenova? And... the Jenova project?” Mo asked, leaving his hand on Sephiroth's knee.

“Jenova was excavated from the northern continent, by a crew of Shinra workers lead by Professor Gast Faremis, the head of the science department at the time. Back then, we thought what we had found was a preserved Cetra. Everyone wanted to see if it was possible to reanimate it, tap into the knowledge of the Promised Land.”

“The what now?” Mo interjected in confusion. “When did we get into Judaism?”

“The Promised Land is a story passed down from the Cetra. It describes a place of infinite energy and life. Shinra is... rather invested in finding it, as it sounds like an endless supply of mako.” Sephiroth answered.

Mo gave his head a shake. “Sounds like Gaia's version of the Garden of Eden.”

“Perhaps it is,” Veld said, regaining their attention, “But worldly comparisons aside, reanimation attempts failed, and not long after, Gast disappeared. His research was left to the two head assistants at the time, Hojo and Hollander. They were tasked with creating human-Cetra hybrids. Project J was split into two parts— Project G and Project S. Hollander and Hewley oversaw Project G. Hojo and Crescent oversaw Project S. Three hybrids came out of the work, but by that time we'd learned that Jenova wasn't Cetra at all. The Jenova project was shut down. But... well, about ten years ago, it was repurposed. The products of Project J became SOLDIER.”

Under his hand, Mo felt Sephiroth grow tense. More than tense, really, the man felt like he was on the verge of shattering into pieces.

“Does Gaia's scientific community just not have ethics?” he murmured as he moved his hand from Sephiroth's knee to his elbow. “I mean... within reason, I can understand human experimentation... but children can't give consent, much less... much less infants. Sorry, general, but I can't help but think poorly of your mother for agreeing to something like that.”

That earned him a quiet scoff, and Veld made some type of vaguely amused noise as well.

“So,” Mo prompted gently, “Jenova?”

Now the head Turk gestured vaguely, saying, “Who knows? The records we have say the president gave jurisdiction over the Jenova specimen to Professor Hojo upon assuming role of department director.”

So... Hojo was out running around, potentially with unlimited access to some fossilized creature that was used to make super soldiers.
Thrilling.

“Anything about that helpful at all, Tesla?”

Veld's question made him look up. After a moment, he nodded. A heavy sigh left him as he did so, and he put his head in his hands. “It confirms that I need to give blood to not only Genesis, but Angeal and Sephiroth too. Hell, for all I know, it means I need to bleed for every person in SOLDIER. But... knowing that Hojo is loose... it's like being a chick in a coop with an invisible fox. I feel lost and defenseless against a threat that could strike from anywhere and at any time.”

“It is... odd, to say the least, that the president has yet to send your Turks out for him.” Sephiroth said as if in agreement.

Veld gave a huff that sounded vaguely exasperated. “We have evidence, plain and simple, that shows the man going with the terrorist leader. Ordinarily, that would be more than enough to get him to give the order. Usually all it takes is a word from me and the order is given.”

That made Mo pick up his head, commenting, “That sounds an awful lot like the cliche dirty judge in cop shows.”

“Pardon?” Sephiroth asked while Veld blinked.

“Aah— I don't know if you have them here, but back on earth, there were TV shows about police departments. Each episode would typically open with a different crime, normally a murder, and would follow the investigation and the officers assigned to it. In every show I've seen, there's always an episode where the judge presiding over a criminal's trial lets the bad guy go despite overwhelming evidence that the guy is a serial killer. So the officers then investigate the judge, and find that he's covering his own tracks by using the criminal, or paying the criminal to do something, or in cahoots with the criminal. And... well, the president not giving the orders to go after Hojo... kinda sounds a lot like that to me.” Mo explained sheepishly, hiding his face in his hands again at the end.

“... It does, though, doesn't it?”

Mo peeked through his fingers at Veld in bewilderment.

“Tesla, you might not realize it, but you offer a unique perspective on a number of things. Not only as a civilian, but as someone from a different world. You've had experiences I'm confident saying no one else has had. As a result, you see things differently from us, and can offer your opinions on them as such. Your insight is an untapped resource, so to speak.” the Turk told him with a stern expression. “Do you think anyone else could've offered Felicia the advice you did yesterday?”

“I... maybe?”

Veld gave him a withering look and turned to Sephiroth. “Anything else, general, or can you get him out of here before I do something rash?”

“What did I do?!?” Mo squeaked, eyes wide.

He wasn't given an answer. Instead, Sephiroth asked, in an uncharacteristically soft voice, “Do you know where I might find a picture of my mother...?”

Veld visibly softened. Nodding, the gruff man pulled out a wallet and flipped it open. He pulled out a picture and handed it across the desk. “Second to the right.”
Curious, Mo leaned over to peer at the photo. Sephiroth seemed to notice and tipped it so he could see better.

It was of a quartet of people, apparently at a bar. One was a much younger Veld, laughing and clapping a dark-haired man on the back. At the other end of the photo was a woman who... strongly resembled Felicia, actually. Probably the girl's mother. Between Felicia and the dark-haired man was a smiling woman with long brown hair tied up in a yellow ribbon.

“... Told you you take after your mother.” Mo murmured, gently touching Sephiroth's shoulder.

“... You did, didn't you...”

The young man heaved a sigh far too intense for Mo's liking, handing Veld the picture back and standing up. “Thank you, Director. Sorry to have intruded on your time.”

Mo stood up too, nodding in agreement. Veld returned the nod, and they left the office, heading for the elevator. Sephiroth was silent the entire time, in a sort of... dangerous way, really. Mo couldn't explain it, but he disliked the grim aura around the younger man.

Once the elevator had arrived and they'd gotten on, Mo turned to Sephiroth and asked gently, “Do you want a hug?”

For a long, tense moment, the man didn't respond. Mo was ready to step away and give him space when Sephiroth surprised him by leaning heavily against him. Mo stumbled back a step, eyes wide as he grappled with the sudden weight.

“H-hey...?! You okay?!” he asked, worried that... that... oh, he didn't know, that something had happened.

“... My life,” Sephiroth said in a dark tone that made Mo shiver, “has been a lie, fabricated by Shinra and Hojo. They told me my mother was a thing. They... they used me. Used us.”

Gulping, Mo tightened his grip on Sephiroth.

Before he could say anything, the younger man continued, “And no one questioned them. Everyone was content with that. Genesis was... falling apart, and they were fine with that... was that going to happen to Angeal and I? Were they going to let it happen, simply because we're failed science projects?”

His voice was getting darker and colder. Mo couldn't deny the tinge of fear slipping into him now.

He didn't let Sephiroth keep going, saying, “Someone would have fought them. There are people that care... it's like Veld said. Everyone's looking at things just so, it... it's like a horse— okay, a chocobo with blinders on. They can only see what Shinra wants them to. But if that had happened to you... someone would have fought back.”

“Who?” the general challenged, voice rasping a little.

“Lazard. Zack. I'd put money on several of the Turks. People I probably haven't met.” Mo answered, starting to move one of his hands in what he hoped was a soothing motion. Wide, sweeping circles across the man's back, punctuated here and there by gentle pats on his shoulder.

“Will you?”

“Ah?”
Sephiroth lifted his head. Mo froze when feline green eyes glared at him through silver bangs. They were glowing. That wasn't Mo's imagination. Sephiroth's eyes were glowing.

“Will you fight for us when they turn on us?”

Gulping, Mo breathed, “I won’t have to. I'll make sure they never turn to begin with. It... it will take time. But I've blood. I'll bleed dry for you if needed. I'll make sure all of you stay as you are. I won't let them throw you out.”

His hands moved, slowly, slowly, from Sephiroth's back to the man's face. The general didn't react, so Mo carefully pressed their foreheads together.

“What they did... what they're doing... it's wrong. It would never fly on earth. I mean... god, it's messed up... You don't deserve it. None of you, none of it. I wish I could do more. But... oh, Sephiroth... you're so young, and they're already hurt you so much... you're not even old enough to drink yet, and you're a general... general's are supposed to be crotchety old men, not... not you. Oh, Sephiroth...”

He shuddered, closing his eyes and rubbing his thumbs over the younger man's cheeks. He didn't move even when the doors opened.

Hands gripped his shoulders, pulling him close.

“You poor, poor thing...”
Chapter 91

Mo blinked.

He was being stared at.

The usual two were waiting for the elevator with him once again. Mo almost felt like he should've known their names, since they saw each other almost every morning. But this time, instead of the guy reading a book or the woman idly sipping her coffee, they were staring at him.

“... Yes?” he finally asked.

“It was you in the elevator with Sephiroth yesterday, wasn't it?” the woman asked.

Oh dear. Ye Olde Rumor Mill was at it, huh. And it wasn't like he could really dodge this one.

“Yes...?” he replied cautiously.

The woman leaned in, eyes wide. Whispering conspiratorially, she asked, “Is it true you were kissing?”

Mo spluttered in shock, shaking his head. “Wha— No! Who told you that?!”

The man spoke up, saying, “There were several witnesses.”

“And didn't anyone tell you that denial is the clincher?”

He threw his hands up in exasperation. “Okay! From the right angle, it probably looked like we were kissing! But we weren't! I mean, come on! He's not only out of my league, he's nowhere near my type! And he could do better than an old drunk like me!”

“Then what were you doing, that could look like kissing?” the woman pressed. She looked borderline crazy with her wide eyes.

“Hugging it out, okay?! Not! Kissing! I was offering him a shoulder to lean on for a moment and he accepted! I gave him some advice, told him that worst come worst I would have his back, and gave him a hug! That's it!” Mo said firmly, starting to gesticulate in desperate attempt to get the point across.

“But why you? You're just an office-worker, like me. What makes you special, so that he takes advice from you? Trusts you to have his back? I could understand for Genesis or Angeal, but you don't make sense.” the man declared.

“I work for Lazard, I work with all of them! How does it not make sense when I'm handling their paperwork and helping arrange their schedules?”

The two paused, exchanging looks.

Assuming the discussion was done, Mo sighed and looked to the elevator.

“What did he need advice for?”

He blinked, looking back to the man.
“You said you were offering him a shoulder to lean on,” the guy prompted, “So what happened? It must've been big, to shake the Silver General of all people.”

He frowned, crossing his arms loosely. “Why's that? He's only human, and sometimes people need hugs.”

The elevator arrived with a ding. Mo sprang forward, eager to end the conversation.

“But he's Sephiroth! He's not just human!” the woman gasped, drawing the attention of the others already in the elevator.

“Then what, pray tell, is he?” Mo sighed.

“Nothing short of an angel!” she replied dreamily. The two other women in the elevator were out of the loop on the conversation, but still nodded in agreement.

“I think Genesis might have some words to say about that...” Mo muttered.

“Genesis is a half-mutated—”

He cut the woman off with a sharp slap across the face, earned shocked gasps and at least one yell.

“Genesis Rhapsodos,” he said harshly, glaring at the woman, “Goes out of his way to go above and beyond for you ungrateful wretches. He's sick, and yet he still tries to go out and work at being the best SOLDIER he can possibly be. He fought a war for you, and this is how you repay him for all his hard work? Call him a monster and a freak? You don't deserve Genesis. If I ever hear you saying things like that about him again, I can see to it that you're ruined, do you understand?”

“And just what do you think you can do to me?” she hissed, drawing herself up even as she held her reddening cheek.

Mo did similar, standing at his full height and puffing his chest out a tiny bit. The other occupants of the elevator stepped back a little. He knew he was tall. He didn't usually throw it around like this, but tall people commanded some respect. Look at George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.

“For starters,” he said, letting his voice get a little dark, “I can tell Genesis what you said. Or I could call in a few favors from my friends in General Affairs. Or I could even go to Rufus Shinra and ask for a favor, I think he owes me one after I jumped out a window to save his life.”

She already started withering at the suggestion of Genesis finding out what she'd called him. But at the end she just looked sick. The other occupants of the elevator were whispering between themselves, eyes wide.

As the elevator came to a stop on his floor, Mo informed the woman, “You look a little pale, maybe take the day off.”

However, by the time he got to the office, everything he'd just said and done sank in. He sagged against the door, burying his face in his hands with a groan.

“Uh-oh.” Lazard said in an amused tone.

“I did a bad thing...” Mo mumbled.

“Did it involve you drinking?”

Looking up, he found Genesis and Sephiroth standing at the desk. The redhead was glaring
“... No, it involved me bitch-slapping a pretentious cunt who thought she could get away with
dragging you through the mud. And then threatening to sic the Turks on her. And then saying I bet
I could pull a favor from Rufus to ruin her life. And that was all after beating her off with a stick
thanks to the rumor that Sephiroth and I are now an item.” he admitted, trudging over to his spot at
the desk.

“Too late to warn you, I suppose.” the general said in an amused tone.


“No, he isn't, now shut up. My love life is my business, you can poke your nose in it when you
have your own.” Mo snapped, glowering.

“Genesis, please.” Sephiroth said, still sounding far too amused with the entire situation.

“So, are you hiding from the gossiping masses or did I miss something?”

It was Lazard that answered his question, saying, “Sephiroth said the two of you had something
important to share. We're waiting on Angeal now, but I'm going to guess it's not a marriage
announcement.”

Mo squawked indignantly. “You people are incorrigible!”

All three chuckled, making him flush and hide his face in his hands.

It didn't take long for Angeal to show up, Zack in tow. The boy offered to leave if the subject they
were about to discuss was sensitive, but Sephiroth decreed that as long as he could keep a secret,
Zack could stay. Mo could see the delight in Zack's eyes when the general said that, even as he
snapped to attention and saluted. The boy was one of them, even if only just, and Mo could tell it
thrilled him to no end to be included.

And, to be honest, Mo was grateful too. He got the feeling Zack's sunshine-puppy attitude would
make the aftermath of the impending news easier.

“So,” Genesis said as Zack's salute fell and all the SOLDIERs gathered around the desk, “What did
you want to tell us?”

Sephiroth was silent, arms crossed over his chest. From the angle he was at, Mo couldn't see the
young man's face, but he could guess that it was stony and dark.

The silence dragged on long enough that Zack began to fidget, so Mo spoke up, saying, “About
Project Jenova and SOLIER, right?”

“So I was right, then? There is a connection?” the redhead said grimly.

“The three of us,” Sephiroth said, voice level but dark, “Were made, and then shoved aside when
they realized we weren't what they wanted. They would have left us all to rot.”

“What?” Angeal asked, looking both concerned and sick.

Mo took over, saying, “We talked with Veld yesterday. Genesis had found that the source of his
degradation was called Jenova cells, and told me that was the name of Sephiroth's mother. I asked
him what he knew, but it wasn't much, so we called up the Turks... and Veld told us a bit about
Project J. How one of Shinra's workers found what he believed to be a preserved Cetra body up north, and tried to reanimate it. But when he vanished, the intent became to create a human-Cetra hybrid. The project was split in two, handed off to Hojo and his wife, and Hollander and... and Hewley.”

He could see the shock on Angeal's face. It hurt.

“Project G produced two hybrids,” Sephiroth continued, voice getting darker and colder, “And Project S produced one. But then they learned that Jenova wasn’t a Cetra at all and threw us out.”

Mo still couldn't see Sephiroth's face. But based on how Genesis had taken a step away from the man, and how Zack had frozen in place to stare with wide eyes, he could guess. It wasn't that long of a shot to assume Sephiroth's expression was just as intense and hateful as in the elevator yesterday, eyes glowing from behind his bangs.

Standing up, Mo reached out to touch the general's shoulder. He couldn't deny that he flinched a little when those eyes turned on him. “D-don't look at me like that... I already told you... I won't let them do anything else... I won't let them throw you away again... I don't know why I'm here. Saving the world is such a general thing. How, exactly, am I supposed to save it? I don't know, and frankly... I don't want to. Leave heroics to the heroes, I'm just a secretary... But... I'm here, okay? For whatever you need, if it's within my skillset, then... then I'm here.”

He broke eye-contact to look at Genesis and Angeal. Even Zack. “For all of you.”

Slowly, slowly, Sephiroth nodded. After he did, the other three followed suit. Zack even smiled and flashed a thumbs-up, which Mo felt better upon seeing.

“So,” Lazard said in the quiet that followed afterwards, “Where does that leave you?”

“With very little, really,” Mo sighed, sitting back down, “It's confirmed that all three prodigies need blood, but then there's the question of how much. And if it's part of the SOLDIER treatment, does that mean all SOLDIERs need blood? I'm willing to do it if that's the case, but what are the quantities? How much does each individual need? And then... Veld told us that jurisdiction over Jenova was given to Hojo, who's apparently run off scot-free because the president might be dirty... which, personally, I find it hard to sleep knowing that fact...”

He put his face in his hands and sighed.

They really didn't have a whole lot to go on. Theories and conjecture, really. That and fear.

Where was Hojo? What was he doing? Why wasn't the president sending the Turks after him? Would Mo's blood be enough? And if it was, how much would they need? Would there come a time when his red blood cell count stayed down and prevented him from giving SOLDIERs the cure they deserved?

There were too many questions. Too many variables. He didn't want to think about it.

A sharp knock came at the door, making them all look up.

After exchanging glances back and forth across the room for a minute, Lazard called, “Come in.”

The door opened, and Rufus stepped into the office. Mo grabbed a stack of papers from the in-tray and hid his face behind them.

“Am I interrupting something?” the boy said in a tone that suggested he knew perfectly well he
was interrupting, and was not at all apologetic.

“Nothing important. Was there something you needed?” Lazard asked coolly.

“Nothing important. I can come back.” Rufus replied in a mocking, condescending tone.

“Could you two be any more obvious...?” Mo mumbled into the papers he held. He had been under the impression that Lazard wanted his parentage under wraps, but clearly Rufus knew. Maybe more people knew. But really, squabbling like that...

“Why, I haven't a clue what you're talking about.” Rufus declared in the far-too-innocent tone that instantly marked a liar. Even with his nose brushing against... it looked like a payroll form. Taxes of some kind. Even with his nose brushing against that, Mo was aware of the room rearranging. Sephiroth and Genesis leaving the desk to stand at the wall. Angeal moving to join them. Zack fidgeting his way into a corner. And, most of all, he was aware of Rufus now standing over him at the desk. “But something very interesting happened this morning when I returned. Maybe you know something about that?”

He peeked out from behind the papers he was holding to look up at Rufus. The blonde was smirking down at him, cold and calculating as ever.

“Th-that would, uh, depend on what it was...?” he answered, voice squeaking a little.

“Come no, Mo, I think the two of us stand on even ground, as it were. You don't need to be so timid.” the boy smiled, a cold, dry thing with very little emotion. “But what I was referring to happens to be an offer from my old AVALANCHE associates.”

Oh. Oh, that.

“Y-yeah... I know about that... I...” He paused, lowering the papers and his eyes with them. Swallowing nervously, he finished, “I was the one who recommended you to them.”

“It's certainly an interesting idea. A very risky one, of course. My father isn't fond of having rivals.”

Lazard was looking at him curiously now. And he could hear the SOLDIERs at the wall whispering back and forth.

Swallowing again, Mo lifted his head to meet Rufus's ice-cold gaze. A far cry from the hue mako created, but a very striking blue nonetheless. Cold. Glacial.

“I get the feeling you aren't either. But... an alternate energy power company seems like something Gaia as a whole needs. Felicia and Shears have good intentions, and with the things I told them, maybe they have a chance. But... without money and connections, or experience in the business world, they won't get far. You... your presence commands a great deal of respect. Or... obedience, if nothing else. You have experience as the vice president of this company... but you have so much more potential than that...” he said carefully.

Rufus raised an eyebrow at him, smile still in place. At least it looked less like a smirk now. Maybe getting thrown out a window had reached him, somewhere in his mind.

“Start proving that worth you saved, hm?” the boy hummed, as if reading his mind.

“I... If that's how you want to see it, then by all means. I was just trying to help my friends.”
“By saddling them with the person you hate?”

Mo grit his teeth a little. “This is Veld Verdot's daughter and her right-hand man. If anyone is able to work with you without throwing you out the window, I imagine it's them.”

That was definitely Genesis who snorted. And Lazard's coughing-fit was rather impeccably timed.

For a moment, Rufus's smile seemed to waver, eyes flashing. But it was only for a moment, and then the boy was saying, “I best be getting my affairs in order, then, since they wish to head to Cosmo Canyon by the end of the week. Pity I no longer have anyone to help with that.”

“Yes, that tends to happen when you shoot them in the back.” Lazard said, voice sharp enough to make the tension in the room skyrocket. “Is there anything else you need, Mr. Shinra, or will that be all?”

“I imagine that's all, Director Deusericus. Please forgive my intrusion.”

The two were both perfectly cordial with their words, and kept pleasant expressions up. But one would have to be deaf to miss the underlying ‘fuck yous’ in the blondes' voices. Mo couldn't help but shiver. He didn't think he'd ever heard the kind, polite Lazard get so... sharp. Cold. It was... intimidating, really.

Rufus left the office, and Zack beat Mo to melting with relief. “Whoo! That was intense! Like, Shiva's tits, I didn't know there was bad blood between you and Rufus, sir!” the boy babbled.

“Well... there's certainly blood between us.” Lazard sighed, taking off his glasses to rub at his eyes. “But... the matter at hand is less my relationship with Rufus and more what we're doing about this Jenova problem.”

“We need a halfway competent scientist for anything involving that. Someone who knows about the project and is actually on our side.” Genesis scoffed.

Mo sighed. He got the feeling that eliminated pretty much all of the science department.

“Uhh... is Hollander still around?” Zack offered.

“Like I said, puppy. Someone halfway competent.” the redhead replied.

“And as far as we know, my mother is dead.” Sephiroth said, voice flat and cold.

“... if your mother isn't Jenova, then...?” Lazard frowned.

“Hojo's wife. Doctor Crescent. Hojo recorded her as dead in childbirth. Of course, nothing is keeping him from having murdered her.”

A shiver ran through the room.

After a moment, Angeal said, “Maybe my mother knows something.”
Mo looked up with a smile as Cissnei sat across from him. He hadn't seen her for a while, and even if they only had a little time here in the canteen, he hoped they could catch up somewhat.

“So an interesting rumor caught my ear yesterday,” she said with a playful twinkle in her eye.

“Aww, not you too, Cissnei... I already have everyone staring and talking behind my back...” he despaired, looking at her forlornly.

She giggled, waving him off. “I saw you two come to the floor and leave. You don't seem like the kind to let others stew, and it looked like General Sephiroth needed a friendly word or two.”

Mo let out a sigh of relief, shaking his head. “At least someone believes in me. I mean... I got four emails from Reno yesterday that were all kissy-faced keyboard art. Lazard teased us about a marriage announcement, and I'm still getting harassed in the elevator or just out and about!”

Cissnei giggled again, saying, “Well, the three of them are Gaia's biggest celebrities. Genesis's fanclubs are only just quieting down about him flying you around. I'm sure the Keepers of Honor are waiting their turn now!”

Mo paused, fork halfway to his mouth. “The what now?”

“Angeal's fanclub. Genesis has two, the Red Leather and the Loveless Book Club. Sephiroth's is the Silver Elite. And Zack is starting to accumulate a small fanclub of his own,” the redhead smiled at him.

He shook his head, putting the fork down. “I keep saying nothing surprises me anymore, but I should really just start waiting on the news that I'm pregnant or something. Then and only then will nothing surprise me anymore, I think.”

Cissnei laughed, shaking her head at him. “So, how are you doing?”

“Well, contrary to popular belief, I am still single.”

She snorted, ducking her head with her shoulders shaking. Mo smiled, taking advantage of her stifled giggles to take a few more bites of his food.

Once she recovered, Mo pulled out his sketchbook and turned to the drawing of Zack. He'd started to color it by this point. He was leaving the background plain and white at the moment, but he was debating turning it into a blue sky with clouds.

“What do you think? Leave it white or put a blue sky back there?” he asked.

“Holy... Is this Zack?!” she gasped, eyes wide as she carefully took the sketchbook from him.
“Yep. Not done just yet. I need to color the flowers, touch up my shading, and add a little more color to the sky. But I don’t know about the backdrop.” he nodded.

“Mo, it's beautiful! What're you going to do with it?”

He gave her a shrug. “Give it to Zack, maybe. Or just stick it in my portfolio.”

A powerful glint came into Cissnei’s eye. “Do the blue sky in the background. And when you're done, give it to me.” she declared.

Mo snatched his sketchbook back, asking, “Why, what'll you do with it? You know I sign my work, so you won't be able to claim you made it, right?”

“I won't— Here, finish your lunch and I can show you!”

He raised an eyebrow at her, but tucked his sketchbook away and started eating. She looked incredibly excited, and he had no clue what to make of that glint in her eye.

No sooner than he had finished eating, Cissnei grabbed and pulled him up. Mo wasn't given a chance to question anything, pulled along to the elevator. He found they were going down to the lobby, making him raise an eyebrow again.

“You'll see, trust me!” the redhead smiled.

“Everyone says that, it just makes me trust them less.” he informed her.

She giggled in response.

They had to stop at a few floors along the way, picking up or dropping off additional passengers. But before long, they were stepping out and into the large lobby. Cissnei pulled him over to the front desk, greeting, “Hey there, Mira!”

One of the receptionists looked up with a smile. “Hey yourself, Cissnei. And how are you? Lose Zack again?”

It took him a moment to realize she was talking to him. And then a moment after that to realize she was the one who had agreed to keep an eye out for Zack that time Lazard couldn't get ahold of him.

“Ahh, no...” he mumbled, looking to Cissnei.

“Mo, Mira is the president of Zack's fanclub. Show her the picture.” the Turk told him, wearing a grin that wouldn't be out of place on Reno's face.

... Oh, he saw what she was doing.

“Y'know, you could've just told me what you were doing...” he grumbled, pulling out the sketchbook and opening it to the picture of Zack.

Mira gasped upon seeing the picture, eyes wide. “You drew this?! It's gorgeous!”

“It's not done yet. I’ve got a ways to go with it.” he told her.

Cissnei jumped in there, saying, “What do you think, Mira? If you had, say, fifty copies of the finished product as posters, what would you do with them?”

“I'd give them out to our members! We're such a small club still, and we don't have any
merchandise like the other fanclubs, but I think everyone would be thrilled to have such a thing!” Mira declared. She then blinked, blushing a little, and added, “If you would allow it, Mo.”

“... Sure, why not. Not like I do anything with half the stuff I make.” he said with a shrug.

“Excellent! Give it to me when you're done and I can get it made into posters!” Cissnei declared.

”Thank you very much! Oh, how much would you like for them?” Mira asked, beaming.

Mo shook his head, tucking the sketchbook away. “It's fine. I don't need anything for it.”

After a moment, he said, “Actually, how does one go about joining the club? It makes sense to be part of the thing I'm making fanart for. Plus... well, Zack's a good kid. I want to support him in whatever way I can.”

Mira smiled and nodded, saying, “Right now all we have is an email newsletter, since we're so small. If you give me your email address, I can add you to the list.”

Mo nodded, accepting the memo-pad and pen she handed him. He carefully wrote down his email and handed it back with a smile. Mira informed him that the newsletter went out every three days. If he wanted, she could send all the old newsletters tonight. After a moment, he said yes.

By that point, his break was more or less over. He said goodbye to Mira and Cissnei and headed back to the office.

Halfway up, Angeal stepped into the elevator.

“Oh— Mo, just the person I wanted to see.” the man said.

“Uhm? Okay?” he blinked in confusion.

But instead of continuing, Angeal sighed, running a hand through his hair. He looked... distressed? Conflicted? Upset? Upset felt like a good umbrella term.

“What is it?” Mo asked gently.

After a moment, Angeal heaved a sigh. “Could I come see you tonight? Or... could we go out? Or something? I... I need to talk to someone, and...”

Mo felt his heart thud, but he reminded himself that he already knew Angeal was off the table. “Yeah. I can call you when I get off work, and you can pick where you want to go.”

Angeal gave him a wan smile. “Thanks.”

“You've been good to me, Angeal. It's the least I can do.”
Mo found Angeal waiting outside his apartment.

“Aah... have you been waiting long...?” he asked awkwardly.

“Not really. Don't worry about it.” the man smiled.

“Too late.” he replied, unlocking the door and pushing it open. Tapatio came racing over to greet him, squeaking loudly. “Hey buddy, sorry I'm late... we got backed up on reports at the last second...”

“He's really attached to you, huh?” Angeal smiled, following them in.

“I guess so. Everyone tried to warn me that cactuars tend to run away, but if Tapatio really wanted to leave... I mean, he knows how to work the elevators, apparently. If he wanted to leave he would leave.” Mo answered, gently picking the sentient succulent up. He was grateful Tapatio hadn't left, really. It wasn't much, but having the cactuar around made the apartment better to come back to. He really owed Tapatio another walk sometime soon. Go talk to Aerith about the whole Jenova thing.

“That's new.” Angeal commented, drawing him back to the present. It looked like he was examining the Puck painting.

“Ah, yeah. The mass-produced garbage that came with the place offended me on a personal level. Once the Turks got me all my canvases, I had to fix it. I still have so many left, though, I need to figure out what to paint...” Mo admitted, putting away his bag and shoes. Tapatio bounced out of his arms and into the kitchen.

“It's beautiful. The purple makes it really eerie.”

He couldn't help but smile a bit, moving to the couch. “It's from a play. The flower described is called love in idleness, and is more or less used to make a love potion.”

Angeal nodded, following after him. “Sounds exotic.”

Mo shrugged, admitting, “I'm mostly just happy that ugly thing from before is gone.”

“Gen was of a similar opinion. He tore the ones in his apartment down almost the second he moved in. The ones he replaced them with... they have a different feel to them from that, though.” the younger man smiled.

“I think, were we on earth, those would fall into the impressionism category. My stuff is typically best described as... well, contemporary. I don't know if my paintings fit any movement. I don't know if anything I make fits any movement, really.” he hummed, resting his cheek on one hand as he recalled the paintings in the redhead's apartment.

Silence fell for a moment, the two of them on opposite ends of the couch.

Sighing, Mo ran a hand through his hair and said, “I don't think you came to discuss my art, though. What was it you wanted me for?”

Angeal fidgeted, like a schoolboy put on the spot after no one raised their hand to answer the
teacher's question. The action made Mo's heart sink a little. He was probably ten times too sober for whatever seriousness was about to take place.

“... I called my mother. When I asked her what she knew...”

Angeal stopped, taking a shuddering breath. Mo reached out to touch his shoulder, just barely brushing his fingertips over warm skin. But that seemed to be enough, the SOLDIER gathering himself and speaking again.

“She's coming here. So she can explain... so she can help us.”

“Isn't that a good thing?” Mo asked quietly.

“Why wouldn't she tell me something like that? That she... that I'm...”

Aah.

Mo scooted closer on the couch, wrapping his arms around the man and gently pulling him close. After a moment, Angeal hugged him back, breathing slightly erratic. Trying not to cry.

“... Parents... they try to do what's best for their children. The good ones, anyway. I admit... knowing your mother was part of the project, and volunteered you... I won't be starting with the highest opinion of her. But I think... just from how torn up you are, she's been a very good mother. She probably never told you because... because she knew it would hurt you. She wanted... sorry. I really don't know.” he admitted, gently rubbing Angeal's back. There was a squeak at his knee, and Mo broke the embrace long enough to scoop Tapatio up into it. The cactuar patted his face, then Angeal's.

“Gen was right,” the younger man mumbled into Mo's shoulder, “SOLDIERs are monsters.”

“No!” he snapped, grabbing Angeal by the shoulders and yanking him off. Voice rough, Mo hissed, “Don't say that! Don't you of all people ever say that again! Never! Never ever ever say it ever again, you hear me?!” with his fingers digging into Angeal's sweater as he shook him. Tapatio gave a shrill cry as if in agreement, hands whapping against the commander's thighs.

“Mo—”

“Do you not understand how perfect you are?!” he continued, eyes wide as he approached hysteria. “You're beautiful and perfect and whatever god made you can never be blessed enough! You're kind, handsome, strong, you're a great teacher, you help complete strangers out of the goodness of your heart, you make the most divine apple pie I've ever tasted, and you care so much for your friends and coworkers! Do you not see that?! Are you blind to how... to how much I wish you were less perfect?! Because if you were less perfect, then maybe I wouldn't feel like I'm about to combust every time you smile?! Maybe I could get over this stupid crush, because your answer was no, dammit, I can't have you!”

By this point, his head was shoved against Angeal's chest, fingertips just about pushing through the knit of his uniform. His chest was heaving, eyes watering. Tapatio was hugging him now, gently patting and rubbing.

“Never call yourself a monster, Angeal... Please, for my sake, never, ever, ever do that again...”

There was a small stretch of silence.

A warm hand came to rest on his back. “Sorry. Complaining like that... compared to everything
you've gone through, it must seem childish, huh?"

Mo sat up so fast he clonked the back of his head on Angeal's chin. The two of them jerked apart, holding their affected areas and making small pained noises. Tapatio went back and forth between the two of them, squeaking and patting their chests.

Mo managed to recover first, sitting up and offering Angeal a glare. “I never said that, and I don't want to hear you say it either. And I definitely never want to hear you address yourself as a monster ever again. What would Zack think if he heard you saying such things?” he scolded.

Angeal blinked owlishly at him.

Tapatio squeaked, bouncing down and away.

“...”

An insistent buzzing cut him off.

An email?

... Oh. Oh.

Angeal looked at him curiously, head tipped to the side as he pulled his phone from his pocket.

“Sorry,” Mo said sheepishly, “I joined Zack's fanclub today. Mira said she'd send me all the old newsletters.”

“A fanclub already? I didn't know the puppy was that popular.”

“I only found out because Cissnei wanted to sell one of my drawings to them. She introduced me to the president and I decided to join... So he's going to fly across the world, and then swim back? Does that boy never just walk? Seriously...”

Angeal chuckled, reading over his shoulder. “I'm pretty sure staying still is a foreign concept to him, walking probably isn't much better.”

Mo smiled, humming softly. “Silly puppy.”

For the next few minutes, the two of them were quiet, reading over the newsletters and discussing Zack. Angeal had quite a number of stories to tell about the boy. Mo had to admit, he was largely unsurprised with the things Angeal told him. All of them seemed so... in-character that it was easy to believe them.

Tapatio came bouncing back eventually, grabbing the TV remote to play with. The cactuar settled down on the other side of his as Angeal, making him smile.

It was nice. Soft and domestic. Not overly so, to the point where Mo felt he was taking advantage of the younger man at his side. The same way it felt when Reno crashed on the couch, just...
quieter. Calmer.

“I wasn't super close to my family. Maybe it was my fault for never reaching out to them, maybe I was just so jaded I never noticed, maybe they never wanted a second kid after a miracle like Teddy... They were supportive, sure, but we were always distant,” Mo commented as the topic got dragged around to family, “So I'm a little jealous... when I hear people talking so fondly about their families. It's... childish and petty, I know. I'm an adult. But sometimes I just wish that...”

Angeal gave him a squeeze as he trailed off. “If it's any consolation, I'm pretty sure the Turks have all but adopted you. Reno in particular.”

Mo snorted, shaking his head with a smile.

“Mo...”

He blinked, looking up at Angeal. The SOLDIER looked serious again.

“... When... when my mother gets here... I think you should meet her. Before we get to Jenova or Project G or S or...”

The man trailed off, face clouding over.

Mo sighed, leaning against the younger man. “We aren't dating. You have no right to be this anxious about me meeting your family.”

Angeal's spluttering made him laugh.
On a serious note, though, depression doesn't care about your feelings or daily life.
Bad days can happen where you can't get out of bed. Bad days can happen where you can get out of bed but can only shamble about like a zombie. Bad days can happen where you can get out of bed and go about your daily routine and the only person who knows it was a bad day was you. They happen seemingly at random, but in my experience serve as a sort of ‘crash’ after the high of good things happening.
Thanks again to everyone still reading! Your support is appreciated!

Mo was silent, regarding the elevator doors blankly. The other people in the moving box were chattering, but it only reached him as a dull buzzing.

It was a bad day.

Usually after shaking his way out of bed, he was able to go about business as normal. But sometimes that didn't happen. Sometimes the day just stayed bad.

Lazard had definitely noticed. How could he not have? Mo had trudged silently into the office and stared at the same sheet of paper all day. He couldn't even remember if there had been anything on the page. He'd had to be manhandled into the elevator and told to go eat when his stomach had started making noise.

The elevator dinged. The doors opened, and the others inside spilled out to go eat.

Mo stayed, leaning against the wall and staring dully.

He didn't want to eat. He wanted to lie down and curl up into a ball until nothingness swallowed him up.

The doors slid closed again, the elevator moving once more. Called elsewhere.

He didn't care.

Stupid. Pathetic. Useless. Couldn't even do his job right. Needed someone else to take care of him.

Slowly, slowly, Mo slid down the wall, drawing his knees to his chest and dropping his head down. His stomach whined in protest, but he didn't want to move. Didn't want to do anything. He'd gotten up. Gotten dressed. What more did the world want of him?

Another ding. Voices.

He didn't care.

He just wanted to huddle in the corner and turn to dust.
A hand touched his shoulder. He didn't react. More insistently, the hand pushed at him. He was forced to sit up. Groaning, he blinked, looking blearily at the one touching him.

Blonde hair. Blue eyes.

Rufus, his memory supplied.

“What happened?”

Oh. The boy was talking to him. But he couldn't process the words right. Could acknowledge they were there, but not respond properly.

He shrugged his shoulder out of Rufus's hand and touched his forehead to his knees again.

Worthless. Stupid. Couldn't even answer when someone talked to him. Pathetic. Waste of space.

The elevator began to move again. He didn't care, didn't react. Stayed still. Wanted to fade away into nothingness.

Hands touched him again. Somewhere, some part of him screamed that he should be panicking. He was alone with Rufus, it screamed! Rufus's hands were on him! He didn't want Rufus to touch him! But Mo just couldn't bring himself to care, allowing Rufus to haul him upright, to coax him to lean against a white-clad shoulder.

Couldn't even stand on his own. How stupid. Useless, pathetic, waste of space.

The elevator stopped, doors opening. Mo let himself be lead out. He stayed silent, unable to bring himself to care that Rufus was leading him somewhere. Alone. Just the two of them.

So what. Maybe he had it coming.

Thumping. What?

Oh. A door was opening. Had Rufus knocked?

Lazard appeared. Mo heard the man talking, ask, “What happened?” but his brain felt like it was made of mashed potatoes and peanut butter. He could hear the words, couldn't make sense of them. There was too much of a disconnect.

Words. More words. Rufus and Lazard were talking. Mo tuned out, allowing his head to drop down.

He didn't care.

A hand touched his cheek, traveled to his chin and tipped his head back up. Lazard was looking at him.

“What happened?”

“He won't answer. But if I remember correctly, he's yours now. Rather careless to leave him out and about in such condition.”

“He's a person, Rufus, not an object.”

Mo let his head drop once again. He felt boneless but too stiff all at once. He didn't want to think about that, though. He just wanted to drop to the floor and quietly become part of it.
Suddenly he was changing hands, leaning against Lazard instead of Rufus. Rufus was leaving. His messy concoction of a brain complained that it had missed what had happened. But Mo couldn't bring himself to ask what had happened. He missed it. Too bad, so sad.

Stupid stupid stupid.

After a moment, Lazard pulled him into the office. Of course. The office. The blonde man gently steered him back to the desk and sat him down. He moved and followed without complaint, not caring enough to object. Hojo could literally appear right then with an undead Fuhito in tow and Mo wouldn't be able to bring himself to care.

Lazard moved around, in the corners of Mo's vision, before reappearing.

“Come on, let's go.”

Go, some tiny part of him questioned, go where?

The younger man pulled him up and guided him out of the office. Mo followed without question, leaning against his boss and dragging his feet.

Oh god.

Lazard was his boss.

That tiny sliver of wrong-bad-no bubbled up through the mashed potatoes and peanut butter, strong enough to force out a tiny whimper from his throat.

Instantly, they stopped.

“Mo? Are you alright?”

No. No, he was so far from okay, smashed and shattered into hundred of pieces and rebuilt haphazardly with strips of tape holding him together. Look at him, being dragged from the office like a dead body. How in any sense of the word was he alright?

Lazard lead him to the elevator, and for a short while they just stood there. Waiting, his mind supplied. The elevator was coming.

He didn't care. He didn't care he didn't care he didn't care. Nothing mattered. Why did it matter? Why did he bother? Stupid, useless, lazy fag, piece of trash layabout. Never should have gotten out of bed. Never should have been born.

They were in the elevator. Hadn't they just been waiting for it? Had he blacked out? Tuned out? He didn't know.

The box stopped, doors sliding open, and Lazard coaxed him out. Down a hall. He didn't think he knew this one. There was a chance he did, and the memory just wasn't connecting, but he didn't think he did.

Whatever.

It didn't matter.

Nothing did.
Chapter 95

A soft sigh slipped past his lips as he woke up. Swimming slowly into consciousness, he nuzzled into the pillow in a last-ditch effort to cling to sleep.

The sheets smelled... different. Cleaner than he remembered them being, he needed to change them still. But in their cleaness, they smelled different. Not like the detergent he used.

As he blinked awake, picking his head up to look at the sheets, a familiar voice asked, “Are you awake now?”

Mo sat bolt-upright, head snapping around to stare.

Lazard sat at the edge of the bed, marking his place in a book as he examined Mo carefully.

Everything came back in a rush.

“Oh my god...!” Mo keened, shoving his face into his hands. He'd had a bad day. He'd had a bad day and been unable to hide it, and Lazard had been forced to drag him out of the office. “I-I'm so sorry, it'll never happen again I promise—”

He was cut off by gentle hands pulling his own away from his face.

“It's okay, Mo. I'm not... angry, or upset, or anything like that. I'm just glad nothing serious happened. You were in a bad way for a very long time, and the doctor I spoke to said the only thing to do was keep an eye on you. But... I am confused as to why you didn't just call in sick.” the blonde told him in a gentle voice.

Mo couldn't stop the tears in his eyes from welling up as he looked away. “I... I can't always think on my bad days... a-and normally I'm able to act as though nothing's wrong... just go about things as normal... I try not to let it interfere...”

“Yes,” Lazard said in a stern voice, grip tightening on his wrists. Mo swallowed, closing his eyes as he waited to be told off, fired. No one wanted an erratic employee who couldn't do their job, and it was Lazard himself who said he hired Mo to spite Rufus. “Mo, I want you to tell me honestly. How many bad days have you had since you started working for me?”

“Just the one...”

“Including the time Angeal and Genesis rushed you to medical?”

“Th-that doesn't count!” Mo objected, shaking his head. “That was... that was an endorphin crash! I would've been fine even if they hadn't shown up, I would've slept it off and been just fine in the morning!”

“Any other times? At all?”

“No!” he yelled, voice strangled around the lie. Lazard didn't need to know about what had happened during his time with AVALANCHE. It was nothing. Inconsequential. He'd already been enough of a burden to the younger man.

Lazard heaved a sigh. “I suppose that's a good thing. If you feel up to it, I can get us some breakfast.”
Mo's traitorous stomach chose that exact moment to howl a battle cry.

“I figured as much. From what I can tell, you didn't eat at all yesterday, and you refused everything I tried to give you.”

Lazard's voice was light-hearted, but Mo felt his heart plummet to somewhere under the Shinra building.

Yesterday? He only recalled up to the afternoon. How long had he been out with Lazard watching over him? What time was it now?

As Lazard stood and left the bedroom, Mo hurried to kick the sheets off and follow. But as he stood up, he was forced to stare down at himself. He wasn't wearing his clothes. He wasn't even wearing his designated sleeping clothes. Plain white pjs, of the light but long variety. Too short for him and his gangly limbs.

His gaze snapped around the bedroom.

It wasn't just the sheets on the bed that were different. Everything was. It was bigger, more spacious, of nicer quality. The painting hanging on the wall was an ugly abstract thing.

Oh no.

To be fair, some part of him chirped, why did he think they were at his apartment to begin with?

But he couldn't be here. It was wrong, inappropriate. Lazard was his boss. Mo should not be in this man's apartment. He had been a burden. He'd inconvenienced Lazard. There were lines that shouldn't be crossed. He was in his boss's apartment, wearing his boss's pajamas, it was inappropriate.

He couldn't... shouldn't be here.

But as he lunged to the bedroom door, intending to excuse himself and leave, fast, now, he froze.

He could see Lazard working in the open kitchen from here.

Oh no, Mo thought miserably as he took the scene in.

Lazard... looked different. Mo hadn't been paying attention, trying to avoid Lazard in the bedroom. But now Mo felt like the younger man was all he could see.

The blonde was humming quietly as he worked, glasses slipping down his nose. His hair was slightly messed up, like he'd gotten out of bed and run his fingers through it. He was wearing a plain t-shirt, probably on the old side, and sweatpants that were starting to develop fuzzies on the thighs.

It was a good look. It was warm and domestic, contrasting and complimenting his professional image quite well.

Oh no, Mo thought miserably, he's hot.

Oh no, he realized dejectedly as his chest tightened, Lazard was the kind, noble, dependable type. Mo's type.

He needed to leave now, before he ended up breaking further. Lazard was off-limits. His boss. A
hundred to one said he was straight. And even if he wasn't, why would he stoop to scrape the bottom of the barrel with Mo?

He needed to get out of here.

“"You don't have to," he choked out, drawing Lazard's attention to him, "You've... you've done so much already, I don't want to impose... I'll just get dressed and go...”

“Not until you've eaten something. And you aren't imposing.”

No no no, he needed to go, get out get out get out...

“I've been gone for two days, I need to check on Tapatio and make sure he's okay!” Mo objected, shaking his head.

“Tapatio is at Angeal's. When it became clear you weren't going to be well enough to go back to your place, I called to ask him. He was happy to help. I would have taken you to your apartment, but I don't know where it is, and I didn't want to leave you alone in such a state.”

Stop. Stop stop stop.

It was wrong. Inappropriate. Bad.

He needed to leave now. He needed a tactical retreat, to regroup and sort his thoughts, undo the tight band on his chest. He needed to remind himself that Lazard was not an option. Rufus was more of an option, and Rufus was obscenely young in comparison to Mo, terrifying to be around, and asexual.

Mo blinked, and found Lazard looking at him. “I'm sorry...” he apologized, sure he had missed the blonde saying something. A question he missed.

“Don't be. We're all happy to help, Mo. You don't have to stand on your own.”

Lazard smiled softly, moving out of the kitchen. Mo took a step back in response. If Lazard got too close now, Mo wouldn't be able to deny any attraction.

It wasn't real, he screamed at himself, it was just the neediness that followed a bad day, that unjust desire for attention! Lazard wasn't what he wanted! It was just a brief moment of lust, it would pass! It wouldn't even be a lasting crush!

Because it wasn't. He knew better than anyone that life wasn't a romcom, wasn't a bodice-ripper. Love at first sight didn't exist. It took months, years, to fall in love, and longer to solidify it to the point of eternity. And he wasn't about to fuck up whatever there was between him and Lazard because of a split second of longing.

As he gathered himself, steadied his breathing and cleared his head, Mo noticed that Lazard had stopped, watching him carefully. He shook his head, murmuring an apology and stepping out of the bedroom at last.

“It won't be anything fancy, but I'll have something done in just a minute. Why don't you come here and sit down?” Lazard suggested, patting the table in the kitchen before turning back to whatever he was making. It smelled like egg and meat. Possibly an omelette, then.

Slowly, hesitantly, Mo obeyed, moving to the kitchen and sitting down. He watched Lazard work, listening as the blonde hummed. He didn't recognize the tune, if there even was one.
Lazard's hands were bare.

He didn't know why it only struck him now, but Mo found his eyes riveted on Lazard's hands.

Whenever they were at the office, the blonde was always... flawless. Hair combed and styled, suit immaculate, hands gloved and glasses pushed up. Seeing his boss... undone like this... Mo felt like he was intruding. It felt very personal. Private. Like he shouldn't be seeing it.

Blushing, Mo dropped his gaze to the table.

It was different from seeing Reno hungover and lazy on the couch. It was different from three days ago with Angeal spending the night. It was different, and he didn't know how to react to it.

"Careful, watch out."

He sat up, and Lazard put a cork potholder down in front of him, followed by a small skillet. As Mo blinked, brain trying to catch up to what was happening, another potholder and skillet were put down across from him, and Lazard sat down. Jolted out of his stupor, Mo looked down to see what it was the younger man had made. He found a breakfast hash— potatoes, cheese, meat, and herbs with a fried egg on top.

"I know it isn't much, but I figure it covers all the bases. And you'll feel better with a full stomach.” Lazard commented.

Mo squeaked out his thanks and grabbed the fork stuck in the skillet. Keeping his head down, not looking at Lazard, he stabbed into the egg, popping the yolk and shredding the white.

"Is something wrong? You won't look at me."

Dammit.

Blush darkening, Mo answered, “It's weird... seeing you like this... I... I don't know how to react...”

He got a chuckle in reply. “I suppose I do paint quite a different image in the office. Appearances need to be kept up and maintained, after all. But you can relax in your own home.”

Mo nodded, and found his gaze straying to Lazard's hands as he ate.

The blonde seemed to notice, and held one out for him to examine. After a moment, he put his fork down and reached slowly out. Taking Lazard's hand in his own, he looked it over. To his surprise, there was a scar across the man's knuckles. Blinking, Mo turned Lazard's hand over to see the palm. There was another scar on the ball of his thumb, and several spots of shiny skin between his fingers that Mo knew were from blisters— he had several of those himself. Running his fingertips over the skin exposed to him, Mo found there to be several rough callouses.

"Not what you were expecting, hm?” Lazard chuckled.

“... Not really, no...” Mo admitted, brushing his thumb over the scar slashing down the base of his boss's thumb.

“I grew up in the slums. The president... was not good to my mother. I grew up poor and having to fight for everything, sometimes literally. You can't see it, but there was a time I got my nose broken in a fight. My mother did an excellent job setting it. And I have one scar on my knee, from where I tripped and did a number on my leg thanks to the poor condition of the street. But those are both easy to hide. If I want to keep appearances up, I have to wear the gloves.”
Frowning, Mo looked up at Lazard. “Appearances for who?”

“The other directors. That I'm every bit as well-bred and raised as them.”

He offered a sympathetic grimace, turning Lazard's hand over again to run his fingertips over the scar on the blonde's knuckles.

“But I understand, because of that, Mo. I understand the need to keep up appearances and make people think something or another.”

Mo snatched his hands back as if Lazard had burnt him, and hurried to start eating again.

For a while, there was silence. They ate quietly, not speaking. Mo kept his head down, no longer looking at Lazard.

He shouldn't be here, he reminded himself. He needed to finish eating, get dressed, and leave. Pick up Tapatio and go home. Hide under the blankets and pretend none of this had happened.

Mo was about halfway done with his food when a phone rang, making him jump. After a moment, Lazard stood and moved away. But he was back before long, holding out Mo's phone.

“It's Rufus's number.” the blonde informed him.

Blanching just a little, Mo accepted the device and answered the call. “Hello?”

“Where the hell are you?!”

He jumped at the loud roar, holding the phone away from his now-ringing ear. Apparently Lazard heard as well, looking up in alarm.

“Sh... Shears?” Mo asked in confusion.

“No, it's fucking Bahamut! Tell me where you are right the fuck now so I can come kick your ass!”

Mo blinked several times in shock and confusion before hanging up.

Almost instantly, his phone began ringing again. Mo silenced it and threw it to the couch in the next room. It bounced off the back and hit the floor, making him wince. However, the insistent vibrating implied that it was fine.

“... I should finish eating and leave before he figures out where I am and kicks your door in to kill me.” Mo told Lazard.
It was the afternoon. He really had been out of it for a whole day.

Mo sighed, running a hand through his hair as he waited for the elevator to arrive.

Tomorrow Angeal's mother was due to arrive. Day after, he was slated to give three more pints of blood. And hopefully after that... hopefully life would return to normal. He could take Tapatio for that promised walk, go talk to Aerith... and once all the Jenova nonsense was over and done with, things could... could settle.

Still. He was missing an entire day.

Lazard had instructed him to go to his apartment after collecting Tapatio, and take the rest of the day off. He felt like he was going to need it, in all honesty. It was... overwhelming, everything that had happened.

Like realizing Lazard was just as much his type as Angeal. Mo got the feeling he was going to be absolutely miserable for the next few days, until he got the courage worked up to tell the man. If he ever did. Chances were he wouldn't. Hell, it hadn't even been him who told Angeal. Reno had ratted him out.

The elevator doors slid open, and he rolled his shoulders back—

He was practically nose-to-nose with Shears.

Mo turned around, intending to run down the hall, but an arm caught him around his neck, and he was yanked back into the elevator.

"The fuck you think you're goin'?" Shears bellowed in his ear.

"Th-the Lifestream, apparently..." Mo choked out, clawing at the arm holding him in place.

"Ease up, Shears, he's not going anywhere."

He was released, and found the elevator moving. In addition to himself and Shears, Felicia and Rufus stood off to the side.

"So do I get an explanation before getting trounced, or am I just heading straight to medical...?" Mo asked warily, trying to step away from Shears.

That was apparently a bad idea, because the man lunged forward to grab him by the front of his shirt and shove him against the wall.

"What was yesterday about, huh?! Can you not get help when you need it?! Or is your skull full of chocobo-shit?!"

"Wh... what?" he gasped, wincing as he was pushed even harder against the unrelenting metal of the elevator.

"I told you, didn't I? To stop wallowing in your guilt and self-pity and get a goddamn life?!" Shears snarled.

Mo couldn't help but grit his teeth and reply, "It's not that easy..."
“Oh isn't it?!”

“Shears, that's enough!” Felicia barked.

Mo lifted his hands to hide his face as Shears stepped back. “I tried, okay...? Years ago, when I was
dating Tyrone... I had a regular therapist I saw twice a week for several months... I took I don't
know how many pills... but none of it helped... oh, God, that was about when I took to drinking...
And that worked... that helped... it helped me figure out what I was feeling, helped me out of bed,
helped me in... I tried to be better... but it never worked... I'm just fucked up and broken...”

A gentle hand brushed past his wrist and through his hair. “Just because you're broken doesn't
mean you need to be thrown away,” Felicia said gently, “Broken things can be fixed.”

A twisted noise clawed it's way out of Mo's throat, and he shied away from her touch.

“Mo. You've done so much for everyone, how can you think that you're broken?” she persisted.

“I wasn't trying! For any of it!”

“So I take it you tripped out the window, then?”

Blinking, Mo lifted his head to look at Rufus. “Wh... what?”

The blonde shrugged nonchalantly. “You said you weren't trying. That implies your saving my life
was an accident.”

Shaking his head, he objected, “That was different! I... You... It was different! If I hadn't, you
would have died!”

“And isn't it the same for everyone? Didn't you arrive here by protecting a complete stranger from
a madman? Didn't you agree to nearly cripple yourself to cure Genesis of his little problem? Didn't
you put your all into saving Miss Verdot? And I believe the story goes that you used yourself as
bait to allow everyone in Midgar time to escape a terrorist attack?” Rufus replied, with no space
between his questions for Mo to interject. But really, he didn't have a comeback, and given the
boy's smirk, Rufus knew he had Mo pinned.

He gave a soft, strangled noise, whimpering, “I hate you.”

Shears scoffed, saying, “Doesn't everyone?”

Rufus shrugged nonchalantly, and continued, “Shears has a bit of a point, though. You won't get
better if you don't get help.”

“I said—”

Felicia cut him off, saying, “That was a different time and a different place. You can try again here
and now, where things will be different.”

Before he could reply, the elevator doors slid open. A small gaggle of people made to step on but
froze upon seeing them.

“This one's full.” Rufus hummed casually, reaching out and pressing a button.

“And where, exactly, are you taking us?” Shears growled.

“I figure my office— sorry, former office— is as good a place as any to finish this conversation
up.” the blonde smiled.

Mo let out a small groan. He really didn't want to go back there... not only was that place just uncomfortable to be in, he didn't want to risk running into Heather again. Reno had done a pretty good job telling her and the other top-floor secretaries off, but he still didn't want to face them again.

Before too long had passed, they were getting off at the sixty-ninth floor. Mo automatically felt his shoulders hunch, and Shears definitely noticed. Mo just shook his head as they stepped out.

The secretaries who saw him either stared, throwing knives with their eyes, or turned pale, hiding in their work. Shears noticed that too, of course he would, and turned to narrow his eyes at Mo. Felicia was casting glances over her shoulder at him too. Mo shook his head again, harder.

It was one thing to defend Genesis, but it was another entirely to have an entire floor of cutthroat secretaries baying for his blood.

Thankfully, they didn't run into Heather, making it to Rufus's office without issue. But the door shutting behind him made Mo feel like he'd just sold his soul to the devil.

The appearance of a very large animal jumping forward to back him against the door didn't help.

“What the hell!!” he squeaked out, bumping against the door and holding his hands up as the thing paced back and forth before him. It looked canine in build, but was the size of a jaguar or something. Something big and predatory. It had a short tail and a long protrusion of some kind coming from the base of it's neck. It's eyes were yellow and it's pelt black.

“Heel.” Rufus said in a lazy tone as he headed for his desk. The monstrous canine instantly turned and trotted to the blonde's side.

“His pet guard hound. You'll be fine, he seems to have trained it relatively well.” Felicia told Mo.

“I feel no better about sharing a room with a hellhound knowing Rufus trained it!”

Rufus chuckled at that, patting the... the guard hound's head. “I believe we were discussing your mental condition before we relocated?”

Mo wondered how far he could make it before Shears dragged him back. Or before the guard hound decided he was prey and gave a more lethal chase.

“So,” Felicia prompted, “Why don't you get help? You clearly need it, and I get the feeling you know you need it.”

“I-I don't wanna be a burden to anyone... it's my problem, and I'm an adult, I... I should be able to handle my own problems.” he replied, not looking at any of them as he hugged himself.

“Bullshit, those people are paid to handle your problems.” Shears scoffed.

“I get the feeling that you just don't think you deserve help.” Rufus hummed nonchalantly. “What with the saying everything you've done has been an accident or unintentional.”

There was about half a second of silence before Shears was standing before him, growling out, “Always second best, was it?”

“How do you even remember that?! I barely remember that!” Mo half-yelled, trying his best to shy
away from the angry man.

“What now?” Felicia asked with an audible frown to her voice.

“Why don't you tell them, huh?” Shears challenged.

“Because I only told you because I was borderline delirious!” he replied hysterically.

“Tell us what?” Rufus asked.

“About your brother?! And everyone loving him more than you?!” Shears roared, shoving at Mo's shoulder.

“Shut up! You don't understand, don't act like you do!” Mo yelled back, voice cracking halfway through.

“We would understand if you told us.” Felicia said, and he could see how she was trying to stay the voice of reason while Rufus's guard hound rose to it's feet.

“No, you wouldn't!” he cried, feeling tears well up in his eyes as he pushed Shears away.

“Fucking try us, Tesla!”

“You wouldn't understand!” he screamed at Shears, feeling the strain on his throat. “You wouldn't understand what it's like living every day in fear of being attacked and killed just because you're a fag! What it's like to hear your mother laugh for someone else every day, but never for you! To be responsible for the death of your entire family! To fall in love time and time again only to find that you're being used, or cheated on, or lied to, no matter what! To be viewed as nothing but a piece of cock-jewelry when I was planning to propose, goddammit! And Lucius— I thought I was special! I thought he wouldn't throw me out like he did everyone else! I... I hate it! I hate that I can't trust anyone to be telling me the truth! I just want... I want to be accepted, like anyone else, is that so much to ask?! But I can't trust that I'm not a burden, that I'm not in the way or inconvenient or unwanted! I... I...!”

His desperate screaming trailed off into quiet whimpers and hiccups as he pulled at his hair, tears flooding his vision.

He hated it. Hated himself. Hated that he couldn't identify emotions or tell when a relationship of any kind was actually working out. Hated that he broke down like this, couldn't keep it together and be a goddamn adult for two minutes of his life.

Someone touched him. He couldn't tell who through his tears, and jerked away with a pathetic sob.

He was such a mess. Broken. Useless. Waste of space.

“Mo—”

“Don't, Felicia... just let me be broken... if you touch me you'll get hurt...” he begged, dragging his hands out of his hair to start scrubbing desperately at his face. He didn't want to be covered in tears like this, didn't want to be such a useless mess...

Before he could turn back to them, he found something being held out to him.

It was a small black ceramic cup. It fit neatly in the cradled hand offering it to him. Looking closely, Mo found that there was a small spiderweb of gold on one portion of the cup.
“You continually describe yourself as broken.” Rufus said in a nonchalant tone, as if he didn't care one way or the other. “But there is a practice in Wutai or repaired broken objects with gold. The items are said to become more beautiful and have a richer story when it happens.”

“... Kinstukuroi... to repair with gold...” Mo mumbled, nodding vaguely.

Rufus was still for a moment, but then reached out with his other hand to capture one of Mo's. He flinched, but didn't really react much otherwise. He was confused.

The small cup was pushed into his palm, and his fingers curled around it.

“R-Rufus...?”

“I never really cared for it. But if I'm going to be leaving you alone with my dear brother, I get the feeling you would appreciate having it.” the blonde shrugged, already returning to the desk with his hands in his pockets.

Feeling a lump well up in his throat, Mo lunged forward and grabbed the boy's elbow. Rufus turned to look at him, a quizzical expression on his face.

Shears and Felicia both yelled in shock when he leaned forward to plant a gentle peck on the boy's nose.

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